

Crafting Your Image for Your 1,000 Friends on Facebook

Students are creating idealized versions of themselves on social networking websites-- Facebook and Instagram are the most popular--and using these sites to explore their emerging identities, UCLA psychologists report. Parents often understand very little about this phenomenon, they say.

“People can use these sites to explore who they are by posting particular images, pictures or text,” said UCLA psychology graduate student Adriana Manago, a researcher with the Children’s Digital Media Center, Los Angeles (CDMCLA), and lead author of a study that appears in a special November-December issue of the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* devoted to the developmental implications of online social networking. “You can manifest your ideal self. You can manifest who you want to be and then try to grow into that.”

“We’re always engaging in self-presentation; we’re always trying to put our best foot forward,” Manago added. “Social networking sites take this to a whole new level. You can change what you look like, you can Photoshop your face, you can select only the pictures that show you in a perfect lighting. These websites intensify the ability to present yourself in a positive light and explore different aspects of your personality and how you present yourself. You can try on different things, possible identities, and explore in a way that is common for emerging adulthood. It becomes psychologically real. People put up something that they would like to become--not completely different from who they are but maybe a little different--and the more it gets reflected off of others, the more it may be integrated into their sense of self as they share words and photos with so many people.”

“People are living life online,” said Manago’s co-author Patricia Greenfield, a UCLA distinguished professor of psychology, director of the CDMCLA and co-editor of the journal’s special issue. “Social networking sites are a tool for self-development.”

The websites allow users to open free accounts and to communicate with other users, who number in the tens of millions on Facebook and Instagram. Participants can select “friends” and share photos, videos and information about themselves--such as whether they are currently in a relationship--with these friends. Many college students have 1,000 or more friends on Facebook or Instagram. Identity, romantic relations and sexuality all get played out on these social networking sites, the researchers said.

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Greenfield continued, “In the arena of identity formation, this makes people more individualistic and more narcissistic; people sculpt themselves with their profiles. In the arena of peer relations, I worry that the meaning of ‘friends’ has been so altered that real friends are not going to be recognized as such. How many of your 1,000 ‘friends’ do you see in person? How many are just distant acquaintances? How many have you never met?”

(Adapted from *Crafting Your Image for Your 1,000 Friends on Facebook*,
by Stuart Wolpert)