Identity (Re)Construction in an Online Environment: A Qualitative Inquiry of Older

Adult Facebook Users

by

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Abstract

Facebook offers users a mode in which to (re)construct their identity. Recent studies examining identity and Facebook explore how impression management\textsuperscript{1} is a major factor when participating in the site. However, a research gap exists regarding the perspectives and experiences of older adult users and how they construct their identity on Facebook. This study extends the current knowledge base on identity in online environments. Qualitative face-to-face interviews with 16 individuals (8 male, 8 female) between the ages of 48-67 followed by a detailed thematic analysis indicate that identity is not fixed; but rather, is multiple and ever-changing. Findings reveal the performative nature of identity on Facebook through the identification of seven identities: expressive, hesitant/cautious, censored, vain, controlled, confident, and validated. Results give voice to older adults, an age group largely ignored when exploring the use of social media.

\textit{Keywords:} identity construction, Facebook, older adults, impression management, Goffman

\textsuperscript{1} All efforts that an individual makes, either consciously or unconsciously, to influence audience belief in their performance (self-presentation) are defined as “impression management” (Goffman, 1959)
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Section One: Introduction

This study addresses the current research gap in online identity by focusing on modes of identity construction by older adults. The main research question is: How do older adult Facebook users (re)construct their identities in an online environment? This study extends the current knowledge base on identity (re)construction in online environments by focusing on the experiences of older adults, the fastest growing users of Facebook and other social media (Madden, 2010).

This study is unique in subject and approach, targeting older adult users of digital media (Facebook) through a qualitative approach. Although much attention has been paid to the use of social networking sites (SNS) in the lives of youth, there is a paucity of research on older adults’ use of SNS (Selwyn, 2004). According to Subrahmanyam and Smahel (2011), it is simplistic to think that the search for one’s identity ends in the period of adolescence. Instead, identity construction must be considered a lifelong process. As such, it is critical to move beyond current research examining youth identity in online environments and study identity formation of older adults online. Building on an interpretive symbolic interaction tradition (Denzin, 2001), this study uses qualitative methods to explore the construction of self by older adult Facebook users.

Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings. Erving Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective is drawn upon as it offers an interpretive paradigm (Edgely, 2003) and highlights the performative nature of identity as individuals look to enact positive

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2 Self and identity represent critical concepts for the exploration and analysis of social behavior. They are recognized as being essentially social in nature (Gecas & Burke, 1995). These concepts are intricately related but not synonymous (Gecas, 1995) and more than simply parts, although it is recognized that they may be treated as such for analytic purposes (Altheide, 2000). Nonetheless, despite multiple definitions, Altheide (2000) notes that social scientists appear willing to accept that self refers to “the sense of a total and exclusive persona” (a set or series of identities) and identity is that “part of the self by which we are known to others” (p. 2).

3 Although Goffman limited his discussion of self-presentation to face-to-face interaction, the initiation of new communication technologies such as the Internet has muddied traditional boundaries (Walker, 2000).
images of themselves to others. Goffman’s landmark approach to analyzing the performance of self is applicable not only to face-to-face interaction, but also to asynchronous and real-time interaction on the Internet (Westlake, 2008). This dramaturgical approach to impression management affords a great deal of individual agency, as the individual is not considered as simply passive (Edgley, 2003). Rather, human beings negotiate meanings of their lives in social situations with others (Edgley, 2003). Meaning in the dramaturgical sense is “established in the ongoing process of acting toward and interacting with others” (Edgley, 2003, p.143). Using a symbolic interactionist perspective to frame the ways individuals present themselves in an online space underlines the influence of others in this self-representation. Goffman suggests that these self-presentations are not simply for others, but represent the ways in which a sense of self is developed by way of the impressions created for others (Van House, 2011). Goffman’s (1959) distinction between “front stage” (performances enacted with an audience present) and “back stage” (can step out of character with a non-present audience) is particularly relevant. Although particular features of “front-stage” performance, such as clothing, facial expression and tone of voice, are absent in computer-mediated communication they are replaced by more “staged” elements such as photographs, text font, music, and graphics (Westlake, 2008).

This thesis also draws upon Hearn’s (2008, 2011) discussion of self-branding, which she defines as “an outer-directed form of self promotion focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary capital” (Hearn, 2011, p. 317). Such self-branding demonstrates its inflection on social network sites such as Facebook, which offers a unique virtual space where users can spend their time crafting their public profiles. Hearn views Facebook as an inventory of various types of selves wherein users become “digitized
character actors” (Alexnader, 2007 in Hearn, 2008, p. 211) who methodically produce personal profiles and photographs of their everyday social lives.

**Section Two: Literature Review**

Social networking and identity construction have recently become a topic of interest (Boon & Sinclair, 2009; DeAndrea & Walther, 2011; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). By exploring the ways in which individuals (re)construct their identity in online spaces, scholars aim to reveal the ways in which self-presentation tactics are put into play. Facebook has become the preferred mode of communication for many people (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011) and thus is considered an excellent site for investigating impression management and self-presentation in an online environment (Utz, 2010). Furthermore, as Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) argue, Facebook is an ideal site for studying identity construction since it represents a “nonymous” (the opposite of “anonymous”) online environment where relationships between users are anchored in offline communities (p. 1820). The “nonymous” conditions of Facebook affect identity production since users’ identities are revealed and as a result they do not disclose aspects of themselves they do not want others to know about (Zhao et al., 2008).

There is consensus within the current literature that Facebook users aim to project an ideal image of the self (Zhao et al., 2008; Boon & Sinclair, 2009; DeAndrea & Walther, 2011; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). According to Zhao et al. (2008), individuals are likely to present “hoped-for possible selves” on Facebook, a self that is socially desirable (p. 1819). Supporting this idea of a socially desirable identity, Boon and Sinclair (2009) argue that cultural pressure, social mores, and individual desire lead Facebook users to create idealistic virtual (re)presentations of their “real world selves” (p.103). Although the self (re)created on Facebook
is part of who the user is offline, there is an element of performativity; it is often a more positive, attractive and/or profitable version, a self that the user wants to be (Boon & Sinclair, 2009). Zhao et al. (2008) present a similar argument that the self projected on Facebook is not one’s “real self” but instead represents an identity that individuals aspire to have offline but have yet to achieve. Studies by DeAndrea and Walther (2011) and Rosenberg and Egbert (2011) indicate that a favourable impression is the primary goal of Facebook users. They argue that a user’s ability to control the information they produce on Facebook results in mass dissemination of information (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011).

Although the “ideal self” is a common theme in the literature, there is disagreement regarding whether or not this is positive. Boon and Sinclair (2009) take a critical approach to the artificiality of identity within online spaces and argue that the digital self, represented through Facebook, is a fractured and confused reflection of a person. Zhao et al. (2008) on the other hand, conclude that Facebook serves as a vehicle to empower users to produce socially desirable identities that they are not capable of producing offline.

According to Hearn (2008), Facebook produces inventories of branded selves. It is through this ability to control one’s message at all times that Facebook users engage in a type of personal branding. Hearn’s (2008) concept of “self-branding” reflects DeAndrea and Walther’s (2009) research findings that when creating online profiles, Facebook users experience pressures to commodify the self into the most attractive package possible. Commodification of one’s identity online reflects how individuals strategically present themselves in favorable ways via various self-presentation tactics (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). I explore Hearn’s (2008) argument that social networking sites such as Facebook represent inventories of branded selves and critique her negative approach to personal branding online by questioning whether or not
individuals (in this case, older adults) are always promoting themselves in order to receive personal gains.

There is a common view among scholars studying identity production on SNS that with social media such as Facebook, users engage in a “performance of self online.” DeAndrea and Walther (2009) argue that, as in face-to-face interactions, users of social media strategically exploit the online environment for impression management (p. 806). Furthermore, rather than presenting the “whole truth” about oneself online users enact their identity on Facebook by making choices about what information they post to their profiles (DeAndrea & Walther, 2009, p. 806; Livingstone, 2008, p. 399). This view that users of SNS make strategic decisions is shared by Rosenberg and Egbert (2011) who indicate that self-presentation and impression management represent conscious efforts to control selected behaviors to make a desired impression on a particular audience (p. 3).

The above study findings that Facebook users utilize the site to create ideal images of the self shed a negative light on this self-representation. Language such as “manipulation” “exploitation,” and “commodification” are used to discuss users’ self-expression on Facebook. Livingstone’s (2008) open-ended individual interviews with teens aged 13-16 offers a more positive approach by arguing that social networking represents a space for teens to engage in a “reflexive project of the self in a social context” (p. 396). In order to exist online, one must write oneself into being; however it does not mean every aspect of oneself must be revealed (Livingstone, 2008). Instead, deciding what to say and what not to say about oneself is an act of agency for teenagers to protect their identity and their spaces of intimacy (Livingstone, 2008). I investigate whether or not this more empowering idea of self-presentation posited by Livingstone (2008) applies to older adult users of Facebook.
Section Three: Research Design

This study uses in-depth interviewing, using the long interview method, described as a conversation intended to highlight the inner views of research participants as they depict their “worlds, experiences and observations” (Charmaz, 1991, p. 385). The research question focusing on how older adults present themselves on Facebook render a qualitative inquiry suitable for an interpretive and exploratory investigation as it permits emergent methods, questions and themes to develop during the study process (Creswell, 2003). The qualitative interview is a particularly relevant technique for accessing individual perspectives and experiences (Devers, 1999). An interpretive symbolic interaction framework is used (Denzin, 2001), allowing for an emphasis on stories and personal experiences, which helps to illuminate participant’s feelings and perceptions.

Qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews with older adult Facebook users were conducted. Respondents include 16 English-speaking individuals (8 males and 8 females), 48-67 years of age, and from the Sydney area in New South Wales, Australia. “Older adults” in this context refers to the “baby boomer,” the generation born between 1946 and 1964. Recent studies (Madden, 2011) indicate that 65 percent of adult internet users use social networking sites. This study focuses on the boomer-aged segment of social networking since this age group is more likely than older generations to make regular use of these tools (Madden, 2011). In fact, 32 percent of users aged 48-67 are making social networking part of their daily routine–logging onto these sites daily (Madden, 2011). This number has grown by 60 percent in only one year (Madden, 2011).

Interviews with participants were digitally audiorecorded. Once each interview was completed, a program called ExpressScribe was used to transcribe each interview verbatim. Recruitment for in-depth interviews used a snowball technique–establishing an initial connection
with a few individuals relevant to the research topic and then using them to establish contacts with others (Atkinson & Flint, 2004). Face-to-face interviews occurred in a location of the participant’s choice. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and observational and reflexive field notes were taken immediately following each interview.

Following ethics approval by the Research Ethics Board at Royal Roads University (Victoria, British Columbia), informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to study participation. Further, participants were informed that all identifying information would be removed to maintain anonymity and necessary steps would be taken to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was used as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data, which allowed for organization and description of the data in rich detail. Basic thematic analysis was extended by interpreting various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998; Bulmer, 1979). Consistent with the focus on Goffman and the consequent research questions, an interpretive thematic analysis was conducted, the goal of which was to perform latent levels of analysis. This process involves data description intended to document key patterns in the semantic content and interpretation, wherein underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations are identified and theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A coding scheme was developed from the conceptual framing, which directed the data analysis and interpretation; it included concepts of impression management, as well as ‘in vivo’ terms and categories of participants as they emerged from the data. Coding strategies established by Braun and Clarke (2006) for qualitative thematic analysis was used. Initially, data was transcribed verbatim, read and reread, and observational and reflexive field notes were reviewed.
in order to render familiarity with the data. Next, initial codes were generated by identifying noteworthy data features systematically across the entire data set, noting data relevant to each code and collating codes into higher-level themes. Finally, a written account was produced by the selection of powerful exemplars, and analysis was related back to the original research questions and relevant literature.

To enhance the overall trustworthiness of the study (verifiability, consistency, integrity of findings) measures to achieve trustworthiness as outlined by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) were used throughout the research process. Specifically, emergent findings were verified using strategies known to enhance credibility (persistent observation and prolonged engagement with the subject matter, including reasonable time spent with data, and overall development of the project), dependability (audit trail established through field notes, extensive memo-writing and reflexive notes, tracking decision-making) and confirmability (multiple reviews of the analysis, interpretation and representation of data).

Section Four: Results

Facebook represents a unique spatiotemporal zone wherein users construct their identity as multiple. The collection of identities that are manifested on Facebook can easily be shown to be diverse and multiple; an individual does not have one fixed identity but rather, they are multiple. According to Gecas (1982) identities focus on meanings, which give structure and content to self-concept. Self-concept is conceptualized as an organization of various identities developed out of the individual’s reflexive, social, and symbolic activities (Gecas, 1982). The results of this study explore respondents’ self-conception, the set of meanings held for themselves when they were asked to reflect on their Facebook pages. This self-concept is largely based on the individual’s observations of others, ideas about who they are based on others’
behaviour, their wishes and desires, and their self-evaluations (Gecas & Burke, 1995). Analysis of the data revealed seven common identities evident in participant narratives, which contribute to the individual’s self-concept. These include: expressive, hesitant/cautious, censored, vain, controlled, confident, and validated.

A number of participants use Facebook as a mechanism for self-expression and tend to use the site to demonstrate their identity as creative, opinionated, talented (particularly regarding work), and humorous. For many, the site provides a space to express themselves in ways they have not been able to offline.

It’s definitely a tool for self-expression. Absolutely. It certainly is for me and because I have a group of friends who are very creative. I have a group of very creative friends you know photographers, textile people, jewelry, a lot of work with pre-loved things, recycled things, now they make things out of wire and- so because we’re a group of- and some sole traders like me, sole traders and creative- we’re all interested in expressing that. So we do express those things and feel free to express it. And for me it’s an outlet to express in a way that I’ve never been able to express before. (P2, F)

Facebook provides older adult users with a platform to express their interests and share such preferences with their “friends.” Participants “like” and follow Facebook pages that express their preferences such as music, movies, which indicate what they are “into” (P12, M). By sharing this information with other users, older adults are often able to form a community with those who share similar interests/hobbies. For example, one participant expresses that her interest is long-distance running so she uses Facebook as a tool to explore avenues where she can interact with others who also enjoy this sport (P14, F). Another participant indicates that when he realized there were pages on Facebook that provide information of interest (about campaigns for
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environmental awareness and political information) he gained more respect for the site and shared that information with his “friends” (P12, M).

There is a tendency for older adults to use Facebook as a tool to express creativity. The creative identity is displayed largely through the ability to share images on the site. “It allows me to be creative and to explore what is creative for my friends on Facebook” (P2, F). One participant states that she is putting out her “personal persona as a person with interesting images” (P5, F). Another indicates that if he took a photograph he was proud of, he would post it on his Facebook page (P11, M). For many participants, the site represents the sole venue where they can express creative/artistic interests, which they have little opportunity to do outside of this online environment. For example, during his interview, one participant, an academic whose work allows for no artistic expression, uses his iPad to show off the photographs he posted on Facebook (P14, M). He was very proud of his photography and was eager to share his creative eye with others. Facebook provides a mechanism for P14 to express a very artistic aspect of himself through his photography. Similarly, another participant working in an office job uses Facebook as a way to show off his artistic abilities and love of the outdoors:

I’m very artistic, I paint and I do stuff and I take like I said, in my opinion I take great photos. I’m very lucky in where I go in life to take really good photos all the time, not many people get that opportunity. It’s very really beautiful pictures of in the bush just lots of really great photos. (P8, M)

The creative identity on Facebook is also expressed through a sense of “playfulness” in users’ posts. As one participant states, “I find it entertaining as well it’s fun for me to be creative, even in short things. I’ll just post on Facebook you know a fun little quirky clip… It keeps me
entertained, it keeps my creative juices flowing” (P1, F). Many participants identified that being creative, mainly through humor, provides “a bit of fun and light entertainment in life” (P9, F).

Participants indicate that the entertainment/fun aspect of Facebook is what draws them to the site. It provides them with the ability to share images/posts they believe to be humorous. One participant mentions that he might have a day (offline) where “there is a lot of serious stuff going on” and on Facebook he has the opportunity to view funny posts such as online cartoons (P12, M). He states, “Sometimes there’s a lot of jokes flying around so I like that... jokes are good” (P12, M). Many participants indicate that despite the fact that they engage in serious discussion on Facebook, the more “fun” aspects of the site are what they enjoy the most. “I’ll post things about rape or child abuse or religion. I start serious topics as well but yeah more often it’s jokes and funny YouTube clips. Frivolous stuff but I think that makes it fun” (P11, M).

Several participants indicate that they use Facebook for work purposes. For many, Facebook offers a venue to express their career-related talents. The site acts as a promotional tool wherein individuals can convey aspects of their work, showing off their talents within that particular field and expressing that to a large, broad audience. As one participant expresses, “You can reach a broader audience much quicker” (P12, M). Another participant indicates that the self-expression she uses Facebook for are similar to a personal website where others can view images of the work that she does (P5, F). She indicates that because of this self-expression, a lot of “friends-of-friends” have asked to be her “friend”. Other participants share similar thoughts:

My interest in it grew when I realized the promotional potential of it. I was doing some events. So I’m an artist, a visual artist, and I realized that people were putting up their
exhibitions and put up their press and so using it as a semi-promotional tool. At first it was just the personal side of it, as it’s gone on I’ve realized it actually has an amazing reach and people really do get to hear what you’re up to… Now with Facebook, with this kind of extended audience, people could probably hear about me or my work in a different way, in a broader way, than having to pick up that particular paper or magazine. (P1, F)

[Facebook] offers us a marketplace that we’ve never had before. There’s an instant ability for me to show a student and be in a conversation with a student. My role as an educator is to show people where to look… so Facebook gives me an opportunity to do that… my Facebook postings can give me a much broader audience to do that. (P5, F)

In fact, for some, the ability to express work reflects their reasons for joining the site and remaining active:

Initially for me it was not so much for personal interactions but probably for the leading in towards the leading into marketing, the business side of things. It’s still all about probably promoting the business and developing a base of connections in the database of people. (P13, M)

Although many participants indicate that expressing their talents in terms of their work is a major influence on why they are on Facebook, others (P15, P16) indicate that they keep their work and personal life very separate. For some, Facebook is not considered an appropriate place for self-expression in terms of work and they note that they make a concerted effort to keep these two worlds separate.

There was a divide among participants regarding expression of their opinions on Facebook. Many users indicate that they are not very opinionated on the site in order to avoid
any potential controversy with “friends.” Others use Facebook as an avenue to share their beliefs even if they are considered controversial. As one participant states, “Any form of opinion is a form of self-expression I think” (P12, M). In fact, some participants are opinionated on the site so that they can be different, to express an alternative to the “norm.” Some participants who are opinionated on Facebook express that they are not concerned that others may not agree with their posts:

I just am who I am but I think all of us are different social situations. Like I’m not necessarily the same person I am talking to you than I am talking to my boss or my colleagues. So I don’t consciously try to be anybody other than myself but I don’t hold back I guess. And if people don’t like it then don’t be my friend on Facebook, you don’t have to listen to me. I’m sure that I say things that offend people sometimes uh yeah discussing religion and things like that, that’s a bit of a minefield. (P11, M)

You’re able to actually express your opinion and it actually helps you, well it helps me I don’t know if it helps anyone else, but it helped me get over this one I’ve been struggling personally for a long long time and that is what other people think. On Facebook anyone, anyone can tap into what you’re saying–they can rip on you, they can agree with you, they can love it, they can hate it. What better way to actually say, no this is what I think and if you don’t like it fair enough. (P12, M)

There is a tendency for older adults users of Facebook to be hesitant/cautious with regards to the site and the Internet in general. As one participant states, “I am VERY spooked by the whole thing. Still” (P14, F). Many experience suspicions regarding who is seeing their Facebook page. They are aware that despite the fact that they restrict their profile and are
selective of whom they “friend”, some aspects of the site are beyond their control in terms of who may gain access to the content.

I’m concerned if I do stop using Facebook how will my data be treated, whether it will be kept somewhere or if I can get rid of it completely. Yeah I guess those sorts of things, confidentiality of your own information or lack of confidentiality of your information, you can’t really control it with Facebook so you don’t know who’s accessing your page. So that does concern me I’m sort of… you know, whereas a lot of young people don’t really care about that, it concerns me that someone can get in and do things and I don’t trust the internet that much anyway. (P7, M)

I know people whose identity has been hacked into on Facebook. So look, I’m the only [name] in the world, it’s not like my name is John Smith, so if you Google me, it’s only me. It isn’t, is this the one from Barbados or the one from South America or the one from Europe? So from my Facebook profile, the amount I put up there, it would be very easy to track me down. I’m aware of that, that’s the internet. (P5, F)

A particular concern among some participants goes beyond “friends-of-friends” and actually extends to advertisers and government agencies. One participant states, “I’m very aware that that just comes back to you and it’s actually a lot of things I think are spam actually and you click on them and they’ve got your details” (P15, F). Others indicate similar concerns:

I have this fear that big brother’s watching us and the more you put on these sorts of things, the more everybody can find out about. I don’t think that’s what I want people to, especially governments or advertisers, to know about me. (P7, M)
Because you get so many advertisements you know that somebody is getting information about you that targets that advertising towards you and that some other people are seeing things about me that I don’t particularly want them too. (P16, M)

Although users remain active on Facebook despite their hesitations, they do engage in cautious behaviour. “I take all the precautions that I’m supposed to as far as my profile goes, my photos and that sort of thing” (P14, F). Participants take part in “precautions” by being anticipatory with what they choose to post/not to post. They do this by avoiding posting anything specific and that they “don’t really want to share with the world” (P7, M). The majority of participants indicate that they do not give anything away that could be used against them such as credit card details (P11, M). One participant expresses her concern regarding the potential for theft:

I reckon through photos people can see what’s in your house… because they can see in the background that you’ve got a big TV or you’ve got a computer and then they go, ah that’s a good place… You’ve got to be a little bit cautious these days. So definitely I am picky with who I friend and share stuff with. (P6, F)

The tendency for users to exercise caution while using Facebook results in censorship and self-consciousness in terms of what they choose to post. Many participants express their conscious choices about what to disclose and how to present themselves according to their perceived audience—who they believe is looking at their Facebook page. The majority of participants are very aware of the layers of audience or “friends” who may look at their page. This results in users’ conscious decisions to censor their posts. “I think about these things a lot and as I’m using it I’m thinking. So, a lot of censoring and a lot of thinking behind it” (P1, F).
Since users are very aware of the public nature of Facebook and that the site goes beyond simply their “friends,” they censor what they post according to both the known audience and the imagined audience. As one participant states, “I don’t really post photos that I don’t want to show my mother” (P11, M). Another indicates, “So I guess if you think about it, any photos that I wouldn’t want anybody to see just don’t go on Facebook” (P15, F). Yet another participant shares her awareness of the public space in which Facebook operates by stating, “I’m aware that it’s a public platform so I’m quite mindful of really operating in a public domain. You know it’s distance, it’s not I don’t pour my heart out on Facebook unless it’s something that’s acceptable” (P3, F). It is critical to participants that they censor themselves by carefully choosing what to post so that it is suitable to a broad audience.

So there are layers of audiences as that showed me this morning because when I wanted to post about just how busy and productive I’d been by 9:30 am. I actually was thinking general audience and then sort of small general you know maybe 50 people might see it and then I thought maybe 500 people might see it, maybe more. So that’s when I censored and didn’t do it. (P1, F)

It’s always been from a business perspective and also for that reason I would be careful about what I said, about what I believe… it wouldn’t be a wise choice to say certain things in the public arena which Facebook is. (P13, M)

Older adult users censor themselves not only regarding the content of their posts but also with regards to the time that they post. For example, one participant indicates that she will not post anything whilst at work, so she will only post in mornings and evenings (P1, F). Another participant reveals that she frowns on others who post during work hours, deeming it
inappropriate and indicating her concern for what others may think of those who do post during those times (P15, F).

Some participants indicate that they were fearful that they might be judged if they disclose too much information about themselves. Consequently, they refrain from posting content they think others may frown upon. One participant states, “I am conscious of my audience when I put something up. Occasionally I’ll think, I might share this and then I’ll think, oh God [name] in America would think I was an absolutely twerp if I shared this” (P5, F).

Another participant expresses a similar concern:

I’m not confident in writing comments because I feel like I’m going to be judged on that. It’s funny when you say audience you don’t think there’s anyone seeing or listening, but there is. I’m fearful of it. I’m fearful of people making a comment and I guess that’s why because I do look at some of the comments and I do think that can be a little bit, oh that’s a bit hard on that person. So I guess I think I find could find it threatening if I did disclose too much of myself. (P9, F)

Rather than posting more intimate details in such a public domain, older adult users of Facebook tend to use the inbox or private message function of the site in order to share their more personal matters. It is through this feature that a distinction can be made between what Goffman terms an individual’s “front stage” and “back stage”. Rather than posting intimate details within the “front stage” setting, a setting in which a large audience is present, individuals use Facebook’s inbox in order to reveal aspects of their “hidden self”. The inbox can be considered a “back stage” setting because it is is a space where partcipants can step out of the character of their public profile. P15 (F) indicates that she tries not “to blurt out too much” on Facebook so anything she wants to say to someone will be sent through a
private message. Similarly, P9 (F) reveals that she does not “give off much” and is consistently closed off. Instead of writing on others walls, she also chooses to send private messages. Similarly, P10 (M) states, “If I want to get down deep and meaningful I would private message somebody rather than leaving it on the open forum.” Yet another participant reveals her reasoning for sending private messages:

Even though you might be pretending you’re doing a private little backwards forwards
I’m very conscious that whatever I write can be seen by a bigger audience. So I generally keep it very light and if I want to go the next step then I’ll do a private message. (P1, F)

Not only are older adult users aware of this broad audience, they also censor their posts in order to appeal to what their audience would like to see and what they expect that audience will respond to. One participant indicates that she only posts pictures of what other people might want to see such as her children (P6, F). Similarly, P16 (F) states, “I don’t blab on it all the time. I don’t let people know I’m about to walk the dog or I’m just sitting here bored. I only do it as basically things that I think will be interesting.” Another participant indicates that she refrains from posting negative comments on her Facebook because she believes others will then “shy away” from her (P1, F).

In order to perform self-censorship and appeal to a broad audience, older adults carefully consider what they post. Many users take time before posting content to their Facebook page:

To write a fairly short, meaningful accurate description of what I want to say on Facebook is the other side of complexity. It’s a complex thing because you don’t want to mislead people, you don’t want to give people the wrong message, so it’s actually something that you might take a bit of time about to get it well to express it well. (P3, F)
I’m not blindly making posts and reflecting things about myself unconsciously like most people do when they don’t realize what they’re putting out there and what information they are giving to people who’s to see that page, they could then use that information for their own vested interests. (P13, M)

One participant states, “I’m conscious of what I’m saying in terms of making sure that it’s not bullshit. You know if I’m saying something serious I want to make sure I’ve done my homework you know” (P12, M). It is clear that this participant thinks well in advance before posting on Facebook. This is also indicated through the field notes taken directly after his interview:

After the interview P12 showed me three pieces of paper where he wrote down a Facebook response to a controversial issue. He also had textbooks laid out that he had been referencing for his response. This has to do with the “stabs” he receives on Facebook for his work in the environment. I found this to be quite intense—I wasn’t aware that someone would go through so much trouble to make a wall post on Facebook. It became very clear to me that P12 places a lot of thought into his posts in order to make clear, well-informed responses. (Field Notes, P12 Interview)

The following excerpt from P12’s interview reveals how he carefully considers his response prior to making a post on Facebook:

I’m a sort of person that needs to think very much before I put something down that I’ll regret… I need to be sure of my facts and I need to be sure if I’m commenting on something serious. If it’s an emotional response that’s pure raw emotion like if I see an image of an elephant with its trunk cut off because somebody wants to take tusks for ivory, I’ll just let rip my emotional content but if I’m responding to something
technical then I’ll have to sit back and take my time and respond and think about how I’m gonna respond. So while Facebook is quite a good tool for instantaneous and very quick and direct communication, it doesn’t mean you have to use it that way. (P12, M)

A number of participants are quick to judge their “friends” on Facebook with regards to their actions on the site and what they dislike about their postings. As a result, Facebook users base their judgments on others’ activity on Facebook in accordance to how they manage their own profile. In particular, participants identify being annoyed with their “friends” when they post or reveal too much. “I don’t do the, I’m really angry with anybody and I don’t do, having a dreadful day wishing you were all here and I’m aware of people who do do it and they annoy me” (P15, F). One participant states, “One of my best friends always puts super sexy photos up of herself which make me cringe” (P1, F). Many participants expressed that their “friends” often post items that they don’t think should be posted. As P16 (M) states, “I’m very aware of what other people post and think, oh they shouldn’t have posted that’s not my business.” Another participant indicates that he often considers his friends posts to be “just so out there.” He states, “…it’s like, oh my god I’ve never put that out there!” (P12, M). The following excerpt reveals how yet another respondent bases his activity on the site by his judgment of others:

I’m very conscious. I don’t post a lot but I’m very careful what I do post and I see some of the things people put on I think, how can you put that on? I had a couple of nieces who are on it all the time and they’re constantly on it, they post a dozen times a day and I just look at it and think, what are you doing that for? Their life is not a mystery; it’s just an open book for everybody to see. So I’m pretty careful about what I put on. (P7, M)
Older adult Facebook users also tend to dislike when their “friends” post about mundane activities in their daily lives and thus refrain from doing so themselves. For example, P4 (M) states, “There are people who a couple times a day, I’m doing x, I’m doing this, I’m very fond of them but ugh it’s just give me a break.” P2 (F) shares a similar thought about her Facebook “friends”:

A lot of other people that are friends but I don’t necessarily need to see what they’re doing everyday and some of them are a bit tedious so they’re, “I just had a lovely piece of cake at a café and now I’m taking a walk down the lovely street,” and I really don’t care.

(P2, F)

Participants also indicate that they do not like it when others post negative content on their Facebook page or use Facebook to complain. As one participant states, “Facebook isn’t for whining on” (P5, F). Another participant indicates that her “friend” rants and states, “I would never do that, absolutely not” (P1, F). There is a tendency for older adults to dislike when their “friends” post downer comments on Facebook. P7 notices his nieces posting negative content to their Facebook pages, which he finds depressing to read. He states, “I don’t know, it’s depressing for me to read that stuff so I wouldn’t post that about myself to other people” (P7, M). Another participant shares an experience of when someone posted an image of a live cat being skinned and was “quite negative about it” (P9, F). She states, “Why do these people do this?” (P9, F) Based on their dislike of others negativity, many participants tend to stay clear from negative comments and ensure that their page is “always upbeat and positive” (P14, F).

I do positive more than negative. Only because my cousins are whining on there–I have very whiny whiny friends who whine on Facebook. They whine about the weather, they whine about oh I’m so bored today or they complain about all kinds of
things and I would not like to come across as negative on there. It annoys me when other people do. For heavens sake find something. You look through, read it and read it and read it, is there anything nice this person has to say? (P15, F)

My son in-law puts some stupid things on there and a lot of the language he uses is terrible and I say to him, “don’t you realize that I’m looking at that?” “Oh I guess you’re right oh sorry.” “And your wife is looking at that and your kids are potentially looking at that as well.” So I don’t want people to think that of me so I guess I am fairly conscious of that point of view. (P7, M)

Although the majority of participants engage in censorship, one participant indicates that he does not censor himself on Facebook. In fact, he uses the site to say what he often does not in offline environments. In fact, in situations offline he would actually censor himself more than on the site.

I’m probably more open on Facebook than I am in real life. I don’t really censor myself at all. I’ve got bipolar and I posted that on Facebook. Yeah five years ago I was, I hope no one finds out I’m bipolar, but I just think now, stuff it, I am there’s nothing I can do about it it’s no different than being diabetic or-. People think there’s a stigma to it so it’s like a hidden epidemic. So I posted a while back now, I can be serious for five minutes, I’ve got bipolar now let’s get back to the jokes. That’s the only thing about me that’s my skeleton in the closet I guess, I don’t normally say that to someone I just met. (P11, M)

Despite P11’s comfort with revealing a private matter on the site, most participants censor themselves on Facebook so that they refrain from revealing too much information. As indicated above, this is partly due to how they view their “friends” profiles and dislike when they
post too much. Participants also indicate that they refrain from revealing too much based on previous mistakes.

Several participants indicate that in past Facebook use, they revealed what they consider to be too much information. Consequently, they now censor their posts to avoid making the same mistakes. For example, some participants mention that when they first joined Facebook they did not realize the public nature of the site. However, once they became aware of Facebook’s broad audience reach, they began to censor what they choose to post. For instance, P14 (F) indicates that when she first joined Facebook she would post pictures of the children in her primary school class. She states, “…And then when I sort of read more into it about who can access this and what can be done with it, I pulled back very much so” (P14, F). Another participant shares his experience of saying something he should not have on the site:

I spoke to a girl who I met abroad. I was talking to her on my Facebook account and my girlfriend said, “What are you talking to her for and don’t you realize that my mum and dad are seeing you talk to that girl?” I went, “No, I didn’t realize that.” I would definitely be very guarded now in who I speak to and what I say. (P8, M)

Other participants indicate that in the past they have posted something that has been misinterpreted. As one participant reveals, she now limits her postings so that there is a lower likelihood for content to be misunderstood:

I’ve actually had that problem where something’s been posted, I’ve posted it, it was something really sort of out there in the air about how I was feeling and all of a sudden everyone was posting back, some thinking what state of mind I might have been in and did I need some help and consideration [laughs] which is really off the cuff. It was just after my dad passed away. It was just a beautiful thought I had in my
head and I posted it a couple of years ago and the feedback was crazy, it was like they thought I might have been jumping off the cliff next door. So, no more of that.

(P14, F)

As indicated in the section on self-expression, some participants present their opinionated self on Facebook. However, for the majority of participants this was not the case. In fact, many participants censor their activity on Facebook by avoiding postings that may be considered controversial.

I’m just very careful because people compared to me are very straight and I’m extremely conservative. Compared to me and my background and my studies and my travels and my philosophy and my belief system and how I live my life is very different than 99% of the population so I choose not to say certain things because I know they won’t go down well in certain circles, because they’ll misunderstand or misinterpret where I’m coming from. So I’m just very careful about displaying my beliefs that way. (P13, M)

Many participants indicate that they shy away from controversy on Facebook because they are concerned of what others may think or the potential for it to be used against them. As P13 (M) states, “There’s certain things I wouldn’t put on Facebook because I know what the repercussions would be with certain people and they would use that as ammunition against you at some stage.” Another participant shares similar concerns:

I wouldn’t post something like a political comment because I don’t believe that the people I post to would want to hear that or I don’t particularly want them to know my political views. Same thing if I was wanting to make a nasty comment about someone
else, I don’t feel like I should use this medium to do that and I wouldn’t I feel people can get the wrong idea about you. (P7, M)

Many participants reveal that they ignore controversial content on Facebook. One respondent says that despite the fact that she sees controversial posts that are funny, she does not re-post them because she tries to “keep things easy” (P5, F). She states, “I think I was brought up in a generation where socially you never talk about politics and you never talk about religion” (P5, F). The tendency for participants to censor themselves on Facebook leads to a representation of an impersonal self, which is created by conducting surface level posts that are not personal.

A common theme among all participants was the avoidance of personal posts. Participants indicate that they are very particular and do not post the majority of their life (P1, F). “I would not disclose close feelings, I would not disclose anything to do with family or relationships or yeah no it’s all very superficial, definitely” (P14, F). Most participants believe that personal, deep, and meaningful content should be kept to oneself and is something that should only be shared with their partners or close family (P10, M). Although participants share their likes and dislikes and sometimes even what they stand for politically and religiously, they indicate that Facebook is not the place for the personal. As P12 (M) states, “I’m very expressive but personal stuff I’d rather- no that is not the right medium for me in that regard. Not much emotional or personal stuff, no way!” Another participant indicates that she does not post her emotions or inner feelings on Facebook: “It’s more about out here stuff you know or I’m fed up with something but you know nothing that’s really close” (P3, F).

Some participants indicate that delving into the personal may reveal aspects of their life that are embarrassing, their “dirty laundry”: 
So there’s this kind of embarrassment factor that comes in and the too personal. So yeah there’s this sort of play between divulging the personal but obviously being incredibly choosey about which side of your personal. See I also had a fight with my husband this morning but I’m not gonna put that on Facebook am I? (P1, F)

I don’t want the main ingredient of my day on my Facebook page. Right so it’s maybe that’s about dirty laundry, I don’t want my dirty laundry on Facebook but it’s more about a depth like I will say I’m happy about this or I’m not so happy about that, so I’ll present positive or negative, but it will be at this level. (P3, F)

Rather than revealing personal information, many participants engage in lurking where they close off/minimize their own activity and instead spend most of their time looking at “friends” pages. As one participant states, “I mean I’m interested in seeing what they’ve got to say but I don’t really want them to know what I’m doing all the time” (P7, M). Another admits to “stalking” on the site, “I probably kept on it just to keep in contact with people overseas and to what’s the word when you stalk people, I stalk people, that’s why I do it” (P15, F). Instead of posting a large amount of content, participants would rather lurk the pages of others. “I’m much more a lurker than an upfront person. I put on something every now and again or comment but I’m very aware of fairly limited public comment” (P3, F).

The vain identity represented on Facebook refers to the tendency for participants to engage in attention-seeking behaviour on the site. Many participants use Facebook in order to show off, both on behalf of the self and on behalf of others. It is common for older adult users to present themselves and their family favourably. As one participant indicates, “I think everybody likes to promote themselves to some degree” (P10, M). Another states:
Naturally it’s all vanity—it’s only a good photo of myself and of course how you present yourself and your family…There’s posts where I think I’m really, really funny and they should all respond cause it’s hilarious. There’s ones where I look absolutely drop dead gorgeous so they should all respond as in, my goodness me how gorgeous are you? Or naturally the grandkids, everyone’s got to love my grandkids. I’ve got the most gorgeous grandkids on this earth so of course I do. (P14, F)

This type of bragging usually involves places participants have travelled or pleasures they experience. P7 indicates that he will post when he is on holiday, for example, if he has just been to Paris and been by the Eiffel Tower (P7, M). Another participant reveals that she will often “tag” herself around places just to say, “well guess where we are now” (P15, F). She also states that she will take photographs of a sunrise “just to rub it in the noses of people who don’t have nice sunrises” (P15, F).

The majority of participants experience major concerns regarding how their physical looks are represented on Facebook. As a result, they put much effort into selecting photographs of themself that are displayed on their Facebook page. One participant in particular was very proud of the way she displays her physical appearance. She places much thought and management into photographs of herself on Facebook:

I’ll change my profile picture. I only put up the good ones so I’m incredibly selective.

Yeah I don’t want to put up any crappy rubbishy snapshots so yeah I’m very conscious of it… I will be totally controlled about which picture go up. (P1, F)

According to field notes for this participant’s interview:

P1 said to feel free (in fact, she encouraged me) to use her profile pictures for the study.

She was obviously very proud of the image she portrays of herself on Facebook. She has
carefully selected the “best” photos of herself to use as her profile images and this was evident not only by her telling me but by wanting others to see them as well. (Field Notes, P1, F)

The participant also indicates that the reason she wants to show off her image to others is because she has recently lost a lot of weight:

Losing 30 pounds is significant as I’m quite sure- and I’ve been aware that I wouldn’t have wanted pictures of myself up before and now I’ve got funky clothes or I’m taking a lot of interesting pictures and I’ve become more promotional of my self image because I like the look better of myself you know in certain pictures or clothes. So without that weight loss I don’t think you’d catch me putting too many pictures of myself on Facebook. And I’m not saying I put a lot on but I’m very conscious of when I change my profile picture and which one it is or isn’t. When I go around putting on 30 or 40 kilos again I don’t think you’d see me. I’d probably leave that profile picture as is and that would be that. (P1, F)

When images of the self appear on the site (i.e. when others “tag” or upload photographs of participants) that they dislike, many participants indicate a strong aversion. A number of participants reveal that they would ask their “friend” to remove the photo. In fact, several participants were very offended when they discussed experiences where others have uploaded unattrative photographs. As P5 (F) states, “Yeah I’m really offended when people upload pictures of me that aren’t very complementary cause I’m vain and want other people to see me in my best light.” Other participants share similar concerns:
Sometimes people will tag you and they don’t think it’s offensive and I’ll say ugh just take that down because it actually doesn’t look nice of your mother on there or of your auntie so can you just take that photo down that’s all. (P15, F)

You know I’d love to portray myself as an unlined 40-year-old woman on Facebook if I had to put up a photograph. And that’s my own vanity there so I don’t put up many photographs. That’s why I get really cross when other people put up a photo of me that makes me look 10 years older than I am. (P5, F)

One participant states, “There was a photo posted yesterday. I went, hey that’s not a photo I wanted!” (P8, M). Another shares a similar experience:

I recently went to India and we went on a bus trip and I had fallen asleep against the window on the bus and somebody had taken a photo of me and I seemed to have lots of chins and I went, oh my god how could anybody put this photo up? (P5, F)

As noted in the field notes, P5 (F) is very caught up in her appearance on Facebook in terms of her personal photographs. “She is very upset when she tells me about the posts of unflattering photos. She also reveals that she hides her age in the ‘about me’ section and posts limited pictures of herself” (Field notes, P5, F). The fact that she hides her age on Facebook reveals a deceptive self practiced in this online environment, a quality that is revealed by several other participants.

Many participants engage in manipulative behaviour on Facebook in order to present a favourable image of the self. For example, several participants rarely post photographs of themselves in order to avoid presenting an unattractive self-image. As one participant states, “I don’t do those [pictures of myself] [laughs] I’m very picky” (P6, F). Another reveals that he rarely posts photographs of himself:
Well I rarely have photos of me… I just don’t see any point in having my ugly mug on a Facebook page, I’d rather have nice scenery. Usually the ones I choose are a profile hat of me with sunnies on. You can hardly see me. (P12, M)

As revealed in the above quote, P12 is deceptive on Facebook by omitting photographs of himself; when he does include a self image it is hard to see what he actually looks like. This manipulation by omission not only occurs through photographs but also through text. What older adult users choose to write on Facebook tends to reflect only aspects they want to share with others.

Yeah there’s a bit more bravado I suppose and a bit of- I’ll talk about when I play soccer and I’ll talk about when I win and scored a goal or you know something like that. But I don’t think it’s exaggerated I think it’s more balanced perhaps by the fact that I scored a goal but we got beaten five nothing you know [laughs] or something whatever. (P3, F)

In the above quote, it is evident that P3 understands that she only represents aspects of her soccer game that depict her as a success. This awareness was also revealed by other participants who state that they are actually aware that manipulative behaviour occurs on Facebook. It is known that users tend to want to present themselves in a favourable light and often times they fail to represent the whole “truth.” As P14 (F) states, “We all like to think everything’s a little bit better and rosier than what it is.” Another participant shares her ideas regarding Facebook users who present themselves as environmentalists:

So I feel that it is a bit of a whitewash, this justifying oh we got to be better people but we’re not. We don’t do it, we sit on the loungechair and click that button. So I think if we really wanted to and we felt that was important, the environmental issue, we should be out there doing it. We wouldn’t be wasting the energy and electricity
that goes into that… I guess obviously that’s what Facebook does, we want to portray ourselves as good people and as something better. (P9, F)

When photographs are posted on the site, participants use deception to present a more favourite image. For example, one participant indicates that he wears a hat in order to cover his bald head (P12, M). Another participant used a photograph of himself from 10 years earlier because he felt that he looked “really good in that particular image” (P8, M). One participant uses a photograph of himself with a large fish as his profile picture. To his “friends” it appears that the participant is a skilled fisherman since the picture depicts him looking proud while holding up this very large fish. However, the participant indicates that although he was in fact on a fishing trip, he did not actually catch that particular fish, somebody else did (P4, M). This participant’s actions reveal not only manipulation to make the self appear “better” but it also presents attention-seeking behaviour.

Participants often engage in attention-seeking behaviour in order to “show off” and get a response from others. For example, P6 reveals that she likes to cook and often posts pictures on Facebook of a beautiful cake she has made. She reveals that the reason she posts these impressive photographs is so others will comment on how amazing they look (P6, F). One participant uses a photograph of himself where he appears to have a hook through his tongue. He states, “I posted it and everybody’s going, people are posting, is [name] okay?” (P4, M). It is evident that P4 posted that photograph in order to seek attention from his “friends,” to attract a shocking response from others. Facebook provides participants with the power to show off, manipulate, and seek attention, thus presenting them in the most favourable way possible. In order to present this vain self, older adult users engage in a controlled behaviour.
There is a tendency for participants to refrain from posting any negative commentary or images on Facebook. Participants indicate that they “stay away from negativity on Facebook” (P10, M). One participant reveals that she will post family photos but only the ones where she is happy (P5, F). Another states, “If I post anything it’s generally positive. I wouldn’t post anything negative, especially about myself” (P7, M). P6 (F) shares a similar opinion, “Yeah everything’s always positive, never negative. If I post something it’s probably a little positive picture or something funny. You know if I see something I like I share it, it’s always positive.” Other participants reveal similar ideas:

I’ve always been a person who you know even if you are having a bad day it’s not anyone else’s fault and it’s unfair to actually cast that upon anyone else whether it be through Facebook or on the street or anywhere. (P2, F)

In real life when you meet somebody you want them to see you at your best. When you’re at home and you’re slopping around and you’re just being a messy person that’s fine but you’d like to think that people only see you as a positive person. So yeah I guess you would use Facebook for that. (P15, F)

Rather than sharing negative aspects of their lives on Facebook, older adults tend to share such negativity in a more personal and less public setting offline. For example, one respondent states, “I would never go on there and be like, oh poor me, even if I felt like that… I’m not like that. I get my support from my family not from randoms out there in the wide world” (P6, F). Similarly, another participant states:

I don’t think I want the rest of the world to know if I’m having a bad day. I’ll talk to someone personally and I don’t feel that it’s a form of comfort for other people to read on Facebook. (P9, F)
OLDER ADULTS AND IDENTITY (RE)CONSTRUCTION IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Not only do participants suggest that they themselves ignore negatives on Facebook, they also observe similar behaviour among their “friends.” As one participant states, “I don’t know whether they intentionally make it look like it’s all good but they don’t portray anything negative” (P9, F).

Participants indicate that when controlling their Facebook page they ensure that they are consistent as to how they depict who they are online. One participant uses her privacy settings to put a review process in place (P2, F). She will receive an email notification notifying her that another user has posted something on her Facebook page. P2 will then review the post and if it is consistent and relevant, she will allow the post to be public on her Facebook page. However, if the post is not consistent, the participant will not allow the post to be seen on her timeline. Another participant shares his concern as to what others would think of him if he was not consistent on Facebook:

Obviously on Facebook me, and I would imagine a lot of other people, have created a particular image and you’ve got to step up you’ve got to be consistent there. If you start being a bit all over the place and one minute you’re supporting environmental movements, next minute you’re saying, oh I don’t reckon [unclear word] aren’t that bad, people are just gonna what sort of fruit loop is this? (P12, M)

For several participants, their children have a major influence on their use of Facebook; they control their Facebook pages with their children in mind. For many, they are the sole reason for joining (some children actually joined the site on behalf of their parent) but they also have a lot of input into the ways in which older adults (re)present themselves online.
OLDER ADULTS AND IDENTITY (RE)CONSTRUCTION IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

I want to present myself as being sane, honest because I’m a role model for most of the people I talk with. I’m a role model for my children so I try to be nice, friendly, positive affirmations. So I’m very, very particular about not giving out negative information very often, I try to be positive. I try to teach my children how I talk to them and talk to other people, try to create a respect always. So I actually talk as a role model and that’s how I see myself when I’m on Facebook. (P8, M)

For some, their child has actually chosen and uploaded their profile picture for them. Others strongly consider what their children will think before they post on the site. In many cases, participants reveal that they do not want to embarrass their child and so they filter posts based on this consideration. As one respondent states, “You’d like to think that your child is not embarrassed by stuff you’ve put on and that’s part of their presentation on Facebook too I guess” (P15, F). Another participant shares a similar thought, “I’m very aware of my kids because I don’t want to embarrass them. You know I don’t want to post something on there they go, oh mom!” (P6, F).

Some participants indicate that they have uploaded items on Facebook in the past and their child has been upset about it. They learn from their children about proper site etiquette, what they should and should not post.

I’ve uploaded a couple of what I thought were cute photos of the boys. I scanned them into the computer and just thought, oh here we go, and the youngest bloke goes, “why did you put that up, next time you ask me first!” And I’m going, oh shit I crossed the line. So ditto, you know, I think fair enough the young blokes got a point and I respect that you know and just cause I’m older than them doesn’t mean I can’t learn some etiquette and
some manners on Facebook either. They’re the ones that have used it more than I have.

(P12, M)

I put a picture up of [daughter’s name] and she told me to take it down… it’s not a regular thing but they certainly- and I just let them know that I’m lurking. I don’t engage on Facebook like they don’t particularly want me to do that, that’s my feeling, but they know and they haven’t de-friended me. They know that I’m just I’m there. (P3, F)

Many participants reveal that the site helps them in expressing themselves more confidently. Facebook provides many participants with an ego boost. As a result, they are able to present themselves more confidently through the site. As one participant states, “It really keeps your confidence up and it’s a support network as well” (P2, F). Another participant shares an experience of an offline situation that occurred because of her Facebook page. This experience encourages her to portray a confident portrait of herself online. A group of individuals approached this participant complimenting her page:

So even though I hadn’t seen them for a number of years because they made that comment to me I got an ego hit from it. They didn’t say what I’d done they just commented, oh it was fun watching reading about you. So definitely it acts in that way to promote your self-image. (P1, F)

As indicated in the following quote, the ego boost participants receive from Facebook often results because of positive feedback and past validation that has occurred for participants on the site:

I have noticed that some things I’ve put up—for example when I passed my PhD which was late last year I put a little note about that and I got a lot of feedback, a lot of likes and
comments. So it’s an ego boost there’s no question. It’s insane it really plays with your ego, your desire for attention and validation. (P1, F)

Many older adult users of Facebook indicate that they often post content on their Facebook page with the deliberate intention to receive feedback. When they do not receive that feedback they often feel disappointed (P1, F).

I will sometimes post some things because I know someone’s gonna get stirred up about it, just to get a bit of a debate going. If I post something about Julia Gilard or something like that, I know certain people that will react to it and I’ve got some ideas what sort of reaction I’m gonna get from some people and sometimes I do it deliberatly to get a reaction. (P11, M)

I’ll post or put a picture up and of course and I’m very aware cause I’m hoping for a response, a like or a comment quite quickly cause that sort of just you know it sort of just endorses what you’ve said or posted. So yeah and then it’s always nice to see a little comment back or a like or something. (P14, F)

I post what I think are interesting pictures of pots and artwork and from the feedback I get from people who do I get you know occasionally I get people who said, god where do you get all these images from they’re fantastic, you know okay I’m doing it. (P5, F)

What participants choose to post or not to post often depends on their expectation of audience feedback, whether or not they will get that feedback/validation that they so desire. One participant states, “I do [post photos] but they would only be photos or albums or anything that I know somebody would be interested in and would make a good comment” (P10, M).

Many participants indicate that they have a certain expectations in terms of who will comment on their Facebook posts. One respondent states, “I have a good idea of who is
going to make a comment and we tend to do that you know probably on any comment or any photo we might upload, we would expect comments from the same people” (P10, M). Another reveals a similar expectation:

Yeah so I guess I’ve got this audience of about 20 that I’m applying too and if the other 70 odd make a comment or whatever then that’s fine but I’m not really expecting them to be there. I guess it’s like if you go to the same pub every night you see a lot of the same people but some people only come once every month and some people come once every six months. (P11, M)

The majority of participants not only expect a certain amount of audience feedback but they also enjoy when they do get this [positive] feedback. As P10 (M) states, “I think positive feedback would inspire you to post more material of the same quality.” It offers a number of participants a confirmation that what they are posting is enjoyable for others (what they so desire) and encourages them to post more. For example, P12 (M) states, “It’s nice to have positive response, it’s nice to have feedback and likes and shares and stuff it’s good because you know your information or what your saying or your thoughts are being heard.” P5 (F) also reveals her enjoyment of positive feedback. She states, “Everyday I’ll have a little flurry on Facebook and share half a dozen images and the next morning I’ll wake up and maybe 15 or 20 likes or sharings or comments and you think, that’s a nice little catch.” For some, this positive feedback offers them a support network:

I find Facebook helps me with my depression… You post, I’m having a bit of a bad day, and 10 people who you hardly know post back and say, “oh that’s no good cheer up mate you’ll be all right.” Yeah and I support other people as well on it and it makes you feel good too. If somebody says they’re having a bad day you try to cheer them up somehow.
It’s like a free counselor. “It’s all right mate, you can handle it you’ll get through.”

Virtual hugs. (P11, M)

Facebook validates the self by providing older adults with a clear picture of who they are. Some participants indicate that they often look through their Facebook page and get a sense of their identity, the aspects that make them who they are.

It puts your notion of self in your face... I even look at Facebook and flick back through my own photos and I can see who I was and who I am and who I want to be and um it’s a little profile of myself but when I look back at it, it’s like, wow that really is me. (P14, F)

I’m a different person with you than the person I am with my mother or collegues. I’m sort of a different person and you’re constantly portaying different images of yourself whereas on Facebook there’s only one and I think it’s sort of leveled out, the differences. I am with different people and made me think, well if I can be myself on Facebook I can just be myself in real life and if people don’t like me, whatever. Yeah over the last few years I’ve more come to if people think I’m a bit strange or crazy, whatever. So I guess Facebook has facilitated that a little bit. You realize that there is really one you and you don’t have to be consistent. I don’t have to be an environmentalist all the time. There’s multiple selves but it’s all me. (P11, M)

Section Five: Discussion

This research not only adds to the existing research on identity management on Facebook, but it also explores a major gap that fails to address older adult users and how they (re)present themselves on the site. The experiences of users in this study highlight how older adult
Facebook users (re)construct their identities in an online environment. By identifying seven identities revealed by analysis of participant transcripts, the findings detail the performative nature of identity in this online space. Results indicate that identity is not a one fixed self; but rather, it is multiple, fluid, and ever-changing. The study reveals an extreme awareness from participants with regards to the way they actively strategize to (re)present themselves on the site. Although participants differ in terms of their self-concept and the identities they decide to share on Facebook, they are all in agreement that it is a very controlled effort.

This study, the first to explore older adults and identity management online, reveals that like current literature on youth, Facebook users tend to create idealistic virtual (re)presentations of their “real world selves” (Boon & Sinclair, 2009). Like younger users of Facebook, older adults tend to represent only certain aspects of their identity, more often than not, a positive portrayal. Participants display how impression management is used to form a clear and relatively consistent (re)presentation of the self. The seven identities revealed in this study will be discussed in relation to Goffman’s work on identity management, and to the current literature that focuses on Facebook and identity with younger generations.

The finding that older adults in this study who display an opinionated identity on Facebook contradicts the current literature in the field that indicates that Facebook users conform to a “norm.” Boon and Sinclair (2009) argue that users conform to cultural pressures and social mores on Facebook; however, the participants in this study who express their opinions on the site refrain from this pressure to conform. One study participant suggests that perhaps as the current literature on younger Facebook users indicates, this pressure to conform only resonates with younger generations: “I can see with younger people like [daughter’s name]
particularly that the currency is to fit in and Facebook really helps them to do that. I think I’m a bit older and not bothered by it [laughs]” (P3, F).

Despite the fact that many participants indicate suspicions with regards to the site, they remain active on Facebook. This coincides with current research that identifies a disparity between reported privacy concerns and actual privacy behaviours (Wilson et al., 2012). Perhaps participants feel that although they are hesitant in terms of what they post, the odds are that nothing “bad” will actually happen. As one participant states, “…that’s just me being a little bit paranoid maybe” (P6, F).

According to symbolic interactionism, others serve as a looking glass in which individuals view themselves (Zhao, 2005). Individuals understand who they are based on their interactions with others, learning who they are by others’ reactions. Many symbolic interactionists have investigated the relationship between others’ appraisals and the individual’s self-concept. They observe that people’s self-perceptions are linked to the way they think others perceive them (Gecas, 1982). The appraisal of one’s self-presentation from others is what shapes an individual’s self-concept (Zhao, 2005). According to Van House (2011), Facebook users make conscious choices about what to disclose and how to present themselves according to their audience, their relationship to them, and their expectations of audience response. All participant responses support this research, as they are very aware of the layers of potential audiences who may view their Facebook pages. Respondents indicated that the feedback they received from their “friends” on Facebook contributed to the concept they have of themselves. Since users are very aware of the public nature of Facebook and that the site extends beyond their known “friends,” they censor what they post according to the known audience and the imagined audience. This aligns with Wilson et al. (2012), whose review of current literature reveals that
assumptions about the perceived audience may influence how Facebook users portray themselves.

Not only are older adult users aware of this broad audience, they also censor their posts in order to appeal to what their audience would like to see and what they expect that audience will respond to. Goffman (1959) argues that there is a tendency for performers to offer their observers an impression that is idealized. He suggests that as human beings we are subject to variable impulses with moods and energies that are constantly changing; however, as characters put on for an audience, such ups and downs are not to be revealed (Goffman, 1959).

Wilson, Gosling, and Graham (2012) reveal that although users themselves construct most information about their identity, observers’ impressions of other Facebook users also affect what they post to their profile. Past studies that examine identity on Facebook demonstrate that “friend” characteristics provide indirect yet meaningful contributions to perceived profile identity (Wilson et al, 2012). Further, according to Burke, Marlow, and Lento’s study (2009) on newcomers of Facebook, social learning and observation influence users’ behaviour on the site. In the words of one participant, “When looking at other people you look at yourself” (P9, F). Hearn’s (2008, 2011) discussion of self-branding applies here, where participants engage in a form of self-branding in which they create virtual profiles to promote the self for others’ viewing purposes. The majority of participants reveal that they create an aesthetically pleasing identity when using Facebook by posting the most attractive photographs of themselves and their family. This reflects what Hearn (2008) would identify as a branding practice, to create an idea in the minds of your consumer (in this case, your “friends”) as “YOU Inc.” (p. 206). Based on many participants’ responses, what older adult users choose to write on Facebook tends to reflect only aspects they want to share with others. This aligns with
DeAndrea and Walther’s (2009) research findings that when creating online profiles, Facebook users present themselves in the most attractive way possible. Rather than presenting the “whole truth” about oneself online users choose what information they post to their profiles (DeAndrea & Walther, 2009; Livingstone, 2008) thus creating a “face worthy of Facebook” (Boon & Sinclair, 2009, p.104). This is evident by the majority of users who control their pages in order to reflect themselves in the best way possible. Turkle’s (2005) text on online life is relevant here as she posits that a central attraction of online interaction is the opportunity for individuals to enact identities that are not available to them offline. She states, “The Internet is another element of the computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. On it, people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves” (p. 178).

Goffman (1959) highlights how individuals aim to enact positive images of themselves to others. It is thus necessary for performers to exercise care regarding everything that is done before the audience (Goffman, 1959). Goffman’s argument is applicable here as participants attempt to control their Facebook page in order to present themselves in a positive manner. The majority of participants avoid negativity on Facebook since most of their postings only reflect positive aspects of their life. According to Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009) adults may have a more difficult time controlling information to the extent that they would like on Facebook since youth are more technically adept. This was not supported in this study since the majority of participants reveal the high degree of control they place in managing their impression on Facebook.

Zywica and Danowski (2006) argue that having control over one’s environment and being able to shape events contributes to individual’s positive self-esteem. An online environment such as Facebook offers participants a space to control their presentation of self,
allowing for a confident self-portrayal. Kendall (1998) notes that online forums provide a social environment in which users have a greater degree of choice regarding their presentation of self than is usually possible offline. Past research shows that individuals are likely to present “hoped-for possible selves” on Facebook (Zhao et al., 2008, p. 1819). It is also argued that users who receive validation for their “hoped-for possible self” may foster higher self-esteem resulting from the praise of others (Zywica & Danowski, 2006). Aligning with past research, this study reveals that many older adults develop confidence through the accolades they receive from their “friends.”

According to Goffman (1959), individuals perform social roles based upon their understanding of how people occupying these roles are supposed to act and the immediate feedback they receive from people in their presence. Although in the case of online performances on Facebook, feedback may not be immediate, it has a significant impact on individuals. Burke et al. (2009) noted that feedback from fellow Facebook members could lead to future participatory behavior on Facebook. Participants in this study reveal that this is the case for them as their desired, received, and expected feedback motivates them to continue posting on the site. This resonates with Burke’s (2009) findings which indicate that newcomers who received feedback in the form of photo comments in their first two weeks predicted a higher number of photos they would go on to upload in later months (p. 27). This seems to be the case for participants who receive feedback from others, which encourages them to continue posting more content of similar quality.

Section Six: Conclusions/ Limitations/ Recommendations for Future Research

Research on social networking and identity construction is emerging in the current literature. However, studies that make use of qualitative methods are lacking. Most previous
work in the area utilizes quantitative surveys or experimental research (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). The only qualitative research conducted involves youth/young adults (Livingstone, 2008; Zhao et al., 2008) and thus, critical knowledge gaps remain regarding older adult’s perspectives and the ways in which they (re)create their identity in an online space. This study filled this current knowledge gap by gaining the perspectives of older adult Facebook users between the ages of 48-67. The results of this study indicate that older adults use Facebook very actively to present multiple identities on the site. Participants are extremely aware of the way they (re)present themselves on Facebook and thus make conscious decisions about what they choose to post/not to post to the site.

Although it would be ideal to conduct interviews with participants globally, the feasibility of conducting a study with such intensive methods mandates the keeping of the proposed research small-scale and local. Another limitation is the potential for selection bias. It is assumed that those who are willing to share their experiences of Facebook use participated in this study. Furthermore, the use of snowball sampling may not represent larger usage patterns since there is no way of knowing whether the sample is representative of larger populations or is unique to the community of those who were interviewed. This study has therefore not captured the experiences of all older adults in an exhaustive fashion, or the perspectives of more occasional users. Rather, perspectives captured are a “window in,” an opportunity to understand some older adults’ experiences, which has not been done before.

Many study participants recognize that the ways in which they (re)present themselves on Facebook have changed since they first joined the site. A study that targets older adult users of digital media (Facebook) over time through use of a longitudinal approach would be beneficial in order to determine the long-term impacts of Facebook and identity management. Future
research could address how older adult’s self history is represented on their Facebook page, offering a comparison between the online and offline self. Although Goffman’s theoretical perspective offers insights into the way older adults present themselves and why they interact as they do, on Facebook, future research on the presentation of self online may be advanced conceptually by considering an exhibitional approach along with a dramaturgical one. The metaphor of an exhibition rather than one of a stage play might be more aligned to these spaces (Hogan, 2010). It is believed that this would allow for a clearer articulation of the potential and perils of self-presentation in the digital age (Hogan, 2010). As Wilson et al. (2012) note, the continued worldwide growth of Facebook and other Internet platforms represent a shift in the role of the computer-mediated communication in daily life and opens up opportunities for further research to examine the impact of these changes. This study represents a contribution to the methodological and substantive knowledge base in this area by using qualitative methods to explore older adults use of Facebook and their presentation of self.
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