

Paper presented at:

**The 5th Annual Joint University of Liverpool Management School and
Keele University Institute for Public Policy and Management**

**Symposium on Current Developments in Ethnographic Research in the
Social and Management Sciences**

1st- 3rd, September 2010, Queen Mary, University of London

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Abstract:

Masks vs Facebook

People all over the world have different ways of putting on masks. They have been making masks for many different purposes (e. g. rituals, protection, entertainment.) Masks represent many different cultural beliefs and styles – but their purpose and function are similar. Masks provide the best solution, a change of expression of a character, they transform – and the transformation power takes the form of putting on a new face.

This paper will explain why masks are used so often by members of Facebook. Masks are used in Facebook for many different reasons. Facebook is excellent example of a virtual and multicultural community with interesting ethnographic investigative material to expose: Who we are and who we want to be. Masks help to confront the questions of identity.

The problem of mask will be considered from the most basic starting point – the name of the portal relating to the mask, followed by the members main photos as an example of a mask. Types of photo, as types of human mask, suggesting the manner in which they desire to be perceived and identified. Typical ways of how members change the photos (graphic programs, applications e. g. Cartoon me, avatars). Using masks is an easy way for the people to be able to hide and protect the personality. Fictitious accounts of famous people as well as accounts of common persons.

The object of the research will also look at the mask like art within the Facebook community as a kind of auto presentation and just presentation art-

works. A mask is more than just the facial covering, it encompasses the whole works.

Keywords: facebook, masks, hypermasks, e-mask, avatar, video-replicant, cyberpsychology

Masks vs. Facebook

Masks are an ever-present and continuously changeable element of every society, and therefore an analytical look at them and their origin provides accurate depiction of the condition a given community is in. One might say that, paradoxically, masks uncover the true face of a society, which also applies to the internet social groups. From the ethnographic point of view, a virtual community is a kind of communication system, with senders and recipients of the message¹. One of the most popular and best developed Internet sites is Facebook, a perfect example of a virtual, international and multicultural community, providing wide area for ethnographic research. Within this portal, masks, being - among others - profile photos of the users, have been adapted to new circumstances and became imminent. On one hand, masks in this community serve the purpose of self - presentation or identity exposure, on the other hand though they are meant to hide that identity, protect anonymity. It is worth noticing that masks created by the users often become unique works of art.

1. The Facebook Environment

The name “Facebook” refers to the popular concept, present in many cultures, that a face may be read like a book. The Facebook users’ community is by no means some anonymous group, but a place where individuals are seen, recognized and their merits are also acknowledged. A face helps to identify a

¹ See: *Identity and deception in the virtual community*, Judith S. Donath MIT Media Lab In Kollock, P. and Smith, M. (eds). *Communities in Cyberspace*. London: Routledge1998; also: Wilson S.M., Peterson L.C., *The anthropology of online communities*, Anna. Rev. Anthropol.2002, 31:449-67.

human being, testifies to their racial and cultural identity, enables us to recognize others.

Facebook provides numerous self - presentation opportunities; one may remain who they are in real life, but they may also create an anonymous account, thanks to which one becomes unrecognizable to others. Such portals explicitly show the extent to which the life of a modern individual is dependent upon new technologies. The on-line and off-line worlds entwine and become mutually complementary. The dependency on the relatively new virtual environment is particularly important, as one gradually, even if unwillingly, becomes part of databases². It is mentioning that Facebook is not a natural creation, but an artificial, designed community, governed by specified rules, of which the users are often unaware. This, in turn, makes them easily subject to manipulation³. Moreover, in this context one is inclined to refer to Wolfgang Iser's aesthetics, and the situation in which portals, objects, inform people of their aesthetic value, thus creating needs and often also sensations experienced by a given community. An individual takes in the images or some certain fashion thoughtlessly, without reference to his/her own self, without analysis, or even without awareness.

² Xie B., *The mutual shaping of online and offline social relationships*, USA 2008, p. 13.

³ Wagner E., McDermott R., Snyder M.W., *Seven principles for cultivating communities of practice*, HBSWK 2002.

2. The Functions of Masks in Community Portals

Identity performs crucial role in Internet communities, comparable to its significance in the real world. The substantial difference between the virtual and the real is the fact that the former provides space for several parallel identities, anchored within one human body. Therefore, virtual personalities are a kind of creation, a mask, which one may use depending on their mood or needs⁴.

Within the portal, community members present different images of their faces. The profile photo is a specific visual representation of the user, and thus becomes most important. Such photo might be regarded as mask for many reasons: it is frequently corrected with various tools, so that the face would look more beautiful. The photo might also be specially selected, taken in the right surroundings, showing the user in a defined, planned way. Many elements of such picture are artificially added or removed. However, even if the image is not modified, the intentions of the owner are the same. The anthropological aspect emerges here, where an individual is assimilating to a new environment, and values oneself according to this environment's criteria. One undergoes identification and incorporation, thoroughly accepts their new creation and electronic personality, or the designed mask. Interactive participation adds to the definition of human existence and the ongoing identification processes; technology creates phenomena such as: immersion, immateriality, telepresence

⁴ Donath J.S., *Identity and deception in the virtual community in: Communities in Cyberspace*, Kollock P., Smith M., London 1998, s. 1. Gertz C., *The interpretation of cultures*, Basic books 1973.

and telematics⁵. An electronic identity, a mask, may grow and improve similarly to a biological body.

Thus, we differentiate two primary basic functions of masks on Facebook:

- They present the profile, depending on one's intellectual or aesthetic preferences; they might refer to a certain archetype, be the result of individual choices, which contribute to human personality construction in a maze, or the net.
- They present the assets of an individual, in the most favorable way; they may, for instance, emphasize intellectual value (certain selected glass frames, or the right contact lens, sometimes even changing or deepening eye color).

The created images take from narcissism or auto-voyeurism⁶. The mirror reflection, supposed to be the avatar for Internet, has been changed, with new technologies, into an idealized one, and has become one of the most important artificial images anywhere. A slight change in the appearance is not reproached, a drastic one meets criticism only if it has been used for a considerable period of time to deceive others⁷. The mirror ceased to be an everyday use object, and became a tool for scrutiny. The coexistent presence and absence in the virtual mask leads to ontological understanding that "that other one is me". It is worth

⁵ See Myoo S. (Ostowicki M.), *Tożsamość człowieka w środowisku elektronicznym*, 2005, p.144.

⁶ See: Kathy Cleland, *Media mirrors and image avatars*, http://www.kathycleland.com/?page_id=8

⁷ See. Hanna E. B., *Face off: Identity in French On-line Debate*, Queensland University of Technology 2009. The authoress puts emphasis on the fact that the Internet is becoming "faceless", so when the user decides to show their true face, they are treated much more seriously. For the research participants, a face is a testimony of sincerity, involvement, truth. Therefore, lack of a face equals lack of authenticity.

referring to Foucault's *Of Outer Spaces*, where the author states: "In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent."⁸

The persons who change their identity on the Internet often understand it as a metaphor of some kind, which might be freely and recurrently subject to changes. A change may take place in two ways: it is either complete or partial only. Understanding mask as a metaphor allows, in turn, for better understanding of an individual in the virtual world. Through analysis and interpretation of its connections with different areas of life, we may better understand who we are, who we want to be. Thanks to its functions, the mask allows to "unmask" ourselves, recognize "our very selves" and find out the purpose of wearing it.

The answer to the question why nowadays we put masks on so often on the Internet, and especially on Facebook, comes to mind when we take a closer look into particular types present on the portal. The mask specifies one's needs, reveals hidden longings, and speaks for us symbolically and metaphorically. It allows the users to show the inner self, one's hidden sensitivity and needs. Consequently, a mask is the internal, mirror reflection of its users⁹. Moreover, it is an interactive element, a channel in the process of creation of the ties between a human being and virtual reality. As Michał Ostrowiecki adequately points out" I

⁸ Foucault M., *Of Outer Spaces*, trans. A.Rejniak-Majewska, „Teksty Drugie” 2005, no 6, p.120.

⁹ However, the moment of self-recognition in the mirror may bring about another interesting issue: „misrecognition” by the user. See Lacan J. (1949) *The mirror stage*. In *Identity: a reader*, Paul; du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman (eds), London: Sage, 2000, pp 44-50.

click – I exist (or even: I don't click – I don't exist)."¹⁰ Virtual functioning may be treated as an important anthropological and ethnographic factor – technology, a given portal and its architecture, dictate conditions to the individual. Our personality undergoes continuous transformations, following artificially created needs of some respective Internet environment.

I would like to present a few examples of Facebook masks categorized into groups accordingly.

PRESENTATION – PPS – Please see annex

3. Virtual Masks Anatomy

A mask is an almost architectural construct, often resembling images of surrealistic imagination; it also is a melting pot, where all socio-technical options are put together¹¹. From among masks used on the Internet, and particularly on Facebook, we may distinguish many different types, such as e-masks, avatars, video replicants, hypermasks, face covered with make-up, face changed with various software tools, face covered with another mask, complete lack of a face or its total coverage, covered face as a work of art - purposefully modeled etc.

One may also observe completely new types of personality construction, basing on cyborgs and machines in combination with human appearance. A mask makes it possible for the users not only to effectively hide their identity, but also

¹⁰ Ostrowicki M., *Umysł usieciowiony - „przeprogramowanie” człowieka*, 2004, p. 59.

¹¹ Milne E., *Dragging her dirt all over the net':presence, intimacy, materiality VI.o*, Transforming Cultures eJournal, Vol, 2 No 2, December 2007, p. 1.

to conceal meaningful interactions happening between them and the community to which they belong¹².

Apart from the term of an “avatar” which, thanks to the recent blockbuster by Cameron, became even more widely known, other names also function there, such as a video replicant or an e-mask. As regards Cameron’s movie, it is an interesting example of a human dream come true; the opportunity to remain within a much better body of a created avatar, putting on an ideal mask forever. When one’s personality becomes insufficient with time, the opportunity to be someone else grows more seductive.

In the context of the avatar idea, it is worth referring to the specific auto-voyeurism, understood as the ability to observe one’s own self in the mirror reflection of a camera. An avatar may be manipulated, mutated, changed on a whim, often becoming a work of art which we ourselves would like to be in our everyday lives.

The making of one’s own avatar in many games or portals begins with a basic mask¹³. It is the first step towards creating a whole new personality. From the perspective of an avatar or an e-mask, exploiting new technologies is very interesting. Since the moment speech has been synchronized with facial expressions, masks have also gained the spatial aspect – consequently, they

¹² See: Wilson S.M., Peterson L.C., *The anthropology of online communities*, Anna. Rev. Anthropol.2002, 31:457

¹³ Erny E., *Introducing to cyberbullying – avatars and identity*, Media awareness network, Newton.

may fully reflect, or even replace human nature¹⁴. It is more and more common that for what we are only imagination is the limit. Hence, a personality has come to resemble a maze¹⁵, where various choices result in different outcome. More and more often, faces grow to be not merely graphic representations of people within virtual community, but also personality manifestos. The relevance of e-masks becomes more and more conspicuous in all electronic environments of everyday media, also in mobile phones. In the LiveMail¹⁶ system, 3D faces basing on private photos, which may be freely transformed and edited. Obviously the technology used here is synchronized speech and mimicry, and the avatars have that feature.

4. Virtual Mask Creation Tools

Basically, the mask is supposed to reflect the natural, real image of an individual. However, it is frequently noticeable that the real faces are hidden under some kind of mask. At times, the user does not wish to be at all recognized on the Internet, sometimes, in turn, the need of bring recognizable pushes him/her to change or beautify their image. Irrespective of whether one wants to be anonymous or not, much attention is devoted to personality creation in any case. This brings about the demand for various tools potentially helpful in this area, such as Paint, Gimp or Photoshop, as well as applications created specifically

¹⁴ Kshirsagar S., Magnenat-Thalmann N., Guye-Vuilleme A., Thalmann D., Kamyab K., Mamdani E., *Avatar markup language*, Eight Eurographics workshop on Virtual Environments 2002.

¹⁵ See: W.H. Matthews, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, London 1922.

¹⁶ Mosmondor M., Kosutic T., Pandzic I.S., *LiveMail: Personalized avatars for mobile entertainment*, MobiSys 2005.

with portal users in mind; i.e. CartoonMe , changing users' images into cartoon characters.

Often, technologies used in the media, and cinema and theatre in particular, get implemented in everyday use. One of the most interesting ones is a hypermask; a series of images projected on the face of the actor, making a kind of a virtual mask. The images may be animations of other faces and they are synchronized with the actor's voice and mimicry. Thus, the face tells a story by means of a mask. A hypermask is simultaneously the art of portrayal and storytelling. It is also a significant input of digital technologies, which create their characteristic performance¹⁷. Initially, it used to be a 2D (two-dimensional) mask, and subsequently it has been improved into the 3D (three-dimensional) one. Some of the images seem to overlap, or emerge from the face; one may project any selected image of a face on the real one, and it will not be distinguished by the recipient. Although hypermasks are not yet too popular, they will certainly become a permanent element of the Internet reality, as declared by the company producing them for theatre on special demand¹⁸.

¹⁷ Morishima S., Yotsuokra T., Nielsen F., Binsted K., Pinhanez C., *Hyper mask – projecting virtual face on moving real object*, Eurographics 2001.

¹⁸ Morishima S., Yotsuokra T., Nielsen F., Binsted K., Pinhanez C., *Hyper mask – projecting virtual face on moving real object*, *The Visual Computer* 2002 (18), s. 2.; Zob. Takže: Salem B., *Commedia Virtuale – from theatre to avatars*, Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, Digital Creativity 2005, Vol.16, no.3, pp.129-139.

Conclusion

Masks worn by Facebook or Internet users are becoming to be analyzed in the context of the so-called cyberpsychology¹⁹. At times, artificially created personalities have a huge impact on the users, as the commitment of the participants is authentic. Therefore, psychological perspective is useful when one examines the path of electronic identity creation, along with the intended vs. actual reactions it evokes. Cyberspace is the extension to human life, though by new narration. The users bring to this new area their traditions, talents and customary relations between gender or race²⁰. Thus, masks most often reveal gender, likings, disposition etc., and so they are not abstract from reality, wholly untrue or reflecting only one's artistic preferences. A mask helps many users gain confidence which they lack in usual circumstances²¹. The answer to the question concerning the immense popularity of masks in the virtual world, and especially on Facebook, which by definition is supposed to be a place for easy identification, is very complex. That is because the situation described above is the average of expectations towards the users and the way they themselves wish to be perceived by others. One may observe the tendency of transferring one's habits and expectations from the real to the virtual. At the same time, since personality in the virtual world constitutes of many different elements, the users have the opportunity to depict them, also in the artistic way. Interestingly, masks

¹⁹ Arnold J., Miller H., *Academic masters, mistress and apprentices: gender and power in the real world of web*, MOTS Pluriels No 19, 2001, p. 2.

²⁰ Arnold J., Miller H., *Academic masters, mistress and apprentices: gender and power in the real world of web*, MOTS Pluriels No 19, 2001, p 11

²¹ See: Wellman B., Hampton K., *Living networked in a wired world*, Contemporary Sociology, Vol. 28, NO 6, November 1999. pp. 7-8.; Zob. Także: Budka Ph., *How "real life" issues affect the social life of online networked communities*, Australian Studies in Social Anthropology Sondernummer KSA-Tage 2007, Juni 2008, p.59.

do not necessarily follow fashions and trends, they are more means of self-expression and self-presentation. They also often become a substitute for art, an artistic creation, perhaps the only completed artwork throughout one's lifetime.

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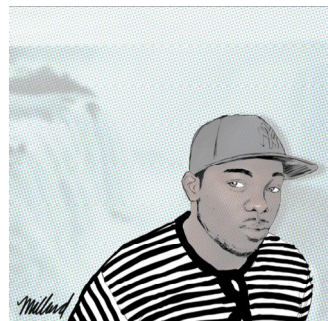
Annex

Masks contra Facebook

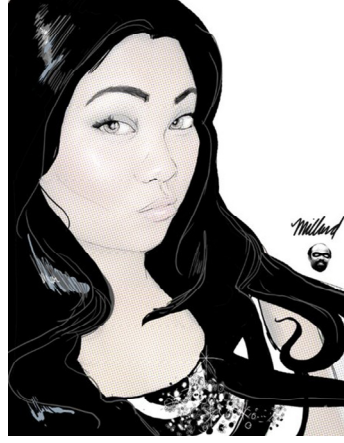
Katarzyna Sikora

“Cartoon Me”

“Cartoon Me”



“Cartoon Me”



“Cartoon Me”



Deformations

Deformations



Deformations



I'm applying my "profile face"
every day...

Changes



Changes



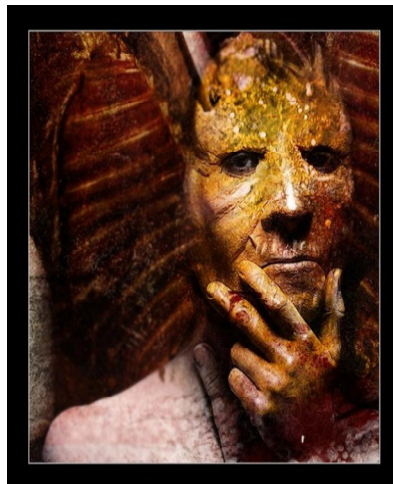
Changes



Changes



To make-up like a mask





Between installation and construction

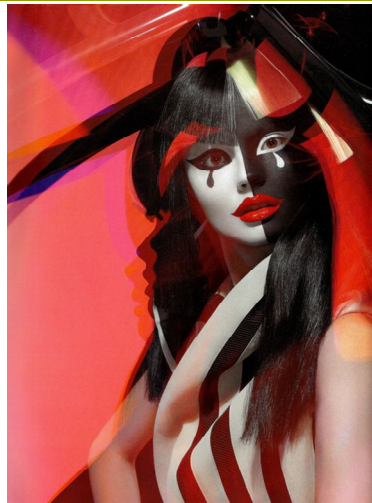
Between installation and construction

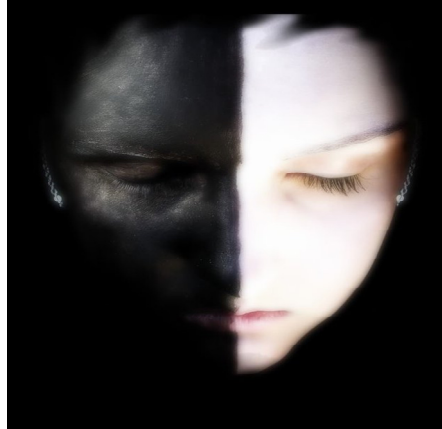


Between installation and construction



Bi-colored masks





Hiding behind a mask







Totally hidden





Stylizations



Funny and scary





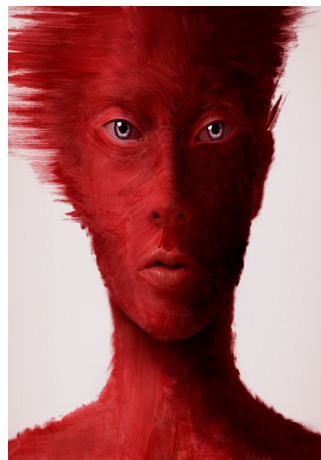
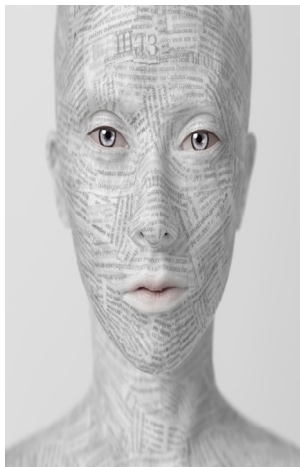
Female and Male masks







ART







Thank you