

Self-Performance in Digital Contexts: A Sociology of Social Display and the Construction of Visibility in Contemporary Algerian Society

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Abstract

This article presents social display as a regular social practice through which individuals produce social images and construct desired identities in digital environments. By focusing on Algerian society, this study seeks to move beyond superficial explanations of self-presentation and to offer a sociological approach that considers the production of the image as a mechanism of social positioning. On this basis, the article draws on a set of sociological theoretical concepts, most notably Erving Goffman's concept of the presentation of self, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, and Axel Honneth's theory of social recognition. This article also seeks to examine how digital space reshapes patterns of social display in Algerian society and to identify the dynamics of the production of social image within the Algerian digital space.

Keywords: social display, self-performance, visibility, digital space, Algerian society.

Introduction

Social display, as a phenomenon, is no longer confined to traditional public spaces such as markets, social occasions, and various gatherings; it has also extended to digital spaces. Social interaction is no longer built solely on lived experience but also on visibility and representation. Individuals today no longer assess a day solely by what they lived through on it but also by how they present their lived experiences on that day in digital space.

In this context, the phenomenon of social display serves as a basic mechanism for constructing social identity, as individuals seek to present self-images that align with expectations for social recognition. The significance of this phenomenon increases as the overlap between rapid digital transformation and the persistence of cultural patterns based on collective recognition increases.

In Algeria, the digital space is no longer merely a means of communication; it is becoming an open social stage through which individuals reconstruct their identities and display them to others. The concept of self-presentation proposed by Goffman finds fertile ground today on digital platforms, where individuals move from the spontaneous display of social reality to its deliberate staging, reproducing and transforming it in pursuit of social visibility that grants them status or recognition in the public sphere (Goffman, 1959).

Accordingly, this article addresses the following two questions:

- How does digital space reshape patterns of social display in Algerian society?
- What social dynamics drive this process?

First: The Theoretical Framework for a Sociology of Social Display

1. Goffman's Social Dramaturgy: From the Real Theatre to the Digital Theatre

Erving Goffman may be regarded as the founding figure of the sociology of social display. In his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), he presented a metaphorical analytical model that likens social life to theatre. In his view, individuals are actors who perform roles before an audience, using a set of symbolic tools and techniques to manage and direct impressions (Goffman, 1959). In other words, Goffman views social life as a play in which individuals manage others' impressions through the front region.

In the Algerian digital context, the profile has become a carefully selected facade, concealing the backstage, which represents simple or exhausting everyday life. Moreover, aspects of success, consumption, and well-being are displayed (Hogan, 2010). For example, one may observe the transformation of Algerian weddings from an intimate family ritual into a digital event staged through stories on various social networking sites, where emphasis is placed on material appearances, such as luxury, dishes, and dress, as a performance intended to prove class status. In contrast, tensions, conflicts, debts, and problems that may precede this event are concealed.

Goffman distinguished between two basic regions in social interaction: the front stage, in which the individual presents the self to others according to the requirements of the social context, and the backstage stage, in which the individual is released from presentational pressures and is more authentically himself or herself. This analysis acquires exceptional relevance in the age of social networking sites, where the two regions overlap and interweave in ways that were previously unfamiliar (Goffman, 1959).

By analogy with Goffman's distinction between the front and back regions, the Algerian individual in digital space experiences a condition in which the front region invades every detail of life. After the home had represented the backstage that strangers did not see, it has become an open theatre through daily routine videos and live streams that film the details of everyday life, including meals, household chores, and private bodily care. Here, display is transformed from the performance of a role into the production of content. The mother who films a Ramadan table does not present only a meal; rather, she presents an identity performance that proves her competence as a housewife, as a traditional value, and her consumer capacity, as a modern value, while attempting to reconcile the pressures of the group with aspirations for individual distinction (Goffman, 1959; Turkle, 1995).

2. The Struggle over Symbolic Capital in the Algerian Digital Field

Pierre Bourdieu offers a deeper critical analytical tool through the concept of the social field, which he describes as a space of struggle over the possession of capital in its various forms: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Within this framework, social display is not merely an innocent representation of the self; rather, it is a strategy for accumulating, converting, and investing symbolic capital within a specific social field (Bourdieu, 1979).

Symbolic capital manifests in intangible resources such as reputation, status, and social recognition, and it is subject to conversion, multiplication, erosion, or loss depending on the intensity of competition within the social field. Here, digital space becomes a new field par excellence, in which the rules of the game are determined by the logic of appearance, influence, and dissemination (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992a).

From another perspective, social display in digital Algerian society is not merely lying; rather, it is identity management, in which the Algerian user seeks to construct visibility on the basis of symbolic capital, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms. Visibility here refers to the capacity to be seen and heard in a space crowded with information (Thompson, 2005). To explain this, visibility can be distinguished into two forms:

Visibility of belonging, in which adherence to traditional or religious values is displayed in public posts to gain the approval of the group and avoid rejection, criticism, or social stigma. In addition, there is visibility of distinction, in which adopting a modern lifestyle is displayed through images of visiting luxurious places or travelling as a form of distinction from the general public.

Notably, the digital space in Algeria is not neutral; rather, it is a field characterised by intense struggle for distinction. What is striking here, however, is the falsification of symbolic capital, whereby some young people resort to displaying the possession of economic capital, such as luxury cars, international-brand clothing, and highly advanced technologies, to extract illusory social recognition. This clearly appears in the phenomenon of virtual migration, where young people publish photographs in places that seem to be abroad or exaggerate their use of French words in their posts to enhance their presumed cultural capital in pursuit of a status that the traditional social structure in real social life does not grant them (Bourdieu, 1979).

3. Social Recognition in Axel Honneth

The theory of social recognition developed by Axel Honneth adds a deep psychological and social dimension to the understanding of the motives of display. Honneth argues that the social actor not only seeks to achieve material interests but also aspires to obtain others' recognition of his or her identity and value at three levels: love, rights, and social esteem (Honneth, 1992). Honneth regards the absence of recognition as a source of social distress and of the struggle for identity, which largely explains the urgent need among many individuals to display themselves in digital spaces and to elicit social esteem through likes, comments, and followers (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

It is self-evident that, in a society in which young people suffer economic or political marginalisation, likes and shares become a currency of recognition. Honneth argues that the absence of recognition leads to denigration; to overcome this denigration in lived reality, the individual constructs a strong virtual identity.

The TikTok platform in Algeria has become a space for practicing mutual recognition. Many of the violent or unusual behaviors that some individuals undertake to gain views are not meaningless; rather, they constitute a desperate struggle to be seen in a society in which the individual feels invisible (Honneth, 1992; Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

As a result of this continuous performance of the self, a form of digital alienation has emerged whereby the individual becomes hostage to reactions, namely, likes and comments, to what he or she displays to others in digital space. Moreover, the pursuit of visibility in Algeria has created the phenomenon of influencers who practice continuous social display, thereby exerting psychological pressure on ordinary followers who compare their own backstage with the polished fronts of these celebrities (boyd, 2014).

4. Analysis of Digital Discourse and Virtual Identity

The analysis of display in digital space requires recourse to multidisciplinary concepts, among the most prominent of which is the concept of virtual identity, addressed by Sherry Turkle in her works on the relationship between the self and technology. Turkle argues that digital space enables individuals to test multiple identities and perform diverse roles with unprecedented flexibility, thereby reshaping the very concept of identity and making it more fluid and multiple (Turkle, 1995).

In Algerian society, digital display may be a means of escaping difficult economic realities. A young man suffering from unemployment may appear in digital images in elegant attire and in places that suggest affluence. Sociologists refer to this as symbolic compensation, in which real-world deprivation is compensated for by possessing an ideal image in virtual space (Miller, 2016).

By analogy with Turkle's view that the screen is a mirror of the self, digital space in Algerian society allows experimentation with identities that were prohibited or repressed. For example, a young woman may adopt a digitally liberated identity while maintaining a conservative identity in reality; by doing so, she practises a form of fluid identity.

This division between the real self and the virtual self leads to what is termed affective dissonance, in which social display becomes a burden that requires continuous mental effort to maintain the desired image before the digital audience (Turkle, 1995).

Second: Digital Space as an Arena of Display in Algerian Society

1. Algerian Digital Landscape: Figures and Measurements

Algeria has witnessed a remarkable digital transformation. Reports issued by the Regulatory Authority for Post and Electronic Communications indicate that the rate of internet access has exceeded 70%, with clear dominance of the Facebook platform and steady growth of TikTok among young people (ARPCE, 2024). This transformation is not merely technical; rather, it is a communicative explosion that has reshaped the Algerian public sphere, transforming it from a physical space governed by direct surveillance into a fluid virtual space (Jabi, 2020).

2. Social Display in the Algerian Cultural Context

The dynamics of digital social display in Algeria cannot be understood apart from the cultural context from which they emerge. Algerian society is characterised by a complex cultural

composition that combines ancient Amazigh heritage, the Arab-Islamic legacy, and multiple colonial influences, producing an identity map that is both highly complex and rich.

Accordingly, digital display is not separate from Algerian value heritage. Certain concepts, such as heshma and sutra, face pressure today in the culture of display. In the popular Algerian context, the value of heshma plays a central role in shaping mechanisms of social display by imposing on individuals the need to save face in public space and to behave in ways that prevent them from feeling embarrassed in such places. In contrast, in digital space, this value loses its weight and is replaced by its counterparts: competition, the desire to appear, and fame.

In this context, the researcher Nacer Jabi argued that Algerian society lives through a conflict between the values of the group, which impose discretion, and the emerging values of individualism, which push towards exhibition (Jabi, 2020). For example, the bride's *tasdira*¹ has been transformed from a symbolic family ritual into a visual product displayed on social media platforms to extract social recognition of consumer capacity or social status, embodying the transition of social capital into digital symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1979).

3. Digital platforms and social differentiation

Different digital platforms constitute differentiated social fields with their own rules and stakes rather than merely neutral technical tools. Facebook tends toward networks of horizontal social ties. In contrast, Instagram is organised around standards of beauty, elegance, and pictorially represented success, whereas TikTok is structured around creativity, entertainment, and viral dissemination (van Dijck, 2013).

In her comparative study of Mediterranean youth, Silvia Ferraris observed how Algerian youth employ these platforms intelligently and selectively, presenting divergent images of the self according to the platform and the nature of the expected audience, in striking correspondence with the Goffmanian model based on the multiplicity of stages for social performance (Ferraris, 2018a).

On the basis of Ferraris's thesis (Ferraris, 2018a), young Algerian people practice identity segmentation: on Facebook, a young person is a citizen who is concerned with public affairs; on Instagram, a consuming self of elegance; and on TikTok, a satirical, performative self. This

¹ The bride's *tasdira* is a display of traditional garments reflecting local culture, as well as contemporary garments, that she wears on her wedding day to show her beauty and elegance to guests and attendees. These garments are often distinguished by attractive colours and are made from embroidered fabrics adorned with stones and ornaments, setting her apart from the other guests in the reception hall.

multiplicity reflects Goffman's model of impression management according to the diversity of digital stages (Goffman, 1959).

Third: The Dynamics of Producing the Social Image in Algerian Digital Space

1. Digital Exhibition and Impression Management

Digital ethnographic observation of the behaviors of Algerian users across social networking sites reveals recurring patterns in the production and recirculation of the social image. Images employed to express material wealth, such as luxury cars, foreign travel, and high-end restaurants, and those expressing religious belonging, such as prayer in the Prophet's Mosque or collective iftar during Ramadan, together constitute a system of circulating social symbols. In Algerian society, these practices break the barrier between the sacred, namely, religion, and the worldly, namely, consumption, as the two are merged in a single profile to produce the image of the successful and blessed individual at the same time.

In his work on networked identity, David Landes analyses how individuals, through these practices, seek to convert social capital into digital symbolic capital by employing admirers, followers, and comments as criteria of social status. Thus, digital recognition becomes a form of full social recognition in the Honnethian sense (Landes, 2015).

In the same context, the Algerian social actor uses the profile as a façade to conceal an economic or social reality that may be frustrating. Images of cars and luxurious places are attempts to compensate for the recognition missing in lived reality, as likes and comments become the new symbolic currency of esteem (Honneth, 1992).

2. Gender Identity and Digital Display

The study of social display in Algerian society requires adequate attention to the gender dimension, which shapes the particular characteristics of the phenomenon. Algerian women are subject to double social surveillance that restricts their expressive freedom and narrows the margin of their digital appearance. In this context, Hadj-Moussa (2015) argues that digital space has not liberated women from traditional constraints; rather, it has reproduced the divisions between public and private in new forms, compelling women to practice strict self-surveillance to preserve their social status. This behaviour corresponds to the Goffmanian model based on the multiplicity of performance stages, as Ferraris (2018a) indicates that young women in Algeria employ platforms intelligently and selectively, separating the front stage,

which reflects adherence to collective norms, as on Facebook, from more private digital backstages that allow them a degree of liberation away from the eyes of double surveillance. Algerian women in digital space are subject to what is known as gendered digital surveillance, a symbolic authority that extends from real space to virtual space. Field studies in the Algerian environment, especially the study by Ould Khessal (2020), indicate that women are compelled to adopt strategies of concealment, or what is termed masked identity, through the use of pseudonyms and symbolic images as a defensive mechanism for expressing the self in ways that evade familial surveillance. This behaviour creates a form of double identity display, which Felici (2020) also confirms in her analysis of representations of the feminine self, as she considers that recourse to alternative digital identities is not merely a technical choice but a sociological response to the pressures of social normativity, which impose on women either a modest appearance or complete absence in open spaces.

3. Youth and the Struggle for Social Recognition

Algerian youth constitute the category most involved in the dynamics of digital social display. Maatouk (2016) argued that virtual space serves as a compensatory space for the lack of social recognition in reality because of structural pressures such as unemployment and the housing crisis, which delay social transition. This corresponds to Jabi's (2015) argument, which analyses the frustrations of Algerian youth and argues that digital platforms offer them an opportunity to build an alternative symbolic status that compensates for the blockage of advancement within the traditional social structure.

This digital compensation does not stop at the limits of lifestyle exhibition alone; rather, it extends to conflictual communicative practices embodied in the phenomenon of the clash in Algerian digital space, as the peak of competition for visibility and self-assertion. For a young person experiencing unemployment, digital superiority, as measured by the number of followers, provides a sense of existence and efficacy. This was confirmed by the researcher Jamal Maatouk in his studies on the sociology of Algerian youth, in which he considered digital space a compensatory space par excellence (Maatouk, 2013a).

4. The Boundaries between Authenticity and Falsity

Digital social displays raise a fundamental sociological question about the boundaries between authenticity and falsity in identity. In his theory of simulation and representation, Jean

Baudrillard analyses how the absence of a real referent leads to the separation of signs from their signifieds so that the social image becomes a simulation of itself in an endless spiral (Baudrillard, 1981).

The absence of a real referent in digital space leads to what Baudrillard (1981) describes as the separation of signs from their signifieds, whereby images circulated across platforms no longer reflect the reality of Algerian users but rather simulate them in a spiral of hyperreality. On their digital displays, young people do not reproduce their everyday lives; rather, they produce images that conform to the platform's standards so that the image becomes the only truth available for social recognition.

In the Algerian context, a sharp tension is observed between the value of truthfulness and authenticity as local cultural pillars and the logic of digital platforms, which tends toward selection and visual composition. Felici (2020) confirms that this tension produces what is termed fragmented identity, in which the Algerian user is compelled to adopt multiple selves to reconcile the pressures of conservative reality with the requirements of digital display, making digital recognition conditional upon the individual's ability to manage this identity division.

Fourth: Discussion and Analytical Summary

A sociological reading of social display in the Algerian digital space reveals a set of intertwined dynamics. The digitally connected Algerian individual does not present the self as an isolated entity; rather, he or she practises a social display governed by a complex equation comprising available symbolic capital, deeply rooted cultural habitus, the logic of the digital field, and the need for social recognition.

It becomes clear that Goffman's proposition about the multiplicity of stages in social performance acquires profound significance in the age of digital plurality, where the individual becomes director, actor, and audience at once. Moreover, the Algerian social structure, with its contradictions and tensions, casts a heavy shadow on the nature, methods, and meanings of digital display.

These practices contribute, on the one hand, to enhancing the social capital of their authors and expanding their circles of social recognition. On the other hand, however, they consolidate social inequalities and reproduce them in symbolic form and, at times, even exacerbate them in new forms (Castells, 2009).

Conclusion

The sociology of social display offers a distinctive analytical key for understanding the transformations of identity and communication in contemporary Algerian society. Digital space is not merely a neutral medium for expression; rather, it is a real social field in which stakes collide, strategies intertwine, and existing structures manifest themselves in their digital form.

Understanding these dynamics requires the development of theoretical and methodological frameworks that are better aligned with the specificity of the Algerian context and that reconcile the major approaches in Western sociology with the data from the Algerian field and its accumulated knowledge. This also requires serious engagement in digital ethnographic research, enabling a deeper exploration of users' experiences and their meanings.

The delicate balance between digital presence and identity consistency remains among the most prominent challenges facing the Algerian individual in the age of social networks while simultaneously offering unique possibilities for self-expression and the renegotiation of symbolic status.

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