
The Spatial Self: Designing For Location-Based Identity Performance On Social Media

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Abstract

Location information has become an essential part of online activity as individuals are using social media platforms to document their offline activity in the places they inhabit. In this paper we call for the development of design recommendations based on the concept of the “spatial self”: a theoretical framework encapsulating the process of online self-presentation based on the display of offline physical activities. We invite the HCI community to engage with relevant work that investigates the relations between online and offline activity that is taking place in other research disciplines such as sociology, media studies and geography.

Author Keywords

identity, location-based social media, performance, social media, spatial self.

Introduction

As the incorporation of geocoded information into text, images, and video on social media platforms continues to grow, so do the norms, practices, and meanings that surround these digital-physical traces.

In earlier work [1] we recognized the display of physical activities on social media as particular expressions of the “spatial self.” The spatial self refers

to a variety of instances (both online and offline) where individuals document, archive and display their experience and/or mobility within space and place in order to represent or perform aspects of their identity to others. In other words, the way we present ourselves to our online audiences is no longer only by textual and visual cues such as status messages, photos, or videos but also through geocoded digital traces, geographical data visualizations, and maps of individual patterns of mobility.

The Online Performance Of The Offline

Geolocated posts, tweets, images, check-ins, and other forms of location-announcement and artifacts of personal mobility are parts of larger narratives and performances of embodiment and experience of place.

The spatial self is an additional means through which people perform their online identity and manage self-presentation on SNS and location-based social media. Just like other online representations of self, this form of representation carries many biases and limitations that researchers should take into consideration in their work.

While there is still much to be learned about relationships between digital productions of mobility, self-presentation, sociality, and place, these representations of physical activities should not be assumed to be accurate. The spatial self reminds researchers that these digital traces are produced and embedded within particular social contexts, significations systems, and subject to certain audiences and norms. If anything, they are more performative than precise. Therefore, the spatial self is a concept that urges methodological caution in analyzing location-

based social media data, patterns of mobility iterated through social media, and location-announcement online.

In our earlier work [1] we proposed the spatial self as a term that categorizes a common cultural practice as well as a lens through which to study the growing number of geocoded representations on locative and social media. Given the multiple and distinct depictions of the spatial self produced over a variety of platforms and within a variety of contexts and situations, the spatial self introduces several opportunities for studying individuals, physical places, and social networks. More specifically, we consider how studying articulations of the spatial self via social media may yield valuable information pertaining to differential mobility patterns, polysemic meanings of place, and collective geographical patterns of social networks.

Designing For The Spatial Self

In addition to studying user activity, we argue that this term can also help technology developers better design geocoded practices on social media. It is crucial for designers to understand performance of check-ins, geo-tagged images and videos and sharing location as strategically chosen markers of identity and active agents in the process of online identity work. By understanding the performative aspects of these interactions, new tools can be developed to support and enhance these practices and motivations.

For example, the visualization of geocoded digital traces can reveal selective daily patterns of mobility, unique experiences of place, as well as social practices and meanings that are formed through the choice to share certain places and physical experiences with

social networks. Aggregating and visualizing data from social media platforms can provide users with new ways to interact with different users based on their historical activity throughout their daily life. These aggregations can also help researchers understand the ways in which place intersects with identity and self-presentation and how to design platforms that emphasize these practices as well.

To conclude, this paper urges the HCI community to engage with relevant work that is taking place in fields such as sociology, media studies and geography and to

produce tools that serve the presentation of the self through physical activity.

In this regard, the spatial self offers a way to study the profile and play of individual social media users within the context of their physical activity and through the selective, curated display of their physical activity. Instagram, Facebook, and Foursquare users exhibit and archive physical experiences alongside other markers of identity and employ the spatial self as a way to communicate where they are/were, what they are/were doing, as well as who they are.

References

[1] Schwartz, R. and Halegoua G. R. *The spatial self: Location-based identity performance on social media*. *New Media and Society*, 1-18, 2014.