Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships

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Abstract

Early research on online self-presentation mostly focused on identity constructions in anonymous online environments. Such studies found that individuals tended to engage in role-play games and anti-normative behaviors in the online world. More recent studies have examined identity performance in less anonymous online settings such as Internet dating sites and reported different findings. The present study investigates identity construction on Facebook, a newly emerged nonymous online environment. Based on content analysis of 63 Facebook accounts, we find that the identities produced in this nonymous environment differ from those constructed in the anonymous online environments previously reported. Facebook users predominantly claim their identities implicitly rather than explicitly; they "show rather than tell" and stress group and consumer identities over personally narrated ones. The characteristics of such identities are described and the implications of this finding are discussed.
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1. Introduction

The impact of the Internet on identity production has been under investigation for more than a decade. However, most early studies focused on online identity constructions in anonymous environments such as MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), Chat Rooms, and Bulletin Boards (Rheingold, 1995; Surratt, 1998; Turkle, 1995). It was found that

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individuals tended to play-act at being someone else or act out their underlying negative impulses in the online world. More recently, researchers began to shift their attention to self-presentations in less anonymous online environments such as Internet dating sites (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Yurchisin, Watchraves-ringkan, & McCabe, 2005). The results suggested that people acted differently in such environments than they did in other online settings. This was an important finding, for it indicated that the online world was not monolithic, and online self-presentations varied according to the nature of the settings.

The present study extends this line of research to identity constructions on Facebook, a newly emerged online social networking site which has become most popular among college students in the United States. We intend to explore the range of identity claims people tend to make in a non-anonymous online setting; to find out whether identity performance is influenced by the nonymity of the environment in which the performance takes place; and, if so, to investigate how it is affected by that. We believe that the findings of such a study will increase our understanding of self-presentation in general and identity construction in the online environment in particular.

2. Literature review

Identity is an important part of the self-concept. Self-concept is the totality of a person's thoughts and feelings in reference to oneself as an object (Rosenberg, 1986), and identity is that part of the self "by which we are known to others" (Altheide, 2000, p. 2). The construction of an identity is therefore a public process that involves both the "identity announcement" made by the individual claiming an identity and the "identity placement" made by others who endorse the claimed identity, and an identity is established when there is a "coincidence of placements and announcements" (Stone, 1981, p. 188).

In localized face-to-face interactions, identity is constructed under a unique set of constraints. The presence of the corporal body in social encounters prevents people from claiming identities that are inconsistent with the visible part of their physical characteristics (e.g., sex, race, and looks), and the shared knowledge of each other's social background and personality attributes renders it difficult for an individual to pretend to be what he or she is not. Identity construction under this circumstance involves mostly the manipulation of physical settings (e.g., furniture and decoration) and "personal front" (e.g., appearance, language, and manner) to generate a desired impression on others (Goffman, 1959). In situations where face-to-face interactions take place among strangers (e.g., in bars), people may seek to hide their background and personality to produce a new identity, but such identity claims still cannot go beyond the limits set by embodiment.

The advent of the Internet has changed the traditional conditions of identity production. As the corporeal body is detached from social encounters in the online environment, it becomes possible for individuals to interact with one another on the Internet in fully disembodied text mode that reveals nothing about their physical characteristics. Moreover, even in situations where the audiovisual mode is utilized in online contact, anonymity can be maintained through withholding information about one's personal background, such as name, residence and institutional affiliation. The combination of disembodiment and anonymity creates a technologically mediated environment in which a new mode of identity production emerges (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002).

An important characteristic of this emergent mode of identity production is the tendency for people to play-act at being someone else or to put on different online personae that differ from their "real life" identities (Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995). Disembodied online encounters enable people to hide their undesired physical features, and anonymity allows individuals to re-create their biography and personality. In other words, the disembodied and anonymous online environment makes it possible for people to reinvent themselves through the production of new identities. For example, in the online world, a man can pretend to be a woman, a nerd to be a star athlete, and an introvert to be an extrovert.

Online "role-playing," as the phenomenon has come to be known, can be an empowering process. Research has shown that the removal of physical "gating features" (stigmatized appearance, stuttering, shyness, etc.) enables certain disadvantaged people to bypass the usual obstacles that prevent them from constructing desired identities in face-to-face settings (McKenna et al., 2002). The emergent online anonymous environment also provides an outlet for the expression of one's "hidden selves" (Suler, 2002) and the exploration of various non-conventional identities (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006). As such, the Internet plays an important role in identity empowerment.

However, the online world is not entirely anonymous. Family members, neighbors, colleagues, and other offline acquaintances also communicate with each other on the Internet. This type of offline-based online relationships is called here "anchored relationships" (Zhao, 2006). An online relationship can be anchored offline in a number of ways. For example, an online relationship can be anchored through institutions, residence, or mutual friends. The level of anchorage varies depending on the degrees to which online partners are identifiable and locatable offline. The most important identifying information includes a person's legal name, residential location, and institutional affiliations (Marx, 1999). If an online environment can verify such personal information and also make it public, then interpersonal relationships are fully anchored in that environment.

An anchored relationship is thus a "nonymous" (i.e., the opposite of "anonymous") relationship. Nonymity can be established even in a fully disembodied online environment through the use of, say, institutional email accounts which link a user to the account provider that will ultimately hold the individual responsible. However, nonymity needs to be distinguished from acquaintanceship. Two individuals become acquainted when each can identify the other and acknowledges to the other that this state of mutual information exists (Goffman, 1963). The establishment of such a relationship provides the individuals with the right or duty for mutual engagement when they come into contact with each other hereafter. Acquaintanceship can be maintained anonymously, as in bars where regular customers may become friends but only know each other by nicknames. On the other hand, people can get to know each other indirectly through a mutual friend without being formally introduced to each other. The concept of anchored online relationships as used here refers to individuals who are nonymous online but may or may not know each other offline.

Identity construction in a nonymous online environment has not been well studied. Unlike the anonymous setting in which individuals feel free to be whatever they want to, the nonymous environment places constraints on the freedom of identity claims. A faculty member on his or her departmental listserv, for example, cannot claim to be someone else without prompting an immediate inquiry. This certainly does not suggest that there will be no self-presentation in nonymous online environments. Identity performance takes place even in places where individuals are fully identifiable, such as in classrooms and offices, but self-performances in such contexts are constrained and tend to conform to

established social norms (Brennan & Pettit, 2004; Douglas & McGarty, 2001). Depending on the degrees of nonymity in the given situation, the level of conformity varies accordingly.

In a fully nonymous offline world where deviance from established social norms will be punished or ridiculed, the masks people wear in everyday life become their "real" or known identities (Goffman, 1959) and a person's "true" self often gets suppressed and becomes hidden (Bargh et al., 2002). In contrast, in a fully anonymous online world where accountability is lacking, the masks people wear offline are often thrown away and their "true" selves come out of hiding, along with the tabooed and other suppressed identities. The nonymous online world, however, emerges as a third type of environment where people may tend to express what has been called the "hoped-for possible selves" (Yurchisin et al., 2005).

According to Markus and Nurius (1986), a person's conception of him- or herself at a given time can be divided into two categories: the "now selves" and the "possible selves." Now selves are established identities known to others, whereas possible selves are images of the self that are currently unknown to others. Hoped-for possible selves are a subcomponent of the possible selves that differs from the suppressed or hidden "true self" on the one hand and the unrealistic or fantasized "ideal self" (Higgins, 1987) on the other. Hoped-for possible selves are socially desirable identities an individual would like to establish and believes that they can be established given the right conditions. For example, an individual may think that he or she has the potential of becoming a famous movie star, but lacks an audition opportunity to show his or her acting talents. The actualization of hoped-for possible selves can also be blocked by the presence of physical "gating features," such as unattractive appearance, stuttering or shyness that are associated with certain people or with high pressure situations of first encounters. The nonymous online environment can in these circumstances empower "gated" individuals to actualize the identities they hope to establish but are unable to in face-to-face situations.

A few studies have recently been conducted to examine identity construction in Internet dating (Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006; Yurchisin et al., 2005) which constitutes a unique nonymous online environment. Unlike MUD or Chat Room settings that are anonymous in nature, Internet dating sites are designed to facilitate the exchange of personal information, which includes, among other things, looks, sex, age, location, and occupation. The nonymity of the environment, especially the anticipation of subsequent face-to-face encounters, had been hypothesized to narrow the discrepancy between "actual selves" and "ideal selves" in people's online self-presentation (Ellison et al., 2006). Results showed that the identities produced on Internet dating sites differed from the identities produced in face-to-face situations, because people on the Internet dating sites tended to "stretch the truth a bit" (Yurchisin et al., 2005, p. 742) in their online self-presentations. For example, people displayed selected photos to cover up undesirable features of their bodies, such as being overweight or too short; written self-descriptions enabled shy people to hide their social anxiety; and the asynchronous communication mode gave users plenty of time to carefully craft an attractive persona (Gibbs et al., 2006). Despite those "truth-stretching" activities, identities produced on Internet dating sites were found to be quite "realistic and honest," as users wanted to avoid unpleasant surprises in subsequent offline meetings (Ellison et al., 2006).

Research on the construction of hoped-for possible selves in Internet dating suggests that users regard their online presentations as an integral part of their overall identity

production and seek to coordinate their online identity claims with their offline self-performance. Because of the presence of nonymity, Internet dating sites provide an opportunity for users to make public "identity statements" (Walker, 2000) that they normally would not do offline. Identity statements are public announcements of one's identity claims, which can be made either explicitly or implicitly. While explicit identity statements often take the form of autobiographic descriptions given by the users, implicit identity statements can be found in the impressions "given off" by the users. For example, by selectively listing one's affiliations with certain groups, activities, or hobbies, an individual is implicitly making an identity statement about him- or herself. Those online identity production strategies enable people to stage a public display of their hoped-for possible selves that were unknown to others offline.

Research on identity construction in Internet dating has generated important findings. However, Internet dating sites represent a particular type of nonymous online networking sites oriented specifically toward the development of offline romantic relationships. This special orientation affects the ways in which users present themselves. Another aspect of Internet dating sites that limits the generality of the existing findings is the dyadic nature of the relationships users seek to establish through those sites, for the pursuit of such relationships may predispose users to project themselves in certain ways. Finally, the level of nonymity is not particularly high on most Internet dating sites, where users are not required to disclose their real names, residence, and institutional affiliations. The online relationships are anchored mostly in the institution that provides the dating service, rather than in the offline community within which the users are embedded. As those characteristics are unique to Internet dating, research findings based on such sites may not be generalized to other nonymous online settings.

3. Focus of the present study

The present study seeks to extend the existing research on self-presentation in nonymous settings. We chose to examine identity construction on Facebook, a nonymous online environment that is less limiting than Internet dating sites. Created in 2004 by a Harvard student for intra-campus socializing, Facebook quickly spread to other university campuses and soon became the most popular social networking site among college students in the US (Cassidy, 2006). Facebook expanded to include high school campuses in 2005, and commercial organizations in 2006.

Facebook is in many ways similar to another popular online social networking site, Myspace, but it also has some unique features that are crucial to the present study. Like Myspace, Facebook enables users to present themselves in a number of ways. Users can display pictures in their online albums, describe their personal interests and hobbies, and list their friends and social networks. There is also a communication function on Facebook that allows users to interact with one another through comments and messages. However, Facebook differs from Myspace in one important aspect: it is nonymous and institutionally bound. For the college and university version of Facebook, membership is restricted to those with an official campus email account, and users' real names are shown in their profiles. The display of users' real names and their institutional affiliations make the Facebook environment almost fully nonymous.

The nonymity of Facebook is an ideal condition for examining identity construction in online environments where the relationships are anchored in offline communities. As has

been found in Internet dating, we expect people to also engage in identity constructions on Facebook and adopt strategies of self-presentation that help them deal with the nonymous situation. More specifically, we expect people on Facebook to present their hoped-for possible selves rather than their "true" or hidden selves. Facebook users may emphasize or even exaggerate the part of their possible selves that are socially desirable but not readily discernible in brief offline encounters, such as one's character, intelligence, and other important inner qualities. At the same time, they may seek to hide or de-emphasize the part of their selves they regard as socially undesirable, such as shyness, overweight, or stuttering. It is certainly true that people engage in such activities in nonymous face-to-face situations as well, but the emergent nonymous Facebook environment provides users with new leverage for selective self-presentation.

Unlike Internet dating participants who are primarily looking for romantic relationships among people previously unknown to them, Facebook users are looking for friendships as well as romantic relationships among two types of people: (1) those they know in person, and (2) those they do not know in person. A major function of Facebook is to help the users connect with those they already know and extend that connection to those they do not yet know. However, due to the mixing of these two different types of people in the audience, Facebook allows users to engage in targeted performances by blocking certain viewers from viewing certain parts of their Facebook accounts. As people present themselves differently to different audiences—for example, people won't tell their neighbors everything they tell their family members—we also expect Facebook users to tailor their online presentations to particular audiences. In sum, we hypothesize that Facebook users will engage in what people on Internet dating sites were found doing—the presentation of their hoped-for possible selves, but the way they do that may differ due to the unique characteristics of the Facebook environment.

4. Methods

This study is part of a broader research project on ethnic identity, late adolescent friendship, courtship and sexuality in a racially-diverse urban public university at a large Northeastern city in the United States. The broader project focused on four minority groups, three of whom are second-generation immigrants: African Americans, Vietnamese-Americans, Indian-Americans, and Latino-Caribbean (of Dominican, Colombian, or Puerto Rican backgrounds). The research methodology combined same-ethnic focus groups, interviews with administrators involved in student services and student organizations, structured in-depth interviews as well as online Facebook analyses.

The majority of the study subjects came from a list of students having responded to a comprehensive student survey conducted by the university administration (National Student Survey). For academic diversity, we also solicited interviews from a universal listing of honors students organized by ethnic ancestry. In order to diversify the representation of distinct social clusters on campus, our within group sampling goals were the following: (a) not more than two cases from a sorority/fraternity within each group; (b) not more than two male or two females from each group from the Honors Program; (c) a mixture of majors/colleges within the university: at least some from non-typical majors for each ethnic group; (d) not more than four from each group highly active in student organizations. In-depth interviews were completed with 63 students who met the above criteria, approximately 8 males and 8 females, or a total of 16 from each of the four groups with one

honors student represented within each cluster of 8 same-sexed groups. The interview guide contained questions related to ethnic identity, high school social life, perceptions of and involvement in campus social life, friendship networks, dating and partnering experiences, as well as Internet usage and Facebook activities.

The present study was based on an enlarged sample of 83 students. For comparative purposes, we decided to supplement our original sample of 63 non-white interviewees with 20 additional cases randomly selected from the list of white students who responded to the aforementioned National Student Survey. Of the 83 cases, 11 students either did not have Facebook accounts or completely blocked the public from viewing their accounts. The Facebook pages of the remaining 72 students were downloaded in March 2007. However, seven Facebook accounts were entirely blocked except for the profile cover pictures and two other accounts were devoted exclusively to group activities, so we ended with a total of 63 analyzable Facebook accounts for our study. Table 1 shows the racial and gender compositions of both the initial sample ($n = 83$) and the resulting sample ($n = 63$).

A comprehensive coding scheme was developed, covering virtually all the major items that can be found in a Facebook account (see Appendix A). Using this coding scheme, the contents of the resulting 63 Facebook accounts were numerically recorded by a specially trained graduate research assistant. For the purposes of the present study, we focused our analysis on the following sections of a Facebook account: user's profile, contact information, social networks, and self-description. Facebook automatically includes the user's real name and the name of his or her university in the profile section. The profile section also optionally includes a profile cover picture, additional photos of the user, and information about the user's sex, birthday, relationship status (single, engaged, married, etc.), the type of relationship the user is looking for (friendship, dating, random play, etc.) and the like. Users can choose to disclose their email addresses, IM screen names, mobile/land phone numbers, and residential locations in the contact information section. The social network section lists users' Facebook friends from both in and outside of their universities, as well as all the groups they have joined. In the self-description section, users can provide an ''About Me'' blurb, state their hobbies and interests (e.g., activities, books, music and movies), and share their favorite quotes. Thus all users must make a range of formal decisions in launching their accounts. As it were, Facebook offers an excellent opportunity for studying identity construction in a nonymous online environment.

Table 1
Ethnicity and gender composition of the sample

Ethnicity	Initial sample			Resulting sample		
	Gender		Total	Gender		Total
	Male	Female		Male	Female	
White	10	10	20	7	8	15
Black	8	8	16	8	4	12
Latino	8	8	16	7	7	14
Indian	8	9	17	7	6	13
Vietnamese	6	8	14	5	4	9
Total	40	43	83	34	29	63

5. Results

5.1. Facebook audiences

Facebook allows users to have control over their information and who sees it. The basic "visibility rule" is that all the user's Facebook friends and schoolmates can see the user's Facebook account. The user can modify this basic visibility rule by changing the privacy settings of his or her account. For example, a user can make his or her account visible only to his or her Facebook friends or to just him- or herself. A user can also hide certain parts of the account from certain people or block certain people from viewing the account. According to the basic visibility rule, those who are outside of the user's institution and not on the user's Facebook friend list cannot view the user's account, but they can find the user in their search results and are able to see the user's cover picture, poke the user, send the user a message or request to be the user's friend, and view the user's friend list. But the user can change that rule such that outside people cannot find him or her in their search or cannot access all the default options. These kinds of privacy control functions enable Facebook users to present different self-images to different people, as they do offline.

What were the audiences the Facebook users in our sample had in mind? We examined this issue by looking at a number of things. First, we looked at their use of the basic visibility rule. If the Facebook pages in an account are constructed for the general public to look at, then the account will be made visible to everyone; however, if the Facebook pages are created for "friends" only, then the general public will be blocked from viewing the account. Using the Facebook search function, we were able to locate the accounts of 72 students, missing 11 cases. As not every college student in the US maintains a Facebook account, it would be mistaken to count all the eleven missing cases as cases of blocked Facebook accounts. According to previous research, Facebook usage among the US college students has reached over 90% (Ellison et al., 2006), so assuming a participation rate of 94% at the university from which our sample was drawn, we would estimate that about five students in our sample ($83 \times 0.06 = 5$) did not have a Facebook account. This means that there were probably a total of six students ($11 - 5 = 6$) in our sample who had Facebook accounts but blocked the public from viewing them. As mentioned early, another seven students chose to make only their profile cover pictures visible to non-friends, and two other students devoted their entire Facebook accounts to group activities, e.g., announcements of parties and other events (these accounts are known as group Facebook
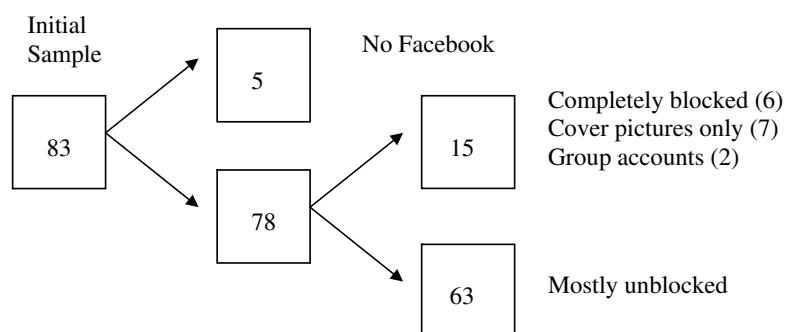

Fig. 1. Division of the initial sample and the audiences.

accounts). The remaining 63 students made most of their Facebook contents visible to both friends and non-friends. Fig. 1 shows the variation in the targeted audiences among different cases in our sample.

Another way to gauge the intended audience of Facebook presentations is to examine users' stated purpose of their being on Facebook. We found that 41.3% ($n = 26$) of the 63 unblocked users said that one of the things they were looking for on Facebook was friendship, or friendship in combination with "dating" or "a relationship," which suggests that they were interested in presenting themselves to an audience beyond their known friends or acquaintances. The intention to make new friends or connections through Facebook was also evident in users' provision of personal contact information in their accounts to people they were not acquainted with. Most, or 59 of the 63 unblocked users, made their email addresses available on Facebook, and 39 of the 59 users disclosed their IM screen names as well. These were clear attempts to reach out to people the users were currently not friends with. Yet, despite Facebook users' eagerness to share their online contact information with others, most of them refrained from disclosing their offline contact information. For example, only four out of the 63 unblocked users provided their complete mailing addresses on Facebook, indicating that the majority of Facebook users saw the networking site as a way of getting to know others online, which might or might not lead to offline meetings.

5.2. Modes of identity construction

Our findings also indicate that people used different strategies in identity constructions on Facebook. Based on the extent to which visual and verbal techniques were involved, we distinguished a continuum of modes of self-presentation on Facebook from implicit to explicit identity claims. Fig. 2 illustrates this continuum of identity strategies and the differing degrees and frequency of use of each mode of expression. First, on one end of the continuum, the most implicit identity claims are visual, involving the display of photos and pictures uploaded by the users themselves or pictures along with comments posted to their accounts by others (known as "wall posts"). Apart from the cover picture, users can show within their Facebook profiles as many photos of themselves as they wish. In our sample, the number of additional profile pictures displayed by users ranged from 2 to 399, averaging 88.4 (median = 63.5) photos per user. Moreover, this option was selected almost universally; the number of users who displayed their profile photos and wall posts ranged from 90.5% to 95.2%. With the exception of six users, all others ($n = 57$) in our sample also let the public view the private wall posts their friends had left for them. Yet, users did not indiscriminately leave everything open for everybody to peek at, for 21 of the 63 users in our sample blocked the public from viewing the more private photo albums in other parts

Implicit <--> Explicit		
Visual	**Enumerative**	**Narrative**
Self as Social Actor	Self as Consumer	First Person Self
Wall posts/Pictures	Interests/Hobbies/etc.	"About Me …"
(95%- 91%)	(73% - 48%)	(37%-8%)
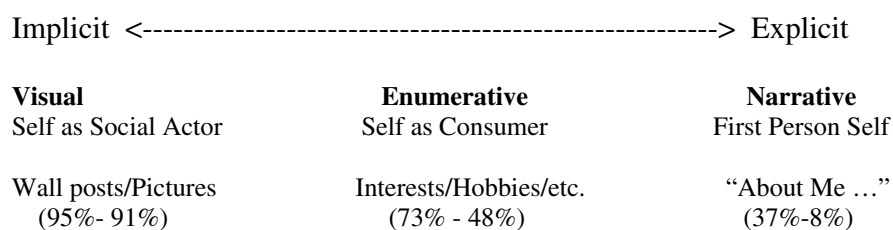
Fig. 2. The continuum of implicit and explicit identity claims on Facebook.

of their Facebook accounts, so the decision to let the public view their profile photos and wall posts was not entirely haphazard. While some created walls of privacy for themselves and friends, most users were happy to let the public see a wide range of photos depicting themselves in the context of their friends, mostly smiling, having fun or expressing affection for one another.

The visual self – projected via the inclusion of large numbers of peer photographs – can be thought of as the "self as social actor." It is as if the user is saying, "Watch me and know me by my friends." By "showing without telling," Facebook users sought to make certain implicit identity claims aimed at generating desired impressions on their viewers especially in terms of the depth and extent of their social ties. Unlike these highly implicit, mostly visual identity claims, we also see more explicit claims that involve users' verbal descriptions of themselves, both enumerated around interests and preferences as well as narrated descriptions of self.

The second clustering of claims on our continuum in Fig. 2 we may think of as the "cultural self" or the self of consumption preferences and tastes. Facebook users engage in enumerative cultural self-description when they simply list a set of cultural preferences that they think define them. For example, in the Facebook account there is a self-description section where users can tell viewers about their personal interests and hobbies, including their favorite activities, quotes, movies, music, books, and TV-shows. Most Facebook users provided highly elaborated lists of such preferences signaling precise cultural tastes. Table 2 shows that users were most likely to share interests and hobbies (73%) and offer some appreciated quotes (71%). A large majority of users also opted to include some of their music and movie favorites (65% of both), somewhat fewer included favorite books (57%), and slightly less than half favorite TV shows (48%). Not only did sizeable percentages of all users select these options for their profiles but also they elaborated each category considerably. The greatest enumeration came with music preferences with users listing an average of 8.3 songs, artists or genres per person (median = 8.3) as their favorites, followed by 8.1 movies per person (median = 8), and finally 4.9 interests per person (median = 4.9). In terms of a continuum of identity claims, the cultural self is the in-between category, more explicit than the "watch me" implied by photos, but it is still indirect: "see what I like/do/

Table 2
Enumerative and narrative self-descriptions on Facebook

Enumerative description	Mean	Users responded	
		N	*%*
Interest	4.9	46	73.0
Quote	4.3	45	71.4
Movie	8.1	41	65.1
Music	8.3	41	65.1
Book	2.7	36	57.1
Activity	3.5	36	57.1
TV-show	4.2	30	47.6
Narrative description			
About Me		42	66.7
1–2 short sentences		23	36.5
1–2 short paragraphs		14	22.3
Long paragraphs		5	7.9

read/listen to." It is also a highly elaborated option; it is a consumer/taste identity, defined as much by what the market offers as by individual or character traits.

The third mode of identity claim involves the most explicit verbal descriptions of self. There is an "About Me" entry in the self description section where users can engage in a narrative self-description whereby they directly introduce themselves to their viewers. While 67% of users did opt to narrate something about themselves, this category tended to be the least elaborated of the identity strategies. As shown in Table 2, 54.8% ($n = 23$) of the 42 users who provided an "about me" blurb in their Facebook accounts wrote just one or two short sentences, and only five users described themselves in relatively long paragraphs. Some typical examples of these brief "about me" statements are: "I'm a laid back type." (a male student); "What you see is what you get, 50% of the time." (a male student); "It's for me to know and for you to find out." (a male student); "From Jersey, Dominicana, lovely girl!" (a female student); and "Currently in Zen mode." (a female student). Not only are most of these statements notably minimalist in their revelatory claims but they often have a playful tone of "wouldn't you like to know".

On a continuum of claims from most explicit to most implicit, Facebook users in our sample appeared to prefer the most implicit, with the almost universal selection of dense displays of profile photos and wall posts, followed by highly enumerated lists of cultural preferences associated with youth culture, and finally the minimalist, first-person "about me" statements. It is as if the Facebook users create a mediated interaction with their audience placing friends and dating partners in between themselves and others. "See me first and foremost in the context of my group." Moreover, these users apparently spend more time defining what cultural niche they are part of than staking a claim of individuality distinct from these desires/tastes. They pick quotes but write few of their own. This tendency to "show" rather than "tell" may relate in part to the medium where it is more efficient to take the more passive "upload option" than to compose a personal descriptive statement, one that might, incidentally, haunt the writer with the passage of time.

Here, we see evidence of users straddling the two possible audiences. What better way to personally convey "kool, hot and smooth" than to signal it through "kool, hot, and smooth" music. A better way to present oneself to strangers as well as friends is therefore to "show" rather than "tell" or to display rather than describe oneself. Moreover, a picture is more than a thousand words and positive remarks from others are more effective than self-praise. These might have been the reasons why implicit identity claims were more common than explicit identity claims in the 63 cases we observed. We turn now to the content of these identity modes.

5.3. Types of identity claims

An important question we wanted to answer in this study was, given the nonymity of the environment, what types of identity claims users would tend to make on Facebook. If it is the case that nonymity makes people less likely to "act up" or play-act at being someone else as they tend to do in places like MUDs or Chat Rooms, then what type of selves are people most likely to present on Facebook? We hypothesized that it would be hoped-for possible selves, and our findings seem to support that hypothesis.

There were great variations in the kinds of self-images produced on Facebook: some were carefully choreographed and well polished, others were simple and rough. However, regardless of levels of sophistication, Facebook users in our sample all attempted to

project a self that is socially desirable. "*Being popular among friends*" was a claim that seems to have underlined many identity projects on Facebook. In theory, Facebook is an online booklet that shows the faces of people and other information that describes them. Indeed, Facebook is inundated with pictures and photos provided by users. Not only did users in our sample display on average 88.4 pictures (median = 63.5) on their profiles, but they also included on average of 4.5 albums of photos (median = 2) elsewhere in the account. More tellingly, most of the pictures we saw were group pictures, showing a user having fun with his or her friends. High school yearbook types of single-person pictures were rarely seen. Even for the profile cover picture, which was supposed to be single-personed, only 42.9% (n = 27) of the 63 users displayed a photo of just themselves, the rest of the sample included those who showed a blank profile picture (4.8%, n = 3), a picture of an avatar (14.3%, n = 9), or a group photo with two or more persons in it (38.1%, n = 24). The fact that the majority of the users chose either not to show their faces at all or to show their faces along with the faces of others in their profile cover picture is very revealing, indicating, among other things, an effort to construct a group-oriented identity.

The attempt to show one's social connectedness and popularity among friends was also evident in other areas of the Facebook account. There appeared to be a fierce competition among Facebook users for the size of social networks they claimed to possess. Facebook accounts display all the on-campus and off-campus friends a user is linked to through the networking site as well as all the groups a user has joined. Table 3 shows that, on average, a user in our sample displayed 150 (median = 101) on-campus friends, 92 (median = 78) off-campus friends, and 25 (median = 15) groups. One user boasted a total of 1283 Facebook friends (511 on campus and 772 off campus) and 129 groups. Another common strategy of showing off one's popularity was to make public the private wall posts from friends. Only six of the 63 users in our sample blocked the public from viewing those items, and the rest of the sample displayed an average of 259 (median = 158) wall posts per account.

In addition to popularity among friends, "*well-roundedness*" (or "anti-nerd") was another characteristic commonly associated with the preferred identities produced on Facebook. Like popularity, one's well-roundedness was seldom explicitly mentioned in the "About Me" blurb; it was, for the most part, indirectly stated through the description of one's interests and hobbies, as shown below:

(1) "Reading, swimming, listening to music, going out, and having fun …" (a female student)
(2) Fashion/shopping, traveling, NBA/NCAA b-ball, … cooking/food, animals, booze, men, poetry/literature, movies, RED, anything highly sexual, being bronze and devilish, partying, dancing like a fool and not caring, ON DEMAND, my mom-mom (a female student)

Table 3
Displayed connectedness and popularity on Facebook

	Mean	Users responded	
		N	%
Number of campus friends	150.2	60	95.2
Number of off-campus friends	91.7	61	96.8
Number of groups joined	24.9	60	95.3
Number of wall posts	258.9	57	90.5

(3)"Baseball, watching movies, dancing, partying and having a good time, meeting new people, exploring new things, and traveling" (a male student)

(4) Sports . . . basketball, football, golf, dancing, partying, technical stuff, cars, movies, hanging out, chillin...hmm what else?? (a male student)

Sports, arts, travel, and hanging out with friends were the frequently mentioned items on users' interest lists, and the proclamation of participating in such activities was intended to create a desirable image of a well-rounded, sociable and fun-loving individual.

A third type of personal quality commonly projected on Facebook was "*thoughtfulness.*" The impression of possessing this desirable characteristic was largely created through the use of quotes. As was shown in Table 2, quoting someone else was the second most frequently used strategy for describing oneself, next only to the listing of one's interests. The number of quotes cited by a user in our sample ranged from 1 to 26, averaging 4.3 (median = 2) quotes per user. Most of the quotes tended to be reflections on life:

(1) "I do not intend to tiptoe through life only to arrive safely at death" (a female student)

(2) "Life is easy if you wear a smile. Just be yourself, and don't ever change your style" (a female student)

(3) "Live as if you were to die tomorrow, and learn as if you were to live forever" (a male student)

(4) "I rather make a life than make a living" (a male student)

Or about the desire to control one's destiny:

(1) "Destiny is not a matter of chance—it is a matter of choice" (a female student)

(2) "It is not our abilities that show what we truly are, it is our choices." (a male student)

(3) "Don't let fear strike you out. Play the game" (a female student)

(4) "And when you dream, dream big/As big as the ocean, blue/'Cause when you dream, it might come true."

Such thoughtful and uplifting quotes conveyed a positive attitude toward life and reflected well on those who cited them.

"Popular," "well rounded," and "thoughtful" were salient among the desirable personal qualities that people would like to possess. A few of the Facebook users in our sample may have possessed all these qualities and demonstrated them consistently, but the majority of them may have possessed only some of those qualities (and even then only some of the time) and were still working on achieving the others.[1] It thus seems that the Facebook identities were not the identities users established in the offline world, nor were they close to the identities users would construct in anonymous online environments; rather, they were the hoped-for possible identities users would like to, but have not yet been able to, establish in the offline world. Facebook, in this regard, served as a vehicle

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[1] It would require a multi-method and cross-setting design to adequately address this issue, but here we can use a piece of information gathered from our in-person interviews to illustrate this point. On Facebook, those in our sample displayed an average number of 239 friends per person, including an average number of 150 on-campus friends. In our interviews, we asked a similar question about the total number of "chums" they might hang out with but were not really close with. In this offline setting, students claimed an average number of 62 chums, including 30 on-campus chums. These are sober numbers compared to those they displayed on Facebook.

that empowered the users to produce socially desirable identities that they were presumably not capable of producing in the offline world due to various reasons, including the presence of the "gating" obstacles (McKenna et al., 2002).

It is equally instructive to consider what aspects of identity were *not* being stressed in these pages. What were the students collectively not projecting about themselves? Not only were they not projecting pessimistic, apprehensive, unspontaneous or narrowly focused personas, as we have seen, but they were doing very little to claim academic identities either. For example, Facebook users have the option of listing classes they are taking and using this choice as a tool for networking with classmates with whom they are having a common intellectual experience. But the overwhelming majority, or 76%, did not choose this option. Similarly, very few, only 13%, made explicitly religious identity claims. One might imagine that this relates to low levels of religiosity among them. Yet, 32% signaled religiosity of some kind implicitly through the selection of religious music, texts or quotes among their lists of favorites. Thus, though academic and religious values might have been real or meaningful to many students, these were not part of the hoped-for selves they projected to their audience here.

Of course, not all identities constructed on Facebook are socially desirable. Deviance occurs even in a fully nonymous offline setting. Although institutionally anchored, Facebook encounters are mediated and the technological mediation can create a sense of freedom that encourages the limited expression of some type of "hidden selves" (Suler, 2002) that are commonly seen in anonymous online environments. We did come across identity claims on Facebook that might be construed as outside or marginal to dominant social norms. For example, some users in our sample projected a superficial or hedonistic image of themselves as those who indulge, in the words of one female student, in: "SHOPPING!!! Eating, men, going out drinking, partying, clubbing, flirting, be spontaneous and random, and being silly;" or "Booze, chix, cars, and sports, you know the usual testosterone fueled crap," as a male student put it. It is interesting to note that in both instances the identity was presented in a half serious and half joking manner, suggesting that the individuals were just trying to act "cool." In a few other cases, less socially sanctioned identities were constructed through the use of quotes from someone else. The following quotes appeared in three female students' accounts:

(1) "I sign in my name/I guess I have to wait a while/I'm gonna play this game/Call me up if you know how to dial/You always had my number/You need to be my lover/Humiliation/I'm in the waiting room – ND waiting room." (student A)
(2) "Did anyone ever tell you that you look like a penis with a little hat on?" (student B)
(3) "Fuck Bitches!" (student C)

And the quote below was found in a male student's account:

(1) "Do you have a condom, never mind I got a Milkyway wrapper."

These kinds of sexually provocative statements, though scattered here and there, were not common in the accounts we looked at. Unlike in MUDs and Chat Rooms, public proclamations of non-mainstream or gay sexual orientations seemed to be rare on Facebook. For example, only five of the 63 users in our sample stated openly in their profiles that they were looking for "random play" or "whatever I can get" on Facebook, and nobody shared an interest in a same sex relationship. Yet, based on interview data that

preceded the Facebook analysis, we knew of two students, one African American male and one Puerto Rican female, who had claimed openly to be bisexual in the context of an offline interview. Yet neither one opted to share their sexual orientation on their Facebook pages. In the female case, she opted to restrict all access to her pages except for her approved friends. On the Facebook pages of the male bisexual, there was nothing explicit to indicate his sexual orientation. Under the "looking for" category, he had selected only "friendship." Moreover, he had not selected the "interested in" option where most heterosexuals proclaimed their interest in the opposite sex. Thus in both of these cases, the users opted not to project a sexual orientation still defined by many in society as aberrant, despite the fact that university students might be expected to be among the most open of subcultures to such orientations. The fact that these two bisexuals chose not to "tell" nor "show" their "non-conventional" sexual orientations suggests the presence of social pressure and a degree of censorship on Facebook, which is not something commonly experienced in anonymous online settings.

In contrast, socially endorsed sexual orientations were openly expressed on Facebook. Of the 68.3% ($n = 43$) of users in our sample who specified their sexual preference ("interested in"), all claimed to be heterosexual. A number of users also chose to publicly display their affections for their loved ones, as was shown in the statement below by a female student:

> "I am currently married to a man named xxx [real name was provided originally but removed here to protect privacy]. He is the reason I wake up ever morning with a smile on my face & the reason why I look forward to living another day. He is my lover & best friend."

By publicly proclaiming her love and affection for her husband on Facebook, the female user constructed an identity of devotion and faithfulness toward a heterosexual marital relationship. This life affirming portrayal of devotion in a traditional marital context parallels the broader, positive identity claims of the collectivity of Facebook users.

6. Discussion

We postulated on the basis of literature review that the identities constructed on Facebook would be different from the identities constructed in the nonymous offline environments or the anonymous online environments. This hypothesis seems to have been supported by our findings. The hoped-for possible selves users projected on Facebook were neither the "true selves" commonly seen in MUDs or Chat Rooms, nor the "real selves" people presented in localized face-to-face interactions. The Facebook selves appeared to be highly socially desirable identities individuals aspire to have offline but have not yet been able to embody for one reason or another.

This result is consistent with the findings of Internet dating studies. While the nonymity of the environment does seem to make people more "realistic and honest" (Ellison et al., 2006) in their self-presentation, the reduction of "gating obstacles" in the online setting enables the users to "stretch the truth a bit" (Yurchisin et al., 2005) in their efforts to project a self that is more socially desirable, better than their "real" offline identity. However, there appears to be some unique features associated with the way in which Facebook users construct their "hoped-for possible selves." For instance,

Facebook users in our sample were less likely to display yearbook types of single-person photos as their profile cover pictures (38.1% presented group photos and 19.1% presented avatars or no pictures at all); they were more likely to showcase themselves indirectly through friend lists, photo albums, and wall posts; and they tried to avoid making explicit self descriptions, such as the "About Me" blurb. In this way, the visual possibilities of Facebook mean that users offer a mediated interaction to their audience, one that requires the audience to pay equal attention to the social milieu of the individual. The appeal is as much to the likeability of my crowd, the desirability of my boyfriend or the magic of my music as it is to the personal qualities of the Facebook users themselves. This mediated appeal creates a triangular relationship of desire or interest between user, displayed friends/mates, and the audience, like that analyzed by Girard (1961) with his concept of 'mimetic desire." This decided preference for "show" over "tell," for implicit and mediated poses over explicit identity claims among Facebook users in our sample may be attributable to the prevailing youth culture, the campus setting with its dense possibilities for off-line socializing, as well as the distinctive features of the Facebook environment.

The findings of our study have a number of important implications for the understanding of identity construction in society. Our results suggest that identity is not an individual characteristic; it is not an expression of something innate in a person, it is rather a social product, the outcome of a given social environment and hence performed differently in varying contexts. Depending on the characteristics of the environment in which they find themselves, individuals will choose to claim identities that can help them better situate within the given social environment. "True selves," "real selves," and "hoped-for possible selves" are products of different situations rather than characteristics of different individuals.

Second, it is not true that the online world is a dreamland for deviant behaviors. In society, individuals are expected to behave according to established norms; conformity to norms will be rewarded and deviations from them will be punished. In a nonymous environment where individuals can be held accountable for their behaviors, people are more likely to present their selves as being in line with, or close to, normative expectations, whereas in an anonymous environment, either online or offline, where individuals are unidentifiable and thus cannot be held responsible, people are more likely to behave as they wish, ignoring normative restrictions (Cinnirella & Green, 2007). The association of conformity with the offline world and deviance with the online world is invalid, for there are anonymous offline environments (e.g., bars) and nonymous online environments (e.g., institutional listservs). Facebook is a nonymous online setting, where users are required to reveal their real names in a fixed institutional context, which explains why users tend not to treat it as a venue for expressing their "hidden selves" or marginalized or contested identities.

Third, it is also incorrect to think that the online world and the offline world are two separate worlds, and whatever people do online "hold little consequence" (Clark, 1998, p. 180) for lives offline. In the Internet era, the social world includes both the online and offline environments, and an important skill people need to learn is how to coordinate their behaviors in these two realms. Among other things, the Internet provides new resources and opportunities for identity production that can be used to overcome some limitations inherent in face-to-face situations. Our findings suggest that Facebook enables the users to present themselves in ways that can reasonably bypass physical "gating obstacles" and create the hoped-for possible selves they are unable to establish in the off-line world. Such "digital selves" are real, and they can serve to enhance the users' overall

self-image and identity claims and quite possibly increase their chances to connect in the offline world.

Fourth, at a more theoretical level, our findings challenge the distinction between "real selves" and "virtual selves" or "true selves" and "false selves." "Virtual selves" commonly refers to online selves and "real selves" to offline selves, but, as has been shown here, Facebook identities are clearly real in the sense that they have real consequences for the lives of the individuals who constructed them. The concept of "true selves" has been used to refer to the "hidden aspects of what we need or wish to be" (Suler, 2002, p. 458), and "hidden" has meant "anti-normative" or "deviant" in this context. But not all socially unsanctioned identities are hidden. Some are performed openly, for example, as acts of resistance. Are such marginalized selves no longer "true" once they have been openly expressed? Moreover, why are norm-conforming selves not true, even if they are genuine? In a nonymous environment, "hoped-for possible selves" are socially desirable selves individuals would like to present to others, and in the cases we were examining, they were also identities that apparently had not been fully established offline. They are "socially desirable" or norm-confirming, but that does not necessarily mean that they are not true selves; even though they are not yet fully actualized offline, they can have a real impact on the individuals. Identities are what we convince others to think of us as; it matters not whether that happens online or offline, or whether they are anti-normative or socially desirable.

Finally, some words of caution. Facebook is a multi-audience identity production site. The control users have over the privacy settings of their accounts enables them to partition their Facebook pages into many "back" and "front" regions (Goffman, 1959), whereby staging different identity shows for different audiences. The Facebook pages we examined in this study were only one type of user performance; we were blind to the other possible shows users presented in their Facebook accounts. Moreover, we only looked at the Facebook accounts at one university, which may differ from the Facebook profiles in some other universities. It should also be noted that the current Facebook environment may change in the future and become, for example, more anonymous or MySpace-like. Despite those caveats, the main finding of this study—the nonymity conditions of an online environment can affect identity production—deserves our attention.

Future research on this topic needs to control for the effects of individual characteristics while examining identity construction in different environments. Most studies on online self-presentation have been conducted using a single-setting design, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to rule out selection effects in cross-setting comparisons. There is also a need to employ multiple methods (e.g., interviews and surveys) within the same study so that the different aspects of identity construction can be examined in different ways. Unlike many Internet dating studies that relied primarily on qualitative interview data, the present study was based on content analysis of Facebook accounts which yielded mostly quantitative data. The next logical step in advancing this line of research is to combine investigators' "objective" coding of the profiles with users' subjective interpretations of their own activities. Such multi-method approaches can help us gain a better understanding of identity construction in different online environments.

Appendix 1. Rules for coding Facebook pages (abbreviated)

Variable	Value and value label
Case #	–
Picture	R's profile cover picture
	0 – Blank
	1 – Self
	2 – With others
	3 – Avatar
Gender	R's gender
	0 – Missing
	1 – Male
	2 – Female
Sex	Sex R interested in
	0 – Missing
	1 – Men
	2 – Women
Relation	R's current relationship status
	0 – Missing
	1 – Single
	2 – In a relationship
	3 – In an open relationship
	4 – Engaged/ married
	5 – It's complicated
Look_For	Relationship R looking for
	0 – Missing
	1 – Friendship
	2 – A relationship
	3 – Dating
	4 – Random play
	5 – Whatever I can get
Birthday	R's birthday
	0 – Missing
	1 – Month and day and year
	2 – Month and day

Appendix 1 (*continued*)

Variable	Value and value label
Hometown	R's hometown name 0 – Missing 1 – Not missing
Residence	R's residence information 0 – Missing 1 – Complete 2 – Partial
Contact	R's online contact information 0 – Missing 1 – Email address 2 – IM screen name 3 – Mobile phone/land phone 4 – Website
High_Sch	R's high school name 0 – Missing 1 – Not missing
Class_Yr	R's year of class 0 – Missing – Year specified
Friend_C	R's campus friends 0 – Missing – # of campus friends
Friend_O	R's other friends 0 – Missing – # of all other friends
Group	R's groups joined 0 – Missing – # of groups joined
Activity	Activities R likes 0 – Missing – # of activities listed 98 – Unspecified
Interest	R's personal interests 0 – Missing – # of interests listed 98 – Unspecified

Appendix 1 (*continued*)

Variable	Value and value label
Music	R's favorite music
	0 – Missing
	– # of music listed
	98 – Unspecified
TV	R's Favorite TV shows
	0 – Missing
	– # of shows listed
	98 – Unspecified
Movie	R's favorite movies
	0 – Missing
	– # of movies listed
	98 – Unspecified
Book	R's favorite books
	0 – Missing
	– # of books listed
	98 – Unspecified
Quote	R's favorite quotes
	0 – Missing
	– # of quotes listed
	98 – Unspecified
About_Me	R's narrative self-description
	0 – Missing
	1 – One or two short sentences
	2 – One or two short paragraphs
	3 – Long paragraphs
Album	R's albums
	0 – Missing
	– # of albums
Post	Wall posts in R's account
	0 – Missing
	– # of wall posts

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