

Identities Part I: Theorizing Identity

Modes of Learning

For this module, the following modes of learning will be used:

- Interactive Module
- Online Readings
- Self-Quizzes
- Media

Welcome!

The modules you have completed to date have introduced you to social media's defining features, and its place in a larger historical context.

This module is the first in a two part series that will investigate social media using the lens of identity. In Part 1, we will investigate three theoretical frameworks that have been used to explain how identities are constructed. We will also critically examine the idea of "authenticity" and examine how we can use a curated set of digital objects (e.g. pictures or status updates) to represent elements of our offline selves to our social media audiences.

In this case, "curating" digital objects means combing through a variety of options and selecting only the ones that present us in the best possible way. In Part 2 we will explore Identity from the opposite perspective to understand why some social media users may be deceptive about their identity.

As you begin this module, please refer to the timeline and make note of any assessments or important dates. If you have any questions, ask your instructor.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this module, you will be able to:

1. Compare and contrast three theories of identity.
2. Explain why some theorists thought the Internet would be a site of "identity play" and list some of the reasons why this did not come to pass.

Key Terms and Concepts

Listed below are some important key terms and concepts within this module.

- Identity
- Front stage and back stage self
- Gender preformatively
- Intersectionality
- Identity Play

Theorizing Identity

Identity is not something you are born with. Instead, your identity is a constant work in progress and it is something that is expressed every time you interact with another person. We will explore identity through three theoretical lenses to help illustrate the ways identity is fluid and situationally dependent.

This will lay the groundwork for two discussions. First, we will explore how identity is constructed online. Then in Part 2 of this module, we will explore deception that can (and does) happen in online communication.

Identity as a Set of Masks

The first theory of identity we will investigate in detail is sociologist's Erving Goffman's theory of dramaturgy.

Goffman put forward the idea that many of the elements we use to talk about a theatrical performance (otherwise known as dramaturgy) can also be applied to interpersonal interactions. Just like the theatre has a back stage (where the actors put on their costumes and get ready to perform) and a front stage (where they play the role of their characters and put on a performance), we also have a "front stage" and "back stage" self. How we dress (e.g. sweatpants versus dress pants) and how we talk (e.g. addressing someone by their nickname versus their formal title and full name) is highly dependent on who we know will be watching us or if we know we will be alone.

Furthermore, we are aware (subconsciously or consciously) that how we present ourselves to others will help them determine how they should treat us, and therefore we take steps to guide or influence how other people will see us.

Goffman explains the importance of being able to read another person to better understand the social interaction about to take place:

"When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude toward them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc. Although some of this information seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him." (Goffman 1).

In this quote, Goffman explains how much information we can distill about another person from a few passing glances. As an example, spend some time looking at the two people in the photograph alongside the text:

- What sort of clothes are they wearing?
- What sort of body language are they demonstrating? Do they seem open to a conversation or are they closed off?
- Are they positioned in a way that might indicate they are open to a conversation with a stranger?

How you dress and carry yourself can convey a wealth of information about you, whether intentional or not. In the coming weeks, pay attention to the choices you make such as where you sit in the classroom when you have (or haven't) completed the week's assigned reading, or how your mood (and desired level of sociability) influences your choice whether or not to wear headphones or bring a book on public transit. As an experiment, try wearing casual and then formal clothes in the same social situations to see if others treat you differently, such as more/less attentive service at a restaurant.

As a summary and review of Goffman's theories, take a moment to watch this short video produced by the BBC and Open University before moving on to the next theory of identity.

Watch: [Erving Goffman and the Performed Self](#)

Identity as a Performance

Goffman is not the only theorist to explore identity as a performance. Judith Butler, a philosopher, is well known for her landmark book *Gender Trouble*, published in 1990. Butler takes Goffman's arguments about identity a step further by arguing that not only is identity performed by an individual as a way to signal to others how we want to be viewed or understood, but is also influenced by external, social expectations. Specifically, Butler is interested in gender performativity, that is, how gender is socially constructed.

She argues that what makes someone "feminine" or "masculine" is not tied to anything in particular in their biology or physiology. Unlike sex, which refers to the biological characteristics assigned in the womb, gender is much more malleable and dependent on the time and place they were born. In this short video, Butler provides an overview of what she means by **gender performativity**.

Watch: [Your Behavior Creates Your Gender](#)

To help explain what Butler means when she says gender is socially constructed, here is a photo of a two and a half year old child. Take a moment to study the photo and ask yourself, based on what you see in this picture with no other context,



This photograph, taken in 1884, shows a child with shoulder length hair, wearing a white skirt and patent leather shoes, and holding a hat adorned with a marabou feather. While today these would be articles of clothing given to a young girl, the child in this photograph is the United States of America's 32nd President, Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the 1880s this was considered a gender-neutral outfit. In this period of time it was expected that boys would wear dresses until their first haircut, typically which would happen around age 6 or 7.

It was also common for all children to be dressed in clothes made of white cotton as for practical reasons it was easy to share clothes between siblings, and when dirty the clothes could easily be bleached clean.

After World War I, children's pastel coloured clothing increased in popularity. This was in part due to the invention of methods to mass-produce clothing, but also by differentiating clothes by gender meant that parents would be encouraged to buy a different set of clothes for male and female children (rather than dressing everyone in white hand-me-downs).

However, in the early days the genders we currently associate with the colours were reversed: pink was for boys and blue was for girls. At the time, pink was seen as a stronger colour, while blue was associated with being delicate and dainty.

The photograph of Roosevelt, and the shifting associations with the colours pink and blue serve to illustrate just how malleable the markers we associate with gender can be.

As another example of how the gender associated with particular clothes can shift over time, in 16th century Persia, men wore high-heeled shoes as part of their functional horse riding attire. Then, in 17th century Europe, men began to wear high-heeled shoes to demonstrate that they were wealthy enough to wear shoes that would be otherwise impractical for manual labour or for walking around the muddy streets of cities. And yet, a few centuries later high-heeled shoes are now viewed as fashion almost exclusively worn by women.

Butler argues there are intense social pressures to dress and act in ways that conform to the expectations of masculinity or femininity, but the way we perform masculinity or femininity is arbitrary and socially dependent. Goffman wrote of how clothes can be used to signal particular elements about yourself to other people, and with Butler's theory of performativity, we can extend this to gender.

Intersectionality

The third and final theory of identity we will explore is intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal scholar, developed the theory of intersectionality to provide a way to talk about how gender and race cannot be separated. Rather than assuming that all women have a shared, universal experience, Crenshaw saw the need for a vocabulary or a way to talk about how black women can face a different set of challenges than white women or black men.

Since then, Crenshaw's concept of intersectional has been expanded by other scholars and now includes other identity markers including (but not limited to) age, dis/ability, sexuality, religion, class, etc. Intersectionality draws on a long history of activism, but it is generally accepted this specific term was coined by Crenshaw in 1989.

Intersectionality can be defined as follows:

"Intersectionality promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations (e.g., 'race'/ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion). These interactions occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power (e.g., laws, policies, state governments and other political and economic unions, religious institutions, media). Through such processes, interdependent forms of

privilege and oppression shaped by colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia, ableism and patriarchy are created.” (Hankivsky, 2)

In a recent interview, Crenshaw summaries why this theory and vocabulary is necessary:

“...we experience life, sometimes discrimination, sometimes benefits, based on a number of different identities that we have. The basic term came out of a case I had where black women were being discriminated against not just as black people, not just as women, but as black women. So intersectionality was a metaphor to say they have race discrimination coming from one direction, they’ve got gender discrimination coming from another direction and they are colliding in their lives in ways we don’t really anticipate and understand.

Intersectionality is meant to help people think about the fact that discrimination can happen on the basis of several different factors at the same time. We need to have a language to have the ability to see it and the ability to address it.” (Lafayette College, 2015)

In this quote, Crenshaw explains that we can’t divorce our identity performances from our bodies. Rather than identity being internal, it is our audience’s expectations, beliefs, and stereotypes they hold about your race and gender influences their interpretation of your behaviour. Therefore, not only is identity something that is performed (as argued by Goffman and Butler), but identity is also something that is imposed on you by external forces. The concept of “intersectionality” provides a lens to talk about our experiences through the sum total of our individual identity performances, but also the thoughts, expectations, and assumptions that are put on you by anyone who crosses your path.

This means that each individual person has multiple, overlapping identities. Having multiple identities is not dishonest, but it can lead to confusion on the part of your audience. This is something we will return to in Part 2 of this module.

Constructing an Online Identity

Thus far, we have discussed markers of identity that influence face-to-face interactions. We began with dramaturgy, where Goffman likened identity to a performance in a play: we act out certain roles to indicate to other people how they should interact with us.

We then moved on to two theories that can be used to explain how external social forces help shape our identities. Butler’s arguments around gender being something that is performed rather than an essential part of our biology, and Crenshaw’s use of intersectionality to identify how multiple identity markers come together to influence how others will treat us in ways that are both positive and negative.

Unlike face-to-face communication, where your physical appearance will inadvertently influence how your audience perceives you, communication in an online venue can mean that your audience will read your words long before they see a picture or video of what you look like.

IRC (Internet relay chat) was a popular method of communicating with fellow Internet users, but this was an entirely text-based interaction. Therefore “... the bodies of IRC participants are not only invisible but untraceable and anonymous: It is almost impossible to track on-line presences to off-line bodies or geographical locations.

Not even an email address is available unless offered. The issue is not simply that one cannot find a 'real body' in which to anchor an identity; the issue is also that one cannot hold an identity accountable for its actions because one cannot trace it to a unique and locatable address (Slater, 2011, 333)".

To put it in simple terms: when you talked to a stranger on the Internet using only text you would have to "take their word for it" that they were actually who they wrote that they were.

This emphasis on text over appearance meant that the early days of the Internet were full of optimism that computer-mediated communication would allow us to construct new identities. The ability to create a new persona was as simple as creating a new user name.

Additionally, by not knowing anything about the person behind the screen, you would have to judge someone else based on the quality of their ideas not their gender or race, and therefore "some scholars theorized that this 'disembodied' communication could free society from discrimination based on race, sex, gender, sexuality, or class". (Marwick, 2013, 357)

In addition to text-based chat rooms, another form of text-based interaction popular at this time was online games known as Multi User Dungeons or "MUDs". MUDs were explicitly role-playing spaces which were thought to allow for unparalleled opportunity to play and experiment with identity. One MUD user interviewed by Sherry Turkle described it as follows:

"You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative... You don't have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It's easier to change the way people perceive you, because all they've got is what you show them. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see is your words" (Turkle, 1995, 184)

However, the ability to try on new virtual masks did not necessarily mean that audiences knew that the person on the other side of the computer was experimenting with new identities. In Part 2 of this module we will return to the tensions that arise when one party expects authenticity, only to find the other party was experimenting with a fictional identity.

Social Media and the Decline of Identity Play

Despite what Turkle and others argued, the Internet ultimately did not become a playground where users could experiment with identities that were not related to their offline or "real" lives.

The Internet as an identity playground failed to come to pass for a number of reasons including:

1. Even when given the opportunity to do so, most Internet users didn't actually create radically new identities online.
2. Racism or sexism isn't just tied to visual appearance. These are deep seeded, internal biases that do not disappear even in primarily text-based communication.
3. The rise of commercial social media sites encourages us to stick to a single online identity.
4. As Internet connections become less expensive and more easily available, more and more people we know offline can be found online. As it gets easier to connect with people we know in "real life", it becomes harder to "play" with new identities online.

Social Networking Sites and Identity Construction

What is Social Media module outlined the differences between social media (any medium that allows users to share information with other users) and social networking sites (websites that facilitate communication between users of the site, e.g. Facebook or Twitter). Recall that in order to be classified as a social networking site, it must allow for a user to create a public or semi-public profile on the website.

This profile on a social networking site plays a very important role in constructing your online identity, in part because it builds on a long history of humans using static objects to stand in as a representation for yourself or another person. This can range from a portrait or statue of a person's physical likeness, to a collection of objects they once owned and used.

For example, Toronto is home to the [Fort York National Historic Site](#), Canada's largest collection of buildings and artifacts from the War of 1812. As part of their exhibits, a collection of clothes and personal items that belonged to Officers are on display in the former Barracks. These items have been collected so visitors to Fort York can have a better idea of what it was like to be a soldier at that time. Stepping outside of the Barracks, visitors find themselves in the Kitchen Garden, which is a re-creation of the gardening practices used in this time period. This collection of heirloom vegetables and herbs are a very different collection than the personal items inside the Barracks, but taken together create a detailed picture of what life was like for a soldier when Fort York was a functional military site.

Collections do not necessarily need to be in a museum or gallery. Take a moment to think about your home and the decorative objects that are on display:

- What are these objects?
- How are they arranged?
- What information do they tell other people about you?

These objects can be anything ranging from a series of photographs framed and hung on the wall, to a lifetime's collection of trinkets collected during your travels. Now, imagine what a visitor to your home can piece together about you by looking at the objects. For example, a large collection of pictures of your extended family can be interpreted that family is something that is important to you. Having these pictures on the wall might also indicate that your family is far away, and you surround yourself with pictures because it is not easy to see them face-to-face on a regular basis. Or perhaps a viewer might think of these photographs as a memorial, and these are photographs of people that you care about but are no longer alive.

It is helpful to think of your social networking profiles as a similar collection of items, however this time instead of a collection of trinkets you have gathered over time, your Facebook page is a collection of digital words (status updates, text posts, comments on posts, etc.) and images. Your Facebook profile is a collection of information about you that can be accessed by others asynchronously, that is, accessed at their leisure whether or not you are currently logged into your own profile at the time.

While you have curated the objects by deciding what photographs were uploaded, how they were cropped, or perhaps writing captions to better explain what is going on in the photograph, your viewers can choose to look at and interpret this information in ways that you may not have originally intended. Similarly, you may have intended some messages to be sarcastic or in a joking manner. Similarly, you

may have intended some messages to be sarcastic or a joke, but they may not be interpreted that way by your reader.

An extreme example of intention verses interpretation was part of our reading for this Module. In the article “‘Overnight, everything I loved was gone’: the Internet shaming of Lindsey Stone”, Lindsey Stone describes how she and her friend had an ongoing joke where they would take inappropriate pictures, often at odds with signs giving directions (e.g. smoking in front of a no smoking sign). This includes the picture where she pretends to be screaming and raising her middle finger beside a sign requesting silence and respect at the Arlington National Cemetery.

After the photo at the Cemetery was posted to Facebook, one of her friends replied with a comment indicating they felt the picture was offensive, but gave them the benefit of the doubt because he knew them both outside of Facebook. This lack of context or knowledge that Stone is not necessarily like this in her day-to-day life was missing when the image went viral. Instead of saying it was in bad taste and leaving it that, strangers who saw the image assumed the worst and campaigned to have her fired from her job.

The Stone case study also illustrates how digital identity can be changed over time. Her work with Reputation.com was able to push the Arlington National Cemetery photo from the first page of search results. This shows that even our worst online mistakes are not necessarily permanent. In an effort to repair her damaged reputation, Stone worked with professionals who helped re-craft her online presence by posting new content that showed she is more than an ill-thought image. While you can never completely remove anything from the internet after it is posted, you can attempt to push it further down the search result rankings to make it less visible.

Read: [“Overnight, everything I loved was gone”: the internet shaming of Lindsey Stone](#)

Your online presence acts as your best (and worst) personal reference. Take for example, the microblogging site Twitter.com. Everything you post has a date attached to it. While you can “schedule” tweets to be automatically posted on your behalf in the future (a helpful feature if you know you will be away from an Internet connection at a time a tweet needs to go live), but you can never backdate tweets. A long history of respectful or interesting tweets can show a potential employer that you have been interested in a particular subject for a long time.

For example, you can demonstrate your interest in the major debates and issues in your chosen field by tweeting about it and making thoughtful observations. A potential employer who checks your social media history will see that these are ideas you have been engaging with for quite some time, rather than issues you brushed up on the night before your interview.

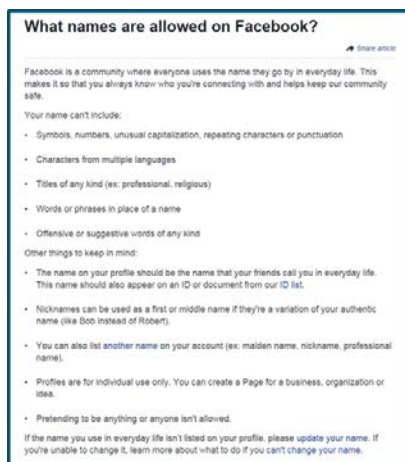
Because Stone was tagged in a photo that clearly showed her face with her real name attached to it, it was very easy for other Facebook users to track her down and then contact her employer to demand that she be fired. In part, Stone misjudged her audience: because she and her friend did not have secure privacy settings on their Facebook profiles, they were talking to a much wider audience than they originally assumed.

Rather than being a few close friends who knew her offline and could say it her actions were tasteless but leave it at that, Stone’s image reached millions of strangers who did not know her offline and were not willing to extend her the benefit of the doubt. We will return to audiences in the *Who are you*

Tweeting to? *Imagined Audiences* module where we will discuss in detail the problems that can arise when there are misalignments with who you think your audience is, versus who is actually reading your social networking posts.

The Importance of Names

The collections of digital artifacts you curate on your social networking profile are a key part of how you construct your digital identity. However, your name is also a key component of constructing your online identity on a social networking site. Increasingly, the way that you can name yourself is being determined by a social networking site's policies, rather than your personal choice as to how you wish to be identified online.



This screenshot shows the Facebook name policy as of September 2016. Of particular note is the following:

“Facebook is a community where people use their authentic identities. We require everyone to provide the first and last names they use in everyday life so that you always know who you're connecting with. This helps keep our community safe.”

In previous iterations of their naming policy, Facebook required that all users registered using their legal name (i.e. the name appearing on government-issued ID). According to this policy, even if you were well known by a stage name or alias, you must still register under your legal name. This meant that even famous celebrities would be breaking the terms of service had they signed up for Facebook under the name “Nicolas Cage” instead of Nicolas Coppola, or “Jamie Foxx” instead of Eric Marlon Bishop.



This policy also meant that people who had reasons to hide their real identity (e.g. using an alias to hide from their abuser) would be forced to use their legal name or no longer be able to use the social

networking site. Only after a lawsuit did Facebook change the requirement to the name you use in everyday life, rather than the legal name that appears on your ID.

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This name policy works if your name follows particular naming conventions. If your name involves a mix of nouns and adjectives - something common in traditional First Nation naming practices - your name is more likely to be flagged and have its legitimacy questioned.

Once flagged, a user must provide documentation to prove to Facebook that your name is authentic such as a copy of one of the following:

- Drivers License
- Passport
- Birth Certificate
- Tribal Identification or status card
- Green card, residence permit, or immigration papers

Facebook makes the assumption that your name is the most authentic marker of your identity and requires all users to register their profiles using the same name that they use in their day-to-day lives. Even if they wanted to, a Facebook user could not experiment with different identities without breaking the site’s terms of service:

“Pretending to be anything or anyone isn’t allowed”. While Facebook states that this is to ensure the safety of all users on the site, it is important to view this message with a critical eye because as we discussed in What is Social Media, this policy also ensures that their data profiles for advertising purposes are as accurate as possible.

Looking Forward

In this Module you have been introduced to the idea that your identity is a work in progress, something that is built over time and subject to change.

In Part 2 of this module, we will return to this idea of role-play and experimentation in order to better understand why some users might be deceptive while communicating on the Internet.

While early usage of the Internet to communicate with others allowed for the possibility of role-play and experimentation, the rise of social networking sites has led to the expectation that most people that you interact with online are being their “true” or “authentic” self. This is at odds with the theories of identity we have explored in this module, which all highlight that your identity is situationally dependent.

Where you are and who is watching you both play a role in the mask that you put on in that moment, even when communicating online. In Module 4 we will investigate audiences in order to better understand how our audiences play a crucial role when constructing our online identities.

Module Summary

In this module we have explored:

1. Three theories of identity (dramaturgy, performance, and Intersectionality).
2. How early text-based communications were promised to be a means for Internet users to experiment with new identities, yet with the rise of commercial social networking sites this did not actually come to pass.

Knowledge Check

The following questions provide an opportunity for you to see what you remember and understand so far. Answer the questions to the best of your ability.

Question 1: Which of the following was not a theory of identity discussed in this Module?

- A. Intersectionality
- B. Performativity
- C. Post-Modernism
- D. Dramaturgy

Question 2: According to Erving Goffman, your “front stage self” consists of a variety of metaphorical masks you put on depending on where you are and who is watching you.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 3: According to Judith Butler, gender performance is directly tied to your biology.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 4: Which of the following is the best statement to describe the theory of intersectionality you were introduced in this Module?

- A. Everyone has multiple, overlapping identities.
- B. Intersectionality is a theory that only accounts for a person’s race and gender.
- C. Your identity is fixed at birth and never changes throughout your lifetime.
- D. All of the above.

Question 5: When given the opportunity to do so, most Internet users will create a new online identity unrelated to their actual offline lives.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 6: Commercial social networking sites encourage all users to register under their legal or “real name” to help tailor advertisements and track Internet usage.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 7: According to the Facebook terms of service you are required to register for the site using the same name that you are known by offline.

- A. True
- B. False

Answers:

Question 1:

- C. Post-Modernism

Question 2:

- A. True

Question 3:

- B. False

Question 4:

- A. Everyone has multiple, overlapping identities.

Question 5:

- B. False

Question 6:

- A. True

Question 7:

- A. True

You have completed Identities Part I: Theorizing Identity.

Remember to:

- ✓ Check the timeline before you proceed to the next module to ensure you have completed any assignments as required.
- ✓ Check with your instructor if you have any questions.

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