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**IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION, SELF-PRESENTATION AND IMPRESSION
MANAGEMENT ON FACEBOOK: SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS.**

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ABSTRACT

Problem: *The objective of the study is to analyze the Facebook environment as a modern space of creating social identity. The processes of establishing virtual identity through the content of a person's profile in Facebook social network is identified in regard with the sociological concepts of self and social identity. The analysis of identity manifestations through social media provides an interdisciplinary conceptualization of the issue of social changes caused by the growing role of the Internet. Presented paper recalls sociological concepts of identity and combines a sociological perspective with the approach of communication studies.*

Methodology: *In order to achieve the objectives of this paper, the methods of content analysis and virtual ethnography were appointed. The study involved literature overview and mini online-survey collected among FB users. The limited amount of data collected for this study and limited research methods appointed determines the classification of this study as preliminary. The research question is current and the in-depth study of the issue is needed. However, findings contribute to the research both in sociology and communication studies.*

Conclusion: *Identity construction in the form of user's profile is understood in terms of intentional process of self-presentation of the self. Sociological concepts of the self, as well as dramaturgical approach and society of spectacle position can be applied to the environment of social media analysis. As shown in the preliminary empirical study – performing in Facebook network involves establishing conscious image of the self and using strategies of impression management.*

Key words: *social media, social identity, self-presentation, impression management.*

Introduction

The question of identity is still one of most relevant in terms of fundamental changes people face in the stage of “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2010, p. 1). Ways of living and lifestyles in post-industrial age have undergone significant changes by entering the 21st century, which is characterized by the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT).

Hence, what makes social media attract attention of scholars in many different scientific disciplines, is the fact of their direct or indirect influence on many spheres of social life.

Implications of social media impact on contemporary societies have been investigated from the perspective of communication studies, sociology, psychology, education, political science, marketing, management and other.

The unquestionable expansion of the Internet contributed to the emergence of the new forms of communication such as chatting, posting, sharing, blogging etc. Due to the possibilities offered by the Internet, mainly the social networking, new social phenomenon regarding the issues of identity have come to the fore. Accordingly – the scientific discussion on the question of identity has evolved taking into account cyberspace as a modern environment for the presentation of the *Self*. Social bonds and interactions built in virtual world are of different type and logic than those in the real world. In today's society, being online is a kind of requirement, expression of thoughts, feelings and appearance is the subject of daily plebiscites in virtual communities.

In times of dynamic development of social media, social identity as the image of self, created through the way one is perceived by other people, has become a subject of consciously made choices to establish a certain virtual personality. In social science the development of the concept of identity has a long tradition. In this study, it will only be indicated that sociological notion of identity is defined and distinguished at three levels: 1) personal identity, 2) social identity, 3) collective identity. Personal identity defined as the image of the self, self-knowledge or self-awareness has a fundamental impact on all dimensions of a person's life; Bauman characterized identity as the idea that a person has about one's own place in society, about one's rights and responsibilities, and how one fulfils these duties (Piłat-Borcuch, 2013, p. 320). George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) distinguished self-awareness and self-concept that individual present to the others (objective self) (Szacki, 2005, p. 582). Mead's position on the two kinds of self has been completed by the notion of looking-glass self, introduced by Charles Cooley (1864-1929). Looking-glass self is the individual's conviction in what way one is perceived by others (Szacki, 2005, s. 559). This belief is crucial for intentional efforts undertaken by social media users in order to manage the image of the self and impression management – what will be discussed in the following sections. Finally, social identity can be described as a set of social identifications that support the process of defining oneself and others in different social categories. Currently, the analysis of the formation of social identity is interesting in particular in the area of social media. Social media users have the ability to decide what will be shared with the world: any information can be edited, posted or hidden if inconvenient for the image. Analyzing these special “treatments” of online identity lead to recall theories of symbolic interactionism, Goffman's dramaturgical theory, and Debord's concept of the society of spectacle.

The objective of the study is to analyze the Facebook habitat as a contemporary space of creating social identity. The processes of establishing virtual identity through the content of a person's profile in Facebook social network is identified in regard with the sociological concepts of social identity. The analysis of identity manifestations distributed in social media reveal mechanisms and intersubjectively shared rules of contemporary society, such as mobility compulsion or lifestyle indicators.

In order to achieve the objectives of this paper, the methods of content analysis and virtual ethnography were appointed. The study involved content analysis of the literature and netnographic (Kozinets, 2012) online-survey collected among 100 FB network users.

Main concepts: identity construction, self-presentation and impression management in virtual world

As noted by Suzana Flores: “in 2009 Facebook was ranked as the most used social network worldwide” (2014: 37) and continues to maintain its leadership position with more than 2.6 billion monthly active users (Statista.com, 2020). As Facebook constantly grows in numbers, its’ own kind of demography has become a popular research subject. The literature overview shows that scholars have already recognized the patterns of online users behavior in terms of the form of activity, and categorized “these subpopulations as posters, trolls and lurkers” (Seigfried-Spellara & Lankford, 2018: 54). Social media enable users not only to communicate, however, referring to the Facebook history, their primary function can be defined as facilitating communication (Flores, 2014). Facebook has contributed to the redefinition of people’s needs, which is replacing the need for anonymity and privacy in favor of being public. Today’s requirement to be noticeable, heard, and followed affect personality, relationships, and social behavior. Using Facebook triggers the desire to learn about other users, to share one’s life and personality with others. Accordingly, the higher is the frequency of posting personal content, the higher is the possibility of gaining attention, feedback, or evaluation. Losing privacy becomes less important in comparison to the gratification user can get in exchange for shared information. By obtaining approval and acceptance of the content posted, user gains psychological comfort and sense of belonging (Flores, 2014). By sharing “approved” content of the self, users try to predict reactions of the network audience and control the way they are perceived. Therefore, the use of Facebook can be analyzed from the position of psychological motivation to meet individual’s social needs – according to Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012), the use of Facebook is associated with two primarily motivated factors: “1) the need to belong, and 2) the need to self-presentation. The need to belong refers to intrinsic drive to affiliate with others and gain social acceptance, and the need for self-presentation to the continuous process of impression management. These two motivational factors can co-exist, but can also each be the single cause for FB use” (Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012: 245)

Facebook lets to generate new, alternative, and more friendly reality, where expression of self is easier. Social media allow to avoid discomfort or anxiety caused by direct contact with other people. It is worth noticing, that sometimes the identity created for the purpose of joining online community does not reflect the real one. Such a contradictory can lead to cognitive dissonance, lower self-esteem (Biolcati, 2019), (Caso et al., 2020) or mental disorders connected with appearance concerns (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

From the perspective of sociology, social media as the sphere of identity building can be analyzed with regard to the metaphor of spectacle or scene. Two such concepts should be recalled here: Erving Goffman’s (1922–1982) dramaturgical approach toward interactions and the concept of the “society of spectacle” developed by the French philosopher Guy Debord (1931–1994).

Goffman’s central idea is that “people, as they interact together in social settings, are constantly engaged in the process of *impression management*, wherein each tries to present themselves and behave in a way that will prevent the embarrassment of themselves or others” (Thought.co July 1, 2019). According to Goffman, formation of self is a reflective, co-creative process that relies not only on our own careful manipulations but also on the way others understand and interpret our conveyed image (Zavattaro, 2013: 512), (Szacki, 2005). The uniqueness of Goffman’s dramaturgical approach is that it has been adopted in many disciplines. Fundamental Goffman’s work *The Presentation of Self*, covering the topic of socially constructed identity, became a benchmark for studying the issue of online self-presentation, the political self or impression management in organizations (Zavattaro, 2013: 512). Goffman’s idea of self-presentation initiated the emergence of impression management issues. Impression management is understood as conscious or unconscious attempt to control the overall image of a person in social interactions. “These include usage of verbal statements, expressive behaviors, and nonverbal behavior and also in integrated behavior patterns, jointly in modification of one’s physical appearance” (Vohs et. Al., 2005).

As far as Debord's theory is concerned, the central metaphor of understanding and describing society also refers to the stage and scene. "The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society and as a unifying mechanism" (Debord, 2006). Andrzej Leder explains Debord's idea as follows: "Society as a whole is constantly acting out something by someone to someone. This is the spectacle as society itself. At the same time, however, the spectacle separates those, who as part of the society focus on themselves all the eyes and all awareness of those, who are watching" (Leder, 2010: 70). Debord's considerations can be applied to the investigation of impression management in social media, however ascribed roles of spectators (*followers*) and actors are not rigidly divided – the hybrid nature of the Internet assumes free and unlimited movements between and across roles.

Both psychological and sociological perspectives applied for the analysis of the internet identity phenomenon show the significance of active (intended, conscious) role of a user in the process of identity establishing.

Discussion on performing in social media involves studying personality, motivation and engagement (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014), (Seigfried-Spellara & Lankford, 2018). Furthermore, the term *online identity* or *internet identity* has appeared in the social sciences. *Online identity* is defined as the identity that is established by an Internet user in online communities and websites (Wikipedia: Online Identity). However, *online identity* within the context of social media is not limited to the presentation of the self. What is important from the sociological and psychological point of view, "the construction and definition of network identity depends on and requires the acceptance and recognition of others" (Del Prete & Redon Pantoja, 2020). This position can be classified as a transposition of the concept of generalized other, introduced by George Herbert Mead to explain the notion of society in term of a particular and shared social system; "an individual experiences oneself not directly but indirectly, adopting the points of view of other members of the same social group (...). The individual acts as other people toward oneself" (Szacki, 2005: 582–584). In turn, self-presentation is defined as a behavior "that attempts to convey some information about oneself or some image of oneself to other people. It denotes a class of motivations in human behavior. (...). Two types of self-presentational motivations can be distinguished. One (pleasing the audience) is to match one's self-presentation to the audience's expectations and preferences. The other (self-construction) is to match one's self-presentation to one's own ideal self" (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987: 71).

The concept of *virtual identity*, connected mainly with *Second Life* phenomenon, is also worth to be mentioned: virtual identity is consciously used by the user, and accordingly – it is certainly associated with self-presentation and self-categorization of the individual (Soldatova & Pogorelov, 2018). What both concepts have in common, it is actively constructed presentation of the self. Such a position is consistent with a constructivist perspective on identity in sociology, what means that scholars tend to classify identity more as a process than as a state.

Thus, the self-awareness of an individual or collective "I" in terms of the "crisis of belonging" (Bauman, 2007: 14–15), becomes an indispensable practice, a repeated or reconstructed procedure of legitimization of one's presence in the world. According to Giddens, the process of establishing an individual's identity results from the efforts to "get to know oneself better", which allows for producing and playing a satisfactory sense of identity (2010: 104). The notion of lifestyle is also significant in Giddens' considerations: "A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices that an individual undertakes not only because they are useful, but also because they give a material shape to individual identity narratives" (2010: 113).

Social media platforms like FB allow user to reveal daily practices one undertakes and thus to establish and control the desired image of self.

“Retouching” identity and managing one’s image in virtual world

The course of the empirical study involved: the netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2012) and conducting mini online-survey consisting of 5 questions (excluding socio-demographic data). The survey was collected among 100 Facebook users. The investigated sample included 100 users selected from the group of the author's *friends* in FB network (which is about 15% of the total *friends* number). The online questionnaire was distributed through personal contacts in Messenger communicator by the method of purposive sampling – sending a link with an invitation to participate. As the conducted research is preliminary and its purpose was only to probe a given phenomenon, no sociometric data will be discussed here. Results obtained from the conducted mini-survey are as follows.

Firstly, respondents were asked why they post on Facebook information about where they have been, what they have done and with whom, and other details from their private lives. The respondents could indicate only one answer. The answers are presented in Table 1:

Table 1	Main motivation to post content on FB	% answers
1.	I want to show off what I do - e.g. traveling	21
2.	I want to share nice moments with my friends	21
3.	I want my friend to know what I am doing/thinking at the moment	17
4.	Because others do so	18
5.	Because it is trendy	18
6.	I don't share any content about my personal life	5
	Total	100

What seems to be important taking into account the main question posted in this paper – this is the number of respondents sharing content due to the desire to show off what they are currently doing (21%), the desire to inform friends about undertaken activity (17%), and posting because of the fact, that social media activity is fashionable (18%). It means that for more than 50% users who took part in the questionnaire, the main motivation is connected with prestige and willingness to share an attractive vision of life. According to Polish sociologist Henryk Domański, “prestige is difficult to grasp because we do not see it directly. Stuck in the middle - covered with labels of social position, wrapped in a coat of appearances, in a web of gestures, bows, respect and flattery. It is one of the phenomena that cannot be touched, unlike measurable, observable things” (Domański, 2012: 13). Prestige is closely related to the category of lifestyle, and thus to the domain of social differentiation. "Differentiation of prestige creates a stratification ladder, which is the conscious counterpart of the objective hierarchy, the basic dimension of social stratification in the sphere of collective consciousness, with significant consequences for behavior and attitudes”, says Domański (2012: 14–15) and adds that the distribution of prestige is determined by the rule of supply and demand, in other words: the availability of a given good or item.

In order to reveal practices connected with impression management, respondents were asked if they use filters or any kind of apps or software to edit photos they share. In other words, how often they “improve” their appearance before accepting a picture on the FB timeline. All of the participants of the study declared that they share photos – although the frequency of posting photos varies greatly among them.

The answers concerning retouching photos are presented in Table 2:

Table 1	The frequency of modifications of the photos posted	% answers
1.	Always	4
2.	Very often	34

3.	Often	33
4.	Rarely	15
5.	Never	14
Total		100

The data show that almost 3/4 of the respondents use photo modification techniques before sharing them with others. It means, that intentional attempt to control one's image is important for more than 70% of survey participants. Users reflectivity applies to the body and appearance – the awareness of the body and non-verbal signals is significant while operating in the sphere of impression management. Retouching photos strongly corresponds with Goffman's and Debord's concepts of social interactions: performing a particular social role involves artifacts that triggers "right" (desired) audience's reaction. In case of FB, user is equipped with many tools helping to build expected image – for example with the *View my profile* function, user can control how other users see our profile, change the account settings to adjust them to personal preferences. As one of the students in social media course conducted by author noted – *Facebook encourages us to create and present a version of ourselves that we want to be rather than the one we are. We never take off mask on FB. Positive reactions make us feel understood and socially bonded¹*. Following happy lives of other users encourages to present one's own life similar or better; photos posted on the profile often stimulate unreal desires and hopes what sometimes can cause mental disorders (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). The next question relates to the one discussed above – respondents were asked about their motivation to correct photos. Most of them declare they correct pictures to improve the quality of the image, only 25% admit they improve photos to look better. What should be noted – 85% of female respondents (N=68) claimed to use retouching tools before sharing photo on the timeline. This constatation should be analyzed with regard to the social constructs of beauty and dominative socio-cultural requirements towards beauty standards.

The purpose of the two last questions was to probe the respondents' opinions about *likes* – i.e. how getting *likes* contributes to the social need of belonging. The question posted was "How do you feel when getting *likes*?" The answers are shown in the Figure 1:

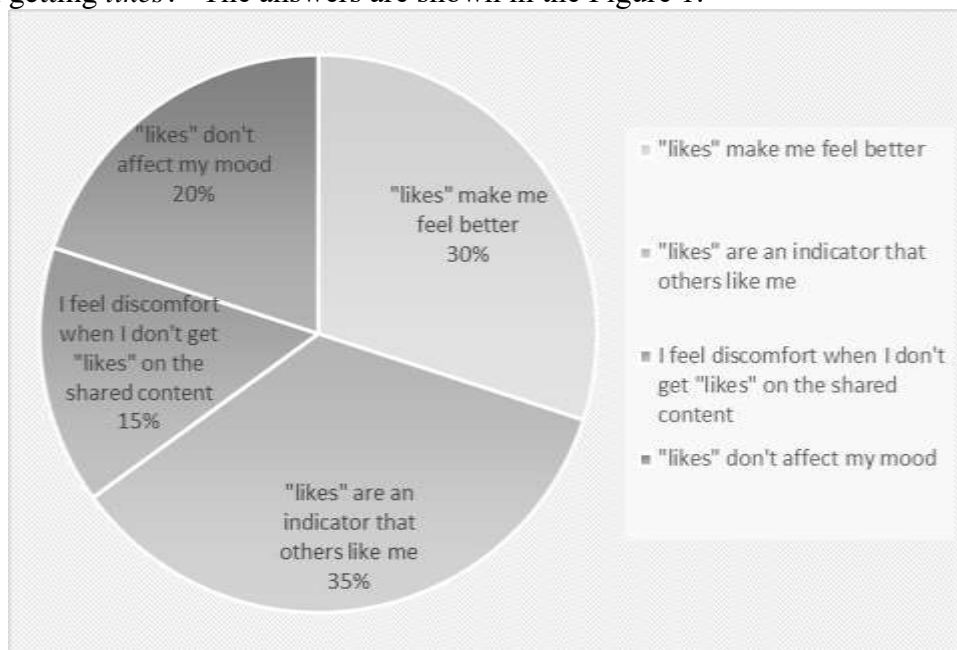


Figure 1.

¹ Course „Social media” for sociology students, Silesian University of Technology winter semester 2019/2020.

Likes are mostly perceived as indicator of liking and lack of *likes* cause the feeling of discomfort among 20% of respondents. *Likes* received from other users evoke positive emotions and contribute to the improvement of mood and well-being. An assumption can be made that receiving *likes* meets the need for social affiliation. In turn, when asked why they give *likes*, almost ½ of respondents answered that press thumb up in order to show support to the person who shares content. Due to the *like* function, Facebook provides users with a feeling of belonging, approval and acceptance.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to examine Facebook environment as space of establishing social identity in reference with the sociological concepts of the self and analysis of society by means of dramaturgical metaphors. Both recalled perspectives applied for the analysis of the internet identity phenomenon show the significance of active (intended, conscious) role of a user in the process of identity establishing. Although there is already an extensive body of literature on the undertaken issue, the question is current and enables interdisciplinary position, combining the perspective of communication studies, sociology and social psychology.

Social media and Facebook itself has contributed to the redefinition of the concept of social needs. The considerations on self-presentation on Facebook can be recapitulated to the symbolic statement that *we are what we post* (Schau & Gilly, 2003). The preliminary analysis of identity manifestations in online environment done by means of online survey on the sample of 100 users shows that one of the most important motivators engaging users to share personal content is desire to be admired. In order to achieve acceptance and popularity vast majority of respondents are prone to correct pictures shared. The limited amount of data collected for this study and limited research methods appointed determines the classification of this study as preliminary. The research question is actual and the in-depth study of the issue is needed. However, findings contribute to the research both in sociology and communication studies

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ФОРМУВАННЯ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ, САМОПРЕЗЕНТАЦІЇ ТА УПРАВЛІННЯ ВРАЖЕННЯМИ В СОЦІАЛЬНІЙ МЕРЕЖІ «FACEBOOK»: СОЦІОЛОГІЧНІ АСПЕКТИ

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Мета дослідження – проаналізувати середовище «Facebook» (FB) як сучасний простір створення соціальної ідентичності. Процеси встановлення віртуальної ідентичності через зміст профілю людини в соціальній мережі «Facebook» визначаються з урахуванням

соціологічних концепцій самості й соціальної ідентичності. Аналіз проявів ідентичності через соціальні медіа забезпечує міждисциплінарну концептуалізацію проблеми соціальних змін, спричинених зростанням ролі інтернету. Представлений документ нагадує соціологічні концепції ідентичності й поєднує соціологічну перспективу з підходом до комунікативних досліджень.

Методологія. Для досягнення цілей даної роботи були призначені методи аналізу змісту й віртуальної етнографії. Дослідження включало огляд літератури та невелике онлайн-опитування, проведене серед користувачів FB. Обмежений обсяг даних, зібраних для цього дослідження, та обмежені методи дослідження визначають класифікацію цього дослідження як пілотного. Дослідження є актуальним, тому необхідне подальше поглиблене вивчення аналізованої проблеми. Висновки сприяють дослідженням як у соціології, так і в соціальних комунікаціях.

Висновок. Формування ідентичності у вигляді профілю користувача розуміється з точки зору навмисного процесу самопрезентації "Я". Соціологічні концепції самості, а також драматургічний підхід та суспільство видовищної позиції можуть бути застосовані до середовища аналізу соціальних медіа. Як показано в попередньому емпіричному дослідженні, виступ у мережі «Facebook» передбачає формування свідомого образу про себе та використання стратегій управління враженнями.

Ключові слова: соціальні медіа, соціальна ідентичність, самопрезентація, управління враженнями.

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