



# A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words: Segmenting Consumers by Facebook Profile Images

Iris Vilnai-Yavetz\* & Sigal Tifferet

*Department of Business Administration, School of Economics and Business Administration, Ruppin Academic Center, Emek Hefer, 4025000, Israel*

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## Abstract

Conventional segmentation efforts usually focus on verbal or behavioral data while ignoring visual cues, which play a significant role in impression management. Drawing on theoretical work regarding motivations for impression management (need to belong and need for self-promotion), we propose that Facebook users differ from each other in the composition of visual elements they portray in their Facebook profile photos (PPs), and thus can be segmented based on this composition. In this exploratory study we present a methodological proof of concept for the visual segmentation of Facebook users. Using a randomly selected international sample of 500 Facebook accounts, we analyze data implicit in PPs and identify visual cues relevant to virtual impression management. Using these cues we segment users into types, and relate the types to demographics, Facebook usage, and brand engagement as reflected in the Facebook profile. At the theoretical level, the findings suggest that the current accepted motivations for Facebook impression management (need to belong and need for self-promotion) should be expanded to include a third motivation, need for self-expression. At the practical level, the findings demonstrate the utility of visual segmentation, which can later be implemented using computerized systems.

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## Introduction

Facebook is one of the two most popular Web sites in the world, second only to Google (Alexa Internet, Inc. 2013), with a reported 1.2 billion active users monthly and 725 million daily (Facebook 2013). Facebook is also the number one mobile app used in the United States, after passing the popular Google Maps in October 2012 (comScore 2013). As a result, Facebook is rapidly emerging as a platform for advertising and marketing: indeed, the Facebook business model is based on advertising income (Mourdoukoutas 2013). But while advertising indiscriminately to 725 million people is bound to produce a certain number of matches (i.e., the right ad being seen by the right person at the right time), it is not highly efficient. Marketers therefore have a strong interest in finding

ways to segment Facebook users so as to target ads for goods and services more effectively.

One of the key reasons people use Facebook is for purposes of impression management (Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012). Facebook users often employ verbal and nonverbal presentation of preferred brands for this purpose (Chen, Fay, and Wang 2011; Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Labrecque, Markos, and Milne 2011; Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012), offering marketers a convenient way to match users with products and services they are likely to find appealing. Another rich source of information is the personal data that Facebook users post in their profiles, including both demographic data and information on the person's interests and activities. But Facebook profiles also contain implicit data, such as photographs, which are mostly overlooked. Facebook users upload 350 million new images every day (Henschen 2013), providing data that marketing researchers can use to understand impression management — and to design ways of targeting online ads more effectively.

\* Corresponding author.

*E-mail addresses:* [yavetzir@ruppin.ac.il](mailto:yavetzir@ruppin.ac.il) (I. Vilnai-Yavetz), [tifferet@ruppin.ac.il](mailto:tifferet@ruppin.ac.il) (S. Tifferet).

In this study we have three aims. First, we suggest a method for segmenting social networking site (SNS) users based on visual cues instead of self-reports, and we illustrate the method on a random international sample of Facebook users. Second, we identify relevant visual cues present in virtual impression management. Third, we use these cues in order to identify different user types, and to relate them to theoretical motivations for using SNSs. We do this by analyzing visual data depicted in Facebook profile pictures (PPs) and identifying the impression management tactics they reflect. We first isolate segments of Facebook users based on the way they use PPs to create first impressions. We then examine whether the identified segments differ by their Facebook usage patterns, by their demographics, and by their brand engagement and preferred product categories as reflected in their Facebook pages.

## Theoretical Background

### *Photos as Online Impression Management Tools*

The brain processes visual data 60,000 times faster than it does text (Parkinson 2012). It is unsurprising, then, that advances in computing power and broadband capacity have been accompanied by a tremendous increase in the visual content uploaded to social networks (Lee 2014). Today, two-thirds of the content on social media consists of images (Citrix report 2014). Nearly half of all Internet users have reposted a photo or video they have found online, and more than half have posted a photo or video that they have personally created (Duggan 2013). Tweets with images receive 150% more retweets than those with text only (Cooper 2013). Indeed, surveys suggest that including images is the most effective means of optimizing social media content (i.e., increasing the number of shares, “likes”, and followers that result; Aragon 2014).

We suggest that profile pictures serve two interrelated purposes in SNS. First, according to social presence theory (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976), communication media differ in the level of social presence they enable, where social presence is defined as the degree to which the interaction partners have a sense of personal human contact. Social presence is highest in face-to-face communication, and lowest in wholly text-based communications, including the forms of electronic communication normally employed by firms engaging in e-commerce (Gefen and Straub 2004). One way to increase social presence in electronic communications is to add images such as photographs. Xu (2014), in a study of trust and credibility in the context of online consumer reviews, found that participants showed greater affective trust in reviewers who included a profile photo, and under some conditions photos were associated with greater perceived credibility of online reviews. Xu (2014) explained these findings on the grounds that feelings of uncertainty in interpersonal relationships make people uneasy (Berger and Calabrese 1975), and that profile photos reduce the feeling of unpleasantness which that uncertainty generates. Accordingly, we suggest that Facebook users similarly seek to increase their social presence and thereby reduce the uncertainty inherent in online interpersonal relationships by representing themselves via a PP.

The second purpose served by PPs in social media, which follows directly from the first, is impression management. In impression management, people seek to construct an image of themselves based on their ideas about how others will interpret that image (Leary and Kowalski 1990). First impressions are formed quickly, in a matter of moments, and as a result must be based on limited information, such as external appearance (Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd 2010). The centrality of first impressions in evaluations leads people to employ various impression management tactics, including verbal and nonverbal cues (Moore, Hickson, and Stacks 2010). Verbal tactics include, for instance, information filtering or “pleasing the audience” (Baumeister 1989); nonverbal tactics include facial expressions, body language, and physical appearance (Fletcher 1989).

On the Internet, both social presence theory and impression management underlie the use of images and other visual cues, such as symbols, by individuals or entities that want to convey a particular message. For example, Vilnai-Yavetz and Tifferet (2013) found that top-ranked universities include more images in their Web sites than lower-rated academic institutions; and Vilnai-Yavetz and Tifferet (2009) found that prospective students relate the presence of images on a university site to better service. Koernig (2003) suggested that online images can be analyzed systematically for the same communication tactics that have been demonstrated in printed ads (Berry and Clark 1986). For instance, the qualities associated with an object can be physically represented using cues such as colors, logos, or symbols, while pictures, videos, etc. can encourage visitors to the site to visualize the object.

### *Facebook Images as Impression Management Tools*

Facebook users can express themselves through explicit declarations regarding their interests or favorite books, films, or music (Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert 2009). Yet viewers of Facebook profiles rely less on these explicit statements, and more on implicit cues such as those found in posted images (Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008). For example, when participants in one study evaluated the personality of Facebook users whom they did not already know, they based their impressions primarily on the users’ PPs (Ivcevic and Ambady 2012). The appeal of these images can even raise the response rate to friendship requests (Tifferet, Gaziel, and Baram 2012; Wang et al. 2010).

Lately, in addition to the PP, Facebook has enabled users to add a cover photo as part of its new Timeline format (Smith 2012). In the user’s profile, the cover photo is a large, banner-style image that dominates the page, while the PP is smaller and less prominent. However, the PP is still the image that appears in Facebook friend requests and news feeds, and it therefore continues to be the basis of others’ first impressions. Thus we focus in the current analysis on the PP.

With Xu’s (2014) findings in mind, we suggest that social network users use PPs to increase their social presence and reduce uncertainty in interaction partners by presenting a particular image of themselves, an image chosen to convey a particular impression about the user’s identity. Specifically, users select profile photos whose visual elements reflect (for

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