Face-Time: The Construction of Identity on Facebook

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by

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ABSTRACT

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Since 2004, the networking site Facebook.com has become an integral part of college students’ lives. Drawing on Goffman’s Performance of Self in Everyday Life and symbolic interactionalism, this paper considers how Facebook is used by users’ to construct or perform their identity. This study was conducted by interviewing six college students and two recent college graduates and observing their Facebook profiles. While people construct identities in all parts of their lives, this performance is particularly evident on Facebook since the norms of use and interpretation are still being developed for this community. This manifests itself in debates over Facebook etiquette, risks and user rules. One Facebook, specific props for identity performance includes the profile, group membership, and photos. Facebook users attempt to manage the impression others receive of them by guessing what their interpretation of their performance will be. The structure of Facebook limits the ways people can construct identities and so some users have to creatively modify their performance.
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The Facebook Phenomenon

The networking-website Facebook began in February of 2004 and currently claims to have “19 million registered users across over 47,000 regional, work-related, collegiate and high school networks” (http://muohio.facebook.com/press.php). According to comScore, “Facebook is the sixth-most trafficked site in the United States” (http://muohio.facebook.com/press.php). Facebook.com was created by Mark Zuckerberg and two other Harvard students (Reuters). Originally a site geared towards college students, it is now open to anyone with a valid e-mail address. Facebook profiles consist of information about the user including their name, picture and personal interests. The site has become one of the most common forms of computer-mediated communication that college students use to contact friends and, I will argue, perform their identities.

Facebook should be seen as part of a “front stage” where people construct identities as part of their performance before an audience. In many ways, the characteristics of identity performance that Goffman and other authors have identified apply to Facebook as much as they apply to offline communication. People create teams and use meaningful symbolic props, much like they do in face-to-face performance. However, Facebook also complicates some identity construction tasks such as audience segregation, the performer attempting to perform different identities for different groups of people, and impression management, carefulness about what information is divulged to the audience depending on how the performer believes the audience will interpret it (Goffman 139). This results in debate over Facebook etiquette, rules and correct
interpretations. In identity construction, the majority of people in most situations are unaware of identity as performance, except when norms are transgressed. Since Facebook is a new medium with contested standards of use, people are particularly aware of the process of identity performance on Facebook. And while the structure of Facebook does limit the possible identities which people can perform, users respond creatively to subvert and challenge these limits by using the flexibility Facebook allows them.

**Methodology**

In this study, I pursued the study of Facebook and identity through interviews and observations of Facebook profiles to gather data about how the site was used by participants. Articles from student newspapers were also a source of information about students’ feelings about Facebook and the role it plays in their lives. My interviews were all done in the first weeks of April 2007. I talked to six current Miami University students and two recent graduates. Four of my informants were women and four were men. To find informants, I used a snowball method by which I interviewed people I knew who had Facebook profiles and then interviewed others on their suggestion. All the interviews were done in person and in a space picked by the interviewee. Most conversations were held in the apartments of the interviewee or public spaces, such as dining halls. While usually the interview consisted of only the informant and me, in the case of Teresa and Karl the conversation took place with both interviewees at once. After the interviews, I confirmed the information from my informants on their Facebook profile and drew examples of what they had referenced in their discussion with me.
Identity Performance According to Goffman

Beginning to look at identity, it has traditionally been conceptualized as a set of attributes a person processes, but this definition does not seem to describe individuals’ dynamic self-identity online. Sociologist Erving Goffman’s proposal that identity construction is a dramatic performance seems much more accurate. According to Goffman, performance is “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman 15). Performance in this respect tries to sustain a specific definition of the situation and lay claim to what reality is; rather than being a result of the reality of identity, performance creates it (Goffman 85). Identity can not just be claimed or expected to be preexisting; instead one must establish it by satisfactorily performing in a given situation (Jenkins 95). According to Goffman, “a status, a position, a social place is not a material thing to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished and well articulated” (Goffman 75). The form a performance takes is socialized, molded and modified by the understanding and expectations of the society in which it takes place (Goffman 35). However, these social expectations, incorporated and exemplified in performance, are an idealized version of society’s values (Goffman 35). Therefore, performers often choose to try to avoid or conceal those actions which are inconsistent with societal standards and accentuate those actions that follow them (Goffman 41).

If we accept that identity is something that is performed, another particularly relevant piece of Goffman’s theory is that an individual fills different roles in different settings before different audiences. This can be a difficult task on Facebook, a site where
potentially the entire public can see one’s performance. The inability to segregate audiences can become problematic as a performance might be interpreted as insincere if one individual is observed filling multiple or conflicting roles. A performer, whether online or not, therefore tries “to segregate his audiences so that the individuals who witness him in one of his roles will not be the individuals who witness him in another of his roles” (Goffman 137). A performer must be careful as the audience is always trying to evaluate the sincerity of a performance, accepting all signs but possibly misreading them (Goffman 58).

Despite this careful managing, the audience usually does not see performance as being something a person does consciously or on purpose. At least part of performance is considered the unintended product of an individual’s unconscious response to a situation (Goffman 70). The pieces of performance that are considered more controllable are “given” and mainly verbal. Given signals are easier to control than “given off” signals, which are mainly nonverbal and mostly involuntary (Goffman 38). But Goffman argues that all “performance is not a spontaneous, immediate response that constitutes sole social reality. Performance can be stood back from to imagine or play with simultaneously other kinds of performances of other realities” (Goffman 207). Therefore, Goffman’s identity is a performance that is deliberately engaged in, but is not at the forefront of a person’s consciousness most of the time.

**Symbolic Interactionalist Approach**

Drawing on the work of Goffman, symbolic interactionalism is also an approach that lends itself very well to studying online identity construction. Symbolic
interactionalism holds that humans act towards objects and events because of the meanings they possess, that meanings arise from social interaction, and that humans interpret objects and events to generate meaning (Fernback 55). According to Robinson (2007), “individuals interpret each other’s language, gestures and actions as symbols; this interaction both reflects and constitutes the self.” Individuals draw on a range of symbolic resources, “images and signs that individuals can use to construct their own identities and to define their lifestyles” (Moinian 63).

While traditional theories have considered self bounded and immutable, symbolic interactionalism conceptualizes self as reflexively constructed through interaction in the social world. Our sense of self is therefore not innate but rather gained from our perception of society’s evaluation of us (Robinson 95). Self can be embodied, but it is not bounded and is constantly renegotiated in interactions (Robinson 93). This looking-glass self is a reflection generated by a generalized other and that other’s judgment as a person imagines it (Robinson 94). Therefore in performing identity, the individual tries to take the position of the other and guess how they will interpret his or her symbols. Jenkins, in his book Social Identity, explains that “self as an ongoing and, in practice simultaneous, synthesis of internal self-definition and the external definitions of oneself offered by others” (Jenkins 20). The identity conveyed must be consistent with the expectations of the audience and with the situation that frames the interaction (Robinson 96). This is challenging as a person can control the signals he or she gives, but can not insure that the signals given are received or interpreted in the intended way (Jenkins 22).
David Buckingham (2003) explains that identity is not the “‘birthright’ of one’s social position and conditions of life,” but is more diverse and fluid (Moinian 63).

Much like I am doing in this study, Jan Fernback in “Beyond the Diluted Community Concept: a Symbolic Interactionalist Perspective on Online Social Relations” considers how this approach along with Goffman’s ideas of performance can be used to study people’s communication online. Fernback points out that symbolic communication is an instrument of reality construction by dynamic processes, emphasizing human agency (54).

**Community**

Since identity is social, community is an important part of its development. One can not perform identity without an audience. Social theorists in the late nineteenth century conceptualized community as dependent on “place-based social interaction, collective value system and shared symbol systems [which] create a normative structure typified by organic traditions, collective rituals, fellowship and consensus building” (Fernback 50). Ideally, communities have distinct geographic boundaries within which a researcher can examine events, artifacts and social relations (Jones 19). This theory presupposes face-to-face communication and the close physical proximity of community members (Howard 64).

Current symbolic interactionalist theory promotes a conception of community that allows for the inclusion of online groups, such as Facebook, as communities as well. The spatial element of community seems too restrictive, as offline communities can be bounded by other things beside geography and the traditional theory privileges orality
over other forms of language (Howard 67). Community is considered as less place-based and more a “process of social solidarity, material processes of production and consumption, law making and symbolic processes of collective experience and cultural meaning” (Fernback 50). Symbolic interactionalism makes community dependent on the existence of social networks and the sharing of information, not physical proximity (Smith and Kollack 17). Community is about knowledge, information, common beliefs and practices (Jones 19).

**Internet History and Development**

If symbolic internationalism’s definition of community not dependent on a physical space is accepted, a new sort of community began in the early 1960s, when the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) was developed by the Department of Defense to give government agencies, contractors and researchers more access to computing (Howard 16). Computers at the Department of Defense and research universities were linked through the Defense Advanced Research Programs Agency (DARPA) (Jones 3). Soon discussion boards and chat rooms developed between the researchers involved. Because of financial investment by the National Science Foundation in the 1970s, the network continued to grow (Jones 4). Through out this growth, the original reasons for ARPANET continue to affect how the internet is structured today as the standards and protocol suites that govern transmission and control of data were developed at that time. Also, the Department of Defense’s original concern about the devastation of a nuclear attack led to the system being decentralized and distributed to individual routers instead of a central one (Howard 16).
In the late 1970s and early 1980s commercial companies began to further develop the technology research begun by the government (Howard 18). With the advent of affordable personal computers beginning in the 1980s, the internet became a widespread sociological phenomenon. In 2001, Horrigan et al. completed a study showing eight-four percent of internet users have interacted on online group sites (Fernback 2007). Now the internet functions as a digital “meta-medium” that carries several distinct media including e-mail, hyperlinked webpages and virtual social environments (Roberts and Parks 267). It provides a medium which facilitates communication among acquaintances and access to other for the formation and cultivation of new relationships (McLaughlin et al. 91).

**CMC and “Cybersociety”**

The development of the internet raise the question again of what constitutes a community. The idea of a “cybersociety” depends on computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the ability to share information almost instantaneously across large distances (Jones 2). Steven Jones in the preface to *Cybersociety: Computers-Mediated Communication and Community* presents CMC as something that socially produces a community in which narrative and its interpretation both structure and fix the status, class, social role and character of producers (Jones 17). CMC is not just an electronic tool but also a “technology, medium and engine of social relations” (Jones 16).

CMC fosters community, or at least a sense of one, among users, and yet it also embodies impersonal communication by means of computers and writing (Jones 18). Traditional conceptions of community described earlier are not applicable online as communication is mediated and lacks direct human contact. CMC produces loosely
structured interpersonal networks, but not the tightly bound, place-based groups traditionally considered communities (Fernback 54).

While CMC does not require close physical proximity, space metaphors which point to a link between new CMC and older forms of communication continue to be used, including “cyberspace” and “navigation.” Beniger suggests that online interactions produce “pseudo-communities,” where impersonal associations simulate personalized communication, a sort of hybrid of interpersonal and mass communication (Jones 24). While Facebook does seem to be a medium between interpersonal and mass communication, this does not produce Beniger’s “pseudo-community,” but connections that are fully their own community.

Identity Online

As much as the internet has been an area of contention for community theorists, it has also been for identity researchers. Identity performance relies on a community sharing common symbols and having agreement about their meaning. The literature in the past has generally accepted that social networks online are “still too new for many standards to have become widely shared both in and across electronic discourse communities” (Howard 3). Tharon Howard in his book A Rhetoric of Electronic Communities points out how this new medium “exnominates and defamiliarizes conventions taken for granted in more mature media” (24). Thomas Valovic in Digital Mythologies: the Hidden Complexities of the Internet also writes that there are no ready-made analogies for human interaction online as it is a new medium with essential guidelines still being developed (Valovic 88). Those involved in online interaction on
this “electronic frontier” are considered unsure of how to make sure that their messages are clearly understandable (Valovic 88). Valovic observes that “conversation and the exchange of information in cyberspace are full of such complications, protocol complexities and ethical dilemmas, although most participants do not seem to worry too much about them” (Valovic 93). Researchers talk of creation of new spaces that involves narrative, technology and social interaction (Jones 4). A dichotomy is set up between the physical world and cyberspace. In this vision

“the physical world is a place where the identity and position of the people you communicate with are well known, fixed and highly visual. In cyberspace, everyone is in the dark. We can only exchange worlds with each other- no glances or shrugs or ironic smiles. Even the nuances of voice and intonation are stripped away. On top of the technology-imposed constraints, we who populate cyberspace deliberately experiment with fracturing traditional notions of identity” (McLaughlin et al. 93)

The mediated forms of communication on the internet are supposed to allow extraordinary freedom to construct identity, as it is hard for others to categorize an individual according to age, race, sex, etc without the visuals provided by face-to-face contact (Roberts and Parks 266). Some authors even argue that “online transactions and communication often take place in absence of meaningful context” (Valovic 94).

I think that this division of social interactions into the “real” offline and the “virtual” online is a mistake which does not fit with what I or other researchers have found in studying online communities. Other authors have also argued that the internet is not that different than other forms of communication and that “the cyberself is formed and negotiated in the same manner of the offline self” (Robinson 94). No medium is
developed in a social vacuum and so it overlaps with older forms with users participating in both (Howard 6).

Margaret L. McLaughlin, Kerry K. Osborne and Christine B. Smith in their article “Standards of Conduct on Usenet” propose that there are developing standards that, while still “amorphous and ephemeral,” point towards the existence of an innovative community online (Jones 6). McLaughlin et al. also insist that online community’s standards are not developed in a void. Instead they are shaped by external technological and pragmatic forces (McLaughlin et al. 103). In the offline world, individuals learn standards of behavior through social structures, reinforced by subtle speech and nonverbal cues (McLaughlin et al. 115). Online communication however is limited to mostly written forms, which deny the full range of reinforcing verbal and nonverbal cues used offline. Members of online communities however are creative and compensate for the restriction of nonverbal cues with alternative methods which McLaughlin et al. call “netiquette” (115). These alternative methods used to convey action, emotions and emphasis include emoticons, nonstandard punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and special keyboard characters (McLaughlin et al. 115). “Netiquette” can be a resource, rather than a constraint, which individuals use as a tool in identity performance (Jenkins 69). Cultural and collective knowledge about conventions and cues “can be drawn on and manipulated in different ways with respect to identity” (Friedman 76). Online users in particular are attentive to primarily textual cues, such as vocabulary, content and phrasing, which Goffman would call “given off” signals.
McLaughlin et al.’s interpretation results in symbols playing an important role in all communities. Symbols generate a sense of shared belonging and community itself is a symbolic construct that people draw on rhetorically and strategically (Jenkins 106). Membership in a community means sharing a similar “sense of things” or “a common symbolic domain” (Jenkins 106). The goal of performance is to reaffirm a community’s shared values and the individual’s identity as a member (Robinson 105).

In “The Cyberself: the Self-ing Project goes Online, Symbolic Interaction in the Digital Age,” Laura Robinson applies Goffman’s theories and a symbolic interactionalist approach to online communication. She asserts that despite communication online being mostly just text and no physical interaction cues, the text continues to mime “structures of expressions” in the offline world. Robinson writes that “offline cuing systems are redefined in online venues that preserve the dynamics of interactional cuing” (Robinson 107). Language plays a large role in online performance for Robinson, writing that “online performance takes place through the language used in messages and postings that are rich sources of expressions ‘given’ and ‘given off’” (Robinson 106). Language is an identification badge for both the self and outside perceivers (Smith 39). A member in a particular community must become fluent in its language and the implicitly and explicitly shared values (Robinson 106).

On Facebook and on other websites that have been studied, the tools individuals have to construct identity depend at least in part on the forms of CMC allowed by the structures of the website involved. Looking at a soap opera discussion board, Nancy Baym considers online community and identity in her article “The Emergence of
Community in Computer-Mediated Communication.” She distinguishes between computer-mediated communication that is synchronic, with users all online simultaneously and messages read and responded to immediately, and CMC that is asynchronic, with users not online simultaneously and messages read and responded to at different times, such as on the discussion boards she studied or on Facebook (Baym 143). This temporal difference affects communication patterns such as the possibility of immediate feedback, composing and rewriting and how many members can participate at one time (Baym 143). However, the medium is not the only thing that determines the patterns of communication online. External contexts also often affect the types of communication that happens in online communities. Preexisting speech communities have common ways of speaking that carry over into online communication (Baym 141). Online “participants’ communicative styles are oriented around common social practices before they enter into CMC, practices that are unlikely to be supplanted by computer mediation” (Baym 141). Robinson agrees with Baym on this point writing that “creating online selves, users do not seek to transcend the most fundamental aspects of their offline selves” but instead users “bring into being bodies, personas and personalities framed according to the same categories that exist in the offline world” (Robinson 94). Robinson exemplifies this by showing how many of the members of multi-user domains are often preoccupied with figuring out other member’s gender and try to “out” female characters owned by males (100).
Real vs. Virtual

In studying identity and communication online, some researchers have also argued that the internet is too different from “real” face-to-face communication to apply old theories, such as Goffman’s. It is true that Goffman’s original performance theory addressed face-to-face contact (Saville-Troike 172). In mediated communication, those involved are often removed from each other in time and space (Saville-Troike 172). Addressees can not adjust their frame of expectations as quickly and presenters do not receive immediate feedback on which they can revise their strategies. Some researchers also try to set up a dichotomy between “real” social interactions in the offline world and “virtual” social interactions online.

However, Goffman did study and apply his theories to communication forms other than face-to-face ones, including mass media. In his book Gender Advertisements he points out that commercials are very much like the rituals we produce every day. Goffman points out that “both in advertisements and in life we are interested in colorful poses, in externalization” (Goffman 84). Commercials are “an ideal representation under the auspices of it characterizing the way things really are” (Goffman 84). Goffman proposes that we do just as much acting in “real life” as we do in commercials. The same can be said about real life and mediated communication through Facebook. The same performance we take part in offline is represented on the site.

Goffman also addresses the idea of reality in the introduction to his work Frame Analysis. He points out that “those who are in the situation ordinarily do not create this definition [of reality], even though their society often can be said to do so” (Goffman 1).
In most situations people just “assess correctly what the situation ought to be for them and then act accordingly” (Goffman 2). People do have some power over aspects of the situation, but these are negotiated between all the participants (Goffman 2). Therefore, the important thing about reality is under what circumstances something feels real for those involved (Goffman 2).

Robinson (2007) also argues that the distinction between the “real” world and the internet not very useful, as the internet is firmly ingrained in daily cultural existence for users. The “real world” of daily life and the “virtual” online world occupy the same social realm (Robinson 53). Farzaneh Moinian in her study of children’s online diaries also described that the online activities of her informants are closely interwoven with “real life,” self-presentation (64). Instead of neutralizing the social meanings of the offline world, virtual environments’ systems of classification can not offer choices of selfhood that are nonexistent in the offline world and so reproduce the cultural norms of offline (Robinson 100). Robinson’s study points out that “rather than freeing us from our offline social identities, cyberspace provides venues in which to codify them” (100). And while often embodied identities such as gender are reintroduced without any physical markers, many online identities are performed in a more stereotypically manner and according to the strictest community ideals (Smith and Kollack 12).

Structure of Facebook

In beginning a discussion of Facebook, it is important to consider exactly how the site functions, as its structure affects how and what identities can be preformed. A Facebook profile consists of several areas of information about an individual. These
include titled sections like “Information,” “Education and Work,” and “Courses.” Within these sections are more labeled spaces to enter specific data such as “Hometown,” “Relationship Status,” and “Favorite Movies.” In some of these spaces, the user can enter a large portion of text. In others, one is confined to one line of text. Much of the entrees into the profile however have to be chosen from drop-down menus, which give a limited number of options. One example of this is the political views space. In 2005, users could choose between “very liberal,” “liberal,” “moderate,” “conservative” or “very conservative.” Soon, the options of “other” and “apathetic” were added. While “libertarian” was recently also included, one still has to choose from among these eight categories determined by the Facebook creators. A profile also consists of one main picture of the user which everyone can view, even those who can not access the rest of their profile. Users also have space for albums of pictures, which can only be seen by those the users allow to.

Another main part of Facebook is the list of groups the user belongs to on their profile. Groups are created by Facebook users around common interests, experiences or causes. They can be open to anyone to join or the creator(s) of a group can reserve the right to approve of all its members. Also visible are the number and names of “friends” one has on Facebook. Friends are accumulated both by asking other Facebook users and by being asked and then confirming that you are “friends.” When other users look at a person’s profile, the profile shows which “friends” the two people have in common.

A newer part of Facebook is an individual’s homepage. This is the page that appears when one signs on to Facebook. It contains the “News Feed” which shows the
most recent changes friends have made to their profiles. Upcoming friend’s birthdays are also listed on the homepage. The homepage shows any friend requests, messages, or pokes one has. Messages work similarly to e-mail messages in that they are two-way private communications between individuals. Pokes are supposed to be an electronic equivalent to actually poking someone.

**Facebook in College**

One way to gage the importance of Facebook to college students is how it has changed users’ language. “Friend” and “Facebook” have shifted from being nouns to being verbs as well. People will “Facebook” others, meaning that they will search for the individual’s name on the site to garner information about that person. You can also “friend” a person on Facebook by asking them to be your friend on the site. As will be discussed more deeply later, being a friend on Facebook indicates a certain level of familiarity, but not a friendship in the same way as offline. The way groups work on Facebook has also affected college students’ vocabulary. “Unjoin” is now a normally used term to refer to no longer being a member of a group. “Tagging” a person means attaching his or her name to a face in a picture in an album on the site. A person’s profile has a tally of how many pictures that individual is tagged in and anyone who can see the profile can see those pictures as well.

Narratives about Facebook with common features and similar rituals in using the site reflect the fact that Facebook has become a community with its own discourse and practices which can be used to perform meaningful identities. All of my informants began their Facebook profiles at different times during 2005. When asked to explain
their reasons for joining Facebook, almost all answered that they were bored and curious about what everyone else was doing on the site. Quite a few also mentioned how Facebook allows them to avoid “real work.” Facebook is considered a distraction from schoolwork, and a way to be social for small intervals of time while sitting at one’s desk putting off writing a paper. Karl, the first of my informants to join Facebook, said he did not know why he joined Facebook because he has always thought it was stupid, but then he further explained himself with common answer of boredom. The only informant who did not mention boredom in her answer was the senior Charlotte, the latest joiner I interviewed. She did not create a Facebook profile until December 2005 when she finally joined the site to get information about her future roommate for a trip abroad. For her, the reason was purely to get information, but this is outside the norm. When Charlotte’s future roommate looked at Charlotte’s profile, she did not have a picture or very much information about herself on it. According to Charlotte, her roommate thought this was really weird. Her reaction is the result of the community expectation, which will be discussed more in-depth below, that one is supposed to post information about oneself on Facebook, not just mine others’.

Most of my informants signed onto Facebook several times a week. Those who are currently students signed on more than those who have now graduated and are working or those who are student teaching. Their workplaces had either blocked the site or monitored internet activity. Teresa, a new college graduate now working in an office, was an acceptation to this. She said that she signed onto Facebook more often now than when she was in school. She had however just moved to a new city and used Facebook
to maintain connections with friends from high school and college. According to fulltime students, how often they signed on to Facebook depended on how bored they were. Usually, it would be three to five times a week. One of my informants, Gregory, did admit to logging on five or six times a day, but only after he asked me to clarify the confidentiality of the interview. This guilt about spending time on Facebook is linked to its position as a distraction for “real” work among college student’s discourse.

Both students and former students reported that they usually signed onto Facebook for only a couple of minutes each time they signed on; they all went through a similar specific ritual each time they signed. First they manage their own information on Facebook and then check others’ profiles. My informants also would approve or reject any friend requests or event invitations as soon as they signed on. The “News Feed” feature on the homepage lists any changes in friends’ profiles which my informants would then go see on the profile. They also often read posts on their friends’ walls. Many pointed out how this process was helpful in following what old friends are doing. Though most talked about high school friends’ lives they followed on the site, Amy mentioned that she was friends on Facebook with a girl she had known in preschool. Next they will sometimes choose to contact other users, either by posting on their walls in their profiles, which everyone can see, or by sending them a private message. Usually this contact will be in response to a change on that person’s profile.

A Facebook user always has the option of signing on and changing the information in his or her profile, but my informants said that they did this rarely. In the past few months most said that they had added a favorite movie or book, but had done
little else. Amy said that she had last changed her picture on her profile at the beginning of the school year. Among my informants, more online changes happen when major life events occur. Charlotte had recently added her plans for graduate school and her acceptance of a fellowship. Teresa, wanting to make a change, complained about how she had just gotten married but had yet to figure out how she could change her last name on the site.

**Facebook and Impression Management**

This brings about an important question. If users of Facebook are not spending their time on the site maintaining their profiles, what are they doing? And how can I claim that Facebook is a space for identity performance or construction if students do not change things on their own profiles? To answer these questions I will use students’ reactions to several changes in Facebook’s structure, which support the fact that college students are trying to manage their identity performance before an audience on Facebook through their profile and that they are very aware of this because of the tenuous possibility of being successful and the confusion over the rules governing interactions on the site.

The first of several recent changes to Facebook is the addition of the News Feed feature, which shows an individual user any changes in friends’ profiles all on one screen. When this was first introduced many Facebook users were disturbed and upset by it. This reaction seems to have been completely unexpected by the creators of Facebook as they apologized for the sudden change several days later after an up-swell of outrage. A person is able to see any changes his or her friends make to their profiles without the
News Feed; this new feature just consolidated the information into one area of the site. It did not open the information on a person’s profile to any users that it was not open to before. The public outrage at the changes included an editorial on September 8, 2006 in *The Miami Student* and an article in *The Amusement* on September 7, 2006. The editorial explains that while Facebook was in the past able to “maintain a good balance between an atmosphere of community and user privacy,” they “fear such paltriness is an excessive invasion” (Miami Student). The editorial also points out how students had reacted by forming Facebook groups such as “Students Against Facebook News Feed” with more than 590,000 members. *The Amusement* article, “Has Facebook Lost Its Mind?,” expressed similar sentiments. Facebook was eventually forced to change how the “News Feed” worked so that individuals can now choose to not have their profile changes appear on it. If these changes had not been implemented, a one day Facebook boycott and a protest outside their offices had been planned for the next week (Jesdanun).

I believe that this surprisingly strong negative reaction to the sharing of information through “News Feed,” at least among my informants, was a reaction against the users’ inability to control their own identity through impression management. An individual user is suddenly unable to make adjustments in his or her performance without the audience, his or her “friends,” being made aware of such a change. This weakens the effect of the performance by making identity seemed more contrived or less permanent. Amy, a self-described very private person, said she was glad that the site’s owners changed the News Feed so that a user can take actions off the list and noted that the feature itself is not necessary. She said she does not like people knowing everything she
does and wants control over her information. Surprisingly, she not only mentioned her own need for privacy, for control over her information, but also that the News Feed made her feel that she was stalking her own friends. The News Feed also made Charlotte feel that she was “peeping” and invading others’ privacy. This is ironic, in that Facebook’s purpose is to broadcast this information. But as Charlotte continued to explain, you should not be told about “friends’” breakups who you do not know very well.

Facebook users are creatively adjusting to this structural change on the site in order to manage the impression their profile gives off by either blocking changes or not making changes that would draw too much attention to their performance. For most, News Feed is now seen as a tool for audience members to monitor the performance of others. Despite their continued reservations about the feature, all the users I interviewed admitted that they liked how much easier it was to follow what was happening in their friends’ lives. A good example of this is Teresa who now was unsure about her privacy settings, but remembered how she was very upset at the change originally. Abby still described the feature as “creepy” and had signed a petition to get it removed, but added that she now thinks it is funny that everyone was so upset at first. Abby later in the interview explained that she would like to join the “One Million Strong for Obama” group, but she has a close friend who is a Republican who would give her a really hard time about it. And he would definitely notice because her choice would be posted on his “News Feed.”

Unlike the addition of the “News Feed”, an ongoing controversial Facebook change is the site now being open to anyone with a valid e-mail address. Many college
students on Facebook continue to be upset about this change, even as the fervor over other changes has lessened. This seems to be due to the fact that this is such a massive change that users have not yet been able to adjust to it in a way that adequately regains them some of their power over their performance. They can no longer be sure that their audience is segregated into the groups “fellow students” and “adults.” Originally, a person had to have an official school e-mail address to join or view the site which meant that only students and curious professors were able to have profiles on Facebook or to see what other people had on their profiles. Four of my informants expressed concern about the new openness of the site because it did not allow them as much control over their identity performance. Three of these four mentioned how Facebook should be not MySpace, another social networking site which has always been open to the public and has struggled with the stigma of being a place where strangers stalk unsuspecting users. Those of my informants who were concerned about it brought up the importance of control and protection. Charlotte was particularly adamant about this, explaining that Facebook started as a “playground for students” where they did not have to worry about what they showed on their profiles. Now people have to be more cautious. Charlotte also felt that it was unethical for faculty or employers to look at the site to glean information about students. For her, they were not the intended audience and the potential that they could be complicated her performance.

For many Facebook users searching for employment after graduation, the question of who is looking at their Facebook profile, who is their audience, has become a paramount concern. Several informants mentioned this in relation to themselves or
people they knew. Abby, who was student teaching when I interviewed her, explained how she changed her profile before she started, as her audience was about to change. She removed anything “you wouldn’t want an eighth-grader to see” and “any stuff I didn’t want to be defined as.” She realized that she had to perform differently on the site so that she would give off a different impression to the new audience of her own students. These censored activities for Abby also included wall posts about alcohol and any memberships in groups with profanity. Abby also chose to unjoin the group “Future Drunk Teachers of America.” Amy, who was an undergraduate assistant, also said that she did not want the underclassmen in the course finding her profile and so she did not list her classes in her profile.

However, there is some disagreement about this kind of management as a response to the change in who can join Facebook. Some students have elected to not make such changes. Roy, a junior at Miami, argued that he should not have to change his profile to get a job. He does not regularly untag his name from pictures and has several pictures on his profile with alcohol. He explained that he is twenty-one and that he plans to have friends at work that he will drink with and so for him to pretend that he does not drink by removing pictures is hypocritical. Roy said he drinks, “is not ashamed of it” and “that’s who he is and he’s not going to hide.” This difference is probably the result of several factors including that Roy is a man and that he is not a teacher who will have students searching for him on the site. My female informants all talked about the changes they had made to their profile because of the expanded audience, but those who were teaching especially felt the need to use this technique of impression management.
Purpose of Facebook

The above mentioned conflicts over changes to Facebook support the conclusion that the major purpose of Facebook is identity performance. It is not surprising that none of my informants directly addressed this purpose, as most of the time performance is something that people are not aware of. However, their responses about their friends, communication, profiles and groups all support Facebook as an identity building activity.

Making connections with other people by “friending” them is one of the major explicit purposes of Facebook and a tool users have at their disposal to construct identities. My informants averaged two hundred ninety five friends each, with the lowest number being forty four and the most five hundred fifty three. In keeping with the argument that some new practices are being developed on the site, being friends on Facebook is different than being friends offline. One’s friends offline certainly can become Facebook friends, but people whom one would not consider friends offline, people who would be called classmates, acquaintances or coworkers, are often Facebook friends. In general, the common standard among my informants was that a potential friend needs to have been met offline at least once. After that, it is appropriate to ask him or her to be a Facebook friend. If the person is someone who was a classmate or an acquaintance in an earlier time, there is a certain level of past intimacy required to become Facebook friends in the present. This point of “friendship” is different for different people, but most follow this rule most of the time. All friend requests by unknown users are rejected automatically or as soon as the user can confirm he or she does not know the person from a “real life” encounter. This standard allows users to be
sure of who the members of the audience they are performing identity for are and they can better guess what their interpretation of the signs will be.

Identity performance and one’s actions with friend requests are intimately connected, with responses to friend requests building identity. Amy described herself as private and so declines many friend requests so that a fewer number of people have access to the information in her profile. Some of her classmates from middle school had sent her friend requests but Amy felt that she did not really know them in middle school and that they were just friending everyone they could find from their class. For that reason, she declined to become friends with them. Facebook users like Amy have developed a resourceful way to manage these unwanted friend requests using Facebook’s structural constraints. She was frustrated when she had to repeatedly decline a friend request from a guy she had only met once. This would usually be sufficient contact to become Facebook friends, but Amy thought his friend request was insincere since the guy had a paragraph on his profile about trying to be friends with every girl on Facebook and she had also been uncomfortable with his attentions when they met. She explained that she did not want him to have information about her since he was “creepy.” Eventually, she just let his request sit unanswered. This leaves him in limbo, without an answer, but unable to ask to be a friend again because of Facebook’s programming.

As already explained, Facebook is used by most people to gain more information about people they already know, but two of my informants had friends that they knew only from Facebook. Gregory, a Penn State football fan, friended several of the main players on the team there. He was excited when they approved his friend request, even
though each of them already had over three thousand friends. Alexei was my second informant who had purely Facebook friends. There are, I think, several reasons for this. One is that Alexei is a freshman while the rest of my informants were seniors or graduates. The rules and expectations about Facebook could be changing or different for different age groups. Alexei was a high school member of Facebook before he came to college, unlike the other users I interviewed, which could have shaped his experiences. Another reason may be that Alexei is bisexual and sometimes uses Facebook to set up what he called “rendezvous,” while the rest of my informants did not express that identity. Facebook connects him to the larger GBLT community and to potential dates. Also, part of his “real-world” identity is being particularly outgoing and social. Having lots of friends from lots of different places and making new friends on Facebook helps construct that identity online for Alexei.

While this paper mostly casts my informants in the role of performers, they also are audience members for other users’ performances. Another of the main reasons my informants gave for being on Facebook was that they like to have information about old friends when they do not keep in touch with any other way. Teresa told about how she learned that a friend she was close to in high school was moving to North Carolina only through Facebook. Teresa was also upset that this same friend saw a picture of her wedding dress on Facebook and did not recognize it as such. However, this is not seen as being the best situation for close friends. Teresa thought finding out about her friend’s important life event on Facebook was “kind of lame.” “Stalking” a friend on Facebook, what Teresa felt she was doing, is looking often at his or her profile to find out what is
happening in his or her life without communicating directly at all. Stalking is not something good friends do, but rather something that acquaintances or friends who have drifted apart participate in.

Communication is another main explicit function of Facebook. Alexei described Facebook as “the new instant messenger,” which had been the main way that college students and high-schoolers communicated over the internet before Facebook. “Getting a hold of people” was the main task Charlotte thought she used the site for. However, communication on Facebook is seen as being not quite as good or as “real” as face-to-face communication, phone calls or even e-mailing. Teresa explained that the communication with her high school friends is “not actual conversation, but just posting.”

A living learning community that Charlotte was a part of had attempted to have discussions over the summer about what they would do when the school year started over Facebook, but she did not think it worked well. Gregory also thought that it was “awkward” that one of his male friends was asked out on a date by a girl on Facebook. The friend went out with her, but Gregory thought that asking someone out should be done face-to-face. Because of the structure of communication on Facebook, it is also possible to ignore attempts at it. Often people do not check their profiles everyday and so it is easy to pretend one has not gotten on the site to see a message or wall post if one does not want to respond. Abby admitted that she received a request of a ride from a girl and just pretended she did not get the message.
The Profile and Identity Performance

Performers can try to make certain choices about what signs they give, but they can not be sure how others are going to interpret them. Because of this, identity performance is difficult in “normal” face-to-face communication, but the structure of Facebook makes it even more difficult to execute impression management. One reason for this is that other people can influence what is on your profile through wall posts and tagged photos. Also, the structure of Facebook allows for certain identities to be constructed easily, while others are harder and require more creative uses of Facebook.

Photo albums are an area of contested control on Facebook. Anyone can “tag” another person in a photograph, tying that other person’s name to that picture. On the tagged person’s profile, there will be a link to that photograph for everyone to see. This is a problem if the photograph shows something the person does not want to be associated with or if the person thinks it is a bad picture of them. Some of my informants have a blanket policy of untagging all pictures others had posted of them so as not being associated with them. Abby explained that she usually untags herself in photos because they have plastic cups in them and she does not want people to think that she’s an alcoholic.

“Religious views” is a category that people seem to struggle to use effectively in constructing their identities within Facebook’s structure. Part of the difficulty is that originally religious views had a drop down menu which a user had to pick from. Now however there is one line of blank space to fill in. One strategy to deal with this problematic category is to fill in the blank with something mocking or funny. Abby put
her religious views as “I love Jesus.” Gregory entered the question “you care why???” Several others of my informants had problems picking an option or filling in the religious views blank because they were unsure or thought them too complicated to address in such a small space. Three therefore decided to leave the space blank. Alexei explained that his religious views are complicated and so he changes what he puts in the religious views space about once a week. Usually the space contains a sentence explanation such as “What you do is of greater consequence than what you believe” and “Really want to know the LORD.” Alexei had problems with impression management as a result of this. He said that many of his friends thought he actually changed his religious views that often and so was insincere about what he posted.

The continuing differences of opinion about the appropriateness of posting something other than a picture of oneself highlight the entire profile’s role in identity construction. People often post cartoon characters, pictures of nature or buildings and other people besides themselves. Both those who approve of using other pictures and those who think personal pictures should be used argue their position by connecting the photograph and a person’s identity. Some of my informants thought that a person should only use a picture of his or herself in the profile. Using something else makes it more difficult for others to “stalk” you on Facebook and defeats the purpose of the site as it is stated by its creators. Someone who only knows you from one meeting can not confirm that they are friending the right person without a picture. Gregory explained that it is called “FACE-book.” Abby pointed this out and than asked if maybe people really thought they looked like a cucumber, referring to a friend of hers who had posted a
picture of a vegetable as his profile picture. But Abby admitted that she once posted a picture of a group of people as her profile picture so that people would not know which person in the photograph was her. This was unacceptable according to Charlotte who expressed annoyance with people who posted group photographs where the profile’s owner was not the prominent person in the photograph. Other informants seemed to think that it was okay to post other pictures. Amy had posted a London skyline picture on her profile for awhile and thought that doing so was okay. She pointed out that if the picture was well chosen it could represent the person’s personality more than a photograph.

Karl’s profile is a particularly good example of the possibilities Facebook provides for identity performance and how its structural restrictions can be adapted to. Karl identifies himself as a communist, which is not an option provided by Facebook in the political views section. Karl chose to select “other” out of the options available. These choices however do not allow him to perform his communist identity, which is very important to him. He therefore uses the more flexible spaces of Facebook to construct himself as communist. Under his “Activities” he has “building the Fifth International,” referring to the movement to build another Workers’ International organization. Marx is listed as one of his interests, along with several other philosophers and one of Karl’s favorite books is *Kapital*. Unlike many users who leave the quote area blank, he has filled his Favorite Quotes area with three different quotes, one of which is Marx’s “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Even his “About Me” section is devoted to communism. He explains that
“The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can only be obtained by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the Ruling classes tremble at a Communistic Revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

Working Men of all Countries, Unite!”

He also performs communist identity in a photo album with only a photo of Lenin in front of a Soviet flag in it. Surprisingly, Karl does not belong to any communist groups on Facebook, but this is probably because of the complicated status of groups on the site, which will be discussed below. All of these pieces of performance reference what a communist is expected to be. Repeating the symbols in multiple ways in multiple places in his profile, Karl tries to make sure that no one misinterprets his performance.

Groups and Identity Performance

Groups are another large part of identity performance on Facebook and help construct virtual communities. Some groups are active forums for discussion and information. Others, however, are purely a tool for identity construction through the list of groups on the profile. Interestingly some groups are joined out of a feeling of obligation to be in the group or the need to have more groups listed on one’s profile. The average number of groups my informants belong to was thirty, with a range from seven to one hundred twenty three. Facebook has set a limit of two hundred group memberships for each user. Too many groups however make each of the groups less meaningful. All of my informants said that they often decline group requests. The reasons they gave were that the groups were dumb or it was obvious that whoever invited them was just inviting
everyone on their friend list. These things would make the group “worthless” in the process of identity building.

The groups on Facebook fall into several categories. One is Facebook groups that reflect organized offline groups. Unlike other kinds of groups, all of my informants were part of these groups. They include campus student groups, places of employment and living-learning communities. Those groups that are based on preexisting campus organizations are used most often for communication between members, a practical function besides marking memberships in the group itself. There are also groups that are attached to other online communities. Karl was part of several such groups. “Muohio Goons” is for people who participate in chat-rooms on the website somethingawful.com, another popular website among college students.

It is interesting to note that creating online groups and trying to produce offline groups from them does not seem to be as effective as online groups reflecting offline groups. Karl is part of a group called “All World Dictators and Wannabes.” The original intent of the group was to create a group of players for a game in which one would claim buildings on Miami’s campus by taking a picture and putting your name on it. Then players would then try to take over other buildings. There would be an elaborate system of keeping points for buildings based on their strategic importance. Karl explained though that this never really materialized, even though the Facebook group still exists.

There are also common experience groups, such as study abroad groups. Teresa joined the Facebook group for her study abroad trip because she did not belong to any groups and she felt like she needed to since she went on the trip. But she explained that
she did not like the people on the trip very much. One does not have to be personally
connected or like people who are in your common experience groups. Facebook groups
formed around interests work in a similar way to experience groups. A member does not
necessarily have any relationship or contact with other members, even on the site. These
include groups like “Harry Potter Book Purists,” “Skyline” and “I Love College, But I
Miss My Dog.”

Facebook groups are also sometimes focused on a person. Abby is part of what
she called “a fan club of a crazy weird professor.” The name of the group is a phrase that
the professor uses often and is distinct. Members will post short stories of strange things
the professor did, said or wore and others will comment on them. Abby is also part of
another professor fan group, which seems more complimentary, but does not have any
wall posts on its site. Besides being focused around professors, fan groups are also based
around authors, celebrities, sports teams and political figures.

A third category caused based groups. Many of these are created and become
popular very quickly and then are abandoned. An example of this type of group is “Stop
OXFORD, OHIO from banning outdoor drinking games.” It was created in November
2006 after the Oxford City Council began debating a proposed city ordinance that would
outlaw outdoor drinking games. There was a general outcry by the college student
population against the ban as an invasion of their rights. Facebook was one of the main
ways that students heard about and organized against the ban. The group mentioned
above was one of several anti-ban Facebook groups that were formed. On November 7,
the group, created by a Miami graduate student, had 1,759 members (Wagner). There
was a plan to sell four hundred shirts that said “Pong Ain’t Wrong- Don’t Ban Outdoor Drinking Games” for ten dollars a piece. At the writing of this paper the City Council had passed a compromise ordinance and the group’s membership had declined to 1,216 members. This is still a large number for a Facebook group, but it is considerably less than the November number.

The final type of group that exists on Facebook is a “dumb” or “silly” group. These groups are controversial. They include groups such as “Perfect Teeth Club,” “Fans of One Night Stands” and “The Group for Roger, the Squirrel with No Tail.” Some of the people I interviewed thought that they were pointless and chose not to become part of them. And even those of my informants who choose to be a part of such groups stressed how they are discriminating in which of these groups they join. Most of these groups are groups in name only. They do not have many wall posts or pictures. People rarely check the group page. They mostly seem to exist as a prop in identity performance on profiles. What groups one belongs to helps build one’s identity. However, if on belongs to too many of these groups, the potency of them is diminished and they seem to be less representative of one’s self. The exceptions to this artificialness are two extremely popular groups “Overheard at Miami” and “The Group for Roger, the Squirrel with No Tail.” The conceptions of these two groups are different. The purpose of these groups is to provide a space to post information. “Overheard at Miami” was created to post ridiculous and dumb things that one overhears. “The Group for Roger, the Squirrel with No Tail” includes many posts about sightings of the animal around campus.
My informants seemed very aware of the identity-building potential of groups on Facebook. What groups they belong to on Facebook are supposed to reflect their identity. If the groups and a person’s official “real-world” identity are not consistent, conflict can result. In my interview with Teresa and Karl, who are newly married, Teresa pointed out that Karl was part of a group she hated. He then explained that before they were dating one of his friends created “The One Night Stand Club,” which he joined. Once the two began dating and even after they became engaged and married, Karl did not unjoin the group. Teresa was upset about this and explained that there had been “some yelling” over it. The group was no longer consistent with Karl’s identity and so Teresa thought he should remove it from his performance on the site.

Abby also talked about her group membership as reflecting what kind of person she was. She had been the founder of “King Library Employees against Uniformed Tour Guides” but later decided that the group was too mean and left. Around the same time, she also left a professor fan group that made fun of the professor because she was afraid that the professor would find it. Abby also got rid of the “I Smile at People on Campus” group, because it was not true. She had considered making other groups such as “I Hate Avon Lake Choir” and “I Hate People Who Have Too Many Groups,” but Abby explained that she also thought that this might be seen as too mean. She eventually rejoined the King Library group because she created it. She also decided that if the professor found out about the group she would just think she was popular. This decision-making process was part of Abby’s impression management on Facebook.
The Rules of Facebook

Facebook is a place for identity construction and as such needs to have a common code of conduct and at least some agreement over how signs should be interpreted. “Overheard at Miami” is a group that two of my informants mentioned when asked about rules of conduct on Facebook. On “Overheard at Miami” people post things they consider silly or stupid that they have heard people say around Miami. People in the group had been chastised by other members on the site for using the wall for other things besides posting such stories. Some people try to create conversations on the wall between members or will post their opinions about something. Another person then points out the purpose of the group does not include those things. There was also a general censoring of a member when he said the speakers in the conversation they had overheard were a “really fat girl” and a “really skinny girl.” He was told not to post again by other members.

Communication on Facebook is another area where rules of use have developed. There are different expectations for messaging than there are for posting on walls. Messaging is a “functional” and “practical” tool for those who use it. It is a way to set up meetings and invite people to parties without making the information public. Charlotte talked about a friend of hers who is now working and so when they talk about drinking they message so that her employer can not read it like they could on her wall. If Charlotte would post about partying on her friend’s cleaned up profile, she would be breaking a rule which prohibits posting things about the college lifestyle on people who are working’s profile. It is also expected that anything longer than a few sentences will
be sent in a message rather than put in a post. Messages are often preferred for their public nature.

Wall posts are used for different kinds of communication than messages. Posts are meant to be seen by the public. More posts help build the identity of a popular, friendly and involved person. Abby in particular used posts to publicly joke with friends. She posts on her roommate’s boyfriend’s wall things like “We can’t keep our love a secret any longer” and “Darling, you left your pants here.” These good-natured embarrassing posts are usually removed quickly by the boyfriend. Wall posts are also a space that Facebook users present friendship by posting congratulations and happy birthday messages.

**Conclusion**

College students are very aware of the power of Facebook features and take care in the management of their identity on the site. Goffman’s performance theory and symbolic interactionalism seem to be well suited to application to the study of such sites. Facebook is the perfect stage for individuals to use props such as group membership, photographs, and friending as tools in the continuous process of performing identity. Individuals try to manage the audience’s impression of their performance by guessing what they will think. This has become more difficult since Facebook membership was opened to the public, instead of being constrained to just students. Decisions about performances now have to be made with a much larger audience in mind. Facebook’s structure both allows for the expression of identity in very specific ways but it also constrains other expressions, as seen through the example of Karl. Users also creatively
adapt to changes in Facebook, such as the “News Feed,” and will probably eventually adjust to the site being open to the public. The structural tools are already there to use in the form of privacy settings that can be changed for different kinds of individuals.

I have argued that in many ways Facebook is not different than other forms of communication. The categories and standards that inform face-to-face communication and performance are not lost when the actions are transferred to online. As several previous researchers have pointed out, new technology, such as the internet, or new ways to use it, such as Facebook, do not develop out of nothing. The vast majority of people who use Facebook see their “real life” and “virtual life” as being integrally linked. They are both places in which to perform identity, though with slightly different props and some different difficulties. In face-to-face communication, a person can receive immediate feedback from the audience and make adjustments to a performance but cannot control “given off” involuntary signals. In CMC, a person does not have that immediate feedback to make adjustments to and can possibly filter involuntary signals. Other signals often replace these however and new concerns arise about what signals are “given off.” Most of the time, people are not aware of identity performance as something they are engaging in. Because of the novelty and continued debates over the rules of conduct on the site, users do seem to be more aware of performance aspect of their identity. They think often about their uncertain audience and their possibly interpretations.

Facebook’s current popularity will probably pass with time, but its users will continue to perform their identities, whether on the site or not. Right now Facebook’s
appeal is largely based on its relative safety and privacy compared to other networking sites and the social position of college students who are away from many of their social groups for the first time. It continues to impact “real relationships” as users see what is expressed on the site as being a close-to-true reflection of a person’s identity. In this way the border between offline and online are blurred.
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