

In the following thesis, I focus my writing on social media as a moderated form of self expression, and particularly the profile as a form of self-representation. Taking Stuart Hall's definition of representation, as the "way in which meaning is given to the things depicted," then, as a mediated form of self representation, social media profiles are one way in which we give ourselves meaning on the internet.

Individual online user profiles typically follow the "social-circles network model." These profiles have specific design standards that have accumulated over nearly 25 years, and have been formalized by the now-defunct site SixDegrees.com from 1997. Such design standards include a username, a profile picture, an option for a bio, user network statistics, a history of the user's engagement, and a contact option. Policies and trends in how interfaces represent these mentioned features differ slightly, but have momentous implications.

Because of differences between each platform's profile interfaces and how such differences translate into modifying their user's interactions with the platform, online user identities and presences differ platform-to-platform. People who regularly use multiple social networking platforms recognise this; around 2017, several internet memes surrounding platform differences became quite popular. Some, like the tweet pictured here, play with the idea that each platform represents a different person. This example shows different characters from John Hughes' 1985 film, *The Breakfast Club*, as different sites. Using the five main characters from this film is a meaningful choice considering its context: it deals with how people are perceived based on their reputation and self-representation.

Each character, all from different reaches of the typical American high school labelling hierarchy, is in Saturday detention for various reasons. They range from popular to not, and degenerate to bookworm-ish. Upon forming an unlikely alliance, they open up and find

common ground, despite their opposing reputations. Their unforgiving principal assigns them each to write a thousand-word essay describing "who they think they are." Instead of writing the essay, four of the characters convince Brian, the bookworm-ish character, to write something. His result is this letter saying: "...we think you're crazy for making us write an essay telling you who we think we are. You see us as you want to see us, in the simplest terms in the most convenient definitions. But what we found is that each of us is a brain, and an athlete, and a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. Does that answer your question?"

To return our analysis to this particular meme, Twitter user Michelle Lee, writes: "me on twitter, facebook, tumblr instagram, and linkedin." Taken literally, she represents herself as a criminal on Twitter, an athlete on Facebook, a basket case on Tumblr, and a brain on LinkedIn. The different personas of each character are analogous to an individual user's 'presence,' which in turn differs between platforms. These different profiles represent different fragments of our online personalities.

Another popular example from earlier this year was the #dollypartonchallenge. Singer and songwriter Dolly Parton uploaded this image to her Instagram with the caption: "Get you a woman who can do it all." Other celebrities and users created their own versions of this two-by-two grid format meme. LinkedIn is a platform geared towards business profiles, Facebook is usually mundane and calls for presentable family-friendly attire, Instagram necessitates aesthetically driven photos, and Tinder is a dating app known for its "hit and quit" culture.

Bearing in mind LinkedIn or Tinder's purposes, Dolly Parton's attire and poses in her image choices make perfect sense and can be explained easily. LinkedIn requires one to maintain a professional look, Dolly's picture follows suit. On Tinder, your appearance is meant to attract people, Dolly's sexualised outfit also follows. Her Facebook and Instagram examples

fit their respective platforms roles, but it isn't as easy to explain why. Both sites require more extensive context.

Focusing on just one aspect of a profile UI standard, like the username reveals a lot of consequences. Facebook, for example, boasts a real-name policy. This feature forces users into a particular direction for their self-representation, this may suit some just fine but might be limiting for others. Most platforms that launched after Facebook, like Twitter in 2006 and Instagram in 2010, don't require people to use their real names. Based on my own experience using Instagram, users pick a username as a variation of their own name or forego their name entirely. I wonder about the reach of authentic representation in this case, does using a real name online reflect one's true identity?

Inquiry aside, Facebook's policy has a sizable list of people affected despite using their real name. Minority groups such as, Native Americans or members of the LGBTQ community have been targeted repeatedly by this policy.

I'm inclined to say that requiring a real name restricts a user's online expression. Though Facebook's posting capabilities in terms of UI is more extensive compared to the likes of Instagram, but I don't feel as compelled to post or share anything on Facebook. My online "language" preference is more visual and the network I've grown on the site doesn't reflect my interests anymore. It's more of a news aggregator or a way to check on my extended family. My friend James, on the other hand, identifies with Facebook's UI a lot more than Instagram's, the posting capabilities suit his needs and amusement a lot more.

Recently, my 16 year old brother said that "going on Facebook is like going to Costco, and Instagram is like going to Trader Joe's." At Costco you have a large variety of food in bulk along with other household items, whereas Trader Joe's boasts a selective collection of

aesthetically pleasing food in smaller amounts. This analogy isn't perfect, but the sentiment that different products fill certain needs differently remains.

Hall talks about a fault in studying representation where believing the meaning that representation gives is a distortion of the "true meaning" of an event; if we view representation as a distortion, we might be tempted to measure and close gaps between this warped account and the "true meaning." Culture is the way we make sense of and give meaning to the world. Cultural studies does not try to find out the "true" meaning. Instead it tries to find out how the meaning "enters" the event. Applying this to online presences, I agree with Hall that an attempt at finding the "true meaning" of a person's life by studying how they choose to represent themselves via social media profiles is futile, but what a person chooses to represent within the confines of a user interface can be meaningful.