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Facebook and other social media allow users to present a curated self, showing friends or the public a happier or more accomplished version of a person.

By Kathleen Burge | GLOBE STAFF | SEPTEMBER 30, 2014

If you are one of Catherine Pisacane's 792 Facebook friends, you got a glimpse into her life a couple of weeks ago. She posted a selfie, taken by her sister, of the two of them smiling and snuggling outside the Museum of Fine Arts.

Her Facebook posts didn't mention that her knee ached, or that she and her sister had encountered an aggressive driver on their way to the MFA — or any daily irritations that everyone experiences but few mention on social media.

Facebook and other social media allow users to present a curated self, showing friends or the public a happier or more accomplished version of a person. Most of the time, as with Pisacane's post, it is trivial. But in some cases, the gap between reality and the Facebook version can be striking, and troubling, psychologists say.

Studies have suggested that looking at idealized versions of our friends' lives leaves us feeling less attractive, less secure about our careers, and generally, more unhappy with our own lives. In a 2013 [study](#), a University of Michigan research team checked in with subjects five times a day and compared how they felt with how often they had been on Facebook.

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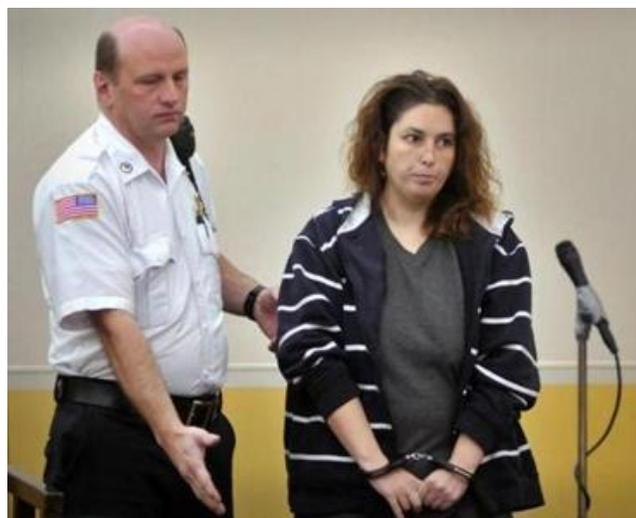
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“The finding was the more people used Facebook, the worse they felt, and the less satisfied they were with their lives,” said [Ethan Kross](#), an associate professor of social psychology at the University of Michigan.

At the extreme end of the divide between curated reality and real life is [Erika Murray](#), the Blackstone woman charged with fetal death concealment after the bodies of three children as well as four living children were discovered in a vermin-infested home. Murray had recently posted cheerful pictures on Facebook of her cooking and updates about her two older children.

“Its official,” Murray wrote in July. “I have a teenager! Happy Birthday [daughter’s name]. I love you so much.”

For
most



PAUL KAPTEYN/REUTERS

Erika Murray had recently posted cheerful pictures on Facebook of her cooking and updates about her two older children.

people, the split between online and offline selves isn’t so remarkable, the realities so much at odds. Humans have long tailored the image we show the world with the clothes we wear, the haircuts we choose, the cars we drive — even the smile we routinely put on for photos. But social media offer even greater control over the versions of ourselves that

we make public.

“There’s certainly an opportunity that people have to carefully curate how people appear,” said Kross. “You can choose which photo to post. Not the one with the big pimple.”

But even small gaps between social media users’ real and virtual identities can cause people to feel bad about themselves, said Cambridge psychologist [Craig Malkin](#) .

They know that the images they are building up online aren’t genuine. Hiding less flattering aspects of their lives can damage their self-esteem, he said. The problem: they’re not truly the people who are being rewarded with “likes.”

“Whenever we feel like we can’t be fully who we are in order to be liked or be admired, it’s bound to affect our self-esteem,” said Malkin, who is writing a book about narcissism that includes a chapter on social media. “There’s a sense of, ‘I feel like a fraud.’ ”

Ultimately, people become accustomed to not discussing problems or difficult parts of their lives. Our online selves may complain about minor annoyances but they rarely despair over dead-end jobs or marriages. They don’t argue with their siblings or get bored caring for their children.

They’re sharing more but revealing less, so they feel disconnected, Malkin said. “It’s not a genuine connection if you’re not sharing difficult emotions. Part of sharing connections to people means them really knowing who we are.”

At the same time, reading friends’ posts about their lives can make us feel worse about our own, [research](#) suggests.

“Tons of my friends say that,” said Jennifer Kove Rose, who lives in Ashland. “I think the conversation you hear is that you feel like your life sucks because they’re always traveling

somewhere or their kid scored the winning goal in soccer . . . You feel insignificant in comparison.”

Rose, 45, was speaking from Florida, where she was having a mini-reunion with college friends. She was conscious of how she portrayed the trip on Facebook.

“I try not to brag on Facebook,” she said. “I did not mention that my girlfriends and I spent some pretty good quality time in a spa. You don’t want to be that person.”

The ability to manipulate online personas has encouraged some people to experiment wildly. In 2009, David Cicirelli, who was a graphics designer in New York, announced to his Facebook friends that he was quitting his job and heading West. For six months, he posted updates about his madcap journey, meeting a young Amish woman on her parents’ farm, being attacked by a rabid coyote and kidnapped by a cult.

It was all a hoax. Cicirelli, then 26, Photoshopped the pictures and made up the details — until he came clean. He wrote a book, “[Fakebook](#),” about his ploy, and how he became envious of his alter ego.

“The point I was trying to prove was how everybody’s online persona was not quite right,” he said. “At the very least, it’s a polished version of the life you’re living.”

A Dutch student, Zilla van den Born, also led her Facebook friends astray, pretending she was traveling in Southeast Asia for five weeks. She posted pictures of herself, sitting beside [a Buddhist monk](#), snorkeling in turquoise water, eating Asian food. In fact, all of it took place in her home city of Amsterdam.

She carried out the project, for her university, to draw attention to the way people manipulate what they share on social media, she later told Dutch journalists.

Usually, the manipulations are subtle. Jacob Cohen, a first-year student at Harvard Business School, found himself replacing his profile picture on Facebook recently with a shot of him wearing a suit and tie. He generally avoids suits, but his entry into business school, he believes, prodded him — not necessarily consciously — to change his image.

“This is a new phase of life where I know that people tend to be more formal,” said Cohen, 27. “It’s a little bit more conservative. And so, I think those pressures can work more on a subconscious level.”

Since he started business school — he was at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government last year — he notices that Facebook feeds into the school’s pressure to socialize as much as humanly possible.

“That’s a manicured image, wanting to show that you’re out and about, and making a lot of new friends,” Cohen said. “I’d say I probably fall prey to that a little bit.”

[Sherry Turkle](#), professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT and author of the book, “Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other,” said managing our online selves has grown more complex, expanding from Facebook to Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and other platforms.

“This is a curatorial effort,” said Turkle. “I think it’s taking up a lot of mind space.”

What does this mean for us? A study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that participants who spent five minutes scrolling through their own Facebook profiles had significant boosts to their self-esteem. They, apparently, bought the same cheery messages about themselves — They were witty! They took great vacations! Their children were beautiful! — that they were relaying to the world.

“During the day, you look at your noncurated self. You live with your mistakes,” Turkle

said. “On Facebook, you’re always the way you want to be.”

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