

I Am Social Media: The Social Self

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Abstract

In “I Am a Camera: The Mediated Self,” Robert Cathcart and Gary Gumpert draw on George Herbert Mead’s groundbreaking theories on the formation of the “self” to argue that the still photograph along with television and motion pictures greatly influence the development of our individual self images. Not only is their argument sound, it has grown exponentially stronger since the creation and widespread adoption of social media. In fact, currently, it can be said that due to social media each of our individual self images is no longer *largely* dependent on photographs and what we see represented in mass media, but *predominantly* dependent on these outlets.

I Am Social Media: The Social Self

Twenty-four years have passed since Robert Cathcart and Gary Gumpert's "I Am a Camera: The Mediated Self" and the theories expressed within have never been so prescient. Photographic images now bombard us from angles and devices never conceived of just ten years ago, creating a constant pool from which to construct a self-image. Still, even with this ubiquity, the photograph constitutes just the tip of the proverbial iceberg when it comes to how media currently shapes our individual selves. The advent and global embrace of social media – a term used to describe Internet-based "communities" where a "user" exchanges a range of information with others engaging in the same behavior – has lifted Cathcart and Gumpert's theory to a level unfathomable when their article was published in 1986. Among these image-oriented social media communities, Facebook and YouTube currently boast millions of users respectively, equating to an unparalleled distribution of not only photographs but user-generated videos. It is truly a new age for the formation of the "self" through media.

This paper will examine Cathcart and Gumpert's theory and its origins in the work of George Herbert Mead. It will continue by reversing the relationship between the two theories and observing how the role of still photography in the formation of self would be considered through Mead's founding theory. Finally, the emergence and ubiquity of social media will be examined as an indicator of self, and an idea posited that the presence of such a medium has altered our perception of our individual self images to such a degree that our they are no longer *largely* media dependent (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 90) but *predominantly* media dependent, and will get more so as time and technology progress.

Examining the Founding Theories

The thrust of Cathcart and Gumpert's theory is that:

With the invention of photography, [members of society] embarked on a new era of self awareness in which the notion of self and the process by which we form and develop our self image has been dramatically altered. Further, we (Cathcart and Gumpert) hold that motion pictures and television are extensions of this imaging process and play a significant part in the role-taking function necessary to the maintenance of a self image (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 100).

As stated in the introduction, Cathcart and Gumpert's premise is rooted in George Herbert Mead's founding theory "that the self is formed in the process of social experience and it develops in an individual as a result of that process" (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 91). The three cardinal concepts in Mead's work are society, self, and mind, all of which constitute different aspects of the same general process known as the "social act" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 160).

The focus here is on the *self*, or "the entire range of cognitive, affective, and social experiences which form personality and our awareness of that personality" (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 91). One has a self because one can respond to oneself as an object, an act achieved through "role-taking," or assuming the perspective of others (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p.161). This process establishes a "generalized other," Mead's term for one's "self-concept."

This "generalized other" is the last of three chronological phases outlined by Mead in the formation of self, following "play" and "game" (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 91). In the first stage, "play," a child merely mimics others' behaviors, not knowing why. In the "game" stage, the child is better able to differentiate self by becoming aware of multiple roles and recognizing

that other's experiences differ from his/her own (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 91). Finally, in the "generalized other" phase, the child is able to actively interpret his/her experience with others and separate his/her "self" from others and their experiences. The generalized other could be said to be the most significant stage in the development of a self, as it is "necessary to rational conduct that [an] individual should...take an objective, impersonal attitude toward himself (sic), that he should become an object to himself" (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 91).

Cathcart and Gumpert's theory relies heavily on this generalized other because its existence allows for the division of the self into an "I" and a "me." The "I" is the impulsive, unpredictable part of each of us. The "me" is the generalized other, composed of the organized and consistent patterns shared with those around us (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 161). Acts begin with an "I" but are then controlled by the "me" to form socially acceptable behavior.

Before the invention and prevalence of still photography, Cathcart and Gumpert argue that human beings were limited in their ability to distance the "I" from the "me" to objectively see themselves as others saw them. As this distance is "a necessary element in the self image process" (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 92), those alive before the advent of photography could not "verify the existence of a unique self" (1986, p. 95) as we can today through pictures. Photographs allow us to observe ourselves in place of another person and function as a form of human to human communication Mead claimed essential to the formation of a self image (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 96). In short, by viewing ourselves in a photograph, frozen in time, we can see ourselves sans distortion, and evaluate our "self" as others would, providing a power commentary on who we are and helping form our self-concept.

Cathcart and Gumpert furthered their theory to include images conveyed in motion pictures and television as also central to our development of a self image: "The institution of

Hollywood...manufactured the personalities which became the iconic images for Americans to test themselves against” and “...television presents the American audience with dozens of images and invites people to find themselves in these roles” (1986, p. 99).

Photographs and Mead

When examining Cathcart and Gumpert’s premise of still photography as an influencer of self image through the lens of Mead’s original theory, one can see many instances in which the former’s stance is supported by the latter’s.

Mead’s third cardinal concept, “mind,” can be described as “nothing more than interacting with yourself” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 162). It could be said, then, that by examining a photograph of oneself, by holding it in one’s hands, one is indeed interacting with oneself. Mead used the term “significant symbol” to mean a gesture with a shared meaning, the “gesture” referring to any act that comes to have meaning, verbal or nonverbal (2008, p. 161). In the case of a still photograph, the “gesture” could be the physical act of taking the picture, the result of which produces a “significant symbol” – the photograph, or, in other words, a record of history understood and shared by society. The “mind” and the “significant symbol” (the photograph) interact to arouse in an individual the internal dialogue by which we are able to talk to ourselves about our experiences (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 92). Thus, the photograph allows us to recognize the duality of the self, or, in Mead’s terms, to become aware of the “I” and the “me” (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 92).

Cathcart and Gumpert (1986) state, “Mead claims that the self is formed in the process of social experience and it develops in the individual as a result of this process” (p. 91). Today, no form of “social experience” is more shared than that in social media communities.

Social Media and the Self

Had Cathcart and Gumpert begun their research for “I Am a Camera: The Mediated Self” within the past few years, it is quite possible that the photograph one “picks[s] up, examine[s], turn[s] over, and scrutinize[s]” (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 94) would have been a side note in their investigations, if not ignored completely. Many of us can count on one hand the number of times we have recently handled a physical photograph. In its place are digital images, or pictures taken by a camera equipped with a removable microchip that acts as a memory device, storing every photograph we take for viewing both on the camera’s built-in screen and for uploading later to home computers. Once uploaded, these pictures can then be – and very much are – shared through the aforementioned social media communities, and, as such, could be said to produce, through these communities and to an even greater extent, the same symbiotic relationship between societal values and desirable images Cathcart & Gumpert originally said was created by still photographs (1986, p. 97).

The integral difference between physical and “virtual” photographs, however, is that while the physical picture has a relatively limited scope, the “virtual” picture, due to its presence on the *world wide* web, is practically unlimited in scope. Thus, it could be said that due to social media, the photograph’s significance in helping form each of our individual self images has nearly no bounds. In essence, social media has created a “social self” for every one of us who participates.

Facebook.com, the most populated social media website in the world with 500 million users, is the largest transmitter of this social self. As such, it acts as the warehouse for the majority of our digital images. Depending upon a user’s account privacy settings, one can view any picture of any person – friend or stranger – uploaded to the website and formulate their own self image from said picture. They can upload pictures of themselves and – even more

significantly – view pictures of themselves others may have uploaded (with or without their permission). This furthers the formation of one’s self concept (and social self) as another’s chosen photograph of another’s physical self increases the distance necessary in the self image process (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986, p. 92). Add to this the fact that users are able to “like” a photograph by clicking on an icon below it and the person in the picture is even more inclined to develop his/her self image based on the endorsement – or lack thereof – of those viewing the photograph.

This “like” system extends to YouTube, where users can upload videos they have created for viewing and evaluation by countless other users. Many of these videos are of the user engaging in or commenting on an activity or personal stance, and the recorded number of views of that particular video can logically attribute to the creator’s self image. If we are “constantly checking, confirming and altering our self concept through acts of communication” (Cathcart and Gumpert, 1986, p. 92), then this “like” system creates the ultimate platform to evaluate our value to society through the communications we produce – and we are producing these communications at a degree like never before.

Most significantly, however, is that Facebook and YouTube are just two of literally hundreds of social media websites that exist solely to allow people to share, comment on and evaluate their self images. Had I attempted to explore even a third of them, this paper would be twenty pages long.

Conclusion

With the number of social media users and the unprecedented level of sharing of personal information and images, it can be argued that now more than ever we base our self concept on how we – and other human beings – are represented through photographs and mass media.

Cathcart and Gumpert's theory, grounded in Mead's original ideas, is more accurate now than they could have ever imagined when proposing it 24 years ago.

References

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