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Is the construction of someone's identity becoming visual instead of linguistic?

Developing an identity in the age of Facebook

Let's imagine someone's first day of university.

He or she is sitting in a big room waiting for the lecturer to start the lesson, who however wants every individual out of the motley crew to introduce themselves to the class. What might happen next? Right! Everyone would talk in a few sentences about his/her origin, faculty, hobbies, age etc..They would use linguistic formulations to tell the people in the room something about their lives and probably nobody would show private pictures, like they do on their *Facebook* profiles. How come, that humans are communicating so differently when they are communicating virtually? Are picture-based ways to create virtual identities superseding the linguistic techniques of self-presentation?

During my essay I want to look more closely at this phenomenon by analysing one of my friends' Facebook profile and examining the way she "shows" her life instead of telling about it. But at first I want to begin with an explanation of the term "web 2.0" and continue with a short observation of the general concept of social networking sites.

As soon as someone starts to do some research about the virtual world and social networking sites, *web 2.0* becomes a constantly emerging term. In fact, "web 2.0" is an umbrella term for a developed and improved form of the internet, that is much easier to access for people whether from their homes or on the streets. All they need are web-enabled devices. It is therefore the name of the internet we know and use these days. Another feature of this internet is that it is common for the users to participate in this medium, which is quite different from the previous web, where users were only recipients. For example, since "web 2.0" was invented, users are able to share contents with the world, like pictures or texts. In the last couple of years this new internet became something normal and common for millions of people around the world and furthermore, the so-called social networking sites became popular and an inherent part of human life.

But what exactly are social networking sites again?

Firstly, they are a way to communicate to other people all around the world with almost no limits. The only thing that is necessary is the technology to access the internet. Once you are part of a social networking site you are either able to keep and improve personal relationships that are anchored in the real world or make friends with strangers who might have the same hobbies or interests etc. Secondly, every user has their own profile to present themselves to the virtual world and also share media like photos, videos, texts or music. Moreover different forms of social networking sites developed, for example *YouTube* as a network to share videos or *Tinder* which is used as a dating-platform. In this essay, I want to concentrate on *Facebook* as a social networking site, where the most interpersonal relations have a foundation in the real world, which leads to a way of constructing an identity that should be as authentic as possible, because there users are usually not anonymous.

Facebook profiles offer users a lot of places to insert information about their character. A study conducted by the Department of Psychology of the Georgetown University examined the reasons of students to fill in these places with personal details about themselves. According to this study the majority of the research participants uses these *Facebook* functions to express who they are. It seems plausible to assume that there is something like a fundamental concern of *Facebook* to let users create identity. In addition everybody is able to express themselves in personal statuses they can easily upload either only consisting of linguistic expressions or combined with a photograph or video.

The first thing that comes to my mind when I think of my Facebook homepage is the flood of pictures posted by several people either by my friends or sometimes celebrities I follow and concerns I like. It is very easy and sometimes even relaxing to scroll down the page to just look at the pictures, whether they show the Shrek-donkey of Halle or a trip to the zoo of an old classmate, and I immediately seem to know what is going on in the lives of my friends or idols. But what becomes more and more noticeable is the domination of these pictured *posts*.

A friend of mine, who uses *Facebook* actively, recently posted a picture of her and her boyfriend (figure.1). She didn't write anything to describe the photo and instead just used *Facebook's* emoticon-function, where the user chooses a smiley to express the emotional state of the post. In the photo her friends are able to see two people where the person on the right kisses the one on the left on the cheek. There is also a red heart-shaped balloon in front of the two. Without any descriptions of the photo everyone can identify these two people as a couple and almost feel the connection of love between them.

This is an example of how implicitly people build up their identities on social networking sites and that telling something about one's identity is sometimes replaced by rather showing it. No

text is describing the picture, just a small generated icon and the picture itself are enlightening the beholder on the fact, that these two people are belonging together. But how is this possible?

The human brain is trained to store and remember single images easier than the whole content of a text. "The strengths of icons are that they are compact and usually quickly recognizable." (Baecker: 2002, 12). The same is true for images. While a text needs more time for the reader to get the main idea of it, a picture is usually very expressive and often even faster and easier to understand. For example, if a text reports about fifteen thousand refugees the reader has this abstract number in his head, but if he sees a bunch of crowded little ships and crying people, he might be better able to understand the tragic of the situation. Moreover when there is a text in connection to a picture, the first glimpse usually goes to the image and then the person decides whether to read the text or not.

A picture usually attracts more attention than a written text, which can be caused by the substance of the image, like the colors, contrasts, composition of elements, or the perspective etc. Looking at the example of the happy couple, the red balloon attracts a lot of attention and people automatically connect a heart shaped thing with love. The second evidence for their relationship is the kiss. The girl is leaning over to the boy and her lips are touching his face. Whether on purpose or accidentally this is a special picture composition, that impresses the viewer and triggers emotions.

Facebook became something like a daily routine for people all over the world. Looking at the homepage to keep in touch with your loved ones has been integrated into our everyday life. In addition a lot of people are under pressure and stressed during the day and maybe therefore have not enough time or are to lazy to read through complex texts and instead enjoy looking at funny, moving or informative pictures.

Two weeks ago I participated in an interesting discussion about the importance of picture- and text-based information. The lecturer divided the class into two groups. The first group had to talk about the advantages of pictures and the second group about texts. When we later compared our results, we saw that neither pictures nor texts alone are the best solution to present something to the world, but rather a mixture of both. This actually showed me how crucial the cooperation between pictures and texts are. Pictures should be integrated in texts and texts describe pictures. Explaining a difficult concept might be easier by writing a text combined with an image. Although it seems like users of social networking sites express themselves through pictures there are almost always little descriptive texts above them, that are sometimes replaced by emoticons. All in all, my own experience shows me that pictures on *Facebook* are unusually standing alone, but still most users prefer to express their identity rather visually than linguistic.

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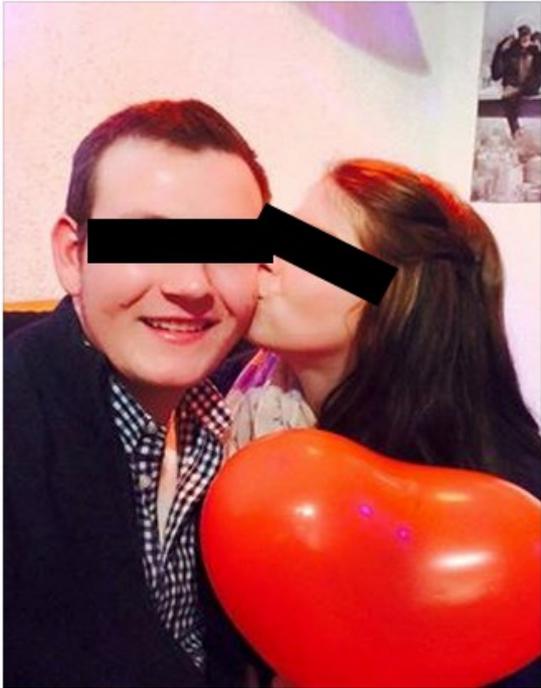　　　content/uploads/2010/08/facebooknarcissist.pdf (05/09/2015)

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figure 1