

# **Social Media, Visual Culture and Contemporary Identity**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In developed nations, university students lead a rich digital life which includes maintaining connections through image-based social networks such as Instagram, Snapchat and Tinder. These ubiquitous technologies are shaping student identities and social practices in an ongoing manner. Social media is used to construct identity through visual branding, wherein individuals utilise imagery designed to attract followers and maintain careful curation of an online persona. In this digital economy, social capital is attached to attributes such as trustworthiness, authenticity and attractiveness. Regular social media use assists in the development of sophisticated visual practices, through which the everyday user shifts their own representation. Network members draw upon increased compositional knowledge and digital tools to depict themselves in a flattering manner which conveys a positive message about their identity as brand. Attractiveness and creativity become dominant factors in these online fora, whereas the widespread use of image editing tools draws trustworthiness and authenticity factors into question. This paper uses Social Learning Theory to explore the use of social media for identity construction, identifying issues inherent for students who place themselves in constant comparison to a wide range of peers, and ways in which educators can utilise these perspectives to inform teaching.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Social Learning Theory, Identity, Authenticity, and Attractiveness.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In developed nations, university students lead a rich digital life which includes maintaining connections through image-based social networks such as Instagram, Snapchat and Tinder. These ubiquitous technologies are shaping student identities and social practices in an ongoing manner. Social media is used to construct identity through visual branding, wherein individuals utilise imagery designed to attract followers and maintain careful curation of an online persona. This paper uses Social Learning Theory [1] to explore the use of social media for identity construction and the issues inherent for students who place themselves in constant comparison to a wide range of peers. In this digital economy, social capital is attached to attributes such as trustworthiness, authenticity and attractiveness. However, this research will argue that attractiveness becomes a dominant factor in these online fora, whereas the widespread use of image editing tools draws

trustworthiness and authenticity factors into question. Through exploring the construction of contemporary identity through image-based tools and the impact of constant online comparison to high status peers, this paper will offer insight into the complex digital lives of contemporary university students and provide directions for future research.

Deaton notes that ‘the most immediate consideration of Educators exploring the use of social media in the classroom is an evaluation of the students’ context’ [2]. People aged 18-29 are the most prolific users of social media in developed nations, such as Australia [3] and the United States of America [4]. This coincides with the commencement of university for many and also aligns with the identity development of adulthood. Heavy social media use amongst adolescents has been directly linked to esteem, anxiety and depression, demonstrating the ways in which ‘social media has a greater impact on teens and plays a role in their identity formation and their search for a sense of self’ [5]. In order for educators to understand the lived reality of contemporary university students, it is important to explore the information systems they are immersed in and the ways students utilise these systems to construct identity in visual culture.

## **2. CONSTRUCTING ONLINE IDENTITIES: SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social Learning Theory can be observed in everyday interactions with friends, family, colleagues or even strangers across a variety of environments and social spaces. Social Learning Theory (SLT) is considered as one of the most influential learning theories given its focus on the learning that occurs in social contexts [6]. The theory proposes that people learn from one another and that people can learn new information and behaviours through observation [7]. Research suggests that often people in social situations will observe the behaviours and actions of others and this will subsequently affect their thoughts, attitudes and behaviours. This does not always result in direct behavioural change; rather, it is argued that social learning may occur if the subject is influenced enough by others.

Bandura (1977) developed Social Learning Theory (SLT) to explain how learning may occur within a social context and how people can learn from one another [7]. The theory gained drive in the 1950s as it provided a platform for exploring how people can learn, adapt and develop both cognitively as well as

behaviourally across social situations. Centred on the principles of learned behaviour including Pavlov's classical conditioning and Skinner's operant conditioning, SLT provides a strong theoretical foundation for the present study. Where Bandura agreed with traditional behavioural learning theories, he went on to add that mediating processes may occur between the stimuli and the response and that learning behaviours may be attributed to social interactions and that through these observations, imitations and replications may follow. In other words, we have the capacity to learn from others and our social environment is a powerful learning tool that can influence behaviours and attitudes. As far as social learning theory is concerned there is both a cognitive and operant view of learning. Humans learn from others through socialisation and imitation, as Bandura notes: 'most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action' [cited in 8]. Conditions for effective modelling include attention and retention, reproduction of the image or behaviour, and motivation to imitate, all of which support 'reciprocal determinism' wherein the individual's behaviour is both shaped by and shapes their environment [9].

The growth of social media in Web 2.0 and beyond has transformed the way people experience the internet. For everyday users, no longer is it a one way communication channel for information, data and resources; instead, it is now a thriving ground of social interactivity and social connections. Indeed social media now plays an increasingly important role in the lives of users, with some reporting social media as a key site in their sociality and identity [10]. Social media produces rich and observable sites of identity construction wherein SLT provides a strong theoretical explanation for the behavioural practices demonstrated online. SLT can be used to explore users' experience and identity development online, as well as the rise of social capital in online fora, as seen through followers and likes, attractiveness and other valued attributes.

### 3. IDENTITY REPRESENTATION IN VISUAL CULTURE

Regular social media use assists in the development of sophisticated visual practices, through which the everyday user shifts their own representation and presents their identity to the online world. Network members draw upon increased compositional knowledge and digital tools to depict themselves in a flattering manner which conveys a positive message about their identity as brand. Here, SLT can be applied to observe the strategies used by individuals to attract attention, encourage retention, and reproduction of desirable imagery through the adoption of valued practices in online environments. As the importance of physical attractiveness increases [11], engaging in social media is becoming a key self-presentation tactic and behaviour in online cultures. The possibility of making a living as a YouTuber, Instagrammer or ceWebriety encourages students to channel effort and time into their online representation and connect with a wide range of people in the hope that they too may be selected for such a lucrative role. The ability to 'friend' or 'follow' celebrities and individuals in positions of power builds a sense of connection amongst followers. This perceived closeness encourages identification and mimicry, with many followers adopting the visual practices employed by famous

identities who have professional teams working to curate their images.

Greater internet speeds and convergent devices have contributed to the current information age where much communication occurs through visual forms [12]. Users are engaged in a continual practice of identity construction and maintenance, specifically through photographs and videos on social networking sites (SNS). For university students who have grown up with these technologies, the act of maintaining an authentic and engaging online persona is a continual and time-consuming process. Most students arriving at university today were born at the turn of the millennia and have grown up with the presence of SNS alongside their schooling. With the growth of SNS in the 2000s, today's students have borne witness to the waves of visual trends and meaning-making emerging online throughout their lives. The proliferation of low cost, convergent digital tools allowed Millennials to document their lives in an unprecedented manner. The ability to constantly communicate in visual forms has created a generation of new media bricoleurs, who draw upon these creative tools to construct identity in multiple and shifting ways [13]. Early adopters used basic coding of multimodal elements on SNS such as MySpace, to engage in creativity and taste-making which contributed to an acceleration of trends through rapid dissemination in participatory culture. The rise of MySpace and its significance to music subcultures was a noteworthy moment in internet culture [14], which led to the emergence of a subcultural photographic style which was rapidly adopted in the mainstream. Members experimented with the growing availability of digital cameras and an emotional punk ("emo kid") aesthetic to create shots with high angle, flattering framing which became a signature visual representation of MySpace and was adopted across other sites. In the 2010s, internet culture has moved away from anonymity and toward authenticity, as 'people began to see the internet as a tool for presenting and promoting their real selves rather than taking anonymous action' [15].

As Facebook and Instagram gathered popularity worldwide, they provided broader platforms for the distribution of selfies, which became a ubiquitous visual means of personifying and sharing experiences. In 2013, this compositional style gained popularity by 17000% and became Oxford Dictionary word of the year [16]. These portraits of the self allow the individual to capture their own image and present their lived experience *as they want to be seen*. Here, individuals focus on the aspects of identity which they wish to highlight, such as 'Mavens' who showcase specific individual skills online, such as knowledge and artistry [Gladwell 2000 cited 15]. Individuals valued in visual culture subscribe to the dominant trend of identity construction through presenting attractive imagery on a regular basis. Sappey and Maconachie [17] suggest that physical attractiveness is a central concept to self-identity. Physical attractiveness is often constructed through social networks, wherein both physique and attractiveness form the basis of many individuals' identity and self-concept [17; 18]. In SNS, individuals engage in social learning, identifying which imagery is 'successful' and approved of by peers through positive reception in the form of likes, sharing and positive comments. Constant communication through visual forms combines with social learning, so that users mimic valued identities and style themselves online in compositions which showcase their physical and intellectual traits in a stylised manner which is attractive to their desired audience.

Consistent branding of identity across sites becomes possible; although different SNS' privilege particular types of visual representation. Instagram is renowned for trendsetting, 'hipster' imagery of food, design and culture, whereas Snapchat allows users to share 'private' observations to their select distribution list with content which disappears in 24 hours. Tinder provides an image-driven, location-based dating service, wherein users aim to attract each other through visual content and minimal text. These SNS are largely used on smartphones, making it possible to broadcast everyday activities in a rapid manner, accelerating trend-spotting and the primacy of the visual to engage the audience. Constant engagement with these tools has allowed users to develop strong visual literacies, both as consumers and creators of the texts. These literacies assist in the construction of engaging online personas, which draw upon the affordances of the image to establish an identity 'brand' to attract the desired audience. SNS users also connect to interest groups and sort images through the use of relevant hashtags. Students use these in informed and sometimes excessive ways to reach a wide range of potential audience members and connect with trends and interest groups. Occasionally the hashtag #TBT (throwback Thursday) is invoked to allow the repeat posting of favoured images from the past; however, new material is constantly needed and this encourages the user to engage in a constant process of identity construction and maintenance.

As visual culture shifts and online social learning proliferates, trends are cycled through at an increasingly rapid rate, and authenticity becomes an increasingly problematic concept. Social media histories are rife with dated trends from 'duckface girls' to 'planking'; however, current visual culture valorises moments designed to look authentic. These are often captured by 'Insta-boyfriends' [19] whose subject dictates the content and action, then delegates the photographer to capture these moments as though natural excerpts of a glamorous existence, rather than a constructed media artefact. A range of images captured at one time may be systematically released over weeks to the audience in order to continue engagement and maintain the perception that the orchestrator enjoys an envious life. Authenticity is further challenged by the ability to change imagery through use of filters and editing tools, such as Photoshop. The existence of apps which can change the user's physical shape, apply make-up and edit out imperfections has led to the value placed on the hashtag #nofilter to highlight the authenticity of the image and the talent of the creator. It behoves SNS users to employ critical approaches to the image to determine the authenticity of the representation.

#### **4. IDENTITY CHALLENGES AND OTHER RISKS OF SOCIAL LEARNING ONLINE**

Constant connection provides the benefit of engagement in visual communities at an unprecedented level; however, there are many emerging negative effects of this immersion in internet culture. Much attention has been paid to issues like cyberbullying and harassment, so here we turn a lens instead to issues created by simple everyday transactions with a focus on students. We focus directly on issues related to the elements required for effective modelling in SLT, specifically attention, retention, reproduction of imagery and motivation [9]. By exploring some of risks and complexities, this section will offer insight and strategic approaches for educators.

In the information age, some economists argue that attention is actually the most valuable commodity [15], and social media are designed to attract user attention through frequent rewards for attentive use. Users are lured through continual notifications and updates, drawing them back into the SNS. This can have negative impacts for users, including intense and compulsive use of technology, and subsequent impact on sleeping patterns and mental health [20]. Students looking for behavioural models may be drawn to the most popular profiles, without fully understanding the construction and financial elements embodied in the construction and maintenance of these identities. To complicate this situation, there are many fake users such as 'sock puppets' and 'bots disseminating false information through attractive mechanisms online [21], so it is important that users develop critical faculties to avoid this misinformation, scams and other subsequent consequences. In order to minimise student addiction to social media and attention to timewasting pursuits, educators can limit SNS use in class and embed information literacy elements in teaching practice, working with students' real-world experiences to construct relevant practices for lifelong learning.

For an undergraduate student working through identity development, the public arena of SNS presents desires and challenges. Individuals draw constant comparisons between their own lives and the lives of those in their social network; comparisons which may result in status anxiety [22]. The perceived status of everyday users may be reduced when placed in an online network which includes regular contact with celebrities and sponsored identities. Comparing a picture of the self taken under standard conditions with a constructed image which has been professionally shot and edited creates untenable and unrealistic expectations regarding attractiveness. Retaining these comparisons of individual experience to higher status peers or, even toward closer peers with a strongly promoted online persona, results in ongoing negative reflections on self, alongside the fear of missing out (FOMO). Constant social media comparison and subsequent perception of reduction in status is leading to increased rates of anxiety and depression in adolescents with high social media use [5]. This is exacerbated through extended time spent on social media which may distract from enjoyable pursuits, and further limits the opportunity to create desirable SNS imagery. It is important for university students to be given tools to manage their social media use and minimise comparison online, in order to discourage the development of status anxiety and FOMO. The educator can play a role through raising awareness and providing students with strategies to manage social media use, which will have beneficial flow on effects for the individual.

Much of the social learning exhibited online can ultimately be seen in the reproduction of imagery by the users themselves. While much of this reproduction of imagery is standard practice for identity development in visual culture, a growing body of research highlights the dangers of normalising extreme behavior through repeat viewing of imagery. For example, excessive alcohol consumption and other dangerous behavior is often normalised through university student posts [23; 24]. While desirable physical capital is showcased through the 'pursuit of forms of physical capital that are increasingly mediated' [11]; the darker side of this phenomena of idealising physical capital through online visuals can be seen in research demonstrating links between body image issues and engagement with thin-ideal visuals [25]. A much-publicised version of this was the

#Thinspo hashtag which was banned from Instagram and other SNS once criticism revealed that this online affinity group showcased imagery of dangerously thin individuals as a form of inspiration for eating disorders [26]. In responding to these issues, critical media literacy can act as an antidote, supporting students to analyse the construction of thin-ideal or other deplorable imagery in order to provide a protective factor for body satisfaction against the negative effects of exposure to thin-ideal images' [27]. When students engage in reproducing imagery to show their identities, it is important the students strive to reproduce behavior which is positive and healthy.

Long-term effects can be incurred through careless or uninformed use of SNS. Ongoing risks for social media users include public embarrassment or permanent reputation damage caused through ineffective use of networks, lack of followers, or minimal reciprocation of effort. The presence of embarrassing material on social media may cause an employer to reject a potential employee; however, the lack of social media presence is also considered suspicious by employers [28]. Students may be motivated to adopt positive or negative behaviours through social learning and this can be leveraged to help them safeguard their digital identities. Here, educators have an important role to play by encouraging students to adopt positive practices through sharing educative examples, rather than offering strict guidelines. For example, discussing privacy, identity and SNS in the context of the affordances of facial recognition technology appeals to students' intellect in order create impact and support informed use of imagery. Students will often share examples from their lived experiences, reinforcing the seriousness of these issues to their peers in the classroom. Educators can then provide helpful strategies, encouraging students to engage in careful curation of their digital identity and minimal sharing of sensitive information.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Identity construction in visual culture is a complex and ongoing process. SLT is an effective approach for considering the ways in which identity is constructed through behavioural modelling on SNS. Contemporary students have grown up online, being encultured in visual literacies through successive SNS and identifying strategies to maintain online popularity through image composition and other tactics. There are negative elements to this presentation of the self online which can be managed through careful guidance and informed approaches. Educators can guide students toward critical analysis and extend their ability to make informed choices in visual culture. In online fora, where attractiveness has primacy and students with critical skillsets and strong visual literacies will be able to best employ these tools for successful use of SNS and ongoing reputation management in a digital world.

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