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Personal Identity and Profile Image in Social Media

Photography is the art and science of creating durable images. The act of taking a photograph is an act of retaining a past moment in the present for the future. The capture of such an image is a way in which a person or group of persons can be enabled to understand and interpret that moment in the light of their own particular culture or timeline.

Prior to the digital explosion and the birth of the Internet, people have tended to retain the images of their special and memorable moments in a physical album of hard copy photographs. These albums are now being gradually replaced by high quality digital albums and Internet galleries. This creation of electronic images on the worldwide web has an increasing number of uses in many areas, for example, business, science, art, and recreational purposes. As a result, the actual and essential network communication of electronic images between persons, that is, the saving, sending and receiving of those images in the contemporary world, is now instantaneous and global.

In our modern society digital images are thus becoming a powerful tool in mass communication. This development is presently taking place through a growing number of social media programmes such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Electronic and digital images are being used to establish personal identity in a wide variety of ways, and thus are becoming a key element not only in the creation of personal identity but also in the evoked response to the digital image.

Taking photographs seems no longer primarily an act of memory intended to safeguard a family's pictorial heritage, but is increasingly becoming a tool for an individual's identity formation and communication. Digital cameras, cameraphones, photoblogs and other multipurpose devices are used to promote the use of images as the preferred idiom of a new generation of users.¹

Accordingly, the use of a digital image moves beyond its immediate presence and purpose. It can enhance network communication in a positive or negative direction and thus lead to a more effective, though not necessarily more ethical, social interaction between cultures, classes, and groups of people. Hence, a profile cover image can be a visual message that reflects and discloses personal belonging and identity.

This raises for me a fundamental question: How then does the Internet community – both user and receiver – perceive and “see” the meaning of the cover image, and how does that relate to those instances when a real and actual name is being used in the social and public media profile? In order to answer this question, I propose to consider two examples from my own personal experience of using and understanding images in the cover profiles of a number of social media programmes.

Your image and communication are critical in advancing your networking success.²

My first example concerns the methodology I use when selecting my own personal cover image for a number of social media programmes. In doing this, I recognize the importance of respecting and acknowledging not only my culture, but also the received impression that my cover image profile will make upon others in the world of the Internet.

With this in mind, I choose not to use a personal photo image of myself. In the culture of my own country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it is accepted and usual only for men to make visible in public their face and body image without restriction. Women, however, are restricted and the face and body of a female are rarely seen through the Internet. This restriction applies also to the public dissemination of a personal image of female family members and female friends.

In recent times, some Saudi women have chosen to ignore this restriction and include their face and body image in their own cover profile in the public arena. Some, though not all, have chosen to show and reveal themselves in their cover image by wearing the hijab. I respect these women for making this choice and I believe that for them the inclusion of their face and body image is an expression of personal freedom.

However, bearing this restriction in mind, I prefer to use my real name in all my social media accounts. As a result, I choose to use the verbal image, Najla, in Arabic, and when required other images that often reflect my specialist field and interest in fashion and design (fig. 1).



(fig. 1) An example of using personal cover profile images in Twitter: the first and central image shows my name, Najla, in Arabic; the second image, which forms a background, is my own personal design and I have chosen to use the traditional bridal clothing associated with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Also, I often include in some social media programmes an image of one of my eyes, as shown in figs 2&3.



(fig. 2) An example of using my eyes in an image in order to reflect my personal identity and the meaning of my real name



(fig. 3) An example of my Facebook profile cover image

Why am I using my eyes? Because my name, Najla, in Arabic, means a lady who has “beautiful and wide eyes.” In my opinion, this image expresses my identity, honours and respects my family and culture, and reflects the meaning of my actual and real name. In this way, I remain true to my own personal identity and I avoid the use of a full female facial image without spoiling the meaning and content of the cover profile.

In order to establish a consistency of identity both for my friends and for myself, I prefer to retain the same cover profile image for a considerable period of time. Thus, these parameters become crucial for me in the shaping and advancing of any networking success I may or may not enjoy in the social media.

The above example demonstrates that underlying and beyond the process of selecting my profile cover image there are deeply held personal beliefs, customs, and reasons; and, for myself, there is always a narrative to tell. Therefore, in my view, what is true for me in the selection process may also be true for others who come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds.

A picture is worth a thousand words. Meaning, a picture tells a story just as well as a large amount of descriptive text.³

My second example concerns the way I perceive the personal cover profile images of my friends and followers in the social media. At the outset I want to emphasise that

my perceptions are not based upon any empirical research - they are based upon the impressions and feelings I receive when I encounter the cover profile images of my followers or the people I follow. I am attempting to put into words my own personal experience.

It appears to me that these profile cover images almost always tell a story and are related to any text or quotations included in the profile picture. In my experience, the images themselves often display a political, religious, social, and personal affiliation. These four affiliations are often illustrated by the use of different visual expressions underlying the narrative of personal profile identity.

In the political arena, some profile covers show strong support for and make use of national flags, party political logos, and portraits of leading politicians and members of the royal family. In the same way, in the religious arena, some profile cover images demonstrate belief and faith by using religious figures, symbols, icons, and even texts and sayings from the sacred writings and the great spiritual leaders from the past and present.

Moreover, some profile cover images express a social perspective by using logos, people, and even buildings or places showing a particular community, organization, grouping or institution. It is interesting to note that the political, religious and social dimensions in a sense all point us to the importance of recognizing the personal feelings and inclinations of those purporting to support the message in their cover profile image.

In the personal arena, feelings and emotions can be expressed in a highly evocative way by using, for example, colours, shapes, texts, icons, and images of persons or a group of persons. In my experience, a number of my friends and followers are constantly changing the image of their profile cover, which may express how they are feeling on that particular day and at that particular moment of their life. This evokes an appropriate response and enables me to identify with my friends and followers in a deeply personal and often creative way. Such personal feelings and emotions again illustrate the importance of moving beyond the visual profile cover image. This has helped me to develop and preserve an empathy with and understanding of my own personal friends and followers.

As a result, I have become aware of the importance of recognizing a variety of motives moving us beyond the externals of the selection process. Inner motivation seems to me to be paramount as I consider my personal response to the cover profile images of my friends and followers. Once again underlying the profile cover image of network communication there is a personal narrative to tell and a personal profile visual identity to express. My recommendation would be to investigate and research further into the relationship between cover profile images, either real or alias, in the social media and the resulting disclosure of an actual personal identity. Are there differences in the selection process of a profile cover image with regard to culture, gender, age, and social status? If differences are found after empirical research, to what extent do these

differences impact upon the Internet community - both user and receiver - in the communication process?

Suggested reading

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Rose, G. (2012). *Visual Methodologies*. 1st ed. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture, By Joanne Finkelstein

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=YNmOgvqtPrYC&printsec=frontcover&dq=image+and+identity&hl=en&sa=X&ei=7s4NVNrNBvsaIDvgYAE&ved=0CDsQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=image%20and%20identity&f=false>

Constructing the self through the photo selection-visual impression management on social networking websites, by Andra Siibak.

<http://www.cyberpsychology.eu/view.php?cisloclanku=2009061501&article=1>

User Descriptions and Interpretations of Self-Presentation through Facebook Profile Images, by Michele M. Strano.

<http://www.cyberpsychology.eu/view.php?cisloclanku=2008110402>

Cultural differences on visual self-presentation through social networking site profile images, by Chen Zhao, and Gonglue Jiang.

<http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1979110>

Visualizing Flows of Images in Social Media, by Masahiko ITOH¹, Masashi TOYODA¹, Tetsuya KAMIJO², and Masaru KITSUREGAWA¹.

<http://www.tkl.iis.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~imash/pukiwiki/index.php?plugin=attach&refer=Publications&openfile=VA-ST2012.pdf>

Your digital image: factors behind demographic and psychometric predictions from social network profiles, by Yoram Bachrach, Thore Graepel, Pushmeet Kohli, Michal Kosinski, and David Stillwell.

<http://aamas2014.lip6.fr/proceedings/aamas/p1649.pdf>

Exploring the character of participation in social media: the case of Google Image Labeler, by Nassim Jafarainaimi.

http://www.academia.edu/1497413/Exploring_the_Character_of_Participation_in_Social_Media_The_Case_of_Google_Image_Labeler

Predicting Viewer Affective Comments Based on Image Content in Social Media, by Yan-Ying Chenyx, Tao Chenx, Winston H. Hsu, Hong-Yuan Mark Liaoy, and Shih-Fu Chang.

<http://dvmweb.cs.columbia.edu/files/13-Chen.pdf>

¹ Dijck, J. (2008). Digital photography: communication, identity, memory.

Available at:

<http://cmst458.drkissling.com/winter2011/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/vanDijck2008.pdf> [Accessed 25 Aug. 2014].

² Heathfield, S. (n.d.). *Your Image Is You Networking for Success*. [online] about money. Available at:

http://humanresources.about.com/cs/communication/a/profimage_2.htm [Accessed 25 Aug. 2014].

³ Phrases.org.uk, (n.d.). *A picture is worth a thousand words*. [online] Available at:

<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/a-picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words.html>

[Accessed 27 Aug. 2014].

This article is part of *Looking at Images: A Researcher's Guide*:

<http://blog.soton.ac.uk/wsapgr/looking-at-images/>