The Passport of the 21st Century

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This is an exerpt from Farah Berrou's visual culture final project research. Berrou graduated with a B.S. in Graphic Design from LAU in 2012. She is currently a junior designer at Leo Burnett.

As part of a senior graphic design research thesis, I investigated fifteen Lebanese graphic designers active on Twitter. Analysis was based on their profiles' general appearance and their Twitter activity over a span of one week. Seven of the fifteen selected designers were young Lebanese women, living in Lebanon or abroad. My analysis aimed at uncovering whether designers attempt to visually represent themselves differently from other professionals and, if so, how they go about doing it. The designers' approach to the digital world through a visual profile can double as a form of identification; however, they have the freedom to customize it to their liking. In contrast with official forms of identification that must follow specific rules, digital platforms allow a designer to create the persona of their choice using only images and text. The launch of such digital sites has led to another version of the self, existing separate from the tangible entity and giving rise to a virtual version of a person's identity. The identity created, shared, and personified on these platforms is one that should be carefully crafted and controlled by the individual since such sites have become a source for information, interaction, and exchange. This information can, in turn, be used from a professional standpoint, identifying possible candidates for job vacancies; their profiles create a window to the side of them they want to put on display.

Through the choice of avatar, bio, and profile background, the designers can present themselves however they see fit. In order to separate themselves from the millions of other users who have the

ability to be "pseudo-designers" with available templates and applications, designers must put in extra effort into making their digital profile aesthetically pleasing.

Barbara Kruger, a feminist artist who started out in the early 1980s, created works that combine visuals and typography. Her most prominent pieces address the male gaze; a concept that revolves around the objectification of women in art. They were the passive subjects that catered to a male audience. Susan Sontag (1977) maintains that, "it [photography] means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and therefore, like power". The mere act of being able to choose how to represent one's self is a reclaiming of power. Rather than being the portrayed, the artist's subject, or the male viewer's source of visual stimulation, the female designer constructing her own profile chooses how she wants to be seen. The ability to define one's own self is also an act of self-definition in a patriarchal world that tries to categorize individuals according to criteria through strict instruction. Regardless of social norms and dress codes, when online, a female designer can be a cement block sitting on a sand dune if that is how

she wants to be seen; she is not required to adhere to any regulations. There are no constraints when one is actively creating one's own avatar in digital space and there is no permanence in its existence. The identity is constantly in flux since all the elements that create the whole can be changed with a few clicks.

If the fundamental exercise of power over individuals is their own confessional interpretations of themselves, then a study of networks of power inevitably leads to an analysis that dismantles technologies of the self.

Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage" refers to the development of a sense of self, which is of a dual nature. It is a mental recognition of the physical existence of the body that combines the real and the imaginary or abstract. When referring to a Twitter profile, the profile is the mirror allowing for designers to complete the internalized mental image with their corporeal identity. Most of the time, they are the photographers of that image too, effectively making them the photographers and models; this creates an out-of-body experience as they are the subjects and the evaluators of the final image. The gaze, or awareness that one is being viewed, is self-inflicted but also reciprocated, since those that they interact with online also use pictures to represent themselves. Therefore, the picture selected along with the general portrayal of one's profile is how an individual decides to present himself/herself to the partially selected audience.

This portrayal is a manipulated version of the self, which simultaneously attempts to keep the
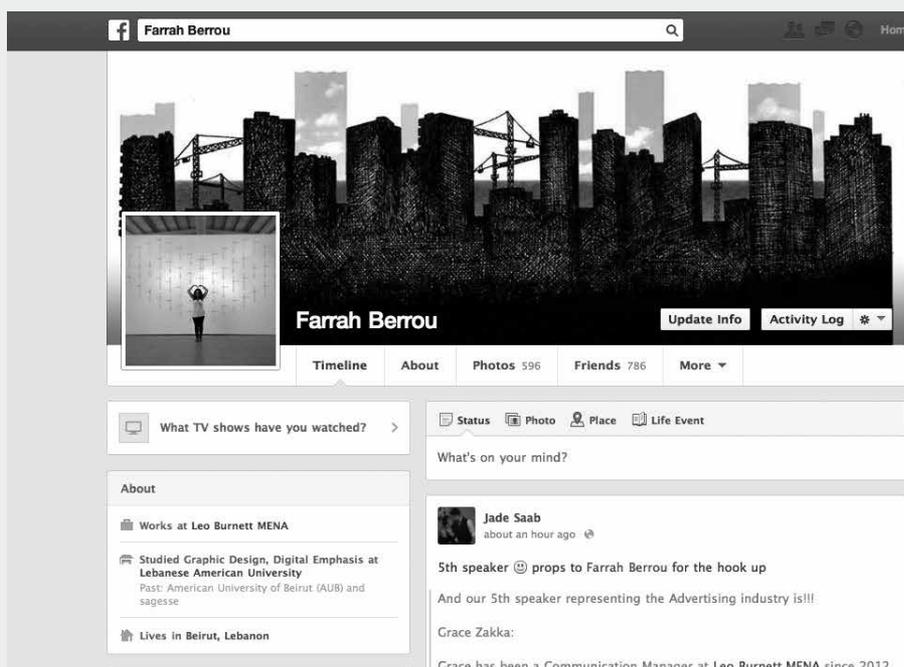
audience interested. As designers, the photograph can be used to show their skills, their creativity, their personality or all of the above. For example, one designer's avatar, photographed from above, captures her in action as she tosses three beanbags into the air. The beanbags have three icons from the Adobe creative suite, a package of programs used by the majority of designers worldwide. Using them as signifiers, she is communicating what she does in a visual language, one she should be fluent with, to those who see it. Only those familiar with the industry would recognize these symbols so it is clear that she is addressing a specific audience. It can be said that she "plays" with these professional programs the same way that she is shown playing with the beanbags. Two other examples are designers that used their own work as avatars; one is a geometric module and another is an illustrated cartoon. Both cases are the designers' own work thus presenting it as their signature but also exhibiting their artistic style. These examples show how some designers use their digital profiles to generate new meanings about them as people; they are visually linked to design and stand out in a sea of "normal" conventional portraits.

Another facet of digital platforms is a shared photograph. These photos are like a visual diary. Allowing others to see one's daily activities or join in the documentation of events that occur in one's life aids in forming this online persona. This visual diary gives others the chance to have a sneak peek into the life of a designer, or the life they would like to appear to have. It can be used as a subtle attempt in displaying work and direct self-promotion. It is not aggressive or forced but still openly accessible to those who are interested. The designer is skilled in photographic manipulation as well as possessing a keen eye for all things visual. He/she knows what makes an image capture an audience's attention, which may or may not be their goal on a social network where they share information.

Digital platforms encourage iconography of the self and how each designer presents their image visually. The persona they represent digitally could have an effect on how others may view them as individuals as well as their creative identity, placing judgment on talent and professional disposition. Representing one's self as an object or illustration versus an actual photograph can give different impressions to the viewers. Disconnecting from physical form could be a way of projecting a side of their personality that can only be conveyed as such. The choice of avatar as their signature reflects how they want to define themselves as visual persons: when given the freedom to express who one is in a small icon, there is so much possibility but also uncountable interpretations. However, this is the job of a designer: to express one idea in a concise visual execution.

The way in which individuals deal with identity is being altered by technology: they are forced to think about themselves in terms of images and visual representation. Studying graphic designers in particular is interesting due to the fact that they are the first generation that utilizes such tools, in the professional realm or otherwise. Because of the availability of tools that allow for anyone to exercise their creativity, it is important to differentiate themselves as designers in the digital world and prove that they have an added value to offer. It is the designers' job to create a visual that corresponds with a specific desired perception, but also to do it better than everyone else. As a result, it is worthy of note to see how they execute such a task when the product they are presenting is the one they know best: themselves.

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