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Virtual Identities

When it comes to what constitutes as our identity, we often think about how materialistic objects will shape our identity.. This ranges from the clothes we wear, the foods we eat, and the type of car we drive. In Robert Atwan's *Convergences*, the reader saw a multitude of ways people construct their identity in this fashion.   John Freyer demonstrated how the simple necessities such as jackets and toasters made up his identity due to the emotional attachment he had with each item from its past use. Brillat-Savarin even made the bold statement, "tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are" (as cited in Atwan, 2009, p. 109). However, unlike Brillat-Savarin's time, there are other identifiers that can be used to shape an individual's identity. A virtual identity is a new form of expression that individuals use to show off their identity to the rest of the world on social networking sites. This essay will analyze what factors lead an individual to construct a false or ideal identity on social networking sites and whether it is a common theme in the virtual world. Furthermore it will discuss the current trend of virtual identity suicide.

The 21st century saw the rise of many social networking sites that gave individuals the ability to construct an online persona. MySpace was one of the earliest tools that allowed people to establish an identity in the virtual world. It came out in 2003, but was soon surpassed by Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook. Facebook still reigns supreme today and within the last quarter it was

made up of 1.19 billion users (Facebook Passes, 2014). That is 1/7 of the world's population and Facebook is still reaching out to more people. That means there are 1.19 billion virtual identities out there, but whether all these identities are real remains to be in question. This is due to the complexity of forming an identity. In Robert Atwan's *Convergences,* he opens up the first chapter by introducing the reader to this complexity that comes with forming an identity. Perhaps the most famous case of this is an individual looking their best for a yearbook photo because they know it will grace the pages for years to come. Atwan(2009) poses the question, "do you select the one that makes you look most attractive, even if it's not a good likeness" (p.62)? Of course individuals select photos that show them in their best physical state. In fact this is one of the first steps in creating a virtual identity on Facebook. The profile picture is very similar to this yearbook selection. Many choose to select a picture just based on how hot they look or if it depicts them in a youthful manner. The user may snap a photo of themselves after applying pounds of makeup or after working out to show off the pump. However, is this really their true identity, or something merely artificially constructed to show the world at your best? Research has shown individuals are quite particular in creating their virtual identity.

There are studies that suggest social networking is just a tool to give people the ability to portray their ideal self. However, what types of people are willing to go to these extremes? The Department of Psychology at California State University did a study that gathered information from two-hundred and sixty one Facebook users that pertained to their personality and self-presentation . The study concluded that, "individuals with a less coherent sense of the self and lower self-esteem reported presenting their false self on Facebook to a greater extent" (Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, & Dennis, 2014). This means a certain percentage of those one billion users are creating a false identity for themselves, an identity that the world will judge.

The ideal self or identity that these individuals wish to create often consists of their dreams, wishes, and aspirations. For example, on dating sites like eHarmony, an individual may post a profile picture of themselves from twenty years ago that depicts them in a more attractive manner in order to enhance their chances of finding a future soul mate. A Facebook user could post a career they have not obtained yet, or even create a false social life by adding unknown friends.

Research from California State University also suggest social networking sites such as Facebook, give users the ability to experiment with a multitude of different personalities. If someone for instance is still unsure about their identity in the real world, they may test multiple identities online. Basically the individual will want to see which one works and gathers more praise from their community or society. All of this is again connected to the individuals' self esteem. Individuals with depressive symptoms tend to be more, "strategic in their self-presentations" (Michikyna et al., 2014). This is usually due to pressure from within to conform or fit in which can only be achieved in their mind through careful construction of the self online. On the other hand those with higher self esteem tend to portray a more realistic portrayal of themselves (Michikyna et al., 2014). This would make sense because there isn't a large gap between their actual lives in reality from their social networking profiles. If they had an actual social life all their peers would know that what was on their profile site was false.

Besides the California State University Studies, other studies suggest that identities on social networking sites like Facebook usually do reflect the actual identity of the user. In other words, it is much more common for people to use their real world identity on a social networking site. The Department of Psychology at Johannes Gutenberg-University in Germany suggests that true identities are exposed on Facebook. For example the study suggests that, "that online social

networks may constitute an extended social context in which to express one's actual personality characteristics, thus fostering accurate interpersonal perceptions" (Back et al., 2010). In other words if you are a shy person out in society, Facebook may give you that desperate need for social interaction. It prevents the individual from actually having to have a face to face conversation with someone. Therefore, they may feel more at ease and in a comfortable position to express their true self. The studies from Gutenberg also claim that it would be difficult to create an idealized identity on Facebook. For example, the article makes the point that, "online social networking profiles include information about one's reputation that is difficult to control (e.g., wall posts) and friends provide accountability and subtle feedback on one's profile" (Back et al., 2010). Facebook after all is a place to connect with friends and if this person doesn't have an accurate portrayal of their true self they will be exposed. Therefore, it is reasonable to suppose that those that create a false identity for themselves on a social networking site are most likely disconnected from society and have few social interactions in reality.

The next area of importance pertaining to virtual identity is losing it all together. This is known as virtual identity suicide which basically means an individual disconnects from their identity in the virtual world. Facebook has over a billion users; however some individuals are deleting their accounts for security reasons. The main concern is over privacy and the fact that one's virtual identity is in the hands of a major corporation that has access to all your information. Austrian psychologists at the University of Vienna found that nearly half of the old Facebook users in their study deleted their virtual identities due to these privacy concerns (as cited in Ellyatt, 2013). These concerns stem from the constant fear of the power of the NSA and Wiki leaks (as cited in Ellyatt, 2013). This study suggests that some people are obviously not

depicting their virtual identity in a false light if they are willing to delete their account due to privacy concerns.

Virtual Identities are being created on a constant basis in our 21st century society. Facebook alone has more than a billion users and will likely grow even if a small percentage creates virtual suicide. The question is raised again on whether virtual identities are indeed realistic portrayals of ourselves. I have shown evidence from both sides that show it is ultimately still a conflicted issue. Is social networking truly a vehicle for us to show our idealized selves? Perhaps it really is just another communication tool with our real identities displayed in order to meet new people and interact with old friends. Only the future will tell if social networking is indeed the best way to reveal our identities to the world. Regardless, there will still be people out there who use it as a way to depict their identity whether it is part of reality or not.

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