

# Exploring Facebook Identity Construction of Vietnamese Netizens

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## Abstract

Studying the ways in which people construct their identities in online environments is a pressing contemporary concern. The research reported in this article was designed to examine the uses of, and influences on, Vietnamese respondents' identity formation on Facebook. Data were collected by means of a social survey and the application of the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique, a procedure that searches for customers' thoughts and emotions by digging deep into the visual and non-visual illustrations that customers collect or make on their own. The findings show how Vietnamese Facebook users present themselves and how they thereby facilitate their self-expansion and maintain their sense of self-esteem. According to the analysis, it can be suggested that Facebook is where adults portray their socially conformed versions against social reflection. They use this platform to seek validation, demonstrate their professional side to make them look better in the eyes of society. Drivers of online identity formation are revealed through negotiating with conflicts in their existing identities. The level of self-modification amongst respondents is adjusted in relation to their social vigilance, conformity and motivations in and between social categorization.

## Keywords

Identity construction; Vietnamese netizens; Self-esteem; Social discrepancy; Young people.

# 1 Introduction

Identity is what Gripsrud (2002, p. 9) called “a complicated set of similarities and differences in relation to other people”. Jenkins (2008, p. 5) argues that identity “is a process – *identification* – not a ‘thing’”. It is not something one can *have*, or not; it is something that one *does*. Following from this construct, Rousseau and van der Veen (2005) address how individuals form ideas within their minds (the individual level) and how ideas diffuse across a population through social interaction (the societal level) with resultant shifting identity formations.

Social media sites such as Facebook provide a new way of constructing “identity” for users nowadays. The platform enables users to satisfy their image desires. What social media tell us about us has deep significance in the construction and maintenance of one’s identity as a reference for one’s ideas to craft his or her identity patterns.

Vietnam is among the world’s top 10 countries in social media users (Statista, 2021). Facebook is the most popular social network in Vietnam, and has attracted over 91% of users aged 16 to 64 in Vietnam (WeAreSocial, 2021). Facebook users are becoming more and more youthful, of which beginners are the most visited and interactive, followed by students 13-19 years old and working people 30-39 years old (WeAreSocial, 2021). Youths’ quick access to new media and “Western and modern socio-cultural practices became important symbols of a new social class in Vietnam” (Pham and Richards, 2015, p. 4).

There are a wide range of studies investigating the identity spectrum: throughout history, identity studies have focused on how people describe themselves as individuals (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 124; Cooley, 1902; Erikson, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934; Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 225) while recent ones take a step closer to identify what it means for the self to go into a virtual environment (Belk, 2013; Chen and Marcus, 2012; Gaither, 2018; Jenson et al., 2015). In early studies, the self was considered to be determined by sets of meanings generated after multiple social interactions and these meanings only began to exist when others recognized them. Being put into a new virtual environment, these arguments revolving around human identity become more complex, and empirical studies believe that under significant discourses, the self actually generates numerous versions of itself. Despite many published theories investigating the relationship between identities and outside interaction, there is a limited body of studies that cover the changing movement inside a person’s mind when they acknowledge the identity gap they create when being online.

This study is designed to examine the construction of identity through Facebook. The researchers employed both a survey and the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET) in one-on-one in-depth interviews which lasted approximately an hour per participant. To conduct the ZMET interviews, each interviewee had been given a significant amount of time to contemplate the topic so that they would be better prepared and informed to express their feelings and opinions. The data were used to indicate the uses, experiences and influences of respondents’ identity formation.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Self is a result of social categorization

Historical studies on personal identity concentrate on how people define themselves as individuals (the “I”). Personal identities are seen as “the set of meanings that define a person as a unique individual” (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 124). These meanings include culturally recognized characteristics that people identify with and internalize as their own. Role identity theory postulates that “the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance” (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 225). Authenticity and self-authenticity, in the sense of “being true to oneself”, is important for individuals and,

not only about roles, it is about “who one is as a person across situations, across time, across relationships”. As such, individual identity has long been considered the product of social interaction (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). In 1969, Erikson also argued that the formation of one’s identity is initiated by being recognized by others.

Tajfel, in his theory of social identity, reinforced this notion by acknowledging the system of social categorizations which “creates and defines an individual’s own place in society” (Tajfel, 1974, p. 293). Social categorization is the way in which people “bring together social objects or events in groups which are meaningful to their actions, intentions, attitudes and system of beliefs” (Tajfel, 1974, p. 69). Categories can be established from different criteria, such as nationality, gender or profession. Categorization is followed by a process of cognitive comparisons between in-groups and out-groups in seeking for positive group distinctiveness.

As a result of their experiments, Tajfel and his colleagues demonstrated that explicit categorization, or the search for group distinctiveness, outweighs the need for similarity among group members, even when no conflict or competition among groups are involved (Billig and Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel, 1982). Positive group distinctiveness plays an important role in people’s decision to be part of a group. They constantly compare between the group they belong to and those they do not in order to enhance their self-esteem and achieve a positive social identity from their group membership (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1982). In other words, people pursue “a positive sense of distinctiveness for their own group and thus for themselves” (Hogg and Ridgeway, 2003, p. 97). As such, an individual’s self-concept is based on his or her affiliation with certain social groups. The stronger the emotional link and identification of an individual with a social group, the more their social self can influence their individual sense of self.

Depending on the circumstances, people will choose their own way to construct and adjust their behaviours in order to present their identity within social and other constraints. Self-categorization theory uses the term “salience” to address the issue of when, why and how a specific identity becomes activated and operated on (Turner et al., 1987). Each situation might serve as a reminder to a person about an individual’s belonging to a certain group and social category, and subsequently the corresponding psychological salience (Trepte and Loy, 2017). In another research conducted by Perez et al. in 2010 about how people’s identity is affected when they consume counterfeit luxury goods, it is indicated that people buying fake products experience three types of joy resulting from being able to save their resources; experiencing adventure, enjoyment and danger; and deceiving others in order to avoid getting caught. Consumers of counterfeit luxury products build an identity in which they consider themselves “smart” individuals by achieving these goals; in return, they get a reward in the form of social acceptance. It can be understood that people would lie about themselves to curate the self that is portrayed to the society; in other words, identity salience is modulated by social and cultural contexts.

## 2.2 Complexity of self in the digital age

Since the self embodies the role one plays in community, activated through occasions, it is pivotal to acknowledge how context manifests one’s identity. Gaither (2018) argued that one may possess multiple identities as a result of affiliation with multiple social categories. This multifaceted aspect of identity is salient in the context of the internet. Similar to the in-person approach, online social network sites such as Facebook have been used as platforms to foster and maintain interpersonal relationships (Chen and Marcus, 2012). The ceasing of geographical boundaries online allows more diverse social interaction from across the globe with individuals coming from different cultural backgrounds. On Facebook, multiple layers of identities can be intersected and integrated in the concept of self and “online technologies such as Facebook facilitate richer community experience not only by making communities more concrete in tangible social interactions but also by extending new opportunities to new identities” (Zhang et al., 2010, p. 73).

Nevertheless, according to Belk's theory of extended self in a digital world (Belk, 2013), altering socialization practices produce an online self disparate from the offline self. The virtual constructed self is not a direct mirror of an individual's real self, due to the power of modification whereby online users have leeway in portraying themselves. The online self – the avatar – is the embodiment of an individual experimenting with role playing with their possible and aspirational selves. The dis-inhibition of virtual work gives opportunities for individuals to express their "true self" better online than face-to-face, e.g., confession practice of "sinful" or "melodramatic hardship endurance" tales (Ridley, 2012). In a complementary study, Qin and Lowe (2021) compared and contrasted the online identity of Chinese college students with their offline selves. They posited that the online self is seen as a better version of oneself by students. It provides what the offline self lacks in terms of manner, attitudes or personality. In addition, online anonymity empowers close (simulated) relationships between strangers which can transcend cultural stereotypes. Nevertheless, this self is rationally constructed with the audience (real or imaginary) in mind. It is constantly monitored and reaffirmed by users' opinions, based on the acts of posting, tagging and comments, especially on social networks. Identity construction is influenced by users' social status, such as the number of followers and social expectation (e.g., gender role). According to Yuan (2018), identity encompasses both stable characteristics (nation, race, gender) and self-assessed characteristics (temperament, attitude, personality). Nevertheless, multiple identities can be created using narratives to suit culture and ideology in different situations and to conform to group inclusion. This insight also is supported in the work of DeVito et al. (2018), in which they state out one of the struggles of LGBTQ+ community when being online – they have to selectively choose what to present online to avoid the peril of stigmatization of their true identity. This raises the question of self-authenticity in the virtual world.

Despite varying methodologies and contexts, recent empirical studies of online identity formation and representation suggest the existence of multiple identities and the influence of public discourse. Descriptions of online self-formation processes, means of embodiment and motivation behind the latter have been investigated. However, none of these studies has explored the latent meaning of online identity salience for social media users. This could only be achieved by accessing the subconscious level of the respondents' mind regarding the topic. With that in mind, rather than investigate the multiple facets of social media users, this study wishes to address a dissimilar aspect, namely online media users' awareness of their strategic presentation in a virtual environment and their motivations to do so. Additionally, this research also desires to connect all the predetermined findings about self-construal, extraversion and modality of communication that influence the information disclosure to form a story-telling approach to fill the research gap.

### 3 Methodology

Qualitative data facilitate the capturing of feelings, thoughts, intentions and behaviours but traditional qualitative research is hard to generalize and prone to researchers' personal biases (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). To achieve greater rigour and trustworthiness, the authors of this paper employed a mixed-method approach with purposive quantitative sampling followed by a self-correcting mechanism, respondent-led and grounded qualitative data-processing tools/procedures of the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET) (Zaltman 1997; Zaltman and Lindsay, 2008).

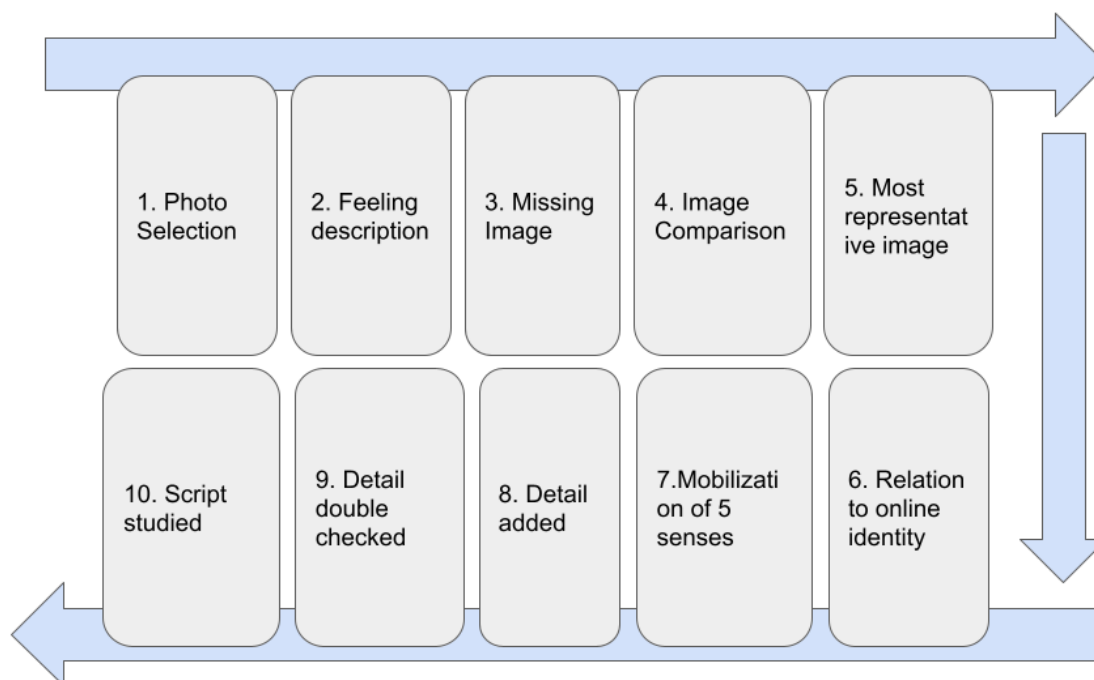
The ZMET method has long been applied in scientific research articles to tap into the unconscious mind and uncover the in-depth meaning patterns unrealized by respondents (Coulter, et al., 2001). The technique is widely applied to investigate human experience, emotion, perception and attitude. There are a considerable number of articles using the ZMET, namely Dooseon Jung (2022), Puspasari et al. (2021), Ryoo et al. (2020), Puspasari and Herwiyanti (2021), Mercado-González et al. (2018) etc. Being image-based, the ZMET allows respondents to distance themselves from the interviewer and therefore generate

richer dialogue more naturally (Hancock and Foster, 2019). Employing both visual and sensory stimuli, this projective method allows variety in thought exploration and captures “the different facets of human expression – verbal, visual, dramatic, artistic and imaginary” (Ramjaun, 2021). Numerous studies posit that the ZMET has the versatility to adapt to different contexts, especially targeting sensitive or abstract social phenomena (Mercado-González et al., 2018; Ramjaun, 2021; Venkatesh et al., 2010). Hence, the technique is relevant to the subject of identity and personal expression, in particular the aesthetics of luxury fashion, body and identity formation (Venkatesh et al., 2010), the metaphors of identity among adjunct faculty (Ryan, 2020), constructing identity through the consumption of counterfeit luxury goods (Perez et al., 2010), etc.

After carefully examining the methodology of these articles and finding that the ZMET analysis is the appropriate method to undertake the inspecting process, this research adopts the ZMET analysis with the aim of evaluating the relationship between the mind and identity in wider scope and greater depth. With the ZMET analysis, researchers are expected to use participant-selected photos to uncover subconscious hidden beliefs that other approaches may miss. This approach therefore shows a superior ability to connect all the feelings and thoughts into a chain of reactions and, in turn, tell the story in a more seamless and reasonable way.

According to Ramjaun (2021), interviewees should be representative of our population to improve the quality of the research. Our qualitative sample thus simulates the population of Vietnamese Facebook users stratified by age and gender (WeAreSocial, 2018), by differing levels of involvement in the virtual community and different levels of interest in presenting one’s preferred image in a virtual community. We achieved this through screening our potential sample via the scale for desire for online self-representation (Kim et al., 2012). This involved the use of a self-administered five-point Likert scale questionnaire asking respondents’ opinion about their online identity on Facebook, their involvement with Facebook, their capacity in managing online identity on Facebook and perceived social norms about online identity on Facebook. The questionnaire was distributed offline in three Vietnamese universities and two high schools in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and snowballing online through Vietnamese professional groups on Facebook. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS 20.0 to select the most representative sample according to the abovementioned criteria.

Following the third strand in identity research which focuses on people’s identity verification in relations with the material world, the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET) was employed to look into the conscious and unconscious thoughts of the chosen sample to unpack their experiences of building their online identities through Facebook. Zaltman (1997, p. 425) argued that metaphors can assist researchers to understand “important mental states that literal language might altogether miss or underrepresented”. The research followed the 10 steps designed for practicing a typical ZMET, in which verbal description of respondents’ thoughts and feelings is presented through their self-selected images.



**Figure 1.** Ten steps for ZMET. Source: (Hui et al., 2018).

Ten steps for ZMET are as follows:

- In step 1, participants were contacted and instructed to prepare 10 photos of their own choice showing their thoughts and feelings about their online identity on Facebook.
- In step 2, participants were asked to describe their photos and how they relate to their thoughts and feelings about 'being' on Facebook. The interviewer followed up with questions to clarify and encourage explanation and exploration.
- Step 3 involved a discussion about any missing images which the participants could not find but had thought about. Such details revealed other constructs that might be missed in the second step.
- In step 4, participants were asked to compare the meanings of two images and to suggest how similar and different they are. After that, the most representative images about the topic being discussed were selected by the participants in step 5.
- In step 6, participants were invited to talk about what is meaningless or untrue to them in relation to their online identities on Facebook.
- Step 7 entailed the mobilization of all five senses for further exploration of feelings and thoughts. The participants were instructed to elicit their ideas through the references to sound, smell, taste, touch and feelings.
- In step 8, participants were asked to elaborate their answers and deliver more detailed answers.
- In step 9, participants were asked to look back at their photos one more time and to think about any possibility to change their details such as re-sizing or adding colour and other details. Participants were then asked to summarize the flow of their thoughts and feelings by the use of a map or short movie showing the photos about their online identity on Facebook.
- Finally, step 10 was for the three out of four researchers involved in this research to read and re-read the scripts in identity key constructs for the analysis.

## 4 Analysis

### 4.1 Desire for online self-presentation

The final screening survey identified 355 valid respondents. The final sample consisted of 200 cases free of multivariate outliers based on Mahalanobis distance (Tabachnick et al., 2007). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  is high at 0.875,  $n=16$ . The final sample consisted of: 64% female, 36% male; 57% aged 13-23; 26% aged 24-35; and 17% above 35 years old. Table A1 in the Appendix summarizes the descriptive characteristics for each study variable. Notably, 97% of the respondents had used multiple social network platforms, some as far back as the early 2000s (Table A2 in the Appendix). Facebook social circles ranged from 2 to 5000 people with c. 68% of respondents knowing 50% or more of their online friends in real life (Table A3 in the Appendix). There was no statistically significant difference in the responses by males and females ( $P < 0.05$  two-tailed;  $n_1 = 128$ ,  $n_2 = 72$ , Mann-Whitney U,  $p < 0.05$  two-tailed; see Table A4 in the Appendix). The four age groups are not statistically different in all but "Many people think it is important to be their real life self on Facebook",  $\chi^2 = 6.106$ ,  $p = 0.047$ , with a mean rank of 92.31 for 13-23 years old, 113.59 for 24-35 years old and 107.94 for  $>35$  years old (Table A5 in the Appendix).

Respondents were categorized based on their level of involvement with Facebook and their interest in, and capability to execute, online self-representation. Twelve respondents (8 students, 4 professionals; 7 females, 4 males and 1 LGBT) were selected randomly from these categories and participated in the process of one-to-one interviews. Although participants had different ways of grouping their images and organizing their thoughts, main themes emerged around their experience of being on Facebook in general and the way that they manage their presence on the site.

**Table 1.** Most commonly used metaphors.

Description	Conceptual metaphor	Thematic category	Deep metaphor
Smiling faces Shaking hands A network	Relationships	Increase or reduce the distance among people	Connection
A channel Learning tools The wave A treasure A new horizon	Information	Information sharing and update	Equipment/ resource Container
Different periods of time	Users' changes	From posting everything to selecting carefully what to post	Journey/Growth
Different people	"Fake" world	Others create "fake" images but I do not	Reflection and image Control
Different social networks	Network comparison	Being more authentic on other social networks	Disclosure/ modification/ management Container
A marketplace A hot pot	Noisy Unheard	A mess of everything Everyone is trying to be louder, but no one is really listening	Voice/expression
Bitter sweet (tea, coffee...)	Mixed taste	Pleasant and unpleasant experience	Affection



Description	Conceptual metaphor	Thematic category	Deep metaphor
Walk on rough surface, Feeling cold, Touch by strangers	Unwelcome touch	"Lonely in the crowd"	Container
Jealousy and doubt	Unpleasant feelings	Managing the feeling of jealousy when looking at others' best moments	Control
Two-sided things (mirror, knife, faces, human sculpture...)	Dual reality	Gap between real and virtual worlds	Vigilance, self- modification, control
The mask The screen	Anonymity Insecurity	Showing the "best" faces and hiding others	Control and vigilance
Boundaries Limits	"Strategic" self-management	Being careful and selective about what to show and express	Rational in conformation/ positioning
Career-related	Being professional	Building a professional look Sharing work-related news	Rational in conformation Motivation
Hobby-related (music instruments, new places...)	Being interesting	Sharing hobby-related news and images Express opinion on social issues	Voice/expression and interaction Motivation
Emotion-related	Being non-sensational	Showing emotions or not	Control

## 4.2 Portrait of me, realism vs surrealism, self-imagery vs social reflection

When asked to select the most representative image to describe their concept of online identity on Facebook, participants' image selection varied in terms of self-attachment. Half chose abstract images with no link to the revelation of their own identity, whilst half chose images referring to a trademark of themselves previously discussed. This suggests that there are two separate assessments of the term "online identity": one based on self-projection of personal experience and the other based on social community of reported behaviour. This is consistent with the most common patterns in participants' answer to questions of online identity, which cited their identity as "true, part of me, as realistic as I can portray", "different facets of me" against "others' online identities" as "different from offline self, unreal, exaggerated, show off".

*"In addition to photoshopped, a little edited and tweaked photos, everything else on the social network shows exactly who I am. (...) I see that there are a lot of friends out there who speak very little, do not show much but talk more when they are on social networks. Many people also live more virtually, create better images, then express different moods between real life and online. I feel that many of them are 'acting' when going online."* (Respondent 9)

The pictures in group A depict a more negative connotation of online identity, citing it as "airbrushed, selective, chaotic, time consuming" (in order of images represented). Group B, in contrast, shows a positive image of online identity as a tool to serve owners' purposes and desire for self-expression, citing it as "revealing hobbies, passions, ambitions, social image". The commonalities between these groups are the users' active involvement in crafting their online identity images via social conformity. While online identity is only a part of the multi-faceted nature of offline identity, users spend time and effort curating the positive part of their images to fit the purpose of connecting to their aspirational group, be it for future







career prospects or seeking soulmates. Despite different perceptions of what online identity is, most respondents cited the same answer that online identity is not fully authentic, due to absence of deviance.

#### Group A: Online identity in general

			
A colourful-haired man with mask Source: (Zunka, 2021)	A girl showing only the clean area of her room online Source: (Alvarez, 2013)	A chaotic painted wall Source: (Dalton, 2020)	A picture of a girl spending her time online Source: (Computers, 2022)

#### Group B: My online identity

			
A man playing guitar as a way of revealing hobby Source: (DeFrancesco, 2022)	A poster with a quote about volunteering indicating passion for volunteering Source: (AIESEC, 2022)	A cartoon drawing with positive message about dedication to make a year better Source: (ChibirdArt, 2017)	A girl holding a microphone, confidently speaking in public Source: (ASOG, 2022)

**Figure 2.** Most representative image of online identity.

### 4.3 “Being” on Facebook: face, two faces and faceless; voice, many voices and voiceless; social distance, vigilance and expression

To describe the experience of “being” on Facebook, most participants used common metaphors related to faces and voices. Such images, including avatars, photos and sounds, symbolize a number of different concepts which contradict each other, creating an impression of Facebook as a site full of contradictions.

Smiling faces, along with other images such as shaking hands and the word “networking”, were used repeatedly to describe positive perception about Facebook as a supportive platform for getting to know and staying connected with friends, colleagues and family members.

*“There are issues I know my parents do not want to listen to, but if I write or share something about it on Facebook, sometimes in a subtle way, they will pay attention.” (Respondent 11)*

While about one third of the study participants mentioned “distance” between people in society in general, only one said that they thought distance had increased due to online networks since people do not talk directly as much as before. Along the same line, everyone spoke of a “channel”, plus images of learning tools and descriptions of “the wave”, or even a treasure or a new horizon, were evoked by some respondents, as symbols of abundant and valuable information resources. There are opportunities to connect, or to regulate the distance between, individuals in an out-group granted by such resources.

No-one described Facebook as a place to build trust. On the contrary, “two-faced” or “two-sided” objects were referred to many times as a reference to the dual reality of “being” on Facebook, which is like:

*“[a] sharp knife with two sides, benefits and harms, good and bad, dark and light, black and white, fake and real...” (Respondent 9) or “a mirror that reflects a false image when I look at myself in it.” (Respondent 1). Consequently, “you might feel vulnerable and inferior because everyone seems so happy, so active and so much better than you are. Even though you know that that is only what they intend to show off and that is only half of the truth, you need time to manage your initial feelings of jealousy and self-doubt and it could be a very tiring process.” (Respondent 12)*

Another common metaphor is a faceless person, a mask or a screen (Belk, 2013; Makarius, 1983), which indicates anonymity and insecurity. Comments by a number of respondents illustrate this theme:

*“Because physically we sit behind the screen, we are able to be transformed to a totally different person on it.” (Respondent3)*

*“One person could have many different identities.” (Respondent 8)*

*“It is like we use a mask to cover up our true self, so we can never know who a person actually is. The risk is that if we open ourselves honestly to others, we do not know what they may do with such supposedly private information, because we do not know who they really are.” (Respondent 10)*

In talking about “sharing” and “connecting”, more than half the respondents reported being “unheard,” “not feeling understood” and “lonely in the crowd.” An image of a marketplace, or even a hot pot, was called upon to convey an idea of a place with so many loud voices.

*“Everyone is trying to be louder, but no one is really listening. So I feel like I am voiceless in this noisy and messy place.” (Respondent 9)*

On that note, the bitter-sweetness of coffee and tea was mentioned when participants expressed their mixed feelings about presenting themselves and interacting with others on Facebook. Most of the “touches” referred to were not very pleasant, e.g., feelings of being rather “cold or not so warm”, “vulnerable or even hurt”, or “the touch of strangers when being jammed into a public bus”.

#### **4.4 Showing “my best” via virtually constructed self; the rational self, self-modification and social conformity**

One third of the respondents compared Facebook to other online networking sites such as Instagram or Twitter. Most of them favoured the other sites due to the fact that they feel more “secure” to honestly share what is “themselves” without being afraid of being judged and misunderstood. However, the reason for that feeling is that they have fewer but closer “friends” on other sites.

*“On the other social media sites, I show my other side. All of my real feelings including pressure, inhibition, sad and funny things, I will show them on Twitter, which I don’t bring to Facebook. Actually, Facebook is also my true character but it’s better, I show a better face to Facebook. Twitter is more real.” (Respondent 2)*

*“I do not have as many friends on Instagram as on Facebook, but they are real friends who know me well so I feel more secure to express myself.” (Respondent 12)*

There is a sense of “balance” and “neutrality” in the respondents’ perception of their experience of being on Facebook. Referring to the deep metaphors collected by Zaltman and Lindsay (2008), it could be noted that 8 out of 15 key themes realized from the interviews relate to the deep metaphor of “control”, either as being able to manage their own online identity or the uncontrollability of others’ reception and action.

The deep metaphor of control also links to the polarized state that one third of respondents mentioned from “posting everything” to a “limit” or a “boundary of expression”. This “journey/growth” involves thoughtful changes (Spears, 2011) in the way they view Facebook. Most reported disclosing many personal details at the start, then abstaining due to uncontrollable public perception and privacy risk. As a result, they became more conscious on Facebook (Qin and Lowe, 2021) or migrated to a different network.

Overall, respondents agreed that they actively manage their online identity. All respondents admitted that, on Facebook, their online identity comes from the better part of their real identity without any traits perceived as negative (sadness, anger, drama, cursing, psychological disorder, etc.).

*“This (Facebook) shows the beautiful things, the appearance I want to bring to the social network. Of course, when talking about social media, we all have to beautify our accounts. I want to show my best image, which should not be a big editing job.” (Respondent 3)*

*“These images I want to build up on my social media, which can be a little fake. For example, I don’t swear on social media though I do in real life. On the internet, I never scold anyone.” (Respondent 6)*

Many respondents believed that online identity is a filtered glass and that constant monitoring of their online behaviour and image is very important to them. The self-monitoring ranges from omitting undesirable details about oneself to de-individualization or even active detachment. Three respondents mentioned they may not engage in a conversation topic if it means conflicting with others, only use “appropriate wording”, avoid showing personal feelings and only share images that please others’ eyes. A quarter of the respondents cited they could not find an appropriate image describing their and others’ emotions. In other words, they modified their real self to reach the “ideal self” they wish to be and along these processes some even become unsure of their personal frame of mind. Users seek to be “seen to be” something or somebody, to assume particularly successful social identities (Jenkins, 1995; Tajfel and Turner, 2001; Turner et al., 1987).

On the extreme end, respondents also mentioned cases of self-modification – a virtually constructed self which is not a direct mirror of an individual’s real self (Belk, 2013) by exaggeration towards a “fake” self (completely different from real life).

*“People who see my photos will think I am very introspective and interested in being alone. But it is not true. I like that style and then I follow and create it. It doesn’t mean my personality is like that.” (Respondents 5)*

*“I find it a bit virtual... For example, my best friend is rather quiet in real life. But he always posts photos online, which attract thousands of likes, lots of interaction and engagement....” (Respondent 4)*

*“Photos uploaded, along with captions, don’t reflect the real matters. They are very poetic. They (my friends) found some interesting captions somewhere and copied them. There are people who are slightly overdoing things, having captions showing themselves to be very moody, very deep persons.” (Respondent 2)*

According to these respondents, the extreme “ideal self” unrelated to the “actual self” is accomplished by the ability to copy or share artifacts associated with the mentioned “ideal self”. In other words, people can shop for the “ideal self” they want online and experiment with different identities.

Among the respondents, there seemed no significant differences in terms of what “the best” means. In one particular case, while talking about the wider Facebook community, a young female respondent

strongly criticized other users who shared too much about their family life and children (as their different “best” could be an image of a good mother or father) and her view of Facebook recalled the image of an “excessively garrulous woman while users are men who feel irritated and want to walk away.” Such conflicting values coupled with gender biases revealed in the metaphor also indicate the cultural and social dimensions in the process of self-modification. The meaning of “the best” is both personally and culturally constructed; hence, it carries different meanings to different users, and the self-modification and verification process will be in accordance with such different sets of values.

Out of the 15 key themes specified in Table 1, it could be seen that six are linked to the deep metaphor “Container”. Apart from being an information resource, Facebook is a container of users’ memories of “best” moments in life while the experience of being on Facebook is certainly also contained in users’ memories. Moreover, how users’ identity is presented and verified on Facebook is not only contained on the site but in the cultural environment that its users belong to. This container was reflected most clearly in the metaphor of the “boundary” or “limit” that one third of participants used to describe their tendency of posting and sharing on Facebook. Among them, one participant highlighted his missing image of a beautiful girl wearing only her underwear but standing in a crib, which symbolized a “border line” between freedom and cultural appropriation and limitation, and between what “the best” might be personally perceived and socially accepted (Tajfel, 1974; Trepte and Loy, 2017; Turner et al., 1987).

#### 4.5 Being professional and being “liked”; uses and gratifications

Individual online self-conceptualization is driven by specific motivations as half of the respondents grouped their images using criteria. Career development is the main driver of online identity construction. Respondents upload their life aspirations and extracurricular activities and share articles and news relating to their chosen career path as an extended CV for potential employers to look at. Some respondents exercise personal branding and professional portfolio to seek business opportunities

*“I am quite practical; I am told that my Facebook will be looked at by employers. Then I do not want to upload too many things about what I think will look bad”. (Respondent 2)*

*“You can imagine if my customers read those negative words, how can they trust me in my work.” (Respondent 9)*

More than half described their efforts to keep their profile neither “serious” and only about work like the social network LinkedIn, nor too much personal and emotional as mentioned above in the discussion about the deep metaphor of control. Strategies such as sharing posts with a good sense of humour, showing images of personal hobbies particularly in the arts and tourism activities and avoiding mentioning negative emotions are employed. This is more apparent for those already on the labour market. All of them admitted that they intended to be “consistent” in building their images, particularly in relation to their career. Only one respondent said that it is acceptable to look “not really professional” sometimes so one can feel relaxed and leave things as they are. However, the same respondent admitted that he would like to appear “smart” with a good sense of humour. In other words, having a dynamic and interesting personality has become part of the professional identity (belonging to a certain social category), which is modulated by context (Trepte and Loy, 2017).

#### 4.6 Cross-validation

It could also be said that the online engagement of Vietnamese Facebook users is heavily subjected to social conformity (Tajfel, 1974; Ahuvia, 2005). Respondents modified their online identities to fit their social roles (as a student club leader or a professional photographer) or social

expectations (Rousseau and van der Veen, 2005). Constant monitoring of the online self is seen as important by 71% of the survey respondents and 51.5% admitted being capable of managing their online

image. Group formation could also be explained as individuals' responses to the fundamental problems of self-definition (Tajfel, 1974).

Upon close examination, while "expressing personal opinion, thoughts, feeling and ambition" is quoted as one of the important activities in building one's online identity, the ultimate purpose of "self-expression" remains to attract a targeted audience. This fits with the quantitative result of the screening survey, where 64.5% of respondents wanted to establish a preferred image on social networks and 44.5% wanted to leave a preferred impression about themselves on social networks.

While modelling their own online behaviour based on social norms, respondents exercise their own power of control over their online identity in various ways such as using privacy settings, blocking, adding friends, switching online nicknames, etc., to manipulate how much conformity or online modification they desire. Nevertheless, users are unable to completely control their identity image online due to their digital footprint on social networks.

*"I know the functions for classifying and customizing friends but I find that there is a limitation when I like or comment on something, which shows up in the news feed of my friends and they jump in to say something. I decided to open a new account."* (Respondent 8).

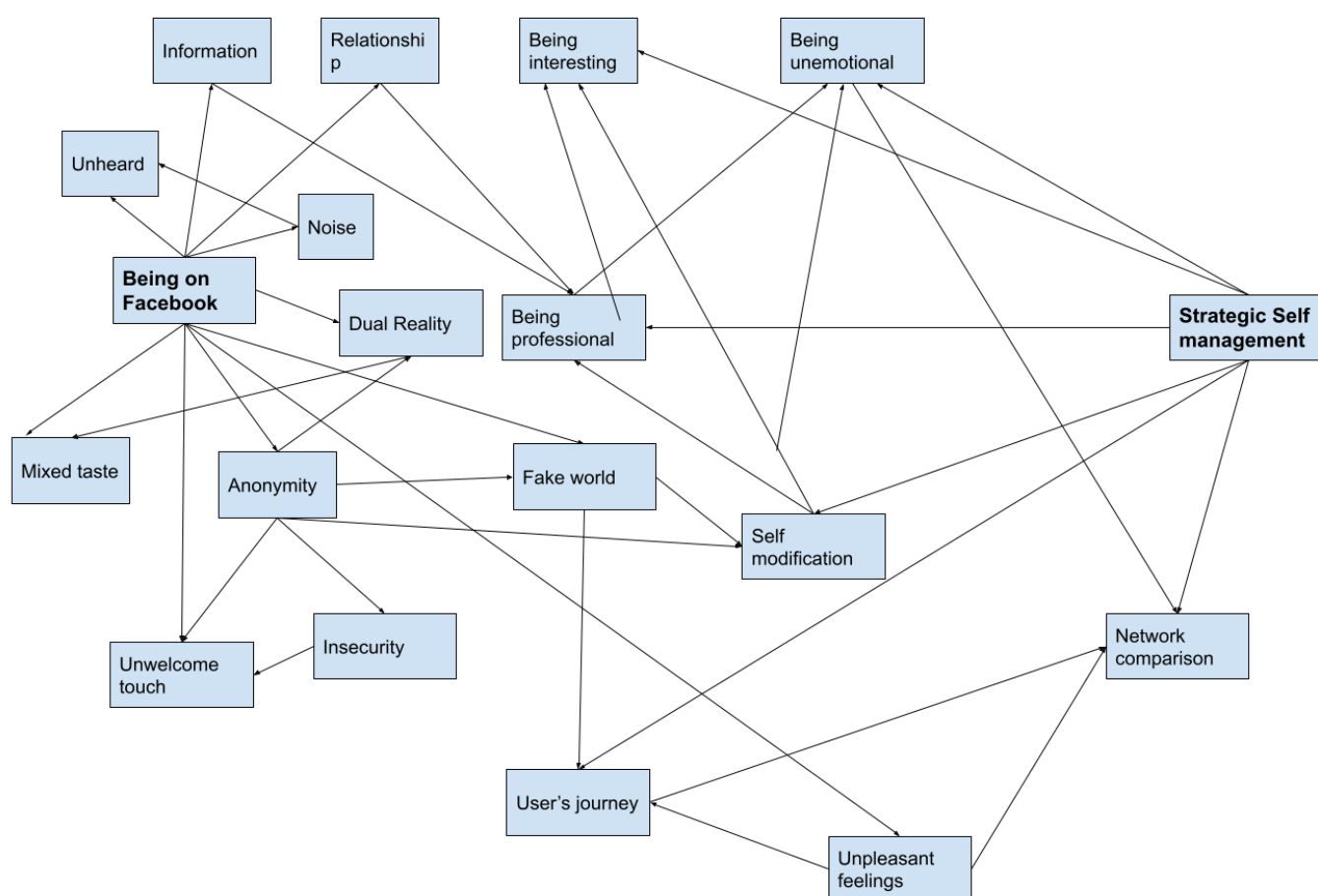


Figure 3. Mental map of Facebook users.

## 5 Discussion

The findings show that the use of Facebook as a means of constructing personal identity among Vietnamese netizens can be both beneficial and detrimental, since the Vietnamese online community is serious about judging others and context (Pham and Richards, 2015; Trepte and Loy, 2017). As a communication tool, Facebook breaks down barriers among people, lets them discuss with a larger

audience and is able to convey topics previously too abstract such as emotion or psychological state. Online identity of Vietnamese on Facebook is constructed of psychological attributes rather than physical attributes. However, our respondents' collage of their psychological attributes is moderated by their possession of multiple online identities. Some respondents switched from Facebook to less exposed social network platforms to show their more negative thoughts and feelings since "emotional posting" is seen as a "vulnerable/thoughtless behaviour". Therefore, when discussing one's online identity, we should link the evidence to their online context and consider more than one platform in order to fully grasp the holistic picture.

Vietnamese Facebook users employ identity construction and modification as a mechanism for normative conformity. A clear demonstration of this can be observed when Vietnamese Facebook users did not discuss gender as a simple demographic basis (DeVito et al., 2018; Yuan, 2018) for their identity construction but nested it under social role, or gender role to be more specific. The idea of self-portrayal as a woman or a man is represented by responsibility as a nurturing mother, or a successful bread winner. In other words, the existence of stable demographic bases for identity construction introduced by Yuan (2018) may not be true in this case; rather, the self depends on shifting shared values and beliefs. This reinstates the role identity theory (Stets and Burke, 2000).

Normative conformity for Vietnamese Facebook users is driven by a strong sense of validation, which embodies identity struggles. Young people in Vietnam in general have a very high sense of appearance in the context of globalization. They need to show a very high social image through consumer behaviour and using the internet (Pham and Richards, 2015). By portraying a certain identity to be positively perceived by a group, Vietnamese can gain appraisal from fellow users. "Social status" is a cluster of four sub-themes: communication and socializing, conformity, career preparation, and sense of belonging can link directly to the beneficiary of a well-modified online identity. This confirmed Belk's (2013) argument of online identity modification level positively associated with self-presentation, self-expansion or maintaining self-esteem (Tajfel, 1974; Ahuvia, 2005). The online discrepancies as a by-product of this process are realized by respondents but the magnitude of the impact may not be clearly understood. Since most respondents criticize unauthenticity of the social media community as a whole, they actively disassociate themselves from that reference group. This can be seen as an unconscious attempt to defend their sovereignty over group influences.

Vietnamese are strategic users of Facebook or social media in general, the pivotal gratification of which includes, but is not limited to, socializing. Users assign each distinctive function to each social media platform, for other sites might be considered as a place to show true emotions, but Facebook is meant to showcase the ideal version of the self for both bonding and career advancement. The paper revealed that the deeper meaning behind respondents' online behaviour is less one of venting but more of seeking social acceptance or like-minded people. This finding resonates with the conclusion of a previous study conducted by Hogg and Ridgeway (2003), who concluded that people intended to find outstanding traits for their groups as a way to confirm that they themselves are also unique individuals. When put together, this sheds an insight into the fact that social platforms such as Facebook is just a tool for a group of human beings to find their own "flock of feathers" and social acceptance through likes and flattering comments which serve as signals to identify people that resonate with them.

The study also raises a question about the role of social media platforms in crafting users' identity. Since the previous finding stated that Vietnamese adults want to portray their better self in virtual environments that differs from their real-world version, how authentic is their community constructed via social site networks as well as their membership? Since Facebook is facing global concerns over its controversial algorithm that instils hatred, misinformation and violence (Hagey and Horwitz, 2021), what is its impact on communities found on it? Assuming the double role of discourse and public sphere, how well can Facebook keep to its core missions of fostering and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Chen and



Marcus, 2012), especially when we set quality of the reports as one of the criteria? In February of 2022, Facebook's parent company Meta reported the daily active user statistic of Facebook in the last three months was 1.929 billion while its average active users in the third quarter of 2021 were 1.93 billion, meaning about 1 million users had been lost during that time. This marks the very first time Facebook witnesses a slump since its first introduction (Hamilton, 2022). This phenomenon, when analysed together with the recent upsurge in popularity of the new social media platform TikTok, which is famous for its entertaining and relatable content, might serve as a critical insight into customer behaviour on social platforms.

Finally, the study questions the idea of duality in identity. In the virtual world, identity is already multifaceted. Online identity variations can be displayed as appropriate to different social circles. However, this boundary is increasingly stretched and overlapped as cross-platforming becomes more common with mega apps, big data and technology monopoly. On the other hand, the level of online self-modification can be tied with the perceived outcome of being seen by other people with real life social ties. The power of anonymity is found in this study to be a potential moderator that affects how creative people are with their online identity. This resonates with our previous finding where online selfie modification was used as a trial version before users proceeded with physical offline transformation depending on social appraisal (Chung et al., 2022). Adding to the concept of the OnLife Initiative (2015) introduced by Luciano Floridi, with the future hyper-connected world, it will become much harder to extract the virtual to the reality. The study suggests thinking of the online and the offline as a blended domain and shifting the focus of identity segmentation from domain materiality to the level of one's anonymity.

## 6 Conclusion

There have been numerous papers regarding the multiple facets of identity; however, there is a limited body of works exploring the awareness of social media users of their own changing identity conducted via social platforms. What they think and actually feel about their actions is also rarely addressed; therefore, this research aimed to analyse further and better what is inside their minds and, in turn, link all the findings to form a bigger, better storytelling picture.

Using the ZMET analysis, we found out that adults feel the need to modify their virtual selves on social media platforms in order to be positively perceived by society. Social media users often spend a great deal of time carefully selecting the ideal image to represent their personality, thinking and feelings. This online-offline discrepancy is widening due to pressure from peer groups; in other words, adults are in a race to make themselves look more desirable. The level of modification of the virtual self is impacted by the perceived outcome of being seen by other people with real-life social ties. However, this discrepancy is gradually diminishing as more people one knows participate in social media, meaning that the power of anonymity affects how creative people are with their online identity in a negative way. Additionally, the place where adults conduct socialization is also a matter that alters the way they behave, as in some platforms they might present a more sincere version of themselves (emotional posting, thoughtless behaviour, etc.) so when studying behaviours of social media users, it is necessary to address the platform we want to explore.

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**Author Contributions:** H.C.P.: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – Original draft preparation – editing and. L.N: Methodology, Data curation, Writing – findings. P.T: Writing – Discussion. T.T: Data curation, Software, Validation.

**Data Availability:** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author.

## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Descriptive statistic.

	Statistics		Mean	Median	Std. Deviation
	Valid	Missing			
I want to establish a preferred image for myself on Facebook	200	0	3.42	3.00	.904
I want to present my image on Facebook	200	0	3.56	4.00	.933
I want to project an image about myself on Facebook	200	0	2.62	3.00	1.059
I want to give a preferred impression about myself on Facebook	200	0	3.69	4.00	1.029
Participating in Facebook is very enjoyable to me	200	0	3.42	3.00	.870
Participating in Facebook is pleasurable to me	200	0	3.12	3.00	.816
Participating in Facebook means a lot to me	200	0	2.91	3.00	.917
Participating in Facebook is important to me	200	0	2.95	3.00	.934
Many people think it is important to establish their images on Facebook	200	0	3.71	4.00	1.020
The presentation of self-image is common among people on Facebook	200	0	3.73	4.00	.935
Many people think it is important to manage their image on Facebook	200	0	3.83	4.00	.903
Many people think it is important to be their real life self on Facebook	200	0	3.29	3.00	.975
I know how to project my image reasonable well on my own on Facebook	200	0	3.41	3.00	.827
I can decorate my image reasonably well on my own on Facebook	200	0	3.20	3.00	.889
I know how to create my image reasonably well on my own on Facebook	200	0	3.13	3.00	.902
I can manage my image reasonably well on my own on Facebook	200	0	3.39	4.00	.923

**Table A2.** Number of social network platforms used.

Number of social network platforms used					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	6	3.0	3.0	3.0
	2.00	4	2.0	2.0	5.0
	3.00	12	6.0	6.0	11.0
	4.00	23	11.5	11.5	22.5
	5.00	34	17.0	17.0	39.5
	6.00	40	20.0	20.0	59.5
	7.00	26	13.0	13.0	72.5
	8.00	18	9.0	9.0	81.5
	9.00	13	6.5	6.5	88.0
	10.00	12	6.0	6.0	94.0
	11.00	4	2.0	2.0	96.0
	12.00	3	1.5	1.5	97.5
	13.00	3	1.5	1.5	99.0
	14.00	2	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

**Table A3.** Percentage of Facebook friends are people respondents know in real life.

Percentage of Facebook friends are people you know in real life					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	< 10%	13	6.5	6.5	6.5
	10% - 29%	33	16.5	16.5	23.0
	30% - 49%	19	9.5	9.5	32.5
	50% - 69%	41	20.5	20.5	53.0
	70% - 89%	50	25.0	25.0	78.0
	> = 90%	44	22.0	22.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

**Table A4.** Comparison of responses between gender groups.  
Note: a. Grouping Variable: Gender

Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>				
	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
I want to establish a preferred image for myself on Facebook	4212.500	12468.500	-1.077	.282
I want to present my image on Facebook	4286.000	6914.000	-.870	.384
I want to project an image about myself on Facebook	4013.000	12269.000	-1.575	.115

Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>				
	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
I want to give a preferred impression about myself on Facebook	4209.000	12465.000	-1.073	.283
Participating in Facebook is very enjoyable to me	4503.500	12759.500	-.288	.774
Participating in Facebook is important to me	4575.500	7203.500	-.090	.928
Participating in Facebook is pleasurable to me	4580.000	7208.000	-.078	.938
Participating in Facebook means a lot to me	4397.500	12653.500	-.572	.567
Many people think it is important to establish their images on Facebook	4206.500	12462.500	-1.088	.277
The presentation of self image is common among people on Facebook	4083.000	12339.000	-1.467	.142
Many people think it is important to manage their image on Facebook	4251.000	12507.000	-.981	.327
Many people think it is important to be their real life self on Facebook	4487.000	7115.000	-.324	.746
I know how to project my image reasonable well on my own on Facebook	4586.000	12842.000	-.061	.951
I can decorate my image reasonably well on my own on Facebook	4483.000	12739.000	-.340	.734
I know how to create my image reasonably well on my own on Facebook	4222.000	12478.000	-1.061	.289
I can manage my image reasonably well on my own on Facebook	4376.000	12632.000	-.630	.528

**Table A5.** Comparison of responses between age groups.

Note: a. Kruskal Wallis Test; b. Grouping Variable: Age

Test Statistics <sup>a,b</sup>			
	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.
I want to establish a preferred image for myself on Facebook	4.496	2	.106
I want to present my image on Facebook	4.214	2	.122
I want to project an image about myself on Facebook	.432	2	.806

Test Statistics <sup>a,b</sup>			
	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.
I want to give a preferred impression about myself on Facebook	.637	2	.727
Participating in Facebook is very enjoyable to me	.126	2	.939
Participating in Facebook is important to me	4.402	2	.111
Participating in Facebook is pleasurable to me	.580	2	.748
Participating in Facebook means a lot to me	1.873	2	.392
Many people think it is important to establish their images on Facebook	4.784	2	.091
The presentation of self image is common among people on Facebook	3.918	2	.141
Many people think it is important to manage their image on Facebook	1.152	2	.562
Many people think it is important to be their real life self on Facebook	6.106	2	.047
I know how to project my image reasonable well on my own on Facebook	2.233	2	.327
I can decorate my image reasonably well on my own on Facebook	.904	2	.636
I know how to create my image reasonably well on my own on Facebook	4.524	2	.104
I can manage my image reasonably well on my own on Facebook	1.748	2	.417

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