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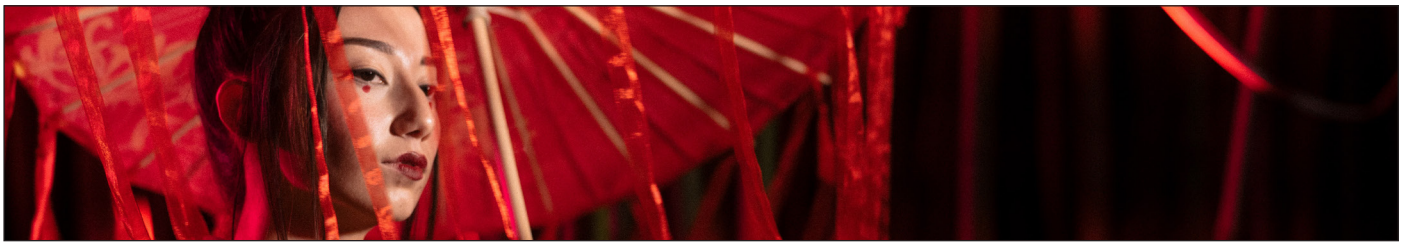

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The visual performance of online identity: Instructor presence and persona across tools and settings

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Abstract

This article uses instructor identity and presence as a proxy for exploring how visual elements are used to convey identity in online settings. By focusing on ways identity can be visually communicated within online course spaces (e.g., photos, graphical elements) and communications (e.g., use of memes and emoji), along with the effects of identity elements performed in other public online spaces (e.g., social media profiles), we show the complex and distributed ways that people perform identity. Instructors serve as a model for students, who in turn follow these cues and learn the boundaries of how to appropriately perform their own professional online identities. Implications for instructor professional development, student application of visual identity skills, and future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Who is the instructor? What do they look like? What kind of person are they? Will I relate well to this person? These are natural questions for a student to ponder upon enrolling in a course. Implicit in these questions may be curiosity about whether an instructor will be friendly or stern, humorous or serious, shy or gregarious. Most people have an image in their heads of what an instructor looks like, based on some

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combination of past experience and stereotypes. Their initial impressions of an instructor may shape their initial attitudes toward the class.

Consider the following interactions:

> The year is 1997. It is the first day of class. Students file into the classroom and take seats. A young woman wearing a black sweater and striped skirt sits on a chair near the front of the room, paging through a notebook. Students in the second row start to have a conversation about the professor. When will he show up? Does anyone know who he is? When the clock ticks 8 am, the young woman in the striped skirt stands and welcomes the students. She is their professor. The students clearly are surprised as the young woman assumes her position at the front of the class, but they quickly adjust to the situation as she starts to provide both visual and verbal cues that she is in charge.
>
> Seven years later, that same woman meets a man in a cafe. He asks what she does for a living. "I teach," she says. He assumes she means kindergarten. She says no, she doesn't work with small children. He next guesses high school. She corrects him, sharing that she teaches at the nearby university. He then asks if she is a graduate student. When she corrects him again, and says she is a professor, he tells her she does not look like a professor. Upon further discussion, he shares that professors look old and serious, don't smile much, and are probably male.

Both of these interactions, which represent just two incidents among many when the first author found her professional status challenged based on her appearance, are examples of how people form mental images of an instructor. In the first instance, the students actively sought to identify their instructor, anticipating an imminent presence of someone in that role. The visual cue of someone sitting at the front of the room at the instructor's desk was not sufficient to overcome the students' expectations of what an instructor looks like. In the second, the individual could not visualize that the job of the person sitting across the table was professor. Collectively, these tales demonstrate how people develop a mental image of what an instructor should look like. That image may vary by discipline or grade level, and may be based on stereotypes or past experiences, but nonetheless shapes the learner's expectations.

Switching to the instructor perspective, aside from appearing clean and professional – both subjective judgments themselves -- what one looks like may seem unimportant or unrelated to one's ability to teach. Instructors are expected to be experts in their disciplines who can guide students toward attaining the instructional objectives. One would assume that the instructor is the expert in the learning discipline, and expertise would be communicated via content and learning-related interactions; students have described expertise as a function of many factors, including time, practice, and metacognitive awareness (Bertram, Leak, Sayre, Kustusch, & Franklin, 2016). Instructor appearance nonetheless plays a role in how students perceive and react to an instructor (Feldmann, 2001). In a classroom setting, students may note the instructor's attire, age, facial expression, physical demeanor, hairstyle, and clothing. These attributes are not related to either subject matter or pedagogical expertise, but students nonetheless may view them as markers of time, practice, or metacognitive awareness. Appearance may also affect how students perceive instructors in other dimensions such as approachability (Lukavsky, Butler, & Harden, 1995), competence (Roach, 1997), or credibility (Lavin, Davies, & Carr, 2010; Lightstone, Francis, & Kocum, 2011). In sum, while an instructor's appearance is likely unrelated to their capability, it nonetheless affects student perceptions.

Physical appearance, as discussed above, provides a solid entrée into exploring visual components of identity. However, appearance is not the only source of visual information about instructors available to students. Instructors provide rich cues about their personality, beliefs, and preferences through the graphical choices that they make when designing course spaces and learning materials as well as every time they use an icon, logo, banner graphic, photograph, comic, meme or other visual element. In this chapter, we explore the ways that instructor identity is communicated in online environments via visuals. We begin with a brief overview of how online learning technology has progressed over the last two decades, focusing specifically on the impact hardware, software, and bandwidth developments have had on the ability to create, share, and receive visual information. Then we address the role that visuals play in establishing a sense of presence and identity in online courses. Next, we discuss the different ways students may encounter visual information about their instructor's identity — whether shared with them intentionally or otherwise — through a variety of course-related means. Finally, we explore the ways that instructor identity is created through visuals that appear outside the shell or context of a course, and conclude with implications for other contexts.

2. Visual elements of online learning

2.1 Black text on a grey background

When using visuals to communicate online identity, instructors are constrained by the available tools. When the first author began teaching online in the 1990s, options for sharing visuals were limited. Web pages defaulted to black text on a grey background, and attractive formatting options were relatively scarce. In terms of usability, the best design option usually involved retaining the black text and grey background. Instructors could post learning content on static web pages, although it was not unusual for most online course content to take the form of a physical textbook or similar materials. In other words, the online course was heavily reliant on content materials that existed offline. Most online courses were taught asynchronously, using some combination of discussion forums and email lists for interaction. Text chat tools were the option for synchronous communication. Real-time video interactions required teleconferencing tools, and students often took such courses from special centers. Most home and office computers and internet connections were not sufficient to support reliable video-based broadcasting and interactions.

Some, but not all, discussion tools offered user profiles and supported message formatting, which might include the ability to share an uploaded photograph. However, uploading a photograph was often still a task for the technology savvy individual who had server space and who could use a file transfer protocol (ftp) program to transfer an image file to a server, sort out the location where the file was now stored, and use html to reference that location on a web page or in a discussion board message.

Getting the photo ready to upload to an online tool was another matter altogether. Few people had digital cameras, and the process of getting a photo from a camera to an Internet-ready format typically required a cable and fussy proprietary software for downloading the photo and resizing and saving it. The last step was necessary because many users would be accessing the image via a dial-up modem; patience was required to wait for all but the smallest photos to load. In sum, during the early days of online learning the visual landscape was sparse and low resolution, and required patience for both the creator and the consumer.

2.2 Visuals in contemporary online learning

Contemporary online courses are hosted in learning management systems (LMS), which incorporate various types of learning content, support course communications and assessment activities, and facilitate administrative course functions. LMS tools can seamlessly embed videos, which have become a popular pedagogical tool featuring content ranging from instructor lectures (Crook & Schofield, 2017) to resources found on YouTube and Vimeo (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). The degree to which a course is rich in instructional visuals is dependent on the instructor and instructional designers' choices, and not limited by technological affordances.

Learning management systems are not the only advancement that has supported the use of visuals in online learning. In twenty short years, we have shifted to a time when most online instructors and learners have a smartphone in their hands, with which they can use the internal selfie camera to take their own photograph — or several, if they want to select the best pose — use a filter to optimize it, and email, text, or upload it somewhere in a matter of seconds. Those without a smartphone likely have access to a webcam that will serve a similar purpose. Recording and sharing a video is similarly easy using tools integrated into most phones and computers.

Still, in many contemporary online learning environments, text-based messages remain the default means of interpersonal communication. Learning management systems offer discussion forums, chat channels, blogs, and wikis. In each of these tools, text is the default medium for sharing a message. Many students and instructors find the keyboards sitting under their fingertips to be the simplest and most comfortable means of expressing themselves. Images, videos, and other files may be embedded within discussion messages or wiki pages, but the interface can be confusing or off-putting for students and instructors with lower technology skills and self-efficacy. Even in synchronous classes, where all participants interact in real time and could use both audio and video channels to communicate, students often default to largely text-based communications via the chat window, perhaps punctuated with the occasional emoticon or emoji.

3. Social presence and instructor identity

Instructor identity is developed over time, and reflects a combination of one's beliefs, personal experiences, and schooling experiences (Bukor, 2014). Identity has visual components – one study found that student teachers first considered the visual image of a teacher before considering what it means to actually be a teacher (Ó Gallchóir,

O'Flaherty, & Hinchion, 2018) – as well as elements such as personality, culture, and social roles and responsibilities. Identities are co-constructed via interaction partners, meaning that in a class both students and instructors have the power to assert, accept, and reject communications related to each other's identity (Delahunty, 2012; Dennen, 2011; Vanek, King, & Bigelow, 2018). Identity reflects place, too; instructors who have established classroom identities consider how their personalities and traits translate to an online medium when they make the shift to technology-enhanced learning environments (Richardson & Alsup, 2015).

To communicate one's identity in an online course, whether through text or visuals, is to have social presence. Social presence is a construct that has been defined in many ways, with most definitions sharing the idea of perceiving another person, or having a sense of a person "being there" (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). Presence is not dichotomous (e.g., perceived of not), but instead exists along a continuum and is performed in qualitatively varied ways. The presence that an instructor establishes in an online course can shape whether students orient toward an instructor or their peers, as well as the degree to which students feel compelled to participate (Dennen, 2005). Cultural factors also may affect the development and perception of identity in online learning settings (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014). Although the ability to learn without constraints of synchronous time and shared physical space is considered an advantage for many learners, the uniting of diverse individuals in the online learning space can lead some people to feel that they belong or are othered due to their identity (Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

In online learning contexts, participants may struggle to feel the presence of others, challenged by the transactional distance, or the perception of space separating the instructor and students (Moore, 1993). In early online courses, technological limitations inhibited the development of rich visual presence (Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Lee, & Su, 2005), but even now perceptions of distance can be exacerbated by limited visual communication or identity cues in online courses with preset content and primarily text-based learning interactions (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017). Instructors in one study noted how the shift to online learning and technology-based approaches that automate instructor functions increased the instructor's sense of distance from their students and began to change their sense of identity in this context (Glover, Jones Myers, & Collins, 2018). Students also feel the disconnect, as evidenced in the vast body of literature about how to develop a sense of community among online learners (e.g., Rovai, 2000, 2002).

Although online instructors do not occupy the same type of visual space as instructors who stand at the front of a physical classroom, students still expect their instructors to play several roles in their learning process (administrative, pedagogical, social, and technological; Berge, 1995; Bonk, Kirkley, Hara, & Dennen, 2001; Gómez-Rey, Barbera, & Fernández-Navarro, 2018), and through these roles to express their identity. In particular, the instructor's social role is important for developing rapport with students (Liu et al., 2005), who like to have a strong sense of their instructor's personality (Trammell & Aldrich, 2016). Students also are concerned with the pedagogical role, and want to be assured that their instructor is competent, clear, and can make the course content relevant (Goldman, Cranmer, Sollitto, Labelle, & Lancaster, 2017). Instructor attitude toward the course also affects student perceptions of instructor identity (Özgüngör & Duru, 2015), and is established through instructor tone at the start of a course (Eskine & Hammer, 2017). Collectively, these attributes are aligned with authenticity (Johnson & LaBelle, 2017). Instructor self-disclosure is valued by students, but considered a luxury compared to characteristics directly related to course content (Goldman et al., 2017). In short, students express greater concern with identity elements that align with the course content and teaching activities than identity elements from other contexts, although competence in other instructor roles may be equally tied to instructor identity and the student experience.

Even if students do not expect instructor self-disclosure, they still want to perceive the person who teaches them. Richardson and Lowenthal (2017) build on Dennen's (2007) notion of instructor persona to share various empirically supported ways that online instructors might make themselves appear "more real" to their students. Among the list of persona-developing actions provided by Richardson and Lowenthal (2017) is a single visual-based one: sharing a photograph. However, this does not mean that profile photos, which are discussed later in this chapter, are the sole visual means of developing one's persona. They are, however, a very important one for perceiving the social presence of a specific person.

From personal experience, the first author can attest to the psychological importance of sensing a "real" instructor. An early online course experience with an instructor known only as "Mr. Finance," a faceless facilitator with a generic name, was unsettling. "Mr. Finance" knew her name, saw her profile photo, and assessed her performance in the course. In return, she had no identifying details for him. She did not trust this persona-less figure, and guessed that he might actually be a collective of people interchangeably

grading student assignments, much like how a secretarial pool collectively serves executives on an as-needed basis.

Alternately, with contemporary technological advancements, Mr. Finance might be a social bot. Social bots, such as the ones used in online customer service instant messaging, might interact with students on topics related to course content and procedure. Although people tend to anthropomorphize bots, and social bots are programmed from models of natural instructor interactions (Schmulian & Coetzee, 2018), social bots are focused on a specific human-created task, which means they lack the depth and complexity of humans. They are unable to embody a complex identity and interact effectively beyond the task they are programmed to do (Grimme, Preuss, Adam, & Trautmann, 2017).

Instructor presence remains an important part of cultivating an identity within a course. While presence is considered a positive attribute for online instructors, presence is not always positively received, and may not yield a strong sense of instructor identity. In short, instructors must be present in order to communicate an identity, but the specific identity that their presence communicates will depend on their choices for various course elements.

4. Visual identity and course elements

Instructor identity can be communicated either directly or indirectly via a variety of course elements. Choices like details shared on a course profile, including profile photos, and emoji, which serve as a proxy for facial expressions are deliberate attempts to communicate one's expertise, demeanor and mood. In contrast, choices made about design elements such as typeface, color, and templates may appear on the surface to be aesthetic, but still provide clues to the course designer's personality or a specific mood or sentiment the instructor wishes to evoke.

4.1 Visual identity directly communicated through course elements

Several course elements are designed to explicitly communicate elements of instructor identity. Instructor profiles are one such element, and these typically include a profile photo. Many learning systems carry over that profile photo to other parts of the course, displaying it wherever there is instructor communication. As a result, when students read the instructor's words they may also see the instructor's face, thereby narrowing the transactional distance a little bit. Additionally, many systems facilitate the addition of emoji in the midst of or attached to text-based messages. These emoji communicate a sentiment, similar to seeing a gesture or an expression on an individual's face. In this section, we discuss how these elements communicate instructor identity.

4.1.1 LMS profiles

Most learning management systems (LMS) have a user profile function. These profiles usually are set up by filling in details on constrained forms that prompt the user to share personal information. Most of this information is text-based, such as name, position, and contact information. An option to upload a single profile photo tends to be the only explicitly visual option, and even then, the photos may have a constrained file size and shape, such as a one-inch square. Complex images do not display well in such tiny proportion, and this size limitation favors supplying a close-up head shot for the profile image. To that end, the profile form is designed to push users to follow conventions.

Within the profile, instructors may have another way to share their identity with students: by linking in their various other online profiles. The profile form may provide space for sharing one's web site or a social media profile. The choice of what to share is up to the individual, who may consider what students might think about their instructor if they saw glimpses of their instructor in another context. Both social media profiles and the issue of context collapse are discussed at greater length below.

4.1.2 Profile photos

Photos are important visual elements of profiles. For example, in an eye-tracking study, profile photos attracted the most attention on Facebook (Kessler, 2011). In another study, people made inferences about character based on brief exposure to facial appearance in photos (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Profile photos tend to follow a standard format, showing a single person posing for the camera (Hum et al., 2011), although profiles photos that include other people demonstrate that the individual has successful relationships and is considered agreeable (Hudson & Gore, 2017). Profile photos provide robust identity cues through eye contact, facial expression, body posture, clothing, and background, and influence how people perceive each other (White, Sutherland, & Burton, 2017). Sharing these photos has been found to have positive effects on course outcomes (Imlawi, Gregg, & Karimi, 2015).

Although the relevance of physical appearance to teaching ability and performance is questionable at best, students nonetheless react to and comment upon visual perceptions of their instructors. For female instructors in

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particular, physical appearance is noted by students in course evaluations (Mitchell & Martin, 2018). A small body of research has focused on student perception of instructors based on elements of their appearance as well as their demeanor. Professional dress has been positively associated with student perceptions of instructor credibility (Lavin et al., 2010; Lightstone et al., 2011; Roach, 1997), and in turn has been found to influence student behavior (Lavin et al., 2010; Roach, 1997).

Choosing a profile photo can be a daunting task. While some people may be rather matter-of-fact and select a standard, institutional head shot, others may get caught up in thoughts about their appearance in a particular photo. Sometimes, instructors have little choice of profile photo, when systems default to their official institutional photo, often the same one featured on the institution's web site or used for official identification cards. This use of a common photograph across contexts ensures a consistent and officially-sanctioned visual identity is portrayed.

Even when choice is offered, it may be constrained by institutional rules requiring that a "passport style" photo of the individual be provided. In other words, such specifications call for a front-facing photograph focused on the individual's head. No distracting elements should be in the photograph (e.g., hats, props). The background should be neutral. The facial expression should be somewhere between a blank stare and a slight smile. These rules, if enforced, prevent people from being creative with their profile photos. They emphasize a direct photographic representation over a visual expression of identity or affiliation. In other words, the implication is that a profile photo is intended to help people identify each other should they meet in a face-to-face setting. It is not intended to actually help people get to know one another.

Profile photos might make some instructors more vulnerable to student critique in an online context than they would be in the absence of any visual presence. Prior studies have shown that students are more critical of female instructors than they are of male instructors. These studies have disguised the instructor's gender by using a different name and found that student opinion changes with differently gendered names (MacNell, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2014). Lisa Brown might become L. Brown, or even just Dr. Brown. Whereas names can be adjusted in this manner, it is more difficult — and also not standard practice — to obscure gender in profile photos. That noted, individuals are often quite savvy about how to portray themselves based on their social status. For example, a study of journalist's profile photos showed that both women and freelancers were more likely than men and those in full-time employ to portray themselves as serious in profile photos, suggesting that they were using the photos to be competitive on the job market (Carpenter, Kanver, & Timmons, 2017).

Research on profile photos confirms that people make judgments about other people based on their physical appearance, clothing, accessories, and other elements visible in the photograph. Scholarly profile photos were rated in one study, with a focus on the perceived professionalism and attractiveness of the individual (Tsou, Bowman, Sugimoto, Lariviere, & Sugimoto, 2016). Findings showed that male and older individuals were considered more professional in their photos, whereas women were most likely to be considered attractive. Combined with other studies of how women's photos are perceived on social media, which suggest that stereotypes still prevail (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013), this finding suggests that women might need to rely more than men do on dress and facial expressions to communicate their professionalism. Some of the visual markers of professionalism in a profile photo included neutral colored clothing and glasses (Tsou et al., 2016). In contrast, selfies, lab coats, graduation clothing, and athletic clothing were considered less professional. Together, these studies and others in this area demonstrate why instructors may wish to think about the identity they wish to communicate to students before selecting a profile photograph.

A final consideration in a profile photo is the smile. Smiles have been deemed a universal indicator of positive affect (Cross & Pressman, 2020), although in some cultures they may be received with skepticism (Krys et al., 2016). Early findings from a study in progress by the second author (Arslan, 2019) suggest that academics tend to refrain from smiling in official profile photos, or maintain what has been termed a low-intensity or closed-mouth smile (Gironzetti, Attardo, & Pickering, 2016). They are more likely to offer more generous, high intensity smiles on their social media profile photos, although in some instances the same photo is used across platforms. The importance of the smile as it is received by the viewer in different contexts should not be underestimated. A professor might choose an unsmiling photograph for an official profile photo, believing that the photo conveys intellect and a serious approach to work. Whereas that expression may be positively received in a research context, in a teaching context a student might think the unsmiling professor is aloof, stern, or unapproachable.

4.1.3 Emoticon and emoji

Emoticons are iconic representations of a word created by characters on the keyboard. The smiley emoticon :-)

is widely recognized, as is its counterpart, the frowning emoticon :-(. Like their name suggests, they are icons that express emotion. Emoji, a term derived from the Japanese terms for picture + character, are pictograms that express an idea through a simple graphic. Although emoji are relatively new, they have roots in older forms of communication such as cuneiform script and hieroglyphics (Alshenqeeti, 2016).

Emoticons and emoji provide instructors with an easy non-verbal way of communicating their feelings about a topic to students. A simple icon can feel like a more natural way of expressing pleasure, for example, than making a stilted statement like "This makes me happy." In face-to-face environments, many individuals rely on a facial expression rather than a verbal one to communicate these sentiments. Not all emoji represent facial expressions or human gestures, but those are among the most commonly used emoji (Lu et al., 2016).

Emoji are often believed to have fairly universal meanings (Alshenqeeti, 2016) that transcend language, but in practice they may not. When emoji are used, the sender and recipient still must agree upon the meaning in order for communication to be successful (Doiron, 2018). In our experiences, some emoji have more consistent meaning across people and cultures than others. For example, the simple smiling emoji is taken as a positive indicator – the sender is thought to be smiling – whereas the frowning emoji is a sign that the sender is upset. Consider three versions of the same sentence provided as feedback to a student (see Figure 1). The first sentence is plain and emotionless. The second, with the addition of a smile, feels encouraging. The third, ending in a frown, suggests disappointment. The placement of the emoji, at the end of the sentence, is the norm for most communication (Kralj Novak, Smailovic, Sluban, & Mozetic, 2015). However, cultural and even generational differences can lead to different interpretations. Youth in 2021 have co-opted the skull emoji as an expression of humor (e.g., *I'm dying of laughter*), and consider older generations that still use the laughing/crying and rolling on the floor laughing emoji to be out of touch (Yurieff, 2021).

Emoji have been incorporated into learning activities in a variety of ways. In one class, a game of emoji Pictionary was developed (Brody & Caldwell, 2019). Another instructor created a lexicon of emoji to be used for providing feedback to her students (Romig, 2015). When looking at the emoji and their ascribed meaning, in many instances it is possible to envision the instructor grading a paper and having that same look – whether quizzical, excited, or bored – on their face. Essentially, emoji can serve as a proxy for facial expressions.

Figure 1. Feedback samples with different emotions.

1. Next time be sure to include the full reference list.
2. Next time be sure to include the full reference list. ☺
3. Next time be sure to include the full reference list. ☹

4.2 Visual identity indirectly communicated through course design elements

A course design can feel sterile and impersonal, can appear branded and official, or can exude personality. In online courses, instructors can eschew any form of visual customization, leaving default visual elements in place; accept and apply the institutional visual identity, or choose custom elements. It is the latter case that most clearly provides information about the instructor's identity, although one might argue that lack of visual design suggests a preference for minimalism or a lack of interest or effort, and that adopting institutional visual design elements is a sign of school spirit or pride.

4.2.1 Typeface and color

Words and photographs support communication and identity formation in online courses, but they are not the sole force that communicates who we are and what we do. Instructors also communicate meaning about themselves through many of the graphical elements we choose when teaching. Every choice to switch from a default typeface or color reflects something about the individual. Consider this example from the first author:

> A young girl I know has begun typing reports for school. Through her, I have come to realize how ingrained in my head certain rules about typing reports are: Times New Roman. Black. 12 pt. APA formatting. I follow a set of standards in my professional writing and correspondence, and these standards remove any element of personal visual communication, leaving the focus solely on the words that I share. This girl typed a report about Pueblos. It used a fanciful font. At the end she shared a photo of a puppy and an image of a unicorn. The font and the graphics were not at all related to the topic – they were clearly distractors – but they provided a reminder of just how powerful these visual elements can be. If all you did was glance at the report for a moment, without reading the words, you would not be the least bit surprised to learn that it was written by a fourth-grade girl.

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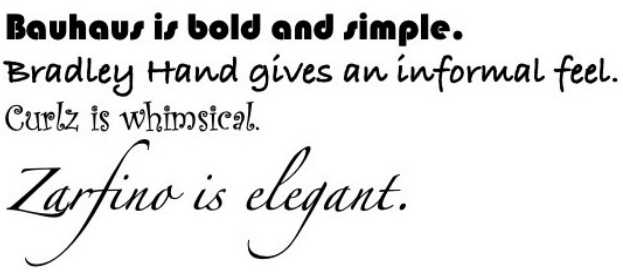
Figure 2. Typeface examples.



Typefaces are thought to have their own personalities (Brumberger, 2003). Course materials are expected to appear in a standard typeface, like Times New Roman or Arial. When stylized fonts appear in course materials, they evoke a feeling. In Figure 2, each typeface is unique, and can complement or detract from the message being communicated. The Bradley Hand example shown above might be good for instances when a sense of personal communication is desired (Mackiewicz, 2005), but it would impede readability and be considered unprofessional for lecture notes. Instructors do not typically vary typeface much within the main body of course materials, striving instead for readability, but may choose these forms of stylized text as a proxy for a signature or for use in a banner or cover graphic.

Similarly, there are default color expectations in most learning environments. Black text on a white background is the standard for typed documents. This combination provides strong contrast and prints well. Institutional colors are popular for templates and accents, and communicate that the instructor aligns part of their professional identity with their employer. Other colors may provide insight into personal preferences. Although "no single meaning exists for any color, even within a particular culture" (Fine et al., 1998, p. 453), color nonetheless evokes both emotion and meaning.

4.2.2 LMS templates

Most learning management systems have a default course template designed to support readability and navigation. From a color perspective, these templates are likely to use a palette with good contrast both on screen and when printed, and may reflect official institutional colors. When instructors do not change the default settings for a course shell in a learning management system, students learn relatively little information about the instructor. Sometimes an institution mandates that all courses and instructors use the same template, preventing an instructor from showing their individual design preferences (unless, of course, the instructor uses a different template, which would suggest a rebellious attitude). However, some institutions allow for customization of some course areas, and choices that an instructor makes – or does not make – can send a message to students.

When limits are set within a learning management system, the rationale may be rooted in cognitive learning theory. A consistent design across courses will mean that students do not need to pay much attention to the interface, thereby reducing extraneous cognitive load for students. Conversely, when students must navigate a different interface in each course, much time can be lost looking for the correct button or section of the course. Still, there are some visual elements that can be changed without causing undue stress on a student's cognitive load. One is color, which has been discussed in greater detail above. Another customizable element that can be changed without undue stress on cognitive load is the cover photo. The cover photo is the banner graphic that appears at the top of the screen when a student logs in to a course. Many instructors do not change their cover photos. Some do not know that it is possible. However, a custom, themed image conveys information about the course – and potentially, by association, the instructor – every time a student enters the course shell.

4.2.3 Course materials

Course materials may not seem like a likely source of visual information about instructor identity, but when they are instructor-created they may showcase an instructor's personality. Powerpoint slides are one example. Templates contain distinct visual design elements and text styles. An institutional template may be viewed in a neutral manner, especially when it is the standard for courses at the institution, or may be considered a mark of professionalism. Colorful templates may be perceived as bold or playful. A lack of a template may communicate a non-nonsense or utilitarian approach to learning. Finally, custom-created templates showcase an instructor's creative side and also communicate effort.

Lecture videos are another form of course material. They provide a direct opportunity to communicate the instructor's identity, and give the students a sense that their instructor is present, in a continuous episodic sense, in their course (Crook & Schofield, 2017). Prior research has found that students respond positively to seeing their online instructors in lecture videos (Draus, Curran, & Trempus, 2014). In particular, students with low technology self-efficacy may benefit from the ability to see their instructors (Lyons, Reysen, & Pierce, 2012). Not all lecture videos are created

equal. Videos that show the instructor's face have more of a personal feel than videos consisting solely of narrated slides. Thus, while an instructor might feel that slides are more germane to communicating topical information about a course, they should not overlook the opportunity to communicate presence by also showing their face in an instructional video.

5. Visual identity through course interactions

An instructor may communicate identity through visuals across different course times and contexts. In this section we discuss the role of visuals in communicating instructor identity during online course introductions, and on an ongoing basis throughout the course.

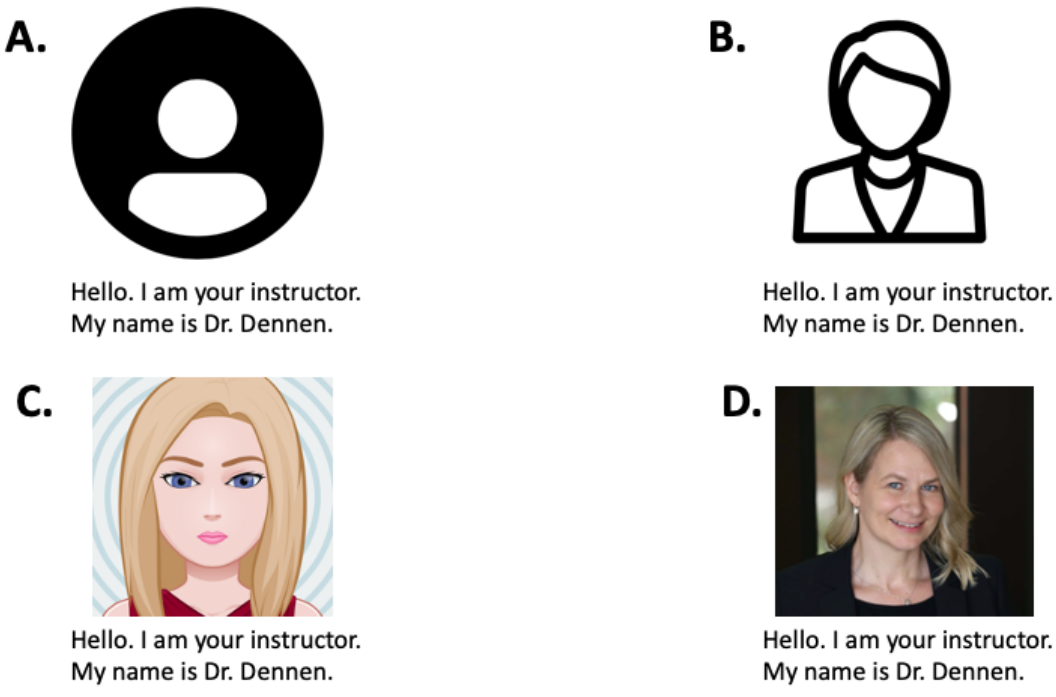
5.1 Course introductions

The first day of class provides an opportunity for introductions and is the time when students typically form their first impressions of an instructor. In a survey of college students, Eskine and Hammer (2017) found that students respond well to instructors who start their class with an accessible tone, and poorly to those who appear uncaring or intimidating at the start of a class.

In an online class, introductions – whether made via email or on a discussion forum – provide a way for each member of the class to begin to communicate their identity. Students typically follow the instructor's model for how to post (Dennen, 2005), setting the overall tone for a class.

With that in mind, consider the four introductions presented in Figure 3. The text is the same for each one. Little can be learned from this text beyond the name of the person teaching the class. The image accompanying the text augments the text in some of the examples. In example A, a genderless default profile icon appears. This instructor has either neglected to share or chosen to not share their image with students. Example B similarly has a generic profile icon, but this time the icon has a somewhat female appearance. It is uncertain if the icon represents a specific gender by design or by default. In Example C, an avatar appears as the profile photo. The avatar may not be an accurate visual representation of the instructor, but is nonetheless a personally selected representation of the instructor – perhaps the instructor idealized. If the avatar looks like an actual person, then the realism of the avatar will typically lead the students to infer that it is a reasonable likeness of their instructor. Finally, in Example D, a photograph is included. In the photograph, eye contact is made with the viewer. The instructor begins to feel more like a real person. A student could be confident that if she arrived at the instructor's office on campus for a meeting, she would be able to recognize the instructor.

Figure 3. Four examples of introductions with profile images.



https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.9e975efc

The above examples incorporate profile-style images, which were discussed in depth earlier in this chapter, but introductions need not be verbal and visual replications of a standard user profile. Whereas generic user profiles are often expected to communicate an official identity, introduction posts can be both more personal and more personalized. Embedded photographs might be included, providing a less formal glimpse of the instructor or even a visual of something that the instructor associates with their identity. The things shared in the introduction, both verbal and visual, might be chosen specifically because they somehow relate to the course topic. For example, when the first author teaches learning theory she sometimes shares a photo of her dog being trained. In contrast, when she teaches learning analytics she might share a visual of data collected from her fitness tracker.

5.2 Ongoing course interactions

Throughout the duration of a course, instructors have the opportunity to interact with students through announcements, and learning activities. Although announcements are primarily about administrative and structural elements of a course, and learning activities are focused on achieving objectives, instructor persona can be communicated throughout both. In a visual sense, this may be done by sharing either personal photographs or images that are personally meaningful. Students might learn that an instructor has a good sense of humor when comics or memes are shared. Alternately, an instructor could display an artistic side or a love of nature by sharing relevant images. Relevance, in this context, may reflect either a direct connection to the course content, to current events, or to course administrative issues.

For most people, a personal computer communicates a great deal of identity information while in the midst of conducting routine actions. Thus, instructors also should consider how they communicate identity inadvertently when screen sharing. If an instructor uses their own computer for a webinar and shares the screen, they immediately communicate information through the visuals on their personal machine. Choice of desktop image and screensaver may provide glimpses of personal interests. The organization of files on the desktop (or lack thereof) communicates information about workflow and habits. Delving further, if an instructor were to open up a web browser with amazon.com, students would immediately see images of the individual's recent searches as well as recommended products. Visits to many web sites would deliver advertising images tailored to the individual user.

6. Other online presences

Although instructors and students are connected through courses, the space and materials through which a course is taught are not the only ways in which students glean information about their instructors. As with most contemporary situations, the solution for finding information involves a search engine. Prior studies have confirmed that students look up information online about their instructors prior to and during a class (Dennen & Burner, 2017). An Internet search for an instructor's name is likely to yield a wide variety of information about that person, particularly if they have a fairly unique name and are active either as scholars or with online life in general. Two of the most common forms of online information that these searches yield are personal web sites or pages, and social media profiles. Mixed in with those are photographs posted by other people (e.g., at professional or social events), and scholarly artifacts (e.g., publications, lecture videos, slides).

6.1 Web sites and pages

Personal web sites or pages provide instructors with the opportunity to present themselves to a broad audience. That audience may include current students, prospective students, colleagues, administrators, potential future employers, collaborators, and the mass media. Web pages, through their design, communicate various attributes of their owner's identity, both explicitly through their content and implicitly via small graphical elements (e.g., color, lines) that are united on a page (Thorlacius, 2010). The content that instructors include on their web sites can vary widely. Some merely duplicate their curriculum vitae on a web page, whereas others seize the opportunity to share informal updates about their accomplishments, personal interests (e.g., books, music), and personal information about their family and travels. Images make web sites interesting to browse, and it is not unusual to see photographs of an instructor giving a talk, visiting a location relevant to the topic that they teach, conducting research, or with their family. These types of images expand upon the narrower instructor identity that may be portrayed in the class context.

6.2 Social media profiles

Social media profiles can be rich with visual information. They are constructed via a combination of elements that together communicate information about the individual. Some of these elements are text-based, such as a username and biographic description, whereas others are visual, including profile images and shared photographs. Other identity

information that may be shared includes contact information (e.g., email, URLs), geographic location, networked connections, and things that the individual likes (Dennen, 2015). In a social media setting, identity is performed online through both direct actions to modify one's own profiles as well as through one's visible relationships with others (Cover, 2012). The default presentation for most social media profiles incorporates both permanently present information and a feed of recent user activity. These activity feeds can include items shared by the individual or by their friends. In some instances, they also provide an overview of recent user actions (e.g., joining a group or favoriting an image).

Social media accounts also provide information about affiliations. Affiliations are the groups of people in which we claim membership in or are otherwise aligned with. As an academic, instructors are affiliated with the institutions for which they teach, and with their various alma maters. Other affiliations vary. People belong to community and faith organizations. They participate in hobbies and sports. They read, watch tv and movies, and listen to music. They have family and friends, and also favorite things. All of these affiliations flesh out a sense of a person's identity, and most of them reflect information that is not by default shared in a class setting. Some of this information may be private or inappropriate for sharing in the class setting, although these are often personal and subjective judgments.

Social media tools typically offer users a sliding scale of privacy settings. In the most locked down and private mode, only approved people can see that the user has an account. In contrast, an open account would allow anyone on the Internet to see what a person has shared and what has been shared about them. Open accounts have both advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage is the ability to be easily found and connected to by one's friends and acquaintances. The main disadvantage is the same; sometimes people do not want to be found by certain other people.

Consider the following scenario: Joseph is an instructor at the local university. He is also an avid guitarist, volunteers at the local animal shelter, and is a husband and father. He knows many people across different contexts. He uses social media to share photos of his spouse and children with his extended family; to organize events among his guitar-playing friends; to get and share updates related to the animals available for adoption at the shelter; to maintain a connection with his college friends; and to build a 'parent network' among the parents of his children's friends. Joseph leaves his basic social network profile settings open in order to make it easy for some of these acquaintances to find and connect to him. This means that his basic profile is also visible to his students, should they seek information about him online. His students will learn about his volunteer work, his hobbies, and his family activities.

This scenario is an example of context collapse, a phenomenon in which the parts of a person's life that are typically kept separate come together. Context collapse is an issue that may concern some instructors, who are aware that their personal online self-disclosure among family and friends may inadvertently share with students' information that is not typically provided in a professional or educational setting. In visual terms, this might include photographs of themselves, their homes, their friends and families, and leisure activities they engage in (Sarapin & Morris, 2015). In some instances, individuals may try to conceal their identity online in order to avoid uncomfortable context collapse via collision, or the unintentional connecting of contexts (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Pseudonymous and anonymous identities are the two alternates to real name identities, with pseudonyms serving as the option for someone who wishes to perform a coherent and identifiable alternate identity (Dennen, 2015). Individuals who use pseudonyms might also choose an avatar to provide a visual representation of self without showing their face.

Context collapse is not always a negative thing. Some individuals may wish to cultivate an open persona and invite everyone in their networks to potentially interact. When context collapse occurs via collusion (the intentional connecting of contexts) (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014), instructors should take deliberate efforts to facilitate the connection through their name and visual identity. These individuals should consider how their main identifiers – name and profile photo – are connected across platforms (Brigham, 2016). Using the same name variant (e.g., inclusive of full first and middle name or initials; given name versus nickname) and profile image will confirm identity and connect profiles across platforms.

An alternate approach for instructors is to maintain multiple accounts. This solution works for individuals who may wish to have some sort of general, somewhat impersonal social media connection with students and others in their professional sphere and a more personal connection with their friends and family. Bossio and Sacco (2017), in their study of journalists' identities on social media, discuss how it becomes necessary to choose between having professional-only accounts that portray a streamlined, intentional identity, or allowing visual elements of the personal and professional to merge comfortably in a public space. There is no single or correct approach for an instructor to take. The important thing is that instructors maintain a high sense of

awareness of and control over the identity they communicate via social media and its visibility to their students.

7. Conclusion

In this article we have addressed a multitude of ways that online instructors intentionally and inadvertently communicate their identity to students via visuals. Instructor identity helps contribute to instructor presence within a course, and this presence is important for helping to reduce the transactional distance associated with online learning. Students at a distance may be reticent to communicate with an instructor who feels unfamiliar or whose identity is unknown. Profile photographs are perhaps the simplest way to help quickly establish a baseline sense of who an instructor is, combined with relevant biographical or professional information. Throughout a course, students will glean additional information about instructors through both their visual design decisions and visuals shared throughout the course of instruction. Students who seek additional information about their instructors are likely to find that information via personal web sites and social media profiles. For this reason, instructors should periodically examine their broader digital footprints to ensure that the image portrayed via an Internet search is one that they are willing to have students see.

7.1 Implications and future research

Educational institutions may prepare their faculty for teaching online from pedagogical and technological perspectives, but overlook the importance of the instructor's social role and how instructors establish online identity. Prior research shows how changes in technology adoption and learning environments affect not only instructor activities, but also their perceptions of self as actors in a digital environment (Avidov-Ungar & Forkosh-Baruch, 2018; Jonker, März, & Voogt, 2018). For institutions, this idea has professional development implications. Faculty may need assistance to understand the role identity, including visual components, plays in establishing their presence in technology-enhanced learning settings. Additionally, it has implications for the field of visual literacy, which presently classifies most visual literacy skills in terms of visual writing and reading abilities (Kędra, 2018), but could consider more explicitly address issues related to the visual communication of identity.

Whereas institutional choices and support has implications for instructor professional development, each instructor's choices has implications for how students negotiate issues related to online identity. When students explore identity, they consider who they are right now and who they are to become as a result of their education (Patsarika, 2014). In other words, their experience in higher education prepares them for similar interactions in other contexts. Instructors model identity performance for students, and classes may provide the space for students to explore identity through learning activities (Novakovich, Miah, & Shaw, 2017).

Making the visual construction of one's identity – whether it is their school identity within the class context or their professional and personal identities shared through web sites and social media – a deliberate act rather than an accidental one positions instructors well for being leaders in this area. Consequently, instructors need to develop visual literacy and virtual identity management skills that can be fluidly applied across different online media (Sime & Themelis, 2020). These skills can be passed along to students, who are likely to be lacking in visual literacy skills themselves, even when they are contemporary youth who are heavy users of technology (Brumberger, 2016). What students learn and mirror from their instructors will result in actions, dispositions, and skills that carry over into personal and professional contexts.

In personal contexts, instructors have long been role models for their students, who in turn emulate them in areas such as leadership behavior (Patrick, Scrase, Ahmed, & Tombs, 2009) and personal beliefs (Holt, Ogden, & Durham, 2018). Instructor identity performance can also help challenge stereotypes and provide motivation for underrepresented populations who see their own identity reflected in an instructor (Motha & Varghese, 2016; Olsson & Martiny, 2018). When instructors in online and technology enhanced courses are able to masterfully use visuals to convey an identity that is simultaneously professional and personable, they set a benchmark for others. Online class spaces, in turn, provide relatively safe virtual environments for students to practice visual elements of identity and communication. Instructors and peers then have the opportunity, should they take it, to give students feedback about the effectiveness of their visual presence.

The implications for professional contexts are broad reaching. We could replace instructor and student with manager and employee, and most of the same concepts would hold true. Much of today's corporate interactions, whether within an organization or outside of it, involve some degree of virtual connection. LinkedIn profiles provide an opportunity to perform one's professional identity, as do personal web sites. Students are told that when they seek jobs, prospective employers will look up their online profiles to glean information about them. Employee directories may be constrained and leave little option for personalization,

but internally and informally employees may have opportunity to perform their identity through visual acts such as photos and artwork shared in their workspaces.

Future research might explore not only how students perceive their instructors, but also the trickle-down effects of instructor visual presence across course areas (e.g., LMS profiles, visual design of course materials, use of emoji) on student use of visuals for identity communication in both personal and professional settings. Additionally, research on whether instructor modeling, stated expectations for students, or explicit instruction about use of visuals is most effective for shaping students' long-term visual behaviors would be useful to determine best practices in online instruction. Findings from studies in these areas could be used to help develop professional development and standards to guide future generations of instructors working in technology-enhanced learning environments.

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