A Study of Self-Presentation in Light of Facebook

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Abstract

This paper examines self-presentational theories in the light of self-presentation management on an increasingly popular social networking site called Facebook. This site allows users to build up a list of ‘friends’ and interact with them by sharing personal information, pictures and other self-presentational items. The theories considered belong mainly to Irving Goffman and Mark Leary, and the research problem is how these theories may be generalised to online social networks and how the case, Facebook, contributes to our understanding of self-presentation. The conclusion is that while the self-presentational theories explain much of the self-presentational behaviour on Facebook, these explanations become unparsimonious in some cases. The paper further proposes suggestions for amendments to existing theories. It does not seek to come with an alternative self-presentation theory for Facebook, but to reveal strengths and weaknesses that can be considered when such a step is to be taken. The most notable suggestions are the concepts of Computer-Mediated Tactility, which is a virtual form of nonverbal behaviour involving expressions of tactility, and the concept of Detached Self-Presentation, a cognitive division of self-concept caused by a difference between the current offline self and the presented online self.
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1.2 Introduction

Everybody tries to manage the impressions that he or she makes on other people. This is called self-presentation. According to Leary it is “the process by which people convey to others that they are a certain kind of person or possess certain characteristics” (Leary 1996: 17). More specifically, self-presentation is a kind of impression management, which is the management of others’ impressions of a social unit such as people or organisations (Leary, 1993). Self-presentation is either done consciously or unconsciously. It is quite necessary for the smooth functioning of social interactions (Leary, 1996). When we meet new people in various social settings, such as big celebrations, it is difficult to keep a conversation going without knowing something about our conversation partner. This knowledge does not need to be as complex as an account of the life story or social network, but could also be sex, age, personality, attractiveness – or any other observable characteristics. As these characteristics help create an impression of a person, it is in this person’s interest to manage them as well as he can.

If nobody cared about their impressions on others, sporty people would take fewer showers (to the dismay of fellow travellers on a crammed tram), or lawyers could find the way to court-rooms in their pyjamas. Self-presentations become more important when people want to achieve something, such as improving or initiating relationships, doing well on a job interview or obtaining sympathy. It is important for facilitating communication that we take care of how we look, smell and behave. Usually, “our behaviour is […] constrained by our concerns with others’ impressions” (Leary, 1996: 3). If it is not constrained, we find ourselves in an embarrassing situation.

Self-presentation is a complex topic in social psychology, and there are many subtopics to study. Motivation, power and influence, social anxiety, social capital, Social Exchange Theory and Evaluation Apprehension Theory are but some of the topics I came over during the preparation of my study that could be interesting to apply to an online setting. However, I have focused on the tactics of self-presentation and examined to what extent self-presentation theories explain self-presentation on Facebook. One of the reasons why self-presentation on social networking sites may be different from face-to-face is that online one may “inspect, edit and revise” (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001: 110) one’s self-presentation before it is made available to others.

I have chosen to focus mainly on Goffman and Leary’s theories. This is because they have covered the topic of self-presentation in a systematic and (in most places) a detailed way.
It is noteworthy that although Goffman was not a social psychologist (he was a sociologist) he has contributed to social psychology through a series of publications in the 1950s. As regards Mark Leary, his interest in self-presentational tactics was right to the point of this paper’s topic.

In the theory section I account for Goffman and Leary’s approaches to self-presentation, as well as some effects of challenging situations such as embarrassment, the avoidance of which regulates self-presentation, and front region control, which is related to making different self-presentations to different people. In the discussion I will examine to what extent the theoretical approaches can be extended to Facebook self-presentation. Here, I will also examine how the case, Facebook, can extend our understanding of self-presentation. Some of the interpretations are based on my own experiences with online self-presentation, as well as on conversations with other Facebook users. Throughout the theory and discussion parts I will use John and Anna as examples of Facebook friends.
1.1 Relevance for Social Psychology

As a quickly growing online community, Facebook has become an arena for social interaction among adolescents, youth and adults from countries all over the world. With an average of 250,000 new users every day since January 2007\(^1\), the number of users is steadily growing, and each one of them is in some way engaged in self-presentation.

The spectre of social psychological phenomena that we find in our daily lives is well represented on Facebook. Self-presentation is an especially significant element of Facebook. Most Facebook users believe that those who see their profile pages the most are members of their offline social networks (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007: 1155), i.e. people they meet often.

Many of the current self-presentation theories were developed at a time when Internet was not invented or in use. At best, these old theories explain social phenomena on Cyberspace at least as effectively as in offline environments. At worst, we will need completely new theories and models. Most probably we are somewhere in the middle, and we need to make amendments and a few additions to the existing theories. The self-presenters are the same people as before, but they have got a new self-presentational tool and a new arena for social interaction.

Some research has already been done around popular use of the Internet, but networks where the members are fully identified are unusual, and Facebook stands out because of its size and the diversity of members and applications. With the emergence of online social identity we have an unexplored opportunity to study how well our current theories explain self-presentational behaviours and to make the amendments we find necessary.

What makes Facebook an even more exciting case for a self-presentation study is the new self-presentational behaviours. For instance, computer-mediated tactility which is examined in the discussion part is so new that social psychology has not developed any known models around it. These behaviours are developing right in front of our eyes, and this makes our opportunity to study them even more unique. Furthermore, anything that comes after the opening of a Facebook account is essentially related to self-presentation. Although there can be alternative explanations to Facebook behaviour there is almost always a self-presentational dimension to it because most actions can be seen by others.

Understanding online self-presentation may have implications for how we understand other phenomena, such as self-esteem, subjective well-being, social anxiety and identity formation. There seems to be an agreement that our offline identity affects our online identity.
However, with the exchange if culture and identity on the Internet, and especially on social networking sites, it is quite possible that online self-presentation affects offline identity formation (Kosanovic, 2006). Furthermore, younger individuals seem to socialise more frequently and intimately on the Internet (Birnie & Horvath, 2002), and as there is much identity formation going on in adolescence (Hogg & Vaughan, 2006) we could claim that young people’s self-concept is shaped on the net, at least in cases where individuals create an ideal self instead of a realistic self. And most of us do, to some extent, present ideal sides of ourselves in social interaction.

2 Account of Self-Presentational Theories

Goffman mainly gives us a perspective to understand self-presentation from. He conceptualises the phenomenon of self-presentation by likening it to a theatrical play. While Leary also discusses how self-presentation should be understood (e.g. not as a mainly deceptive strategy employed by fraudulent people), his focus is mainly on the actual methods of self-presentation. The aim of this section is to give an account of some basic principles of self-presentation.

2.1 A Dramaturgical Approach to Self-Presentation

Goffman’s so-called ‘dramaturgical approach’ compares people’s everyday self-presentation to stage acting, where the ‘performer’ plays a role for an ‘audience’ in a ‘front stage’ area and then retreats to a ‘backstage’ where he will change back to a non-performer role.

The performer is the person who self-presents. What is noteworthy is that the performer will normally have different roles to which he adjusts according to which play is currently on the scene. A teacher, for instance, could act in an authoritarian manner in an unruly class, but display a completely different performance at a family reunion. The audience would be the pupils and the family members, respectively. Goffman (1959) refers to this as front region control, which is controlling one’s behaviour according to which front region one is in.

The performer interacts with the audience in the front region. While a significant part of this interaction is task-oriented, a great deal of self-presentation occurs. Goffman (1959) argues that life is very much acting because a performer may take on any role he or she wants. Oftentimes, “a performer engenders in his audience the belief that he is related to them in a more ideal way than is always the case” (Goffman, 1959: 56). Of course, there are certain things one will have difficulties presenting oneself as, such as acrobat or professional golf-player, because people can check one’s skills by simple observation. But it is more difficult to detect an interpersonally directed lie, such as when the performer claims to care about or like the audience.

The backstage is a haven where the performer can loosen some of the self-imposed restrictions from the front area. Goffman defines the backstage as “a place, relative to [the] performance, where the impression of the performance is knowingly contradicted” (Goffman, 1959: 114). Here a contradiction does not necessarily mean something opposite of what is seen in a front area, but rather a significant difference in the role played by that person. By
retreating to a back region, the performer can put aside his or her onstage role, check his appearance and reapply make-up (Goffman, 1959). One of the frequently used back regions is the public toilet Leary (1993).

While the performer can retreat to the backstage alone, he can alternatively share the backstage with a team of fellow performers. Access to the backstage is limited to this small team only. It is a “place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude” (Goffman, 1959: 114). A staff lunchroom at a hospital is one such common backstage. Here nurses are relieved from the pressure of constantly appearing to take care of patients, and they “prepare themselves for performances in the front region” (Goffman, 1959: 87).

The need for a backstage is important for effective task-performance. As Goffman points out, the presence of an audience may be so distracting to a performer that his concern with maintaining an impression of efficacy interferes with the actual quality of the work. This is consistent with the principle in Evaluation Apprehension Theory that a feeling of being under evaluative observation is enough to affect a person’s behaviour (Bordens & Horowitz, 2002).

From a social facilitation perspective (Bordens & Horowitz, 2002) one can argue that in front areas only non-dominant responses are negatively affected. A negative effect of being too much in the front area would be due to the required behaviour being non-dominant. Dominant responses would actually benefit from not having a backstage, because a backstage will allow for non-dominant responses to take up the performer’s attention. Taking this objection into account, backstage will only serve as a stress relief and not increase productivity for anything but non-dominant responses. Indeed, being in a front area for too long may be exhausting because the performer will have to live out his role without recess.

Of course, dividing a situation in backstage vs. front-stage is not unproblematic, as it is a simplification. Team members who are in a backstage will still control their self-presentation in each others’ presence. Thus, we have a smaller front region within the backstage. However, the front-stage/backstage distinction helps account for why people behave differently in different places. Applying this to Facebook, the profile (home-)page would be the front area, whereas dyadic interaction (most notably the e-mail-like messages that are sent between users) and the physical person typing on the keyboard and editing his profile could be examples of backstage behaviour.
2.2 Audience Segregation

While audience segregation is not a theory, it is a useful concept in understanding self-presentation. The concept refers to actions that are meant to prevent an audience who has been presented with a specific role does not observe another role played by the self-presenter. Sometimes a behaviour exhibited in one situation should not be observed by a different audience than the one it is intended for. For instance, the teacher from the example in last section could be interested in not letting the pupils see how she behaves with her family members, because it potentially involves a change in the pupils’ response. Goffman (1959) refers to this as ‘front region control’. “By keeping different targets away from one another, people can avoid the awkwardness of trying to present disparate images of themselves to two or more targets simultaneously.” (Leary, 1996: 109).

It follows from the discussion above that the more contacts or friends we have, the stronger is the need to segregate those who receive a particular self-presentation from those who receive another one. “Much of what we know about our friends is not necessarily the result of direct communication (self-disclosure) but results from what others tell about our friends” (Milardo, 1986: 161). To the extent that Milardo is correct in his assumption, our self-presentation in one group of friends can easily be detected by another group of friends. Thus, a person who self-presents very differently from audience to audience may have difficulties trying to maintain these impressions over a long time. Therefore, people must find a balance between how they self-present to different people. If the audience segregation fails the performer can experience a self-presentational predicament, a topic I return to in section 2.4.

2.3 Four Self-Presentational Tactics

Leary presents a number of self-presentational tactics, four of which I consider relevant for computer-mediated self-presentation. Their relevance is due to the ease with which they can be observed online. Memory contrivances (forgetting things in an attempt to avoid unsuccessful self-presentation), for instance, I will not consider because although it may occur in online self-presentation it may be caused by a large information flow (which is characteristic of the Internet) as well as a motivation for self-presentation. The tactics I will consider are self-descriptions, attitude statements, nonverbal behaviours and social associations (Leary, 1996). Here I will give a brief description of each of these, but I will
return to a discussion of its applicability to self-presentation on Facebook later in the paper. As we shall see, these categories overlap some places.

Self-description is simply how people self-present using words. These descriptions tell something about an individual’s values, political or religious affiliation, likes or dislikes, occupation, or accomplishments in life (Leary, 1996). Those who want to make a specific self-presentation will monitor their self-description more carefully because self-description is a primary source of impression management. According to Leary people do not lie so much when self-describing, but they “are more likely to selectively present true information about themselves” (Leary, 1996: 18). When self-describing, an individual must select which information to give, because there is so much one can say about oneself. This provides an opportunity to select the information that makes the desired impression, and this control will reduce the need to lie. Furthermore, people make more indirect than direct self-descriptions. Indirect statements elicit questions from the conversation partner, as in the following example.

… [R]ather than boldly claiming, “You know, I was a football player in college – and a […] good one at that,” a man discussing sports with a new colleague might simply note that “football sure has changed – the big money and all – since I played the game.” (Leary, 1996: 18)

By relying on general conversation norms, this football player pressures a conversation partner to inquire about his sports career.

Leary’s second tactic is attitude statements. Attitudes say something about our values and hence also what kind of person we are. Therefore, “the attitudes we express influence the impressions other people have of us” (Leary, 1996: 19). Anna may express her contempt for a television advertisement that violates some norms, giving her listeners a reassurance of her moral standing. Attitude statements do not need to be bombastic to be noticed. They can be seen in the topics we choose to talk about. For instance, One who talks about global warming very often is apparently concerned about the environment (or very much against this theory)

What Anna says can confirm, modify or completely change our impressions of her. Compared to self-descriptions, attitude statements may have a stronger impact on self-presentation. As an extension to Leary’s theory one can think of attitude statements as a way of shaping one’s identity after the popular impression of the typical attitude-holder. This is particularly true for political and religious ideologies, both of which have their stereotypes and prototypes.
Leary divides the next self-presentational tactic, nonverbal behaviour, into three categories; emotion expressions, physical appearance, and gestures and movement. I will now turn to the first two, which Leary explains more fully. The third, gestures and movements, will be discussed separately under computer-mediated tactility in section 3.4. These two may represent some of the self-presentational behaviours that occur in the object of my study, Facebook.

According to Leary, emotions are not only something internal, but are also communicated to others (Leary, 1996). Through emotion expressions we can influence others’ impressions of us. When people are angry they often show it clearly (Leary, 1996). Some of the behaviours, such as raising one’s voice or making certain facial expressions, are not always as spontaneous and unrevised as they may seem. Having control over one’s emotional expressions means having one more tool of influential self-presentation. Basically, Leary claims that “far from being spontaneous expressions of inner feelings, emotional expressions can serve as self-presentations” (Leary, 1996: 24)

Physical appearance has a strong effect on others’ impressions of us. People who are physically attractive are “perceived as more sociable, dominant, intelligent, socially skilled, and adjusted” (Feingold, 1992, in Leary, 1996: 25). Furthermore, it is “perhaps the most apparent nonverbal channel of self-expression” (ibid.). Therefore, physical appearance is significant for self-presentation – not only because being attractive is considered positive by most people, but also because many positive attributes are associated with physical attractiveness. Acknowledging that different groups have different norms for what is attractive, Leary goes on to claim that whatever we do with our appearance is self-presentational (Leary, 1996). These behaviours can be conscious or rather non-conscious. For instance, wearing a suit on a special occasion may be a very conscious act for John if he does not like formal settings, whilst applying make-up before she goes out may have become so common to Anna that she does it non-consciously. Both these actions affect the person’s self-presentation. Had it not been for their thought of others’ impressions, it is likely that neither John nor Anna would have done their respective actions. After all, very few people go to sleep wearing a suit or make-up.

The fourth self-presentational tactic, social associations, is an indirect method. Those who engage in this tactic do not really emphasise their own personal attributes. Instead, they publicise their connections with famous or successful social units, such as sports teams, celebrities or other popular artists. By doing so, they take part in some of these units’ positive associations. This is called BIRGing, or “basking in reflected glory” (Forsyth, 2002: 94). An
example is name-dropping, i.e. referring to famous people in a way that implies familiarity with them. According to Cialdini, people are much more likely to bask in the reflected glory of somebody who is successful on a dimension they are bad at (Cialdini et al. 1976, in Leary, 1996). Similarly, people can engage in CORFing (cutting off reflected failure) when they have been associated with a social unit that has failed or is unpopular.

There is furthermore a variation on BIRGing and CORFing, namely burnishing and boosting (Leary, 1996). Burnishing is strengthening positive aspects of the object (e.g. sports team or political party), while boosting refers to minimising the importance of the negative aspects. A study by Finch and Cialdini may shed some light on how even trivial social associations are used for self-presentation. In one experiment they told participants in the experimental condition that they were similar to a historical person with bad reputation (Finch & Cialdini, 1989, in Leary, 1996). The similarity was inconsequential – the participants were led to believe that they had birthday on the same day as Rasputin, the extravagant Russian monk. Compared to the control group, these participants downplayed Rasputin’s negative sides (boosting) and stressed his positive sides (burnishing) (ibid.). This impression management – of people’s impression of Rasputin – has been suggested to have an implication for the success of self-presentation (Cialdini & DeNicholas, 1989, in Leary, 1996).

2.4 Avoidance of Embarrassing Situations

People often want to appear competent in what they are doing. Embarrassment is often the result of a blunder or confusion in task-performance, because this can make an impression that contradicts the one they have built. As this discrepancy is distressing, we tend to “[constraint] the kinds of images we claim and […] to regulate our impressions to compensate for our current social image” (Leary, 1996: 135). Hence, how we self-present is affected by our avoidance of embarrassment. This may be of importance for how stigmatised people self-present, because they often have to take their stigma into consideration when self-presenting.

Leary refers to embarrassing situations as “self-presentation predicaments”. These are “[e]vents that clearly (and, sometimes, irrevocably) damage a person’s image in others’ eyes” (Leary, 1996: 118), and these events contrast the impression that the individual has built. Miller distinguishes between several types of predicaments, notably those caused by individual actions and those that may occur during direct interaction with others (Miller, 1992, in Leary, 1996).
Some self-presentational predicaments are caused by the individual’s own actions. These actions involve violating norms of expectations, which in turn may lead to embarrassment. Miller referred to these predicaments as normative public deficiencies (Miller, 1992, in Leary, 1996: 119). Examples of this could be calling somebody by the wrong name, being seen in the underwear by strangers (Leary, 1996: 119) or being caught on the train without a valid ticket. In general, we can assume that the more the situation is controlled by strict norms, the more a violation of them will be damaging to one’s self-presentation.

Other predicaments arise from awkward interactions with people. Sometimes, neither side of the conversation finds something to talk about, although both want to present themselves as socially skilled. For instance, bumping into a childhood friend after many years may be a pleasant surprise, but if we “do not know how to respond, [we] may become embarrassed” (Leary, 1996: 119). Leary extends this category of predicaments to include “team embarrassment”, which is being associated with people who are violating the norms (Leary, 1996: 119). Being associated with people who have normative public deficiencies could be distressing, and a possible self-presentational outcome is that the individual engages in CORFing (Cutting Off Reflected Failure), which means detaching oneself from social units that arouse negative thoughts or feelings (Forsyth, 2002; Leary, 1996). This could be related to the BIRGing, which is one of Leary’s self-presentational tactics described earlier.

Another potential source of embarrassment in self-presentation is stigmas. Some of the stigmas that Leary describes belong to the following categories: past behaviour (ex-convict, divorce), physical characteristics (deformations, disabilities) and personal character (moodiness) (Leary, 1996). As opposed to self-presentational predicaments which are embarrassing situations and behaviours that are only visible for a specific time, stigmas stick with the holder much longer. Crocker has argued that visibility and controllability are the most important determinants of how stigmas are perceived. He further argues that “the stigma can provide the primary schema through which everything about [the stigmatised individuals] is understood by others” (Crocker et al., 1998, in Dovidio, Major & Crocker., 2000: 6). If this is the case, controlling others’ access to or knowledge of the stigma becomes much more important for successful self-presentation. This importance is further emphasised by Leary’s description of the consequences. According to him, stigmas not only lead to negative evaluations but also make others behave differently towards the stigmatised individual (Leary, 1996). Therefore, he argues, this person will want to self-present in a way that minimises the impact of the stigma on others’ impressions (Leary, 1996).
Self-presentation is different for stigmatised people and people in self-presentational predicaments. In self-presentational predicaments, no matter how embarrassing it is, most will eventually continue self-presenting normally. Those who are stigmatised, however, have to self-present with the stigma, and this may be distressing. This self-presentation can be done in different ways, such as concealment, exploitation or resignation (Leary, 1996). Concealment can be linked to Crocker’s visibility dimension. Not all stigmas are concealable, however, but since people self-present in a selective manner, they may choose to physically cover it or by nondisclosure (Leary, 1996: 121). Because stigma may arouse sympathy with the audience, stigmatised people may exploit the situation so that they can get special treatment. Furthermore, an expression of helplessness may justify lack of effort or excuse other problems (ibid.: 122). Finally, an individual in the resignation state will spend very little effort in trying to manage the impressions of the stigma. This is often related to lack of motivation or a perceived insurmountable difficulty.
3 Discussion: How can the case contribute to the theories?

The theories on self-presentation are based on studies of offline social interactions and they are therefore not necessarily adapted to an online environment. We do not know to what extent this is the case for self-presentation on Facebook, as Facebook is a complex social arena where Internet practice has been blended with social and cultural norms. Part of this uncertainty stems from the sudden and unusual popularity of the site. Yet, some types of self-presentation have been found to be different enough to require an extension of the current theories on self-presentation.

3.1 Is the Dramaturgical Approach Appropriate for Online Self-Presentation?

We may ask ourselves whether the distinction between self-presentation in a front area and backstage is applicable to Facebook. Can we attribute different types of self-presentation to different front areas? On social networking sites one may as well operate only with front regions. Logging in on Facebook will turn on a self-presentational “surveillance mechanism”, at least in people who are high in self-monitoring, because the user is accustomed to self-presentational behaviours here. If my self-presentation is relaxed when I’m writing on John’s wall but not when writing on Anna’s wall, this could equally be explained by their belonging to two segregated audiences as by John being in my backstage team. Goffman’s idea that a person relaxes in backstage (Goffman, 1959: 114) is therefore not an exclusive explanation of a relaxed Facebook self-presentation.

That self-presenting could potentially occur solely in front areas, does not mean that back areas do not exist, and this does not invalidate the applicability of Goffman’s concept of backstage on Facebook. Goffman’s (1959) concept of a backstage is simply a place where differences (or “contradictions”, as he calls them) to the front region self-presentations can occur without consequences. The e-mail-like messaging system on Facebook allows for backstage interaction, and this way two friends may discuss the darkest secrets of their lives on Facebook without any other friends knowing. This is certainly a backstage behaviour. The existence of back areas does not contradict the point in the previous paragraph. While back areas do exist, we may observe a greater variation of behaviours in the different front areas.

So far I have not discussed the performer who is backstage alone. This is perhaps the clearest border between back and front areas as regards Facebook. A person who is editing a
Facebook profile is in two places at the same time. While the presented self is seen by others who look at the user’s profile, the “real” person is the physical human sitting behind the computer screen. This brings us to the issue of “detached self-presentation”. While this person is busy with managing online impressions, he may not pay heed to his offline impression. He could be wearing a less flattering attire as well as being ungroomed, unshowered and unshaved. This person will be engaged in self-presentation in a detached state; while he is backstage and nobody can observe him, his presented self may simultaneously be observed and people will get a completely different impression of him. For instance, John is wearing a combat uniform in his profile picture, and his friends will cognitively put him in a military category. While his friends are looking at his profile picture, John is wearing pyjamas and throwing a sheep at Anna on Facebook. This is not to say that John is deceiving his audience. In fact, he may be quite truthful about himself, but he has somehow distanced his self-concept from his current state. Similar examples could be found for people with stigma. Goffman has not taken detached self-presentation into account in his dramaturgical approach, and in everyday, face-to-face interactions this is not a significant weakness. In SNSs such as Facebook, however, this concept will be a basis for understanding the cognitive processes behind self-presentation.

3.2 Motivation

As described in the theory section some stigmatised individuals resign from hiding the stigma because they lose motivation. The embarrassment caused by stigma may make individuals shy and unsure of their self-presentation in face-to-face interactions. The self-presentational theories in this paper do not focus on shy individuals’ self-presentation. In a recent study on social capital among Facebook users, Ellison et al. (2007) found that Facebook led to a substantial increase in subjective well-being and self-esteem for shy people. This effect, however, was not found in people who were less shy. Ellison et al. (2007) believe this is because Facebook provides users with better control over how they self-present. Thus, those who are high in self-monitoring and low on self-esteem and social skills will better be able to self-present if they feel they have more control. If this is the case, the individual’s feeling of control, as well as self-esteem and social skills, should be addressed more directly in self-presentational theories.

The reduction of embarrassment due to control over self-presentation can complementarily be explained through Detached Self-Presentation. As mentioned earlier, DSP
is important in order to understand some of the cognitive processes related to self-presentation. We can see this in the light of Evaluation Apprehension Theory (which originally is meant for social facilitation, but which enhances our understanding of self-presentation as well), which states that a feeling of being evaluated is enough to make us anxious.

The reduction of embarrassment due to control over self-presentation can perhaps better be explained in combination with the concept of Detached Self-Presentation. As mentioned earlier, DSP is important in order to understand some of the cognitive processes related to self-presentation. On Facebook, shy users may feel that it is their detached self (and not their inner “backstage” self) that is being evaluated, and this may reduce some of the social anxiety. This is consistent with Cottrell’s experiment in which participants who held a speech in front of a blindfolded audience were less anxious than those who held it in front of listeners who could see and hear them. He found that “[t]he mere presence of others [did not] account for […] social inhibition” but that the audience must be able to evaluate the performer (i.e. not blindfolded) in order to raise anxiety (Cottrell, 1972, in Bordens & Horowitz, 2002: p. 293). On Facebook, the friends (i.e. the audience) are partly “blindfolded” – they cannot see the person behind the screen and therefore this person does not feel as much anxiety as he or she would have felt in a face-to-face interaction. This does not mean that there is no disappointment if one’s detached self is negatively evaluated, but rather that the detachment creates a buffer against a drop in self-esteem. The implications of this for stigmatised individuals is that they may abandon resignation in favour of other self-presentational tactics, such as burnishing and boosting of their stigma.

3.3 Nonverbal Self-Presentation

A number of nonverbal behaviours can be observed on Facebook. The most noteworthy ones we find what Leary categorised as physical appearance. As mentioned in the theory section physically attractive persons elicit more positive evaluations simply by the virtue of their attractiveness (Feingold, 1992, in Leary, 1996). Furthermore, it has been observed that some of these perceived abilities, such as social adjustment, can be judged accurately through pictures (Rind & Gaudet, 1993, in Walther et al., 2001). Therefore Facebook users have good reason to manage the impressions made by their pictures. However, this only suggests that physically attractive people emphasise pictures in their self-presentation – it says little about how they use other tactics for self-presentation. In a study of pictures in computer-mediated
communication Watlther et al. (2001) found that physical attractiveness was negatively correlated with effective self-presentation. While the study was on another platform than Facebook, the relation between physical appearance and self-presentation efficacy can be relevant for Facebook. It could suggest that people consider their pictures to be the most important way of self-presenting; those who perceive themselves photogenic do not engage heavily in other forms of self-presentation because they have already done a successful self-presentation, whereas those who consider themselves less attractive wish to compensate. This may especially be true for physically stigmatised individuals.

The Facebook environment, like other SNSs, is different from face-to-face interactions in that very little is done spontaneously. This means that the self-presentation done on Facebook is under control, and thus so is emotion expressions. Due to the traditional lack of visual cues in computer-mediated communication, smileys (simple faces made by text, such as 😊 and :P ) and later emoticons (a graphic smiley) have developed. These are especially important in attitude statements, Leary’s second tactic of self-presentation, because emotional expressions like sarcasm are more difficult to detect when there is no face on which to see a sarcastic smile. Misunderstanding sarcasm or humour may put an individual in a self-presentation predicament because the message is taken seriously. The importance of visual cues in self-presentation emotion expression is thus correctly taken into account by Leary.

### 3.4 Computer-Mediated Tactility

Earlier this year a new form of online nonverbal behaviour emerged on Facebook. It is characterised by actions that ostensibly involve physical contact, such as hugs, vampire-bites defenestration (throwing somebody out of a window) and sheep throwing. In lack of a proper social psychological term I have named this behaviour Computer-Mediated Tactility (CMT). Basically, CMT is a self-presentation tactic because its use involves unusual actions and emotionally expressive actions.

CMT is characterised by virtually tactile actions, and they are expressed through Facebook applications such as the so-called poke, superpoke and vampire-bites. CMT is a primarily a dyadic exchange, which means that a user performs a CMT action towards a target user. The message that follows a CMT action is printed on the target’s profile page and could be something like “Anna decided to throw a sheep at John”. These actions convey nonverbal behaviour in a manner that in the real world would be understood as tactile communication.
Currently there are no known self-presentational theories in social psychology that fully accommodate the idea of computer-mediated tactility (CMT). This is partly due to its novelty, but could also be because a self-presentational theory on physical contact is difficult to generalise across cultural borders. However, as mentioned in section 2.4, one of the nonverbal tactics described by Leary (1996) may share some similarities with CMT. He argues that people “use gestures and bodily movements to convey impressions of themselves” (Leary, 1996: 26). He refers to gaze and posture as channels for presenting power. While Leary’s model of nonverbal behaviour has similarities, it is concerned with personal movements and not physical contact with others. Clenching one’s fist or shaking one’s head are individual behaviours which would fit well into Leary’s model, but hugging or throwing a sheep at somebody always involves doing something to someone. Thus, Leary’s explanation is directed towards purposive body language, while CMT goes further and explains interaction. Therefore we could think of CMT as an addition to Leary’s nonverbal behaviour tactic along with physical appearance, emotion expression, and gestures and bodily movements.

It is now time to look at how CMT can be a tactic of self-presentation.

One of the reasons why CMT on Facebook is perceived as “cool” by those who use it is perhaps that it contains quite unusual elements like throwing a sheep at someone or defenestrating. In face-to-face interactions, throwing a sheep is unrealistic and throwing somebody out of a window is dangerous and hostile. These actions, which in real-life would have involved potentially hazardous situations and a strong willpower, are now performed with the utmost ease. There seems to be something funny about the flying sheep, and being hit by one is not seen as friendly humour rather than an offense. By engaging in “risky” and humorous CMT a user may project a socially desirable self.

The performer of these actions will by many Facebook users be evaluated positively. The way that Computer-Mediated Tactility is organized on Facebook, it is most often seen by the target as well as the target’s friends. This may add a second motivation to the one of making a good impression on the target. By having the message “John decided to hug Anna” on Anna’s profile, John does not only tell Anna that he likes her, but he may also increase his social status among their common friends. Furthermore, Anna will appear popular, especially if she frequently gets hugs or kisses from several people. Waller has mentioned that some girls who live in dormitories make mutual arrangements to receive a phone call at a strategic time, so that their friends see them being paged, This will make them appear popular (Waller, in Goffman, 1959: 16). It therefore seems that some self-presentational behaviours should be
seen in the context of social exchange theory, which explains relationships as a calculation of
gains and losses (Forsyth, 2006).

3.5 Modesty in Facebook Self-description

Leary has criticised the common view in the 1960s and 1970s of self-presentations as
primarily and inherently deceptive (Leary, 1993: 128). However, the issue of deception may be
relevant in the discussion of modesty, because it is part of a dilemma that affects how people
self-present. Self-description, one of the four tactics of Leary, is probably the most
straightforward way of controlling one’s self-presentation in online environments, because
others have limited opportunities to check the information with reality. However, the fact that
a Facebook user’s real identity is often known by the user’s friends (Ellison et. al, 2007) poses
a limitation on the extent of a deception. For instance, if Anna and John were classmates at a
public high school, she is risking her reputation as a truthful person if she on her profile page
writes the name of a very prestigious private school to which she has no connection. A self-
description that includes easily falsifiable BIRGing may possibly result in embarrassment and
self-presentational predicament. The fear of being exposed as deceitful deters Facebook users
from making controversial claims.

In general, people seek to present themselves positively. Paradoxically, the fear of
appearing too pretentious may lead people to be so modest that the self-presentation becomes
unsuccessful. This is particularly a problem on Facebook, where users create profiles that they
hope will make good impression on their acquaintances. If Anna has won the second prize in a
regatta, this will create a positive impression on most people. Because she does not want to
brag about her victory, she could modestly declare on her profile that she has participated in a
regatta. The problem is that it is difficult to see that she is being modest. Her Facebook friends
who do not know about her prize may think of the regatta as nothing special, only a hobby,
and have no idea that Anna is one of the best sailors in the regatta. On the other hand, those of
her friends who know about it may believe that her self-esteem is suffering because she failed
to win the first prize. Thus, Anna’s modesty and humbleness may be perceived as weakness
and a lack of morale. A modest self-presentation is understood differently by those who have
different information. Therefore it may be difficult to find a balance between modesty,
truthfulness and deception.
4 Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, the current theories on self-presentation are able to explain a significant part of self-presentational behaviour in social networking sites like Facebook. This commonality could be because the self-presentation mechanism is such an important part of our everyday behaviour, and so strongly attached to our self-concept, that it works after the same patterns in most settings. However, while Facebook is suitable for self-presentational studies because of its high level of interpersonal interaction it does not mean that it is representative for other online environments. It may be that the arguments in this paper were only relevant for a highly individuated SNS, and would not be applicable to other forms of computer-mediated communication, such as company communication platforms. Although self-presentation may occur here as well, phenomena like Computer-Mediated Tactility would be a distraction to the professional efficacy demanded on these communication platforms.

Furthermore, Goffman and Leary’s approaches to self-presentation were developed with a non-computerised environment in mind, and therefore it is possible that some of the phenomena can better be explained with amendments. The idea of Detached Self-Presentation, for instance, helps integrating Goffman’s front and back area model into the concept of online self-presentation – it opens for a person being simultaneously in a front and a back area. I have suggested that self-presentational theories should pay more heed to such things as the level of self-monitoring and self-esteem. These suggestions may very well have been implemented in other theories of self-presentation. However, it is my belief that these aspects should be thoroughly considered in future studies of self-presentation.
5 REFERENCES


