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The Age of Icons: Digitising the Self in Profile Images

A thesis presented

by

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Abstract

In the “Age of Icons”, a digital echo of the self emerges in an online ecology where representations of the self and others are signified in virtual, globally networked profiles. In digital spaces, real and online friends, followers and connections collide. Social media platforms have evolved into dynamic and malleable communicative spaces, that guide an individual’s construction of a ‘profile’ on their network. The ‘profile image’, provides options for a user to express a visualisation of themselves, alongside multimodal presentations of personal content. This technologically-mediated icon of self, can portray a user’s actual or desired physical appearance, an identity that translates from the “real world” into online expressions of cultural, social and emotional values. Through developing an online presence, in singular, or inter-connecting, social accounts or platforms, this thesis asks the question: how do we construct representations of ourselves online, using our social media profile pictures?

Building on recent literature surrounding online image production, dissemination, and identity formation on social media, I have collected and coded extensive, qualitative data – gathered through semi-structured interviews – with a small study group of 21-35-year-old social media users. This thesis presents a thematic analysis of the process of creating an online identity and explores the adaptation of this online marker of identity to technological features of social media accounts. Finally, it examines impacts of profile pictures in the daily lives of social media users, where online and offline realities can intersect. The chosen case study is ‘profile images’: the literal, or figurative, public face a user wears when interacting in online, social media platforms. The thesis considers the interplay between varied

forms of self-expression, and conceptions of identity in a user, as they live offline and online through their use of social media profiles.

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Introduction

I was first introduced to my digital self at the age of 13. She appeared on Myspace in a laboriously produced profile image, a carefully considered page theme, the background track of an alternative rock song, and an ‘About Me’ description that echoed the colourful, obtrusive, emoji and GIF-ridden communication experiences I was having on MSN Messenger. Across MSN, and Myspace, I cautiously formed a barrier of self-visage, a conscious representation of what I believed at the time to be a digital impression of the “real me”. I added only pre-existing social connections from my daily secondary school and early working life as ‘Friends’ on Facebook, or ‘Contacts’ on MSN. Offline and online, at school and after school, the emergence of social media began to mediate shared, cultural experiences of communication, which evolved into the cross-platform, ‘always-on’ digital presences adopted by many today. This narrative is not just my own, but a shared tale of users living lives that have been digitally mediated as they age alongside the markers of ‘profile pictures’ – forming the Timelines and Feeds of today: the origin of an “Age of Icons”.

Today, the identities of social media users are expressed fluidly, across cultures, ideals, and platforms, weaving malleable representations of individuals in online profiles across the globe. A common, if not prescribed, pattern emerges from this adaptive, moving portrait of an estimated 2.46 billion users, a visual depiction that appears beside a user’s real name or chosen alias: the profile picture. A profile image is a representation of self that echoes the real or ideal traits of a user, revealing crucial information about their personhood. Recent definitions of a profile picture have centred on the image being ‘an announcement’ of who a person is, (Hudson and

Gore, 2017:3), alluding to its nature as a public, shared 'icon'. These definitions are generally tied to what Gerbaudo (2015:2) refers to as a person's 'unique sense of identity' in a profile picture, with Rettberg (2014:40) refining the concept as a specifically 'visual expression' of self. As a feature, a profile image is easy to identify. It exists as a default contribution to a user's social media profile, enforced by the platform they have selected in the process of account set-up. Where a user is permitted to opt-out of using a profile image, the platform will employ a basic, faceless and often-silhouetted icon to identify them in their stead. Being a foundational element of a user's online presence, this thesis aims to understand the significance of profile images, as mobilised by different users across multiple social media platforms. I seek to answer the question: how do we construct representations of ourselves online, using our social media profile pictures?

After identifying key cornerstones in related literature, grounding this thesis in the emergent field of social media research, I adopt a qualitative methodology based on extensive fieldwork to consider: what is gained or lost, favored or disliked, idealised or accurate in the process of translating physical, human characteristics, to an incorporeal, online embodiment of self.

The findings in this thesis are explored thematically, signposted by identifying three, critical stages in the development of a profile image. First, I explore the process of creating and managing a social profile, through selecting a choice in profile image. Next, I look into the technology-specific features of social media platforms and editing apps that enable the 'intertextual assemblage' (Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz, 2015:5) of a profile image. The thesis culminates in insights into how a user's profile, and its

defining 'image', are lived and experienced both online, and offline, addressing key social, cultural and privacy-specific concerns that emerge from this interplay.

In deconstructing the multi-faceted, user-subjective, and technologically mediated construction of online identities formed on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn, this thesis hopes to reconstruct a series of insights into digital self-representation, using a surprisingly under-represented case study – a user's persona, avatar or icon: the 'profile image'.

Literature Review

Each webpage, down to the code it is built from, or the pixels it is displayed through, is representational of the physical world that a user inhabits. From shopping complexes to community events, a user of social media can access reproductions of traditionally "offline" activities, in digital spaces. Today, social media profiles can be mobilised as 'flexible statements of identification' (Tiidenberg and Whelan, 2017:143), in a context where conversing with loved ones, purchasing goods, or accessing services, can be experienced online. A user's profile image is central to online self-presentation in this virtual realisation of real-life cultural and communicative practices.

This thesis aims to undertake a disassembly of the process, ideologies and practices that influence a user's choice of profile image, to contribute to understandings of the breadth, depth and nature of this decision in a relatively new field of research. In analysing discourses surrounding analogous practices of image production, identity formation and expression in social media, such as the 'selfie' phenomenon, this thesis aims to elucidate

its findings on profile images. There is also a small, but growing, body of literature, which has examined profile images by applying the methodological approaches of quantitative or content analysis in media, culture and communications studies, and well as the social and psychological sciences, that all helped to identify a context and scope for this thesis.

Recent research has illuminated and supported an understanding of the multi-faceted process of creating and maintaining an online identity, offering reference points for a fresh data set on profile pictures. Following the process of profile image creation, across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn, revealed insights surrounding: the creation and management of a digital 'self', the platforms and technologies enabling the practice of online identity formation and the social and cultural impacts of "living" these digital identities as online and offline personas intersect.

1. Creating the Self

Creating a social media account is an opportunity for an individual to add an intertextual reflection of themselves to the 'mirror' of digital spaces. With the emergence of an array of new social media sites annually, Wikipedia currently recognising 203 active platforms on its 'List of social networking websites' (2018), regular internet users have become adjusted to the requests of social network sign-ups: "enter your username, password and select a profile picture". At this point, a user's choice becomes a matter of preference: "What image should I select to represent myself?".

1.1 • Segmented Self-Representation

Online identities often begin as fragmentary, or static narratives, a user chooses a social media platform to represent themselves on, and may be

guided to access another to suit a range of purposes that can be social, personal or professional, generally using similar processes to guide a user through set-up, starting with simple requests for a username, password and profile picture, then building to more detailed, optional or platform-specific features like the 'Bio' on Instagram, where a user can provide a short description of themselves next to their profile image. Gómez Cruz (2016: 3), in his analysis of 'selfies' and digital ethnography, acknowledged the 'mistake' of 'following the latest technology', or restricting his research into online self-representation as 'attached to a single platform'. Instead of tethering his ethnographic studies to potentially transient platforms, Gómez Cruz (2016: 4) established his fieldwork on 'practices that cross several platforms and used different technologies'. This reflects a broader, interdisciplinary movement in internet studies, where prominent authors in the field promote the idea that the self is not produced in isolated segments, but can materialise across audiences, contexts and technologies, to highlight or amplify parts of the self in 'micro-narratives' that convey 'an aspect of the writer or an image showing a version of themselves' (Rettberg, 2014: 35). Analysing online identity production should avoid being 'machine specific or dependent' or 'limited to one single platform', but instead focus on the 'underlying communication purposes of the images' (Markham and Buchanan, 2012:). These insights solidify the notion that self-presentation, specifically in profile images, should be analysed for the socio-cultural values that support their creation, as opposed to the machinations that guide them through these processes, in order to draw richer insights from social media data-sets

1.2 • Selecting a Profile Image

Once a social media user has established their platform coverage, it is time to deliver 'the first important clue' in interpreting their online presence: the profile image itself (Hum et al, 2011:5). This can appear in a variety of formats, where the user may appear alone, in groups, posed or casual. While Hum et al. (2011:5) consider that logically, such a foundational element of a profile must necessitate 'a significant amount of deliberate and conscious thought', the results of their study reflected various attributions of its importance from their participants, revealing a subjectivity to the process itself that may not appear as 'conscious' as it seems. This consideration invited important research questions surrounding how a user makes choices regarding their profile pictures, the forms that they can take, and the functionality of their contents as a vehicle for self-expression.

1.3 • Selfies: Part of the Picture

Some users choose to represent themselves in a 'selfie', a form of digital self-portraiture popularised with a rise in ownership and accessibility to camera-phones. A 'selfie' allows a user to face their own image, shaping and capturing it in within the frame of their smartphone screen. The 'selfie' is a common choice of profile picture, which provided a distinct research opportunity to discover correlated insights into self-representation online. Tifentale and Manovich (2015: 8) recognise one of the essential attributes of a selfie as, 'instantaneous distribution via Instagram or similar social networks'. The sense of immediacy innate in a selfie, allows a user a flexible medium of self-presentation, where a 'self-shooter' may take 'many images in one 'sitting', as they see themselves 'changing and moving in the webcam's screen' (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015: 13). 'Selfies' can be seen as continuations of the tradition of 'photobooths', converging private and public settings to challenge the photographer-model relationship

(Rettberg, 2014:44). In this way, the 'selfie' offers a user a sense of control in presentation and reputation management, as photographer and model, with the practice providing a heightened sense of 'accuracy' to desired presentations of their identity. As Rettberg (2014:44) concisely notes, during selfie-taking, 'the moment of photography is intimate'. Its immediate responsiveness and flexibility as a practice allows the photographer to experience their body as both 'a moment in the past' and 'a potentiality of a good-looking body' (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015: 13). A user can pose, adjust their position and their environment in a selective way, to provide a uniquely personal form of expression that provides more insight into representations of identity than their user-centric presentation initially demonstrates.

1.4 • From Selfies, to Profile Pictures

'Selfies' form an important part of online image content, one that has helped uncover understandings of their communicative function as a performance of identity, as expressed to social media publics. However, their temporary nature, alongside representation of a reduced scope of social media participants, may provide limitations that can be surpassed in interpreting the durable, public character of profile picture. In Tifentale and Manovich's 'selficity' project (2015:5), they analysed '2.3 million images' captured from public Instagram accounts, to examine 'social media as a vehicle of voluntary interpersonal communication'. They found that only '3.5 percent' of images analysed were actually selfies' (Tifentale and Manovich (2015: 5). Other restraints on selfie analysis in the context of understanding general conceptions of self-representation online, were the limited capacities for demographic representation with a 'median age' of '23.7 years', and the fact that the practice necessitates 'falling within a certain income bracket that

supports the purchase of a smartphone' and its 'monthly expenses' (Tifentale and Manovich (2015: 7-8). An analysis of profile images can compensate for these limitations in diversity, by analysing a range of image production practices to draw insights that implicate all users.

1.6 • Representing Ideals

Another choice in representing personal identity online, is displaying a profile image that is not physically mimetic of a user, but reflects them figuratively, or with relation to a personal value. One form of value-based expression, termed 'not-selfies' in the literature, are images that 'communicate on' a user's 'behalf', providing symbolic references to personal identity in their composition that can 'be, locally, more profound and direct than self-portraits' (Tiidenberg and Whelan, 2017:5,14). The way this practice materialises is entirely subjective, it could involve a depiction of a user 'as a child', or 'their own child instead of a photo of themselves' (Rettberg:41). These memetic representations of personal identity work to serve a number of purposes for a user: anonymity, evoking a 'desired response' by 'emphasising that one identifies' with the represented concept (Markham and Buchanan, 2012:9), or as 'metonyms', a signifier from the individual that 'this is part of me' (Rettberg, 2014:41). 'Not-selfies' provide an intertextual medium for analysis, an alternative method of self-disclosure that operates as another means of identifying self in a profile image, further demonstrating the variety of practices that can be researched using these forms of image production as a case study.

2. Digitising the Self

Social media has experienced major shifts in platform configurations, interrupted by regular updates that have impacted identity formation since

its inception. Singular, major movements, are seen in migration practices from Myspace to Facebook that were regularly mentioned by a large portion of the project's participants of this thesis, where their desires to remain connected to their family and friends often necessitated the use of a particular platform. Recent, quantitative studies into choices of social media platform have also identified the factor of 'friends already' having 'their profile up on the site', as a prime motivator for teenage users, a time where most of my research participants started their use of social media websites (Siibak, 2010:4). Perhaps in contrast to when a user in this study may have started using Facebook, today's social media culture facilitates the constant production of new platforms, that may be adopted in transient or trend-based patterns, as well as updates, revisions and additions to platforms already in use.

2.1 • Archiving Identities

Today's social media culture facilitates the constant production of new platforms and features, that may be adopted in transient or trend-based patterns, as well as updates, revisions and additions to platforms already in use. To combat the consistent emergence of better features, or "next-big-things", major social media platforms are promoting cultures of 'longevity' and use of a social profile 'as an archive in the process of becoming' (Tifentale and Manovich, 2015: 7). Automatically generated videos commemorate shared, past user experiences on Facebook, while an 'Archive' feature has been added to Instagram, potentially reflective of its 2012 acquisition by Facebook, Inc. A user is framed, on a social network, not only through 'taking and storing photographs to document their lives', but by engaging in the new, 'default photography mode' of 'sharing', where individuals are encouraged to 'constantly reassess our past selves' and

revise our 'collections' of self-display (van Dijck, 2008:62-64,69). This desire to not only record, but 'place' oneself in a context of evolving digital identities is performed in the 'serial nature of most digital self-representation' (Rettberg, 2014: 11). A new picture of oneself tailored to Instagram's square, grid format, or the addition of a new headshot to LinkedIn, contributes to a 'cumulative logic' that is 'built into the software and into our habits of reading and sharing online' (Rettberg, 2014: 55). Each upload allows the user to affirm their progression against representations of their peers, while providing constant opportunities to reflect on their past, within the context of their use of the platform. The analysis triggered by archival features on social media platforms may, in turn, be contributing to a tendency for users to edit their pictures before distribution.

2.2 • Editing Identities

Social media platforms are increasingly incorporating and promoting tools for editing and manipulating representations of self, affirming pre-existing cultural values of perfecting or idealising one's image for public consumption. The commercial photography of celebrities, artists and public figures, have always experienced a level of 'manipulability and artificiality', contributing to widespread acceptance of digitally altered images (van Dijck, 2008:67). van Djick (2008:66) argues that photographed images, or their painted predecessors, have always 'succumbed to their patron's desire for idealised self-images'. This was recognised further in Miguel's study (2009:65), where she referenced physical attempts to influence a portrait 'by selecting, refusing or destroying the actual print'. These long-standing values and accepted photographic practices exemplify the 'modifiability and flexibility' of digital photography, as a 'small step' in 'a life-long project to reinvent one's self-appearance', mobilised by 'easy-to-use' image editing

software to 'seduce viewers into pictorial enhancement' on social media. (van Djick: 67-72). Marwick (2008:144) solidifies this concept, suggesting a 'normative presumption of digital manipulation' results from user adoption of culturally-accepted image re-touching, exemplified in the popularity of the '#nofilter' tag published alongside a user's images to highlight 'that no such manipulation took place'. With adding a filter providing a vital step in Instagram's publishing process, accessible by the swipe of a finger, or Facebook's easy 'Use Frame' button, clickable at the base of a friend's profile image that has used it once before, personal, individualised expressions of identity have never been easier to re-create online.

2.3 • Mediated and Politicised Identities

When a profile picture appears on social media, it is framed by the social functions of the technology itself, 'comments' can appear below or beside space for a user to provide their own description, where 'like' buttons expand, as on Facebook, to offer the responding user five primary 'reactions': 'Like', 'Love', 'Haha', 'Wow', 'Sad' and 'Angry'. While independent research could be made into the functionality of each of these features individually, researchers have echoed the 'key information' that all of the 'textual and graphic components' provide, offering 'not only platform-specific' but 'contextually specific' insights into a user's intentions in posting an image online (Highfield and Lever, 2015: 2). Succinctly, Tiindenberg and Gomez Cruz (2015:5) term this combination of 'image content, hashtags and captions' an 'intertextual assemblage'. A user is able to generate a highly contextual composition of visual and written 'identity-cues', where 'one "text" modifies the way another is "read"' or serves to juxtapose them to 'communicate more, with less effort, and with a higher likelihood of being seen/read' (Tiindenberg and Gomez Cruz, 2015:5). These

individual “texts” are enabled by features provided by platforms specifically, which may serve to enhance an image, like adding a short description to an image, or connecting an image to related content through using hashtags.

Text and Hashtags

A picture may say a thousand words, but the composition of a digital image may include textual components providing invaluable context to a user’s profile image. A digital composition may comprise a ‘user’s description of the photo and comments and likes by other users’, highlighting or revealing crucial ‘identity cues’ for social media researchers interpreting the image (Marwick, 2008:143). van Djick emphasises the elucidating power of captions, referring to them as ‘the missing voice explaining the picture’, but it is crucial to note that developments in mediated communication also include features like hashtags, which sometimes be as revelatory as the words themselves, indicating the connections a user may wish to make in posting an image (van Djick, 2008:63). Hashtags are a commonly observable social feature of profile images, connecting an idea, word or concept that can only be understood contextually. Practices in ‘highly followed users’ use few more ‘than one or two’, while a user ‘actively seeking followers frequently append dozens to their photos’, capitalising on the search and algorithmic functions championed by the mediums to facilitate user connections (Marwick, 2008:147). In recognising the impact of the surrounding, written mechanisms of a digital image, researchers can add layers of unrealised support to their hypotheses on image production.

Stories and Temporary Images

A user may also choose to enhance a profile image by utilising the emergent functions of “Stories” and “Temporary Images”. Stories often appear as interactive, coloured circles around a user’s profile image. Once selected, they display a curated series of images and short videos, captured in real-time. A “Temporary Image” allows a user to select a profile image and delegate a time or period for publication, after which the profile image reverts to a user’s original photo. I join Hudson and Gore (2017:16) in encouraging further studies into the nature and purpose of temporary profile image mediums. Rettberg’s 2014 prediction (2014:40), of a future increase in the prominence of ‘time-lapse videos’ appears to have manifested in social media’s temporary image functions. Time-lapse videos are a form of video portraiture, popularised by Ahree Lee’s YouTube compilation video of photos she had taken of ‘herself every day for three years’ that started ‘a new genre’ on the platform in 2006 (Rettberg, 2014:40). The ‘fascination of watching time lapse selfies’, in observing ‘how the subject changes and eventually ages’, are reflected in recent iterations of “Stories” and “Temporary Images” on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. This thesis has aimed to analyse both temporary approaches to digital photography as complementary functions to profile images, where a focused, comparative study could further refine the significance of these practices,

Protest Avatars

The surge in popularity of ‘protest avatars’, including the layered iconography of a profile picture ‘frame’, can act as expressions of the moral or political values of a user that are crucial to understanding their ideal self-representation on social media. In choosing to change one’s profile image to a protest avatar, a user foregoes their ‘individual uniqueness’ to become

'fused to a collective subject' (Gerbaudo, 2015:7). Key features of a protest avatar are viral adoption, users changing their image as a practice in solidarity and imitation of the 'protest avatar that is 'trending at that point in time' (Gerbaudo, 2015:10-11). Though researchers have disregarded profile avatars as superficial, trend-based performances of political activism, Gerbaudo (2015:1) attributes this to a 'lack of "stickiness"', an image's capacity to be easily discarded and forgotten among other features in the malleable practices of profile image production. Rather than being 'frivolous' examples of image presentation, they are the 'functional equivalent of traditional political symbols, such as badges', historically recognised expressions of identity in human history. Adopting frames or protest avatars are examples of real life values, intersecting with digital representations of self, a common result of profile image production that acts as central to a user's profile.

3. Being Digital

With smartphones pocketed, a user of a social network today is mobile, available and active to present forms of self-expression from a number of contexts. In communication, people use 'Google', 'YouTube' and 'Tweet' as active verbs in everyday sentences, expressing a fusion of online practices, with offline realities. Potential social or cultural motivations for choosing a profile image have been identified across disciplines. Hudson and Gore's recent psychological research into the area identified 'personality' as an influential factor in analysing profile picture content, while detecting a gap in their research regarding how 'central to people's self-concept' the profile pictures actually were (Hudson and Gore, 2017:3) In analysing the intersections between the socio-cultural influences of profile images, in comparing a user's online and offline choices of self-representation and their

experiences in the two spaces, it aspires to contribute to multi-disciplined understandings of digital image dissemination on social media.

3.1 • Idealism vs. Accuracy

In assessing the authenticity of a social media user's profile image, it is important to consider the relationship of accuracy with idealism, to understand where online and offline realities intersect or integrate. Profile images can foreground a representation of a person's 'corporeal' form, when taken as a 'selfie', combining with 'moral or intellectual aspects of the self' (Tiidenberg and Whelan, 2017:7). This method of photographic self-fashioning can 'lead to both the realisation and internalisation of corporeal truths', as envisaged in their image and act as 'inspiration for bodies physically transforming'. (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015:11). Body-positive, pro-feminist online groups provide an example here of well-functioning, closed communities of content collaborators, encouraging 'people to put their body out there by soothing their pre-emptive worries about whether it is good enough to be publicly exhibited' (Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz, 2015:10). The practices of members in these groups contribute to a positive digital space for self-exploration, creating environments where users feel 'in control' of their 'self-created safe-space and post for one's own benefit', contributing to constructive reinforcements of self-image among users (Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz, 2015:17). While closed groups have displayed the potential to operate safe image-sharing practices in body-positive spaces, a user may consider the greater implications that audiences can present in wider social media publics. Publishing an image publicly can contribute to concerns of losing control over an image once publicised, and its potential for 'future reuse' that could cause 'potential liabilities in someone's personal life or career' (van Djick, 2008:71). van Djick retells an

experience of a student who had 'taken pictures' of her friendship group 'in various relaxed positions on the couch' and posted it to her 'photoblog' (van Djick, 2008:2-3). The following day, she received an email from her roommate, who had sent a picture of the image, Photoshopped to display the women 'with dozens of empty beer cans and wine bottles piled up on the coffee table in front of them', which she had thought to be a funny joke to send to 'a long list of their peers (van Djick, 2008:2-3). The intersections of online and offline life contribute to these misunderstandings, potentially jeopardising levels of privacy that the roommate had not considered. While positive reinforcements of self are prominent in closed, focused communities, the general public of social media users present a different domain, and set of concerns, for a user posting content online.

3.2 • Perceptions of Sociability

Quantitative studies of the content of profile images, have explored correlations between a user and impressions of sociability in profile pictures in their networks. Hudson and Gore's 2017 study into profile picture content identified a critical difference in gender-based perceptions of 'sociability', where the amount of profile images of 'male account owners' featuring 'just themselves', as opposed to 'just with other people', acted as an indicator of 'his willingness to experience new things' (Hudson and Gore, 2017:13-14). In considering the same features in profile images of 'female account owners', these factors could relate to 'her interpersonal warmth and friendliness' (Hudson and Gore, 2017:13-14). Hudson and Gore (2017:13-14) also discovered a gender-neutral correlation between 'the inclusion of others' in a user's profile pictures and a 'sociable personality (i.e., high extraversion and high agreeableness'. When a user views a profile featuring 'several pictures with close others', they may identify a viable 'friend' prospect, from their

choice of profile images (Hudson and Gore, 2017:5). The indicator of sociability is fundamental to the purposes of the networks themselves, offering a gauge as to how future social experiences on the platform can develop with a potential connection.

3.3 • Networked Content

When a user chooses to represent themselves online, they accept and fulfill dual, inter-related roles: Content Creator, and Audience Member. When interpreting and evaluating content on social media sites, a user makes a conscious decision about who to allow into their network and which networks to join as followers themselves. To produce a self-representative profile image is to allow oneself to be interpreted, necessarily, in the context of an audience, where an image becomes 'embedded in networked systems' (van Dijck, 2008:71). Being a consumer, as well as a producer, of content, a user can purposefully seek to be identified as an 'influencer' or authority figure on the platform, or act as a passive or unintended point of inspiration for the image or textual choices of others online. Users learn and adopt new techniques for themselves, while teaching other users 'canned poses, flattering camera angles or facial expressions either expressly or through practices of imitation, such as the pursed lips known colloquially as "duckface" (Marwick, 2008:141). Mass adoption of positive social practices have been established in closed online groups, where 'sharing, reblogging and actively participating' in a safe community space, can help to 'reinforce ways of looking and experiencing bodies' in a 'body-positive, feminist and queer-friendly way'. (Marwick, 2008:8). However, wider social media publics are representative of people with broader sets of values, which can be transferred in their interactions online. This was found in the reinforcement of 'patriarchal double standards' on the online, public display

of a women's bodies, where Miguel (2016:7) found that 'people seeing through the lens of traditional gender roles', would carry these over into interpretations of online content. Some male participants in Miguel's study (2016:9) 'had pictures in a bathing suit on Facebook', that they did not consider 'intimate'. However, she found that the same images made by female content producers online may attract 'slut-shaming' from public audiences (Miguel, 2016:9). Interpretations of user content can therefore be shown to provide insightful, but not always beneficial, expressions of their personal, social values as explored in the content they follow.

3.4 • Popularity

As a user's profile grows in popularity, functions of audiences that have positively impacted the development of their online identity as an individual, may evolve into pressures and expectations surrounding the relevance, accuracy and regularity of their content, including their profile image, as a public figure. A profile of a figure that reaches large thresholds of followers must consider themselves in the context of public profiles and an 'online attention economy', where 'page views and clicks' determine a user's 'success' and 'status' as a social media profile (Marwick, 2008:157). A user may not initially intend to reflect or represent themselves as part of the 'attention economy', but the results of Siibak's study (2010:6), into impressions of profile image choices for high-school aged students, identified 'qualities that would lead to popularity', as being 'beautiful looks, sexiness and trend-conscious clothing', which are either subjective to a viewer, or exist as expressions of popular culture and traditional idealisations of beauty without intent or purpose.

Photography itself has experienced marked shifts in audience management in its transition from an analogue to a digital medium, where the 'limited audiences' of physical, film-based forms of photography, as in 'family snapshots', evolved into 'networked, potentially enormous audiences for all types of digital content' (Marwick, 2008:141). The 'cut-off line', for how many audience members a user is willing to communicate to, is largely determined by the individual (Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz, 2015:18). Some users mark this point as an emotional shift from 'positive' to 'anxious experiences of bodies' and online representations of self (Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz, 2015:18). A negative experience of disseminating one's self-image, whether it is through the profile picture itself or the wholistic 'user profile', as related to 'obligations' to the communicative nature of personal photographs that acquire full meaning when performed as a 'repetitive and iterative practice' (Gomez Cruz, 2016:9). Terms like Marwick's "Instafame" (2008:137), the condition of having a relatively great number of followers on the app', have been coined in revealing research projects dedicated to unpacking complex profile-follower relationships, and achieving a uniquely digital celebrity status.

3.4 • Micro-Celebrity

When the account of an everyday social media user reaches 'audiences once available only to those with access to broadcast media', cases emerge of replications of traditional celebrity in the development of online, 'micro-celebrity' status (Marwick, 2008: 138). As online and offline realities merge between a user and their profile, broader social ideals, including the 'hierarchy of fame' and conflation of celebrity culture, are 're-inscribed in a visual, digital medium' (Marwick, 2008:141). Celebrities that maintain traditional stardom – a status 'conferred by mainstream media or

entertainment’ – also create genuine, or illusory, spaces of ‘direct, unmediated’ communication with their fans (Marwick, 2008:139). The practices of “real-world” celebrities, and online public figures are mirrored, fortifying the ‘tropes and symbols of traditional celebrity culture’, with celebrities and microcelebrities vying for audience attention through ‘glamorous self-portraits’, or representations of wealth and fame in ‘designer goods, or luxury cars’ (Marwick, 2008:139). The profile content of celebrities and micro-celebrities now compete for ‘the largest audience numbers’, which are measured and gained by the same social metrics, a like, follow, or react accessible by all users (Marwick, 2008:140). To foster the audience necessary to honor a definition of social media ‘success’ is to actively engage with a steadily ‘attentive’ audience, which can involve ‘answering comments, e-mails, and instant messages’ from fans (Marwick, 2008:140). Accusations of nonchalance or care for fan recognition can quickly arise from a lack of engagement with one’s audience, which contributes to a tentative, high-pressure environment for the account owner once they achieve this ‘status’.

3.5 • Privacy

A social media network provides a silhouetted avatar, waiting to be replaced by a user’s choice in profile picture to visually patron their account. This presents an immediate, apparently contradictory choice for a user: select a personally self-representative image, for public display. As a result, definitions of privacy are uniformly ‘ambiguous, contested, and changing’, with users choosing to distribute public information, but still ‘maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy (Markham and Buchanan, 2012: 6). Understanding ‘relative privacy’, is key to applying an empathic, malleable, and vigilant, approach to protecting participants of social media

research projects (Highfield and Lever, 2015: 8). As the platforms remain dynamic – updating, modifying and revisiting their technology to enhance ‘user experience’, it is integral to a social media researcher’s project to understand that the perception or understanding of privacy for ‘users may shift over time’, ideas and concepts of what is and isn’t public information adapting in turn (Highfield and Lever, 2015: 8). It is important to identify what a user considers uniquely ‘intimate’, when it comes to digital self-representation. Research has identified ‘sexy pictures’, indications of ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘relationship status’, as key qualifiers for understanding online intimacy practices (Miguel, 2016: 9). Other approaches to privacy exist, revealing themselves in the interview process, if prompted. A user may, alternatively, look to the specifications provided by social platforms to frame a personal understanding of privacy.

Privacy options are increasing in breadth and scope, to accommodate uses of social media that cross audience ideals, platform-specificities and cyber-security concerns. While a Twitter user profile can be set to ‘either public or private’, a user of Facebook may have ‘several different settings for account privacy’, carrying over into the ‘nuanced privacy options’ accessible beyond an Instagram user’s initial choice of a public, or private, profile (Highfield and Lever, 2015: 3). Efforts to mask or separate Terms and Conditions behind external links, and blocks of long-form text, uncharacteristic to the platforms they represent, may obscure a full view of the ‘implications of sharing an Instagram image via Twitter, Facebook, or another social networking service’ (Highfield and Lever, 2015: 8). A disparate understanding of what a user deems only temporarily communicative, or ‘ephemeral akin to a telephone call’, can also be at odds with the platform’s intentions for their data, valuing the ‘longevity of media’ and the ‘associated

metadata' that social accounts provide, which can be 'analysed, aggregated and used for commercial ends, including focused, targeted advertising' (Highfield and Lever, 2015: 9). These tensions have surfaced in the recent revelation that a third-party, data-mining company obtained the personal data of '87 million users' (Statt, 2018), as well as in the General Data Protection Regulation laws recently instated by the European Union, encouraging platforms to re-evaluate – and even re-communicate – their privacy settings, structures and options for users.

Recommendations of prominent industry bodies further highlight the implications of researching human subjects, and their online representations. The cross-disciplinary, academic committee at The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) have 'advocate guidelines rather than a code of practice', enabling flexibility in a dynamic field of research, 'allowing the researcher to 'be responsive to diverse contexts' and 'adaptable to continually changing technologies' (Markham and Buchanan, 2012:7). Critical considerations surrounding: 'vulnerability', 'harm', 'human subjects', and the balance of 'social benefits' against the 'rights of subjects' are addressed by the Association's most recent publication of their guidelines. They stress the importance of consulting 'as many people and resources as possible', and ensuring vigilance across 'all steps of the research process' when it concerns an issue of privacy, a goal readily accepted by the methodological approach to privacy upheld in the research process for this thesis (Markham and Buchanan, 2012:4-5).

This thesis contributes to the existing research cited above addressing the increasingly complex fusion of visual and textual expression online, which combined with technologically, culturally and socially mediated

frameworks, constitutes and influences digital image production and its meanings on social media. This analysis of relevant literature informs the thematic framing for this study, which is explored in a staged process of developing a profile image for representation in a social network. By applying the methodological approaches of 'digital ethnography' (Gomez Cruz, 2016: 5) and practices of 'scrolling back' (Lincoln and Robards, 2017:6), I identify key factors in each stage of an overall process of identity creation, production and enactment online, navigating the considerations and upload histories of 21-35-year-old users of social media. Choosing to adopt an integrated approach to visual analysis in my fieldwork, was founded on an understanding that while, in the limited literature specific to profile images, focusing on the 'big data', or voluntarily entered user information, has been integral to understanding and decoding online identities, potentially to the detriment of personal, social and cultural contexts that frame them. This thesis contributes to a recognisable absence of specific research foci into the ways we construct and embody representations of ourselves online, using profile pictures on social media as a case study. I firstly explore the process of selecting a profile image, and what ideal traits a user wishes to embody in a profile picture. Next, I analyse how a user adopts or adheres to platform-specific features that impact the networked existence of a profile image. Finally, the thesis considers the profile image "in-action", examining the ways a user's social media profile is mediated and can, in turn, mediate the daily life, communicative practices and cultural values of users.

Methodology

When selecting a suitable process for this study, the research question posed a fundamental point for consideration: can a profile image or, more specifically, the profile it represents, qualify personhood? Put simply, the

question appears regularly in ethical considerations of social media research: 'Is an avatar a person? Is one's digital information an extension of the self?' (Markham and Buchanan, 2012:7).

1 • The 'Onlife' Approach

This thesis, in aiming to uncover how a user negotiates true or idealised conceptualisations of self, necessitated the collection of insights that spanned online and offline expressions and considerations of individuality. Gomez Cruz (2016: 5) termed this unique approach to qualitative analysis, integrating considerations of a social media user's online and offline photography practices, an 'Onlife Ethnography'. 'Onlife' is described as a series of practices that exist 'somewhere in between' online and offline realities, as 'a result of years of practices of mediation' (Gomez Cruz, 2016: 5). To understand the image, without understanding the processes behind it, is like trying to analyse an art piece with no historical or personal context to the artist themselves. We can establish general, representational insights from the images – base identifications of 'man' or 'woman', 'old', or 'young' – but without the balance of contextual understanding, it seems that quantitative approaches to social media research, uncovered in surveys, data-scraping and mining technologies and content analysis studies, can only provide partial insights into self-representation in profile images. Paying 'too much attention' to analysis of these examples of 'traceable and easy-to-collect data', may lead a researcher to miss 'several points on how people feel, think, use, perceive and adopt digital media in their lives.' Gómez Cruz (2016: 10) In embracing the approach of Digital Ethnography, Gómez Cruz (2016: 4) advocates for the ability to 'detect emergent practices with technologies' and then, 'reposition them into a complex and rich context', drawn from the invaluable insights into a user's choice of image.

Though research has developed to greatly improve the efficiency and accuracy of technologies for assessing and guessing the traits of an individual online, the importance of qualitative research remains pertinent, when so many user-specific variables are at play.

2 • Scrolling Back

I chose to apply Lincoln and Robards's (2017:6) 'scroll-back' methodology of analysing a user's historical choices of representation on social media, in combination to a digital ethnographic approach to research. Revisiting past ideals for self-representation, through the retrospective visualisations of online photo albums, offered critical, supplementary information to an initially traditional, semi-structured interview process. I selected a platform that all of my participants were represented on, Facebook, to access highly-personalised, reflective and revealing insights into online identity construction, allowing participants to interpret 'their own digital traces' and 'reflect on changes in their own disclosure practices over time' (Lincoln and Robards, 2017:6). A crucial part of this exercise, highlighted by Lincoln and Robards, is to place the participant in control of the actual 'scrolling' process. I found that this, similarly, allowed users to choose what they wanted to explore with me, observing the live construction of their own interpretations of their personal representation online, providing invaluable insights that contributed, cumulatively, to the broader considerations in my thesis.

3 • Interviews and Coding

The interview processes were semi-structured, informed by the previously explored approaches of 'Onlife Ethnographies' (Gomez Cruz, 2017), and the 'Scroll Back' methodology to guide participants through thematically-tailored, scripted interview sections, and a series of related sample

questions, which kept the interviews targeted and easy to navigate for participants. Follow-up and complementary questions were guided by individual insights, where further information was required on a point of interest raised by the subject. The initial exercise, I termed the “First Impressions” activity, was inspired by Lincoln and Robards’ (2017) approach to social media-related research interviews, where their participants were ‘asked to note down on a piece of paper what they perceived to be their personal timeline of ‘critical and ‘fateful’ moments’, throughout their experience using Facebook, allowing the researchers a means of comparing a user’s hand-written, perceived personal milestones, with analysis of their digital representation in their Facebook Timeline (Lincoln and Robards, 2017: 8). To account for the variance in research aims, the “First Impressions” exercise my participants engaged with structured as an entirely participant-led, hand-written or typed analysis of what their profile image, across platforms, communicated to them visually. Some participants chose to remain silent throughout the process, while others verbally guided me through their written analyses, offering multiple intersections in content and building a multi-faceted vision of their current choice of self-representation. I found that the process made participants feel comfortable and ground themselves in the ensuing discussion, bringing up talking points and initial ideas that were expanded on as we moved through the questions.

Though the interview process expanded over a number of weeks to meet conflicting schedules, taking short breaks to transcribe and code previous ‘sets’ of interviews allowed reflection and revision of the interview process. By transcribing and thematically coding all of my interviews manually, I was able to deeply familiarise myself with the emerging findings, constantly refining approaches to certain subject matter, and highlighting new topics of

focus to discuss in future interviews. I closed each interview with use of Lincoln and Robards's 'Scroll back' method (2017:7), where participants used my smartphone or laptop, or their own device, and 'clicked, tapped and scrolled their way through their own profiles', with my prompts or guidance where particular attention was paid to a particular image, to draw out any user-generated understandings of self in the process (Lincoln and Robards, 2017:7). Candid reflections and comments in post interview farewells, reinforced the success of the 'scroll back' method in providing deeper understandings and insight into each user as an individual, and as a member of an online community. I noted that some users, that were existing social connections before the interview process, even changed or re-arranged assemblies of their profile images after our discussions, reflecting the potential for self-reflection to extend beyond the intended research period, into their practice online.

All research data was coded thematically, with critical, participant insights identified and labelled in accordance to the 'stage' of image production they belonged to. The highly personalised, "story-telling" nature of the interview process informed the three stages in online identity formation: creating the self, digitally processing, or 'digitising' the self, and "being", or living, as an online "self", or avatar, in digital spaces

3 • Privacy

For the purposes of this thesis, the profile image is understood to be close enough in reference or relationship to a user's "real-world" identity, for it to be considered if not an instantiation of self, at least a desired expression of it. Various and extensive measures were carried out to protect the privacy of the participants. Each individual was assigned a pseudonym that was used in any instance where data was collected or coded. All transcription

documents were password-protected and transferred to a university-secured server post-use, deleted from the researcher's personal computer. Interview recordings were taken with a smart phone, with fingerprint-based password protection, and deleted post-transcription. I chose to employ images as a visual reference in all interviews to guide participant analysis as well as, where permitted, revisit them in the thematic analysis stage. With the permission of all participants, I took 'screen captures', where relevant and removed all identifying features before storage, briefly referring to them in the analytical components of my study, before deleting them permanently. I chose not to republish any photograph representation of a subject, in the belief that de-identifying features, in the context of the rich participant analysis in this study, would not be enough to erase the greater risk of breaches to a participant's privacy.

A crucial component in protecting the security and privacy of research participants in this study, formed part of the initial decision to choose profile images as an object of research. The profile image is the first touch-point' a user makes with another and is a necessarily public portion of a profile on a social network. In some exemptions, like LinkedIn, the image may be visible to site members only, or a user's 'Connections' but, in most cases, where a user of social media can be searched and found on a network: their image appears alongside their username, placing a "stamp" of digital, visual identification upon them.

4 • Diversity

Each member of this study was given the option to self-identify their gender and pronoun preference, resulting in a final, participant demographic of 50% male, 40% female and 10% non-binary individuals. The small sample of a total of under 15 participants, kept intentionally low to allow for deeper

analysis, all fell within the age-range of 21 and 32. The choice of age-representation was inspired by the decision to employ Lincoln and Robards's 'Scroll-back Method' (2017:4), which recruited users that displayed 'sustained use' of social media, to unravel 'growing-up' narratives in their participants lives, that were mediated by, or represented on, their Facebook Timeline. 20% of participants in this study can be considered 'influencers' in their networks, with followings of over 20,000 on their public, social media accounts. The other 80% of people combined professional and personal use to varying degrees, with manageable followings.

I developed each stage of my research process with the advice of my supervisor, the University of Melbourne's Human Ethics Committee, and ongoing reference to the AoIR's 'Internet-Specific Ethical Questions' (2012). Following their recommendations for a 'process approach to ethics', where the researcher is positioned as 'addressing and resolving ethical issues as they arise', I performed my research in definitive, closed stages, allowing multiple points of review or adaption, where necessary, of my approach to ethical research (Markham and Buchanan, 2012:12). For example, where the phrasing of a particular question may have encouraged a user to reveal too much superlative information, I was able to identify and re-structure these elements throughout the research period.

4 • Recruitment

Recruitment was limited to people who were existing 'Friends' or connections in my personal, social media networks, who had expressed interest in participation after gaining a brief understanding of the project. Once genuine and willing interest was established, the participant was forwarded a digital copy of the Plain Language Statement, a sample-set of

Interview Questions and an official Consent Form. After reviewing the informative documents and presenting written consent, each participant underwent a research interview at a public location of their choosing, at an appropriate time during business hours, or a specified, approved time that was more convenient for the participant.

When walking down the street, an individual is faced with only what they can see physically of another, when navigating social media, a user can access the surrounding, 'real-world' data related to a person, stressing the importance of analysing a user's socio-cultural practices, and personal interpretations of their own image production practices, in social media research. The combination of semi-structured interviews, with the application of the 'scroll back' methodology, informed the process-based approach this thesis takes towards the realisation of self-representation online.

Results and Discussion

Chapter One • Creating the Self: Establishing and Managing Online Identities

1. Choosing a Platform for Representation

With a broad scope of choice in social media platforms, each presenting unique audiences, features, and intended uses, there is an increasing tendency for users to construct identities across platforms, sharing amassed explorations of self in text, videos and still images. Each platform's profile picture presents a new opportunity to shape one's identity to suit a new online social context, or to target content towards a user's perception of the audience members present on particular platforms. The participants of this study all possessed Facebook accounts, alongside at least one another social account. However, for the purpose of acquiring the most targeted information, about everyday use of social media practices and how they mediate lived experiences, some participants opted to disregard a profile that existed for a purely representational purpose that may not have provided any further scope for analysis, for example, David, 25, held a blank Instagram account, that featured no posts, but offered him another way to contact specific friends that did not have Facebook. 30% of participants chose to identify as using a single platform, which was unanimously identified as Facebook, whereas the other 70% were split in even configurations, as follows:

Primary Platforms	Percentage of Users (%)
Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn	10%
Facebook, Instagram and Twitter	30%
Facebook and Instagram	30%
Facebook Only	30%

General patterns of use included 60% of participants possessing a combination of professional and personal accounts, and 40% who used social media for personal use only. The scope of this research covered the dominant platforms used by participants, but profile images were also employed and referenced across other platforms, in dating apps, or the domain of Snapchat. While Snapchat has existed as a popular form of instant, photo-based online communication, the participants of this study generally conceded to placing no import on self-presentation on the app in their profile image, some of them not even knowing if they had one, revealing a preference towards the communicative functions of each ‘Snap’. These context-specific spaces were not generally in line with broader considerations and patterns, that could be revealed through focusing specifically on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Before the modern realisations of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn, popular platforms used by participants were Beebo, MSN Messenger, and Myspace. Participants cited a number of common uses between their past and current representations on social media, as what Edward, a 24-year-old Communications Assistant, described as ‘pre-cursors’ to modern instantiations of these networks. All participants referenced a

tendency to join platforms where their friends and family had existing online profiles. Each participant who had used one of these 'early' social media platforms noted a significant shift in use, with Facebook as the 'gateway' platform to their modern uses of social media, each citing the migration of their friends and family to Facebook, as their main entry-point into the platform.

1.1 • The Happy Facebook Self

Every participant was represented in a Facebook profile, a possible remnant of the platform-shifts mentioned by participants in this study. A singular pattern was held across all user responses, with regards to their use of online identity on the platform: to facilitate social connections with their network. Where responses shared another connection was expressed in a need to appear affable, approachable or happy in their images. Tyson, a 23-year-old Entrepreneurial Businessman and Design Student, explained his desire to 'portray happiness' in his profile images as resulting from an understanding that 'people respond to human emotion' online. Kate, 25, echoed this aspiration in her preferred appearance in a Facebook profile image, explaining, 'I always try and just make it look friendly and happy'. Facebook was a platform that, for them, accommodated their personal values and desires surrounding their online self-representation, with Edward even establishing that, for him, Facebook offered the 'most space to use different kinds of images'. Kate, 25, furthered this idea, adding that she chose to keep faithful to an assertion of 'this is who I am' – which she expressed in a literal representation of her 'face' in her profile pictures. In line with the platform's main purpose, facilitating social connections, the need to represent humanity in a Facebook profile picture revealed a concern

among users, of wanting to belong and assimilate to representations of 'happy' and 'social' users in their networks.

1.2 • The Professional Self on Twitter

Twitter was primarily identified as an interest-based pursuit, or career tool, in participant responses. For two participants working in the gaming industry, it was important to represent themselves as a professional, first and foremost, and to champion or appeal to their ideal persona in the creative industries. Selena, 28, used her 'professional profile photo', taken by her partner, a photographer, for Twitter to 'represent' her profession 'as an Entertainer' and Salesperson in gaming to her peers. In typifying her idealised professional self in her images, she found her accounts helped her gain 'more followers', and develop her 'community on Twitch', a platform for presenting 'live-streams' of her playing video games, which is a popular form of entertainment in the gaming community. Not only did her profile image allow her to visually assimilate to what she perceived the ideal gaming persona to be, but it provided a tangible method of communication to her targeted audiences, in her embodying this character online. Charlie, a 23-year-old Game Artist, approached self-representation with similar, professional intent, but chose to adopt a self-drawn, iconified representation of themselves, to avoid offering their 'face' as their 'first impression' on their Twitter account. They used their profile image to instead, de-personify their online presence, directing a user towards their 'work', as the focus of their account. Charlie's practices enacted their focus of drawing more users towards their content, but in further discussions, they acknowledged the difficult task that self-representation can pose as a 'feminine person in games'. Twitter users in this study tended to invest in a representation of themselves that could enact a professional persona, as a physical guise, or as

a means of conforming to an idealised, professional self-image that met the expectations of their desired audience, for the purpose of furthering their career prospects.

1.3 • The Value-Driven Self on Instagram

Instagram was identified as a medium that also facilitated exploration of business pursuits. It also acted as a digital “mood board”, for some participants, allowing them access to images that pertained to their interests and values. Kate, 25, is a Fitness Model who used Instagram to embody ‘the persona’ she wanted to portray, to ‘hone into’ her ‘target market’ as a ‘health and fitness authority figure’. To qualify as an expert in the industry, Kate mentioned a need to look ‘professional’, as well as fulfil her personal ideal of ‘practicing what’ she ‘preaches’. This was achieved, for her, by using a ‘profile photo’ of herself ‘at a photoshoot, really “done up”’, referring to the combination of hair, makeup, skin tone and, muscular figure that contributed to her desired embodiment of a fit, healthy individual. Noah, a 21-year-old Apprentice Tradesman, chose to structure his accounts around an impression of himself and his connection to music, as a passion or interest. It was evidenced in his Facebook profile picture at the time of interview, which presented him with an Australian, alternative musician. His Instagram profile simultaneously portrayed him in the setting of a music festival. He found Instagram ‘a lot easier’ than other platforms, to represent himself individually. He deemed it ‘more acceptable’ to represent himself as ‘just one person’, in an Instagram image, noting that his approach to Facebook images may confuse a viewer of his public Instagram account as to who he was in the photo, where his Facebook ‘Friends’ would recognise his visage from real-life encounters. In mentioning ‘acceptability’ in representing himself alone in profile images, he echoed similar concerns to

those he expressed in other parts of the interview process, wanting to avoid appearing as a 'loner' online. Both examples of self-representation on Instagram reveal a user's tendency to leverage the specificity of a platform's audience members and personal ideals for content, to meet the needs of what they want to explore in self-representational images online.

1.4 • The Conservative Self on LinkedIn

For reasons that were not explored in this study, only a minor number of participants maintained a presence on LinkedIn. For one of the participants, de-identified here due to the small nature of the sample, they considered their profile to be more of a tokenistic addition to their use of social media. During the interview process, they revealed that they were not aware of their privacy settings on the platform, which we tested to find consistent with the fact that they were actually unsearchable, and entirely private on the platform. They felt the platform to be very 'prescriptive' when it came to 'what image' a person 'can use', and that the image they selected did not say 'anything about' them 'at all' from a personal perspective. However, they found this to be a feature inherent to the professional purposes of the platform, leading them to express that they wished to revisit their settings post-interview. For LinkedIn, setting up a private profile can act in contradiction to the platform's purpose of developing and building professional networks, leading users to consider their presentation as relatively featureless to conform to a more conservative form of self-representation, in another example of a professional networking context.

1.5 • Cross-platform Aesthetics and Themes

Alongside considerations of platform specificity, a number of participants referenced the choice to connect their self-representations on social media in

the application of a 'theme' or 'aesthetic' to their profile picture choices. For a social media use like David, a 25-year-old Science Graduate and Salesperson, the theme was simple. He chose to represent 'absurdity and fun' in his images, reflective of a generally nonchalant or casual attitude towards his presence on social media. Alternatively, Naomi, a 25-year-old Masters Student, was conscious of inter-connecting her content across platforms with what she considered her 'watermark' – the colours red, black, and her signature hairstyle. The concepts that supported Naomi's aesthetics were a combination of value statements, presented symbolically in her selected icon of representation. When considering her aesthetics, red was chosen for its purpose as a 'powerful colour', while black, was 'very private', and contributed to the 'mysterious appeal' she embodied in her online persona. Tyson's aesthetic was employed to 'maintain a structure' to his posts, to present a 'continual story' across platforms. He applied this by filtering images in 'black and white', in contrast to profile pictures that he considered 'over the top' with colour. He deliberated on the fact that a user of social media gets 'so much colour and light', and noted that he didn't want his Instagram to add to the overload of stimuli users already experienced online. However, his choice to 'randomly pop in' a 'colour photo', was employed as a technique to draw his followers towards a 'major event' or development, in his multi-modal story-telling practices. All uses of aesthetics and themes served to leave imprints of a user in their practices of self-narration, through a chosen form of visual pattern to their profile pictures.

The considerations of all users revealed differing, complex and often interwoven reasons for developing a multi-layered embodiment of their personal values, and considerations of selfhood, on social media. Each

platform was able to facilitate the expression of another 'aspect' of themselves, producing a dynamic vision of who they were on a day to day basis. These practices were observed in the literature surrounding static, as opposed to malleable, self-representations online, including Rettberg's concept of 'micro-narratives' (2014: 35), which similarly observed that a participant's choice of platform can be deemed more suitable for certain types of personal expression, while others provided leverage points for developing and establishing one's professional self. When placed together, each profile image adds to a multi-dimensional, re-construction of who the person is, and the roles they play in their online and offline communities.

2. Pushing Buttons: Incentive to Change Profile Image

For some participants, the decision to make a profile image update was based on an "A-ha!" moment, an internal alarm that signalled the need for a profile change. For others, it resulted from deliberate considerations of the image and its relevance to a user at a given point in time. Reflections were varied, with many users initially expressing that their profile image was not a central concern for them. Other participants expressed that their profile image was a highly considered, personal and reasoned task. Naomi shared her considerations of a profile picture as a 'staple', highlighting her highly 'methodical' approach to selecting her image, a choice that extended over 'a couple of days' as she decided what she should post, and why she should post it. Tyson connected an update of his profile image to how he was 'thinking and feeling' at a given time, lamenting the 'time and effort' that goes into his 'public, rather than his personal', profile. While early considerations of profile images were not realised in the initial stages of the interview process, participants who expressed not paying 'attention' to their image, revealed subtle hints to more conscious practices, that they may have

not been aware of themselves, while those who had deliberate methods were able to detail them expressively – perhaps indicating levels of comfort with individual social media use, especially in participants who were conscious of appearing casual to their audiences.

A user¹ is guided by personal indicators of when they should update their image, each reflective of traditional “story-telling”, and cultural practices of regular, time-specific communication and information sharing. For some users, it is centred on the passing of temporal milestones, as touch-points between a user and their community. Noah, for example, expressed his use of profile images as a means of checking-in with relatives that in place of ‘regular contact’, choose to ‘base it all off social’. He wanted his picture to show that he was ‘actually doing stuff and hitting milestones’, tailoring his content to meet this objective. Some users indicated that they had specified time frames, like Ava, a 26-year-old PhD Candidate and administrative worker, who indicated that it was around the point of ‘3-6 months’ that she would consider producing a new image, or for Edward, who reached the same point at ‘6 months’. Jeremy, a 32-year-old Author and Salesperson, considered photos alongside markers of personal relationships. A photo with ‘an ex-girlfriend’, would incentivise a change to a photo he took of himself, or a loved one telling him to ‘change it based on what they think’ he ‘should look like on his Facebook’. Capturing crucial, temporal events in a user’s life extended throughout a range of practices on social media, including a tendency to facilitate self-expression of a ‘timeline’ of personal development.

1. I utilise the phrase ‘a user’ throughout the piece as a simplified means of referring to social media participants in this analysis. I am aware, however, that this terminology has been critiqued for its homogenising implications and wish to note that this phrase is used only for the purpose of convenience.

Earlier, we explored existing research into platform-driven mechanisms for image preservation, and the emergence of archival functions as 'built into the software and into our habits of reading and sharing online' (Rettberg, 2014: 55). However, in participant reflections upon temporal self-representation, it was difficult to place where the origin of archival processes began. The participants expressed a desire to maintain an updated, or visually significant, self-representation of their current values, best summarised in the literature as an 'archive in the process of becoming' (Tifentale and Manovich, 2015: 7). Users appeared to respond to their network's call to provide a new update to their self-image, reflecting a participatory relationship with the platform, where platform-specific functions mobilise, encourage and enable the personal project of self-image that a user is undertaking.

3. From Source to Selection: Choosing a Profile Image

3.1 • Photo-piles, Albums and Mobile Storage

The use of smartphones integrated a user's personal photos, with those they received across social networks, as saved in a device's 'Camera Roll', or 'Photo App', offering a user a convenient means of selecting a profile image to upload to a network. Edward selected photos from a time he had 'travelled somewhere' and based his decision on 'how much personality' he wanted 'an image to reflect' of himself. While Ava mentioned her chosen practice of scrolling through her Camera Roll, before finding an image that she likes. She 'gravitated' towards pictures in her selection that felt made her 'look better' than what she believed she did. Alternatively, when Naomi could not capture what she deemed 'that perfect' photo, she chose to adopt a still shot from a Simpson's episode, that she felt captured 'her', without

having to capture her 'face'. In this, we can see that participants that chose from a selection of photos that they had previously taken or assembled, seeking out those that reflected, characteristically, what a user most wanted to convey in their profile picture.

2.2 • Photo bursts, and Tailored Shoots

Another method identified by this study's participants was to take a series of images, at a specific time when they felt comfortable with their appearance, before uploading them either immediately or retrospectively to their networks. Others even went to lengths to prepare a semblance of a photoshoot or devote a period of time to the purpose of taking a new profile image. A number of participants identified with the process of taking a number of photos at once, for the purpose of selecting the ideal profile image from the series later. Kate would 'take heaps', before she chose 'the best one', while Naomi took 'multiple photos' but acknowledged a personal rule that 'if you're not getting a good photo in three photos', there's 'a very possible chance that you're not going to get the perfect one in the next couple'. The potentially time and energy consuming nature of posturing one's self image in real life, led Naomi not to engage in the practice often. Charlie also took their images in bursts. They described their process like an oft-repeated mantra: take a selection of '10, 20 pictures, delete a bunch of them, save a few of them, and then – editing'. It was important for the photo to not only represent her 'right now', but for it to look 'better than her last profile picture', echoing Kate's earlier desire to envision her profile images as a 'one up' each time. These more active measures of profile image production are developed in real-time, while simultaneously aiming to achieve a set future goal for their construction, acting as a highly-malleable choice of assembling an image for public display.

Self-representation could be found in a user's albums: intertextual folders that comprised selfies, internet memes, GIFs or family portraits. Whether selecting a photo for personal or professional purposes, the smartphone acted as camera, photo album, or even as a visual resume, as well as provided an audience for a user's content on social media. The reflections of participants who favoured the process of 'self-shooting' an image, were analogous to findings in literature studying the practice of 'selfies', where researchers identified 'selfie-taking' as a unique practice of flexible self-expression, where a user could view themselves in 'a moment in the past' as well as 'a potentiality of a good-looking body' (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015: 13). While considerations of profile images as containing 'a significant amount of deliberate and conscious thought' (Hum et al, 2011:5) were reflected in users who chose from photo collections, both assemblies of "offline" and online story-telling practices among peers were merged into a single machine – the smartphone – that automated, through social media software, a streamlined process of self-expression.

4. When Reality Met Ideology: Expressions of 'Selfhood' in Profile Images

4.1 • The Attractive Self

The profile image, being an inherently visual medium, provided an opportunity to present oneself in an image produced to appeal to others, or represent one's most 'attractive' self. On Instagram, Kate considered a 'flattering' image of herself as providing the audience with 'a feel-good' image that invited her audience to 'click on her profile'. Naomi specified a condition for a 'dream photo' as one 'taken of you when you're not looking', and 'you still look great', indicating a desire for naturalism, or an

unmediated expression of beauty that may contradict with the way profile images are facilitated as a social construct by the platforms themselves. This was further explored in Charlie's feelings of being unable to 'look good' without being 'perfectly composed', claiming that they did not know how to replicate what 'to do with' their 'face', if they were not 'looking at it', as they did when they took a selfie. Their choice to use 'selfies' as their primary format of profile image, represented how they wanted 'to look' and how they 'think', was in tension with their belief that these factors did not 'sort of translate in real life'. Participants visions of an attractive self, recognised culturally constructed and networked ideals of beauty, where an image must be flawless to demonstrate perfection, resulting in a tension between the self that appeared in the image, and the potential of how that self would appear to its networks.

4.2 • The Professional and Value-Driven Self

Profile images also accentuated the ideals inherent to an individual's profession, or further explored the personal lifestyle choices of a user. Kate's occupation as a fitness model, necessitated a running theme of 'health and fitness', central to her profile image on her public Instagram. She noted that her self-expression was constantly being negotiated 'in the back of' her 'head', as she identified whether a chosen image was 'appropriate for a health and fitness page'. Due to the rapidity, and potential transiency, of possessing an 'authority status' in her industry, her profile image considerations had to include her online 'reputation', that she felt could be lost in '5 minutes'. Selena's similarly career-focused choices for her professional profile images were 'more polished' by nature, where key features of the image like the 'backgrounds' chosen, her 'outfit' choice, as well as 'the lighting' were conscious decisions in the image production

process. For Noah's personal accounts, he wished to present an ideal lifestyle choice of being active, that countered the inherent inactivity in engaging in online communication. He wanted to avoid displaying himself as 'just being inside' his 'house all the time', instead hoping to reflect a passion for music, as well as 'going outside', to avoid appearing like he had an 'addiction' to himself. He believed that he could counter this by being in an image with 'someone else', as reflected in his choice to regularly feature encounters with musicians in his profile images. Adding a new elements to existing understandings of image representation online, embodiments of the self in a profile image, as a professional or value-focused individual online, offered another form of identity formation that required a negotiated thought process between the image itself, and the type of network it would feature in.

4.3 • The Facetious Self

A user's choice in profile image could provide a comedic, or decidedly ironic, means of expressing oneself as a casual user of a platform, or someone who did not wish to engage with the visual politics of identity management on a serious level. Ava related a 'silly and funny' representation of herself, to spikes in confidence levels in her daily life, which she identified as times of 'being true to herself'. David's profile images were similarly centred around humour, wanting to present 'absolute absurdity' in the image, or him and his partner 'just being fools'. Jeremy echoed this desire in his intent to simply appear 'bemused', wanting to present a profile image that appeared 'to have a serious intent', but in actuality, was a 'play on itself' and taking himself seriously that was generated 'more out of irony than anything else'. The choice to present oneself with something 'humorous', in place of a serious depiction of self,

could be considered a reactionary form of profile image used in contrast to user images that were more self-aware of their visual functions within networks.

4.4 • The Authentic Self

An important tension revealed itself in the interview process, users wanted to represent themselves in an 'accurate' way, while navigating the mediated process by which a profile image was taken, the platform it was represented on and who was going to see it. Kate recognised the importance of people online showing 'who they really' were, without being 'too fake', choosing to represent her most 'natural' self among private Facebook Friends. David further acknowledged this idea, stressing that his photos were not taken 'for any vanity reasons', but rather held a dual purpose for capture. His profile images were not just candid representations on his Facebook, but functioned as communicative, supportive messages to friends who may have 'had a bad day'. Charlie recognised their profile images as 'looking good' in what they 'look like at the time' but expressed a contravening need to maintain 'complete control over everything'. To ensure the representation was accurate to their self-conception, they chose 'selfies' that were 'framed very tightly' to their face – perhaps indicating a sense of control over the body that was hidden from the image. Tyson lamented his 'entire social media' set-up online, as a 'plethora of hypocrisies'. He stressed, as if to himself, that a social platform was not 'just there for' him 'to be dumb and ditzy', a self-recognised part of him that could be embodied in his images but was not necessarily accurate to his real character. He identified himself as 'quite introverted' in comparison. The way users represented themselves online was sometimes an extension of their choice of presentation in their real social networks, as in the example of David sharing his photo-assemblies privately, and publicly. At other times, it appeared to be in conflict with the

limitations their chosen methods or platforms presented, warring personal ideals with their engagement with other users as viewers and perceivers online.

4.5 • The Inauthentic Self

Some users self-identified with practices they deemed inauthentic in relation to their personal lives, not just in appearance, but a perceived value reflected in them that may be inconsistent with one they held. Ava was impacted by her inability to be 'the way' she was 'with friends' and trusted people in her life, on social media, as a result of having connected to audience members online that she would not trust in real social interactions. Naomi acknowledged her personal, Facebook profile photo as 'too perfect' to represent herself, or her life, but that she chose to upload it specifically for the purpose of appearing 'too good to be true'. For Naomi, this led to an understanding of her profile image as a social guise, or 'face to a profile', that you 'can't actually add' or befriend, due to her privacy settings. Jeremy possessed similar reasons for an acknowledged inaccuracy in his photos, which he attributed to an 'apathy' or 'indifference' for the platforms themselves. He expressed:

'To me, Facebook seems like a very isolated place. In some respects, it's too open. It's like walking in a crowd of people. So generally, if I'm walking, if I want to be seen, I'll be seen. And if I don't, I don't, and on Facebook, that's who I want to be known as. If I want to be seen, you'll see activity – if I don't, then you'll never see activity, so I think that is what I want reflected in the photos. A general passivity to it all.'

Alternatively, Tyson noted a deliberate choice to not 'over-think' his profile images, due to the emergence of what he termed 'obsessive' behaviour that, at one point, led him to deactivate his entire 'suite' of social media platforms. Tyson's identified an inauthentic, past practice of over-editing photos. He constantly revisited old photos, deleting images where he 'saw something wrong', or identified them as not achieving 'over 100 likes'. He identified these behaviours as 'detrimental' to his 'physical' and 'mental' health. In a personal aside, he identified a time where, despite the fact that he 'wasn't eating', he perceived his images to be 'healthy' and paired them with hashtags that presented a realm of desired features in Instagram's networks: #jawline, #face, #cheekbones, #highlight. The audience's 'validation' of these portrayals, contributed to his overall establishment of an 'unhealthy' concept of 'perfection', which was affirmed by the fact that others 'liked' his images. This broad scope of understanding 'inaccuracy', as demonstrated in a profile picture, revealed insights into how users can construct audiences as 'others', where the over-representation of idealised self-portraits can impact a user's ability to feel connected or represented on platforms, in comparison to the reams of 'scrollable' content that tend to amplify the presence of normative ideals of 'perfection' and 'beauty', through algorithmic measures of the number of users that 'love' an image, without representing each individual as fundamental to the framework.

Recent studies identified the reinforcement of existing social roles and hierarchies as transferred to online platforms, through representations of cultural ideals in that enabled a user to express themselves as an individual, but in the context of a 'online attention economy' that determined success as based on 'page views and clicks' (Marwick, 2008:157). This identified structure is represented in trends such as 'Instafame', which 're-inscribed'

normative ideals and structures including the 'hierarchy of fame' and 'celebrity culture', that already permeated mainstream media outlets (Marwick, 2008:141). Participants identified their roles across platforms, in personal, professional and other social contexts, by segregating their content into platforms they thought a particular part of themselves, be it their value system, identity or opinions, would achieve the best rates of 'success' on. While these are still genuine instances of self-expression, their ongoing 'socialisation' and measurement against other online content on social media platforms, may initially impede insights into the user as an individual. Looking past the initial, digital "fancies" of a platform, may offer tailored insights that contribute more substantially to understandings of broader patterns of use.

Chapter Two • ‘Digitising’ the Self: Using Technologies for Self-Representation

1. You’, Remastered: Use of Editing Technology in Profile Images

1.1 • Touching Up

A practice reflected upon by most participants was their subjective means for adding re-touches to a specific image. ‘Filtering’, cropping, straightening and adjusting the lighting in the image emerged as the most popular points to ‘re-touch’. Ava took her photos in Snapchat first for the purpose of ‘using Snapchat filters’, to ‘look nice to start with’, but did not necessarily share it on the platform. She saved a copy of a Snapchat image as the foundation, then would ‘click through the different filters’ in the in-editing software on her ‘Camera Roll’. This is where she would adjust ‘contrast’ and ‘brightness’ or apply anything ‘that soften[ed] the image’. Naomi also utilised ‘soft or high contrasting’, as a ‘blanket over the whole thing’, rather than adding re-touches to ‘random bits’ of a photo. Charlie would not take a photo where ‘the lighting’ in their environment was ‘not good’ already, they would stay focused on ‘how colours worked within a picture’, and the ‘nice complexion’ of skin that resulted from altered colour settings. Filtering, as one of the most common practices, represented opportunities for users to easily touch-up their image with an added sheen or gloss to cover visual demonstrations of imperfection.

The participants used applications on both their smartphones and computers for editing. On their smartphone, they would use a combination of, Snapchat, their Photos Application, Line Camera or Snapseed. The computer offered the “last line of defence” against imperfection. The programs used by participants were Adobe Lightroom and Adobe

Photoshop, as well as VSCO as means of applying 'serious' editing, if the photo necessitated it. Both Kate and Charlie employed specific, external applications when they edited their photos. In both cases, they chose to use an editing platform to remove an imperfection or blemish that they deemed an unnecessary component of an authentic image. Kate used Face Tune, an editing application external to social media platforms, but chose not to employ it often, due to a choice to 'preach being natural' on her timeline. She would choose to remove only 'a big bruise on her leg', or other outlier in a photo. Charlie echoed this action, noting that, if the picture contained something undesired 'in the background', or if it was a 'blemish that' they did not 'want to deal with', they would upload and edit the photo in Snapseed, before 'taking it into Photoshop' on their computer if the smartphone application could not 'handle it'. There were also minor number of participants who chose to not apply any editing features to their images and acknowledged any such practices as inauthentic. Ultimately, in networks surrounded by artifice – in technology, in values, in presentations, it can be a hard task for an individual to avoid editing anything that makes them 'stand out' from the crowd.

The process of editing may seem to only provide an understanding of a profile image as representative of the self as belonging to a broader social ideal of perfectionism. It has been cited in the literature that 'manipulability and artificiality' have been long-standing influences on representations of self - originating in early practices of painted portraiture (van Dijck, 2008:67). However, in discussions surrounding the individual functions of each edit, paying an individual focus to their realisation – like the removal of a blemish – better reveals itself as a part of 'a life-long project to reinvent one's self-appearance' (van Djick: 67-72). Platform-tailored editing software

has only made the appeal of removing minor, transient ‘blemishes’ on an individual’s self-representation, an easier goal to attain for a user.

2. Beyond the Image: Using Complementary Features on Social Networks

2.1• Frames

Frames were a popular feature across a number of social media platforms, where a user selected from pre-made, often user-generated, ‘overlays’ to add to their image. It could appear as an affiliation to a political cause, or as a superficial addition to the image for aesthetic purposes. Most participants in this study identified political support as their primary incentive for applying a frame. Ava commended a frame’s ability to provide ‘the option of putting forward something that's meaningful to you’, and to give her audience the opportunity to know what she ‘stands for’. She referred to an example of a theme she used to ‘support marriage equality’ in the lead up to Australia’s 2017 Marriage Equality postal vote – a practice that a number of other users engaged with. Selena noted that the “Yes!” frame, a popular version of the Marriage Equality related frames that featured an exclamation of a ‘Yes!’ answer to the postal survey, which allowed her to identify as not only someone who supported marriage equality, but as ‘a safe person to come out to’. Use of frames among participants expressed a desire for individualisation, as well as an express means of identifying with causes, that were specifically political in nature, to reinforce their stance on a topic of popular debate.

However, frames also presented downsides that led users to avoid them, in both the functionality of the feature, as well as varied interpretations of the

political content in profile images. Charlie expressed immense dislike for the way a frame would 'save out another image', which resulted in multiple, published instances of the same photos that would also split the distribution of social metrics. Charlie noted frustration with the fact that an image 'could've had 100 likes', but they ended up spread over different instances of the photo being published. However, a significant, parallel concern to positive understandings of frames emerged from discussions with Tyson, one of the participants who identified as LGBT+, who commented on the use of the LGBT+ flag in Facebook Frames as having been potentially 'misleading for a community'. He praised the fact that 'so many people were doing it to support their allies' but noted the 'mixed message' that it sent to the community it was supporting. The universal adoption of the flag 'made everything so much more of an unknown', for Tyson, where – in looking for LGBT+ connections, specifically romantically – he had to look 'beyond the flag' that represented his sexuality, in case a user was using it only representationally. It was interesting to note comparatively negative connotations to content that was otherwise well-intentioned, perhaps offering further insight into the aforementioned disconnect that users may be developing in using the communicative functions of these platforms, among visually dominant expressions of ideals that do not offer enough insight into the specific rationale behind a user's decision.

2.2• Hashtags

Hashtags were mainly found in participant use of Instagram or Twitter accounts, where the text of the hashtag was connected to the functionality of gaining or attracting audiences. The hashtags did not appear specifically in profile images, as Instagram and Twitter's profile images did not provide the function of viewing additional information for the profile image itself. However, Selena, among other participants noted that hashtags were 'how

people' found 'your content'. Her Hashtags were always 'directly related to the photo', in regard to its context. She used the example of using '#japan', both 'in English and in Japanese' to attract audiences from both countries. Kate's hashtags were associated with Instagram trends in the health and fitness industries, which included: #transformationtuesday, #throwbackthursday and #flexfriday. She tailored her hashtag to connect to image dissemination practices that related to audience behaviours. On a Monday, she knew people would access Instagram 'looking for motivation', so she would publish her 'strongest stuff' on a 'Monday morning'. Hashtags primarily acted as means of connecting the content of a profile to other profiles, for the purpose of gathering new audience members on a platform.

2.3• Social Metrics: Likes, Comments and 'Reacts'

While many of the participants indicated that they did not use accompanying descriptive text for profile images, some considered the text-based 'comments' of other users, as well as the 'like', 'react', or 'heart' features offered by the platforms as information, directly relevant to the user's expression of identity, that extended beyond what a profile image could provide. For Kate, the 'likes' and 'comments' would project 'a lot about the person, and whether they've got real or fake followers'. She determined the authenticity of a user by 'the number of likes and comments', as well as the 'quality' and content of their photo. Noah focused on the 'type' of 'likes' a profile image had. He considered a 'like' as expressive of 'no real effort' on behalf of the audience member, whereas a 'react' on Facebook, appeared as an emoji, and would show him that the reaction was 'premeditated' by the viewer. An almost equal number of participants indicated no interest in the social metrics surrounding a profile image, not elaborating much further than wanting to express, as Naomi did, that they did not care 'what other people' thought, when it came to someone

else's profile image, or their own, online. Ultimately, the functions of social metrics as a framing device to profile image use offered analytics that were either used as determinants of authenticity online, or disregarded.

2.4 • GIFS, Emojis, and Memes

The use of further visual stimuli – either in accompanying text to an image, or in the commentary around it – appear in: GIFs, Emojis, and Memes, all popularised form of internet image production, that often spread “virally” across platforms. For some participants, using an emoji allowed them to add another level of visual engagement to their posts. Kate referenced ‘always’ using ‘emojis’, believing that if a comment on a photo online is just ‘text without emojis’, that ‘people are not going to read it’ or stay engrossed with her content. Naomi referred to her use of GIFs as a form of image production on Twitter, referencing enjoyment in posting a ‘short GIF video’ of herself ‘doing strange things’, she offered an example of a Twitter post of her playing with her hair, in bed, with a Tweet that referenced her behaviour when another user asked if she was busy. GIFs, Emojis and Memes adopt the meanings attributed to them by a user. In isolation, they may be unintelligible or fragmented, but in relevance to the context of a user's audience, they operate as an entirely functional method for communicating self.

2.5 • Temporary Profile Pictures and Stories

A user's ‘Story’ would appear, on most platforms, as a highlighted ring of colour around a person's profile image. On Facebook, it was integrated into the Facebook Messenger feature, while on Instagram, the story was foregrounded at the top of a user's feed, offering a ‘line-up’ of profile images, surrounded by coloured indications of each having published a ‘Story’. A Story was an instantaneous, real-time upload of what a person did

in their day-to-day life, which were taken in series of small videos or images, viewable for a time period specified by the account holder. Tyson separated his online life in relation to what he described as the 'softcore', his themed, profile content, and 'the hardcore', his story, that he believed was 'there to portray' his 'life in a real way'. Kate similarly used her story against the context of her health and fitness 'authority status'. She wanted to give her audience 'a laugh', as well as an insight into what she did, and how she maintained 'the look' and 'mindset' that she had at that point in time, without contradicting the main purpose of promoting a health-conscious lifestyle. 'Temporary Profile Pictures', where a user could identify a specific time frame for an image to be published, added a countdown feature that ended with an offer to extend the time a profile image appeared for, removed it or made it permanent. Charlie noted that they were partial to this form of expression, using it to publish their university 'graduation photo', which they noted would 'only represent' who they were for 'that week'. Both Stories and Temporary Images could be conceived as moving selfies which acted as a presentation of a user in a moment in time, and offered a deeper layer of humanity, or an extended means of exploring their use of the platform, albeit in a temporary way.

Briefly deconstructing the purposes of metadata in online self-image production practices has helped to solidify their representation in the literature, as providing 'metonyms' that add partial representations to an overall understanding of an individual's sense of self (Rettberg, 2014:41). The newly formed genre of temporary profile image functions mirrored the purpose of selfies in allowing a user to display interpretations of self that were malleable and flexible within the frames they were taken in – culturally and visually (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015: 13). While their standalone

analysis may be limited in significance, they are integral as signifiers to meanings presented in profile images that may be initially concealed to an outside observer.

My initial thought to include the processes of editing and producing meta-data was limited to understandings of these actions as contributors to a, potentially, superficial means of online interpersonal interaction. However, when I analysed each instance of editing, it was clear that a user would apply each edit, for a specific, self-referenced purpose. I grew to appreciate the individualised reason behind every edited feature, as it became clear that they operated in constant juxtaposition to distracting, mass realisations of culturally-developed ideals of perfection, celebrity culture and viral image dissemination. A user would then adopt these factors as reference points for navigating their presence on the platform.

These values in social media content have already filtered down into high-school aged users, who identified 'beautiful looks' and 'trend-conscious clothing', among a list of primarily superficial characteristics, that determined a popular identity on a social media platform (Siibak 2010:6). The damaging imposition of 'traditional gender roles', and restrictive ideals for beauty and perfection in profile image production, have also, already been found to carry over into digital spaces (Miguel 2016:7). In doing so, it appeared that platform-driven features that aimed to connect people on social media, may have added to an overall, growing sense of isolation or disconnect between users. They simultaneously worked to position a user as a contributor, as well as a receiver, of overall cultural values that a user may not assimilate to, but ultimately belong to, when they framed self-narratives within a platform's structural confines.

Chapter Three • 'Being' Digital: Audiences, Socio-cultural Impacts and Relationship Management

1. Competition and Cavalry: Following and Interpreting Content Between Users

1.1 • Give or Take: The Functionality of Audiences

When we discussed disclosure practices online, in terms of what a user was happy to reveal in their profile photo, many participants possessed a keen awareness of how content was to be perceived in their networks, as a guiding influence over what they posted. Ava aimed to 'look good' in her profile image, for the friends and family that would view her content. However, she felt limited in what she could or could not post. This was mentioned as a result of having 'certain people' on her profile that she would not want to offer insights into private aspects of herself – most notably, any disclosure of her sexuality, that these audience members would attempt to contravene. Tyson expressed a similar concern for social media, in his need to 'control' his content 'down to the last word' after having unintentionally published a hashtag that his followers viewed as 'offensive'. He mentioned that, even after removing the image, the 'backfire' resulted in him losing '200 followers'. He recognised that offending people was perhaps inherent to life, but the issue 'with social media', was that it could still exist online 'permanently', despite an attempt to intercede the issue. These expressions of a heightened awareness of how content would be interpreted by a user's audience served to limit and control what some users chose to prevent of themselves online, diverting the process of profile image creation towards concerns for its reception in a user's network.

When a user reached public status, the pressures to update content grew alongside their increased audience numbers. Kate, despite being a social media influencer, acknowledged that ‘no one’ was ‘forcing’ her to ‘put out content’, the result of conscious choices to not accept opportunities from ‘sponsors’ that wanted her to advertise products to her networks. Tyson, who held a similar, ‘influencer’, status when he was a prominent Snapchat user, received similar offers from friends to advertise their content. It was a ‘hard line’, for Tyson, to juggle being a ‘professional’, while ensuring you do not ‘sacrifice’ yourself to make ‘sales’. Tyson reached his ‘peak’ of ‘25,000 followers’ on Snapchat, and ‘5,000 Facebook friends’ on his personal profile – mentioning that he considered anything over ‘10,000’ as ‘reaching public status. However, his accounts were ‘cut off completely’, and abruptly, when he received a ‘phone call’ from a ‘random follower’ that had acquired his personal phone number, knowledge of the specific town he lived in, and his ‘mum and dad’, resulting in a ‘death threat’ that caused him to completely disengage with social media. He later re-invented himself with a de-identified username and new social media accounts. The delicate arrangements and negotiations that a social media user makes with regards to what they will publish to an audience, seem to only become amplified when a user is elevated to ‘public status’.

1.2 • Following Me, Following You: Observing the Content of Others *Comparisons of Self and Belonging*

Impressions of how a user related their profile image content to the self-managed context of the content they followed, was explored in how participants responded to the practices of others online. For Ava, she noticed that on social media, with ‘everyone who [was] trying to make themselves look prettier’, she did not want to have a comparatively ‘ugly’ picture when scrolling through the platform. For Noah, it opened up a ‘level of jealousy’

that someone had 'done something', or 'met someone' that he had not, when viewing this on other's profiles. Whereas, Naomi found social media's reminder that 'there's always someone better than you' to be an inspiring and motivating force. She looked to identify 'a bit of' her, in 'them', the people she followed, whether it be in style 'nationality or ethnicity'. This offered initial indications of profile image content as possessing multi-faceted impacts to their wider networks – as objects of self-construction, as well as points of reference for others who navigated online identities.

Happiness and Familial Ties

For some users, representations of personal happiness, or crucial milestones in their networked 'friends' lives, were of keen interest when engaging with content online. For Naomi, happiness was the goal of 'what people' tried to capture' and in turn, she considered that as a viewer, 'looking at a photo 'made her happy'. David provided another example in his impressions of people who appeared to be 'enjoying themselves' online, as users who would place a 'link to a stupid YouTube video' on their profile. He contrasted this with a concept of 'stupid stories', where he referenced the uptake of fake news stories that included online articulations of existing 'myths', such as 'vaccines causing autism', that were published by some family members in his network as 'evidence'. Noah enjoyed acknowledgements of a 'milestone' in his family's life, if a relative were to have a baby, or 'announce an engagement', but similarly disliked what he perceived as their contributions to viral image dissemination. A user will identify values in other profile content that may, in turn, influence their expression, as well as their experience, of their virtual identity - particularly in considerations of content published by people in their real social networks, like friends and family, that may be closer tied to a user's self-presentation online.

1.2.3 • Identifying Authenticity

Many participants referenced seeking out content that appeared genuine and could be understood as 'accurate' to what the profile image had inferred to be present in a user's content. Most analyses of authentic content, were analysed in reference to inaccurate content. If a user presented a profile image that was 'overexposed, unexposed', or 'over-filtered', it led Tyson to mistrust that user as a potential account to follow. Jeremy furthered this in a hypothetical consideration of whether one would want their profile image to 'represent a fake, Adobe Photoshop version of you', or 'your real self'. He used the example of 'Donald Trump and his Twitter account that featured a close-up profile picture, centred on his 'face'. He mentioned that there was conflict between his profile image, with the associated 'context' of his 'position of power' as the President of the United States, and his content. Jeremy explained that this presented an 'inconsistency', between 'what the profile image has said, and what content' was written. He referenced Trump's notoriously unexplained tweet – where he simply typed 'covfefe' (Hunt, 2017), or when he referred to NBC journalist Joe Scarborough as 'crazy', and Mika Brzezinski as 'dumb as a rock' (Teague Beckwith, 2018). Considerations of the authenticity of other user's profile content could be identified in measuring what an image said about an online identity, and what the content actually presented.

It is important to note the analogous content of what a participant in this study wanted to represent, with what they would follow as a user. Similar themes of viewed expressions of a happy, authentic and networked self were echoed in both elements of their engagement with social media. This was identified in relevant research projects, as a result of the image operating as 'embedded in networked systems' (van Dijck, 2008:71). Users

would replicate previously identified 'canned poses, flattering camera angles or facial expressions' in their own content, when they viewed it in others (Marwick, 2008:141). This connection was solidified in considerations of a profile image as networked and tailored to the audience of a specific user.

2. Virtual Actions, Real Life Consequences: Impacts on Daily Life

2.1 • Impacts on Professional Life

Social networks encompassed a broad spectrum of people from one's life: friends, family and professional connections. A user interacted with these publics in their daily lives, often choosing to articulate themselves differently in each context. This acted in contrast to the singular identity of an online user profile. Where, instead of being able to physically alter one's presentation to suit the context of a lived experience, all selected audience members would combine to interact with a single expression of self. Selena, mentioned being 'in trouble with work a stupid amount of times' after posting something on social media. She referenced a 'younger and dumber' approach to social media, where she would 'put everything on Facebook' and had the 'wrong people' on her 'friends list', who tried to use personal posts 'against' her to try and get ahead professionally. Charlie referenced their tendency to 'follow back' industry contacts that she may 'get to know', initially, 'based on their social media accounts'. Charlie's choice to represent themselves as a self-drawn icon, rather than physically, in their profile image can lead to 'mix-ups' where they have been on both ends of confusion as to who a person was, in reference to their social profile. Charlie has been commonly confused with another game artist, who was a student 'at the same time' as Charlie and did 'similar work' to them. With their use of Twitter as an 'asset' for 'networking' in their industry, Charlie found that would 'know' them 'from online', before knowing them 'in real life'. Where

an audience may not know them, they knew their art – which was consistent with her desired professional identity online. Developing a persona as an ‘author’ was a projected desire for Jeremy, who was writing a novel, indicating that ‘the author’ figure on social media would help facilitate a ‘platform where people’ could ‘communicate’ to him, as a disembodied ‘writer’, instead of himself, as a ‘human being’, who did ‘not care’ for active use of social media platforms. The roles or guises that an individual may encompass in real life, including a professional or public-facing persona, can also be enacted in the functionality of different profile images on different networks.

2.2 • Impacts on Personal Life

A social media user would couple professional, online personas with personal projects of selfhood that explored their interests, values or experiences. Ava viewed her personal space online as providing ‘more freedom’ than what she had in ‘day-to-day life’, due to the ‘protection of being behind a screen’. She developed pages or posts that were devoted to ‘personal projects’, where her audience’s expectations for ‘updates’ on the project ‘helped with motivation’ for her ‘to continue it’. She provided the example of having used Facebook as ‘successful’ means of ‘opening up conversations about mental health’, in online and offline ‘social circles’. Kate found that her use of social media encouraged her to ‘really live and breathe everything that’ she is, while mentioning the fact that it led her to ‘spend less time doing other things’ in her life when she focused on ‘this identity, this platform and getting the content up’ on her Instagram profile. A user can find a social media network a simultaneously exploratory and time-consuming means of examining personal identity, impacting lived time, with time spent online to support these representations.

2.3• Effects on Relationships

The process of building and maintaining social relationships in real life, has become increasingly integrated with online interactions between peers. Use of social media has led to positive reinforcements of social relationships, Jeremy had met new people through Facebook, as well as made 'old friends, new again'. Edward acknowledged that an 'offline identity' presented a capacity for contextually-defined self-presentation that was dependent on the 'kind of groups' he was 'engaging with'. He referred to the ability to represent the self to a managed audience, where a user who may not be 'very social' when 'offline', could become 'social and engaged' when 'online'. However, Tyson's use of social media as a business practice led him to, contrarily, 'sacrifice' relationships with 'family' and 'friends', as he tried to 'put an aesthetic out there' of who he was, as a 'brand'. He referred to a moment where 'social media was the definitive cause' of a relationship breakdown, after the man he was dating received a fabricated message that Tyson 'was cheating on him', due to their identification as a couple on a social platform. Real and virtual relationships can be combined and productively realised in the convergence of public and private online networks that comprise a user's audience, but also provided unwanted impacted where two or more "worlds" of a user intersected in an unproductive manner.

When a user integrated physical and mental conceptions of their self-image, they manifested in both positive and negative integrations of a person's closed, offline networks, with online networks that could cause a variety of intersections between the two works. These worlds could meet positively, where closed groups, such as the body-positive movement of 'Sexy Selfies' cited earlier, operated as supportive forces in a person's development of

identity online, where users would encourage 'people to put their body out there by soothing their pre-emptive worries about whether it is good enough to be publicly exhibited', within the safe space of the network (Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz, 2015:10). However, profile images are necessarily public aspects of profiles that can exist in privatised networks, merging to cause 'potential liabilities in someone's personal life or career' (van Djick, 2008:71). The way the online and offline worlds are merging, provides impacts that have, are yet to, extend beyond one's person life and career, to effect their existence, security and privacy in public networks in general.

3. Clearing Blurred Vision: An Important Lesson in Privacy

Issues of privacy were often varied and subjective to a user, which necessitated a social media researcher adopting a personalised understanding of privacy, framed by each participant, that is imperative to future research developments in the field. The participants in this study each expressed unique views on privacy, and where they chose to draw distinctions between 'private' and 'public' content. Tyson recognised the practice of 'following someone', or simply 'liking or viewing their profile picture' as 'so intimate' in 'today's society'. Whereas, Ava considered her 'profile picture' as the 'limit' of what she was 'willing to share with everybody'. Outside of that the public could not 'find out' any more information, as 'it would not be posted'. A number of measures were also employed by users to enact their personal understandings of privacy in the online space, some platform-specific. Edward set his 'profile picture' as 'just for friends' on Facebook, while Kate chose to 'stop accepting people' that she realised were finding her through Facebook and Instagram's integrated, 'people you may know function'. This compilation of views already present fragmented, user-specific representations of a number of concepts of privacy

– the only limitation, being the limitless potential for frameworks of privacy as conceived by a social media user.

This final consideration, brings us back to Markham and Buchanan’s ethical question (2012:7): can a profile image or, more specifically, the profile it represents, qualify personhood? Which I explored in this thesis through the framing query: how do we construct representations of ourselves online, using our social media profile pictures?

Conclusion

This thesis set out to understand how we constructed and embodied representations of ourselves online, using profile pictures on social media as a case study. I provided a thematic analysis of profile image content to interpret user experiences of 21-35-year-olds on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn, filling an identifiable knowledge gap in social media discourse: to under the process of transferring human characteristics, to digital embodiments of self. I analysed the public ‘face’ a range of user’s expressions of self, as lived online. Though my sample of under 15 case studies was limited, and confined to participants accessible through my own networks, future research could expand upon these foundational, qualitative understandings of profile image content, in projects with extended-time frames, and scope in other, communicative networks that extend further across the globe.

I interpreted interview content that followed users through the stages of profile image production, to find that users of social media are experiencing various aspects of their lives – professionally, personally and ideologically –

as mediated by, and as a mediator of the platforms they use. This contributed to audiences that appeared to be in conflict with their chosen form of self-visage, in reference to the whole. Practices typified by body-positive communities, or the small, reflective insights participants have offered – like sending an image of ‘self’ to connect to a friend having a bad day or remaining accountable personal projects online – expressed users who wanted to contribute to a more positive view of social media, against the often platform-dictated, and culturally mediated, values presented to users. If the future of online profiles moved beyond the self as conforming to normative ideals of success – to the self, ‘as is’ – it may allow us to weave a better, more representative visualisation of humanity that may amplify its power to connect audience members to one another, instead of isolating them by placing their concept up to be measurable against public ‘acceptance’ or ‘denial’. To move forward in the ‘Age of Icons’, may just be to really, truly, view a profile image as an individualised, representative expression of self, within the diverse publics we encounter in our daily lives – just online.

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