



Blekinge Institute of Technology  
School of Planning and Media Design  
Department of Culture and Communication

Collaborative Virtual Environments: Identity Construction in Online Environments  
with a Focus on Facebook

**Funke Jaiyeola**

2011

BACHELOR THESIS  
B.A. in English and Digital Media.

Supervisor:  
Lissa Holloway-Attaway

Funke Jaiyeola

Lissa Holloway-Attaway

Final Project

May 2011

Collaborative Virtual Environments: Identity Construction in Online Environments with a Focus  
on Facebook

The emergence of collaborative virtual environments dates back many years, the earliest examples coming closely after the development of the Internet. In 1965, Ivan Sutherland proposed the concept of the “Ultimate Display” and with this discovery came many online phenomena one of which is social networking sites. Collaborative virtual environments comprise different online communities, such as dating sites, social networking sites, business networking sites and a host of others. One key point that is encouraged in a collaborative virtual environment is interaction, and for this to occur there must be some form of embodiment (that is “bodies”) engaging in specifically defined actions, reactions and performances, whether they are playing games, chatting or networking. However, for the purpose of my research, I will examine the social networking aspects of a collaborative virtual environment with a focus on Facebook. My research will demonstrate how online environments influence one's interpretation of “the self” and explore how identities are constructed in this medium. I aim to show how identities are shaped and constructed on the Internet through some of the determining factors of the virtual world, which include lack of boundaries, seamlessness and programming technology. The advent of the Internet created a shift

in the way the world as a global village had been operating, bringing about a shift in cultures. According to Sherry Turkle in her book, *Life on the Screen*, we moved from a “culture of calculation toward a culture of simulation” (Turkle19)., This shift means that through our use of social communities, we have come to blur the line between what is real, and what can be considered as real, or what is absolutely artificial. Through the use of computer language and instructions programmed into this virtual social communities, we are able to represent ourselves in many forms: we can shift shapes with or without conforming strictly to a particular shape by customizing our page, changing the aesthetic values of our wall depending on our culture or understanding of the technology. I propose that identities are constructed on social networking sites, specifically Facebook, with a strong relationship to postmodernist influences. Some of the characteristics of postmodernism that I believe are relevant to identity formation are: users “textualizing” their persona to create an identity, and the use of nomenclature, that is users adopting names and sometimes creating groups with specific naming styles for group members. These groups are ways through which users may also articulate their identities. Any user on Facebook has the right to create a group. The user who constructs a group is called an administrator and is responsible for maintaining the group’s profile and hence its identity. A group’s identity may be based on cultural, religious, sporting, leisure or ideological stance.

Facebook, arguably the most popular social networking site today came about as a result of a school assignment and was originally designed primarily to cater for students in the United States. Danah Boyd in her article “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, And Scholarship” explains,

Facebook was designed to support distinct college networks only. Facebook began in early 2004 as a Harvard-only SNS (Cassidy, 2006). To join, a user had to have a harvard.edu email address. As Facebook began supporting other schools, those users were also required to have university email addresses associated with those institutions, a requirement that kept the site relatively closed and contributed to users' perceptions of the site as an intimate, private community. (6)

She goes on to describe how Facebook eventually became public: “Beginning in September 2005, Facebook expanded to include high school students, professionals inside corporate networks, and, eventually, everyone” (6). On Facebook, there are a number of things going on; the user is involved in a lot of activities like “presencing,” role playing, performance, location. Further, cultures and subcultures are continually established on Facebook through the creation of groups, events and pages. All these factors combine to make the community thrive. However, the community remains incomplete without the user who adopts a view point, an action point and engages in activities which all combine to define his/her identity.

It is an undeniable fact that identities play key roles in virtual communities. Identity according to Peggy A Thoits in her essay “Identity Structures and Psychological Well-Being”, refers to the importance of self conceptions in terms of individual roles” (236) in identity formation. Additionally, Andrew Wood and Matthew Smith in their publication “Online Communication: linking technology, identity, and culture” define identity as “a complex social and personal construct, consisting in part of who we think ourselves to be, how we wish others to perceive us, and how they actually perceive us” (Wood, Smith, 2001). In the same vein, many

media theorists persist in measuring identity in terms of social, racial, or gender basis. The early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century till date has witnessed structuralists as well as post-structuralists theories trying to explain the intricacies of identity and how social systems define and construct identity. These formulations are based on notion of the “self” linked to the idea that identities have nothing to do with biological phrenology but are rather constructed through influences from the society as a whole. While modernists insist on viewing identity in a categorized manner with the fixed variables of ethnicity, race, gender and social status and also on the premise of semiotic beliefs, post-modernist stand on the point that identity is fluid and cannot be measured on these fixed variables. Harnes-Garcia sheds more light on this in the book “Reclaiming Identity” where he states that:

....the essentialist view would be that the identity common to members of a social group is stable and more or less unchanging, since it is based on the experiences they share. Opponents of essentialism often find this view seriously misleading, since it ignores historical changes and glosses over internal differences within a group by privileging only the experiences that are common to everyone.

Postmodernists in particular insist that identities are fabricated and constructed rather than self-evidently deduced from experience, since- they claim- experience cannot be a source of objective knowledge . (30)

Postmodernists are of the opinion that identity cannot be measured on a fixed scale but rather hinges on fluidity and multiplicity. This belief tends more toward postmodernists’ belief of the structure of the world and how there are no hierarchies or fixed system of things. Identity as a

concept is fluid and remains unstable. We are influenced by our environment in different ways and this in turn shapes our identity or the way we construct ourselves (our self-construction). Norms, cultures and happenings shape the way individuals construct their identities whether online or offline. Also, personal experiences shape the way different individuals construct their identities at any given time. Different personalities are adopted depending on whether people are at home or at work. At times, many external factors contribute to how individuals constitute their identity in real life but this may not necessarily be true in online environments. Reality is mediated, and thus individuals may adopt a role-playing status online and adopt different online presence depending on the situation and physical appearance no longer matters (or does it?). Status messages, wall posts or notes on Facebook explicitly require users to adopt a role thereby constituting an identity. Arguably, the online environment influences our notion of the self in a way that differs from the real and what is revealed within the framework of what is considered as real. In the post-modernists view, an individual's identity at any given time may be compared to a window that can be seen through as opposed to a mirror that reflects what the individual really is. Online environments encourage a variation of many selves in one body. The metaphorical comparison of identity to a window effectually depicts what identity construction means in a postmodern definition. The views (acts) seen (performed) through a window (self) depends on the actions or happenings occurring as at the time the window (self) is opened (activated). Erving Goffman in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday life* describes humans as actors and prevailing circumstances as stages that influence our actions and thereby bring forth the end product which he calls identity."The self ... is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely

from a scene that is presented (Goffman 245).” Goffman claims that we are all actors performing on the stage. He states that our acts vary depending on whether we are on the front stage with audiences viewing and perhaps scrutinizing our performances, or whether we are backstage. I claim this is equally applicable in online environments like Facebook.

Facebook like many social networking sites encourages the construction of identity. First, the user is presented with a space for profile picture, this being one of the process of constructing an identity. Identity construction is made easy because of the technology involved. Users are able to construct and reconstruct identities as they deem fit and as often as they like because the technology involved has made this possible. Further, the accessibility of some users to this technology affords them the liberty of constructing an identity for greater accessibility to information and connection to people calls for greater agency. Users have the choice of uploading personal pictures, leaving the space blank or uploading any desired image that conveys what the users wish to be associated with. Then there is the wall, a locus for social activity on Facebook. The wall feature is available for every Facebook profile and allows users to post thoughts, send greetings and engage in any other textual activity which brings us to the notion of users’ identity being disembodied and embodied again textually. In this instance, the user becomes what he/she writes. Users write and rewrite themselves into being in order to keep up with the constant charade of distorted, fragmented, mirrored and oftentimes opaque identity. However, each user has the ability to restrict who can view or post on their walls. There are a number of options available for the wall feature. Users may allow specific friends on their network total access to their wall by viewing, reading posts, commenting and also posting. Alternately, users may decide that even designated friends on their network may only view posts

but are not allowed to post on the walls. This setting is a personal preference and depends on each user's discretion. Facebook is constantly asking users what they have on their minds. Since the body cannot be separated from the mind, it follows that the thoughts being shared at any given time exemplifies the users' identity at such time. In this way, users become what they write, that is identity takes on a textual form.

Further, with Facebook, identities can either be expressed implicitly or explicitly. Identities are expressed implicitly when users upload pictures. This way, the users become passive, weakly telling other users to see them in any way they might like to interpret the pictures. Meanwhile, an identity explicitly implied is actively declaring, "this is who I am: this is how I want to be seen." This is when identity becomes textual whether through notes, wall posts or status updates. The texts become flag bearers boldly declaring the intent or supposed intent of the user at such time.

### **Identity Construction and Impression Management.**

Interestingly, the name Facebook stems from a book given by college/university administrators in the USA to students to enable them know themselves better. The name combines the two variables "face" and "book". Dictionary.com defines Facebook as "a publication for an organization, such as a school or business, which helps members identify each other; also, an online version of this, with profiles including a picture, name, birthdate, interests, etc" or "a school yearbook". Mark Zuckerberg the main founder of Facebook (the social networking site) obviously had this in mind when he created Facebook. Ironically, it is quite interesting to note that the very purpose for which Facebook was created seems now to be

arguably inconsequential. This is as a result of users' constant engagement in their quest for self-presentation. While some users do this with all awareness, some are blissfully unaware of their actions and performances serving as some form of identity construction and/or reconstruction. Also, the face in Facebook becomes "faceless" oftentimes with users putting up several images on their walls making it rather complex for other users to pinpoint who the user really is thereby defeating the original purpose of the site. Users on Facebook have become producers; making use of the access they have on the web to create whatever suits them. Every other second, a user somewhere is busy updating his/her status and a user somewhere is reading this update thereby engaging in the process of "booking" which entails writing and reading. This is one of the many ways through which identities are constructed on Facebook. The "Wall" feature on Facebook lends a great hand in identity construction. Users are able to post things on their walls and on friends' walls. These posts range from pictures, texts, games, invites, notifications and applications to quizzes. All of these serve to enhance impression formation in other users. The "wall" may then be compared to Erving Goffman's idea of the front stage where the user's main actions and activities are performed. In the front stage, the user acts for an intended audience. Messages are posted on friends' walls expressing different things from sharing opinions to birthday wishes (this may not necessarily be something the user enjoys doing but because he/she has to put up a front to maintain a status quo). The user takes it upon him/herself to deliver his lines (status updates, wall posts, etc) to keep up with the self presentation. Though Goffman talks about the physical setting, some of the measures he mentions may be applied in online environments. Goffman explains his constant usage of the term performance to mean "...all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before

a particular set of observers and which has some influence on these observers” (Goffman 32). He labels “front” to be “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (ibid 32). It follows then to compare the “Wall” feature on Facebook to Goffman’s concept of the front where users take up performances before observers (other users who are privy to their wall post and other online activities on Facebook). Just as actors’ performances elicit some kind of response from the audience, so do wall posts, status updates, notes and other performances on Facebook evoke some form of response from particular users’ observers. Impression formation begins with other users’ observations of another user’s wall/page and thus begins the process of self presentation and identity construction. Because users do not usually write or post the same things every time, this makes their identity fluid and constantly shifting. The question then arises, what constitutes an identity? In answering this question, one would have to analyze the various facets of identity. Oftentimes, identity is discussed without recourse to the particular type being discussed; readers are then left to deduce what type of identity would be applicable in the particular discourse under scrutiny. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus mainly on the social or cultural identity. Theorists have argued back and forth regarding what constitutes this type of identity. Judith Butler in her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” argues that individuals (whom she alternatively refers to as subjects following the postmodernists’ and poststructuralists’ practice) cannot assume a stable subjectivity that goes about performing various gender roles but rather, individuals’ acts of performing gender constitutes who they really are gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in

time—an identity, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts”( 120). For Butler, identity itself is an illusion retrospectively created by performances: "In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief” (120). If we view self presentation as how we wish others to perceive us, which we sometimes do, then it follows Goffman’s line of thought that in constructing our identities, we become actors engaged in performances. In order to keep up with others’ perception of us, we adopt what Goffman calls “Impression Management”. In a mediated environment where there may sometimes be confusion between a distinction between the real and what is actually considered as real, it is important for users to have some form of control or hold on the construction of their identities. Therefore, during the process of constructing an identity online, the user does not just relax and allow things take their toll, the user makes efforts to control how he/she is viewed by other users ( in a case where identity is being expressed explicitly). The term “Impression Management” was coined by Goffman to refer to our desire to manipulate the others’ impressions of us on the front stage. In order to maintain the interests of others in us various mechanisms which I will call “sign vehicles” are used to present ourselves to others. The most commonly employed sign vehicles are the following: social setting, appearance, and manner of interaction.

### **Social Setting**

The social setting is the place where interaction and actions occurs. Since the online environment is in observation here, it follows to sat that how the space is arranged and the contents that is, pictures, posts, games, applications and background (where possible), conveys a

lot of information about the user. How we decorate our settings, or what **props** we use, also gives clues to how we want people to think of us. In the case of Facebook, information about education, age, relationship status, books, movies, music, employer, basic and contact information gives other users some inkling regarding identity. When users post updates, share pictures, videos or notes, they are using props to convey information about how they want others to view them.

### **Appearance**

Appearance speaks volumes about us. People's first impressions are based almost exclusively on appearance. However, while it is easy to put up appearances offline, that is, in the physical space through clothing, stature, race and ethnic groups, it is not so easy to do this online. This is because we can strut and dress up, and also adopt accents when physically present but to achieve this online would mean displaying all these through pictures, and again our updates and as earlier mentioned, the information available on our wall.

### **Manner of Interacting**

According to Goffman, our manner of interacting is also a sign vehicle. Our manner of interacting consists of the attitudes we convey in an attempt to get others to form certain impressions about us. One of the most common ways to convey attitudes is through nonverbal communication, the ways we have of communicating that do not use spoken words. These consist of gestures, facial expressions, and body language. This is easily achieved online with the common mode of communicating online being non-verbal and also gestures, facial expressions and body languages being easily conjured through photographs.

## **Gestures**

Gestures online may include users stance towards other users. Messages in gestures can be more subtle, as well. A user may pass a message across to another user or other users by his/her gestures towards them: for instance, ignoring comments, questions or posts that blatantly require responses. People who are well known in real life like movies stars, talk show hosts, and musicians among others fall into this category. Perhaps, to put up a front about their invincibility. By invincibility here, I am referring to their distance, highhandedness and superiority. Other users on Facebook also engage in this gesture. Recipients of such gestures may interpret them however they deem suitable depending on the prevailing situation at the time of such gestures.

**Facial expressions:** Information is also conveyed through facial expressions. It is not surprising that users also buttress their identities through their facial expressions in photographs for indeed looks speaks volumes. One may speak so much or nothing through facial expressions like in the case of poker players who maintain blank expressions making it difficult for opponents to fathom their next move. Hence, an astounding amount of information can be easily conveyed in a look or an expression. A smile, frown, grimace, raised eyebrows, and narrowed eyes all convey distinctly different messages.

**Body language:** like gesture, body language is easily conveyed online through photographs or the more common use of emoticons. Body language is also an effective tool used in conveying messages and holds meanings to be deciphered by other users. Body language can be expressed through the ways in which we use our bodies to communicate consciously and unconsciously. Sometimes body language gives clearer indications of a person's thoughts or feelings than words do.

Speaking further on identity and identity construction, Joanne Finkelstein in her book *The Art of Self Invention*, image and identity in popular culture defines identity and that “claiming an identity is an ordinary occurrence.” (Finkelstein 121). This claim by Finkelstein is rather subjective and open to debate. Because in the book, she further reviews how having one form of identification or the other to identify us thereby simplifies the whole notion of identity construction. Finkelstein has not taken the online environment into account by this claim. Identities are rather unstable, not fixed and absolutely self reflexive in an online environment. That is, identity online is subject to change as opposed to Finkelstein’s approach to identity which leans more toward the modernist or traditionalists view of identity as being fixed, stable and predefined.

In the introduction of her book, “Life on the Screen”, Sherry Turkle demonstrates how the internet is reshaping our existence:

A decade ago, when I first called the computer a second self, these identity-transforming relationships were almost one-on-one..... This is no longer the case. A rapidly expanding system of networks, collectively known as the Internet, links millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities .(9)

She further elucidates on how the medium of the computer through the internet has been helping us keep “track of our accounts and communicate with others” (9). The virtual space allows us to “assume personae of our own creation” (9). We are empowered to adopt identities. And since the power of creation lies in our hands, this means we can create and/or recreate our personae as often as we want. Further, the opportunity to build new networks virtually is created. In Turkle’s

words, “we have the opportunity to build new kinds of communities, virtual communities” (10) we are empowered to cultivate friendships, affinities with people all over the globe. In this environment, we converse, flirt, play games, and associate with people whom we may or may not know physically. We even develop intimate relationships sometimes with some of this people whom we may never meet physically. The bliss of a virtual identity!

Turkle describes several virtual environments such as MUDs (Multi-User Domains or Multi-User Dungeons, The Next Generation, MedievalMush and many others. She extensively describes how these environments operate. The MUDs, she describes as “a new kind of virtual parlor game and a new form of community” (11). Interestingly, in MUDs, users or as Turkle puts it players textualize themselves. She writes that players become authors of texts and of themselves as well. Facebook adopts a similar style in that users are able to textualize themselves through updates, wall posts and notes. One of the characters Turkle describes states that “You are who you pretend to be” (12). Just as a user on MUD can textualize his/her body one’s body is represented by one’s textual description, so the obese can be slender, the beautiful plain, the “nerdy” sophisticated” (12) so also can users on Facebook textually represent themselves and their identities. She describes this process as a performance which “gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones” (12). Further, she writes about the New York Cartoonist who captures the potential of the internet, the MUD this time, as a laboratory for “experimenting with one’s identity” (12). The cartoonist exemplifies this with the picture of a dog with a paw on the keyboard explaining to another dog “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (12).

The virtual environment is such a powerful medium which empowers individuals to become what or whom they want through the existence of many communities which allow users to adopt identities. Another interesting thing about virtual environments such as Facebook is the ability to be more than one self. That is one user may adopt more than one identity simultaneously. This can be done through games, postings, pictures and profile information. For instance, a user whose profile I checked on Facebook had pictures of a boy but had clearly feminine names and listed him/herself as being in a relationship with another user who also had pictures of a boy and feminine names. Both of these users listed their sex as female. They interchangeably update their status with confusing posts. Sometimes adopting female stance and at other times male stance.

Without any principle of coherence, the self spins in all directions. Multiplicity is not viable if it means shifting among personalities that cannot communicate.

Multiplicity is not acceptable if it means being confused to a point of immobility. How can we be multiple and coherent at the same time? traditional cultures have broken down and identifies a range of responses. One is a dogmatic insistence on unity. Another is to return to systems of belief, such as religious fundamentalism, that enforce conformity. A third is to embrace the idea of a fragmented self.....

You can have a sense of self without being one self. (Turkle 258)

In the third part of the book, life on the internet, Turkle examines different phases of the self and identity construction online. She elucidates on how deception is easily done virtually. According to her, “Life on the Screen makes it very easy to present ones as other than one is in real life “(228). Is deception then a key part of why different identities are constructed and adopted

online? Turkle answers this question thus "although some people think that representing oneself as other than one is always a deception, many people turn to online life with the intention of playing it precisely this way. They insist that a certain amount of shape-shifting is part of the online game" (228). According to Turkle, adopting an online persona implies "crossing a boundary into highly charged territory". The result of which could make some "feel an uncomfortable sense of fragmentation", some "a sense of relief" and for some, "possibilities for self discovery, even self transformation" (260).

Correspondingly, Markham N Annette in her essay "Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space," sharing her interview with Theresa Senft quoted her when describing her experience online "All of my experiences online are displacing my understanding of my own identity" (Markham 36). In another interview, Markham deduced that online users seemingly perceive "self" as being a performance: "Most people I met online perceive self to be a performance controlled by the sender of the message.....Thus, if a person can edit or refine his or her description of self to others, and clarify misunderstandings with more precise messages, shared understanding should be possible" (125).

Furthermore, Zhao et al in their essay "Identity Construction on Facebook: Digital Empowerment in Anchored Relationships," explore the themes of space and body on Facebook. They base the premise of their essay on research conducted on selected Facebook users totaling 63. Zhao et al claim that identity construction on Facebook is more implicit than explicit with users preferring to "show rather than tell" who they are (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin). Again, this claim is arguably subjective especially considering that only 63 Facebook accounts were used in drawing this inference when we take into account that there are over millions of users on

Facebook, more than 750 million users according to information available on Facebook statistics page (<http://www.Facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>). Information on this page in the Activity on Facebook session, also states that average users upload contents such as blog posts, notes and more “More than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) shared each month.” Suffice it to say that identity on Facebook is constructed either implicitly or explicitly with some users tending towards one than the other. However, they purported that the online world is not “monolithic” (that is not just consisting of one piece), a claim shared by many other literary and media theorists. They also state that the presentation of self varies depending on the setting. With their essay, they try to find out whether identity performance online is influenced by the medium in which the performance takes place. Quoting from Gregory Stone’s “Appearance and the self”: “identity announce-ment” 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 188), they seek to explain the importance of space in identity construction and self presentation. They outline the constraints posed by face to face construction of identity. They stated that in such interactions, identities are constructed “under a unique set of constraints”. They pointed out that:

The presence of the corporal body in social encounters prevents people from claiming identities that are inconsistent with the visible part of their physical characters-tics (e.g., sex, race, and looks), and the shared knowledge of each other’s social back-ground and personality attributes renders it midcult for an individual to pretend to be what he or she is not. (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin)

According to Zhao et al, the virtual space gives room for the corporeal body to engage in disembodied activities through the seamless space. Traditional constraints such as space cease to be a problem and individuals can now perform identities that go beyond physical space and embodiments. For instance, a user on Facebook may choose to perform his/her identity in a disembodied text mode that reveals absolutely nothing about the individual's physical attributes. There are a handful of such users on Facebook, with no image of a concrete body but only images depicting textual contents like the image below:



**Profile Picture; Toin Swaggie( <http://Facebook.com/jasmine.soaga> )**

Depending on whether the user chooses to remain disembodied by textually representing his/her appearance or whether the user chooses to remain identified or anonymous, the combination..... creates a technologically mediated environment in which a new mode of identity production emerges .”<sup>2</sup>

Further, Zhao et al elucidate more on the ease of constructing identities in an environment with no physical confines or bounds:

Disembodied online encounters enable people to hide their undesired physical features, and .... allows individuals to re-create their biography and personality. In

other words, the disembodied..... 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 pre-tend to be a woman, a nerd to be a star athlete, and an introvert to be an extrovert. (3)

Although, users are able to adopt identities that pleases them online, the level to which this identities are protected is however uncertain. For example, on Facebook, the ability to shape and/or reshape one's identity relies solely on one's understanding of the settings of the site. Some users have found their profiles or chosen identities to be more vulnerable than they thought it to be. (Smith and Kidder). Therefore, in order to create an identity and be confident about its security and believability, a user must have in-depth understanding of Facebook and the general settings.

Are our identities influenced by our gender? When we take cognizance of Judith Butler's theory, then we may perhaps answer this question affirmatively. According to Butler, gender is not something we are born with, she alludes to Goffman's theory that our portrayal of the self are all performances.

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender...must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler)

For a better understanding of Butler's theory on the issue of gender and identity construction and how the two are related, gender is defined as "a person's self representation as male or female, or how that person is responded to by social institutions on the basis of the individual's gender presentation." (Sex, Gender, and Pain: An Overview of a Complex Field)<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Peggy A Thoits posits that identities are should be shaped by gender. According to her, "most people conceive of themselves in terms of the roles they hold. .... As with roles occupied, I found no gender differences in the number of identities claimed" (243). Let us not forget here that gender like identity is how we present ourselves socially and is therefore separate from our sex, which is male or female. Good examples are drag-queens and drag-kings, male dressing and acting like women and vice versa. These groups confuse people to the extent that people do not know how to properly address them without being offensive.

Conclusively, the age of the internet created a shift in the interpretations of cultures and subcultures, the real and simulation, identity and personality, representations and presentations. Like many virtual social communities, users on Facebook are drawn into the seamlessness of the online environment. Suddenly, there is a whole new avenue of opportunities, the computer is no longer regarded a mere calculating machine, it becomes an object of simulation. Through the introduction advanced programming languages, users on Facebook can shape and reshape their identities. Although several studies in the field of sociology and psychology have sought to determine the "why " of identity constructions, one may never be able to answer this question. We may assume that users adopt identities for self or audience gratification, or perhaps for empowerment, social standing, economic standing, or even reputation take for instance the recent case of the Norwegian who committed a massacre. His identity on the social networking

site Facebook supposedly lists him as a Christian and a “right” extremist politically. Many groups have however being created to either refute or back up this claim. One thing is however certain, he was able to maintain a status quo through an identity he built online.

Again, for many users on Facebook, audience gratification or self gratification seems to be a motive for adopting different identities, this may never be ascertained. One fact that is however certain is this, users motive for shaping or reshaping their identities in certain ways are individualistic and may never be known to any other person but to the individual in question.

It is arguably correct to say that peer group influence and perhaps the willingness to prove one’s own personality are factors that may contribute to online self presentation. We may never be able to absolutely ascertain why these identities are constructed. The computer, but most importantly, technological advancement has completely changed the way we see ourselves online and offline. Often, Internet users feel “empty” or “incomplete” when they cannot access the internet at anytime. Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media* could not have been more correct when he described new technologies as being an extension of oneself. The virtual environment has overtime proven to be a powerful tool in the area of self presentation as it allows individuals to maintain their real identity, create new identity and manipulate this created identity through impression management tactics. Whichever way a user chooses to express his/her identity on Facebook, one thing is certain, the user is able to emphasize or deemphasize particular aspects of the self through the information available on his/her profile, the groups he/she belongs to and the general updates on his/her wall. A user may also effectively manage his/her identity with the choice of music shared on his/her wall and the contents such user allows on his/her wall. Identity construction is also encouraged in virtual collaborative environments like Facebook through the

near non-inhibition nature of the space. Although, there are certain features that allows other users to report contents they deem as abusive, users on Facebook are generally allowed to post any content they want, either on their individual wall or other users' wall depending on the setting of the recipient of such posts. Depending on the desire of the user, identity construction may be due to a number of reasons, self-expression, insecurity, security or just a way of having uninhibited freedom, in Turkle's words, "Virtual communities offer a dramatic new context in which to think about human identity in the age of the internet" (Turkle 267). Computers but most importantly, the internet have changed the ways people interact, communicate and present themselves online because physical constraints like space are absent. Also, the internet provides accessibility to a larger audience. In the book, *The Networked Self*, Zizi examines the findings and observations of some media, literary and critical theorists, she states "the interposition of media changes the quality and quantity of information exchanged, influences personal behaviors and attitudes, and shapes an individual's self-image" (Zizi 20).

Perhaps, identity construction is encouraged online because of the absence of spatial and temporal boundaries, or as Turkle suggests, "one can play a role as close to or as far away from one's "real self" as one chooses" (Turkle 12). The construction of identities have gone past the physical space and now thrive more in virtual space as more people favor online spaces because it gives them the freedom to be what, or who, they really want to be. The performative nature of online identities blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality as users become immersed in the virtual world. Online identities often do not lay much emphasis on the physical bodies behind the performance, but rather focus on the performance and the construction of self hence the urge to participate more in the online environment. Users can construct different identities in virtual

environment as much as they want because these identities are neither stable nor unified and can therefore not be pinned down.

Sherry Turkle however warns that taking our identity on the screen for granted might be risky:

People can get lost in virtual worlds. Some are tempted to think of life in cyberspace as insignificant, as escape or meaningless diversion. It is not. Our experiences there are serious play. We belittle them at our risk. We must understand the dynamics of virtual experience, without a deep understanding of the many selves that we express in the virtual we cannot use our experiences to enrich the real. If we cultivate our awareness of what stands behind our screen personae, we are more likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal transformation. 269)

## Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988). Web. 08 May 2011. <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/20589410/Butler-performative-Acts-and-Gender-Constitution>>.
- Dictionary.com | Find the Meanings and Definitions of Words at Dictionary.com. Web. 29 Apr. 2011. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Facebook>>.
- Finkelstein, Joanne. *The Art of Self Invention Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2007. Print.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor, 1959. Print.
- Hames-Garcia, Michael Roy., and Paula Marie Lourdes Moya. *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Los Angeles: University of California, 2000. 25-45. Print.
- Markham, Annette N. *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1998. Print.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964. Print.
- Papacharissi, Zizi. *A Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- "Statistics | Facebook." *Welcome to Facebook - Log In, Sign Up or Learn More*. Web. 30 June 2011. <<http://www.Facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>>.

Thoits, Peggy A. "Identity Structures and Psychological Well-Being: Gender and Marital Status Comparisons." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 55.3 (1992): 236-56. JSTOR. Web. 4 June 2011.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. Print.

Wood, Andrew F., and Matthew J. Smith. *Online Communication: Linking Technology, Identity, and Culture*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001. Print.

Zhao, S., S. Grasmuck, and J. Martin. "Identity Construction on Facebook: Digital Empowerment in Anchored Relationships." *Computers in Human Behavior* 24.5 (2008): 1816-836. Print.