
Appearing out of line: Maintaining Varied Identities

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Abstract

Who are you? A deceptively simple question with a complicated answer, especially when posed to young adults in Singapore, tackling on- and offline notions of identity. In an attempt to shed more light on this conundrum, we looked to where identity seems most visible these days, social media. We interviewed, observed and analysed the online sites and smartphone apps of three young women who have grown up in the age of the internet, to find out how they 'manage' their identities and what the offline/online mean to them.

Author Keywords

Social Media; identity management; authenticity; expression

Introduction

Deborah writes a post for her company's Facebook page, taking on its identity and giving the brand an online voice.

Sarah reposts a political entry she finds insightful on Tumblr, slowly growing an appetite for politics.

Kei¹ downloads an app to help her find the 'Qibla' or direction to face during prayers, giving her a total of 11 Islamic apps on her iPhone.

¹ Kei is name she chose to represent herself in the study.

Approach

How has social media played a part in the identity formation of these three young women (if at all)?

To answer this, we ran a few months of data collection with three research participants, using convenience sampling. We conducted in-depth interviews and collected observational data by being guided into their active and dormant online sites and reviewing archived posts. Participants spoke to us about their social media history to help us understand the, "where we are going and ... where we've been [5]" part of their digital story and evolution of facets of identity.

We also examined the apps in their phones as those can be seen as artefacts with a story to tell about how it was used, and the meanings attached to it. In-depth interviews helped understand the context and reasons behind their posts, choice of site and app.

Each young woman represents different identity experiences online. They are: A communications executive whose job it is to personify her company online. An undergrad who is going through a political awakening and wants her world to know. And a Muslim who until recently wrote homoerotic stories online under a different name and is herself a closet bisexual. These three Asian women represent just a few of the millions online regularly expressing and exploring certain identities.

Wanting to have a more grounded and in-depth understanding of online and offline identities, how they are related, expressed and managed; we applied qualitative methods and conducted a short exploratory study. We discuss our initial analysis here.

Identity formation and expression are two sides of the same coin. Notions of identity hold a central place in an understanding of the role of media in the everyday lives of contemporary society. And the internet is known for providing a variety of spaces where users can explore and express different facets of themselves online (e.g. [3,4]. It affords spaces for many to express their "real identity" [2]. The idea of multiple identities and different expressions of it according to audience and context is not entirely new. Goffman[1] speaks about this when he likens the presentation of ourselves to performances. So a man might 'act' as a father, a friend, a worker, a husband and a son at different points of times. This concept can be linked to how users perform, curate and project their identities in the different online spaces with their different audiences.

The popularity of some of these spaces has made them less private and more public. A popular example:

Facebook, which started out exclusive to "student friendships" only, went on to allow other friends, family, colleagues and just about anyone to participate. It placed "what had been separated out identities all within the same muddled online space [2]."

Further, we saw how our participants curate and communicate their identities differently from one platform to the next. They may project a 'safe' image on Facebook where connections might include family members but have a more risqué profile using a pseudonym on blogging sites like Livejournal. According to our participants, the latter sites allow for creating content that benefit from less self-censorship as only a few friends are privy to the content. Different platforms allow them to try out, develop and explore varied identities, leaving many such users with a trail of multiple identities, showing the evolution of the user's identity and how it is curated and projected.

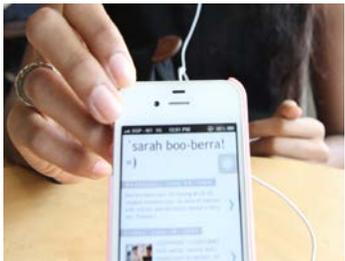
Exploring evolving and conflicting identities

To provide a sense of what we found and our interpretation, we provide below summaries of some of the key points from the phased interviews.

- Deborah, 25, Communications Executive

Deborah is an avid social media user with many online profiles and accounts. Her job requires her to personify her company by posting daily updates on her company's Facebook page, requiring her to be friendly and approachable - even when she does not want to.

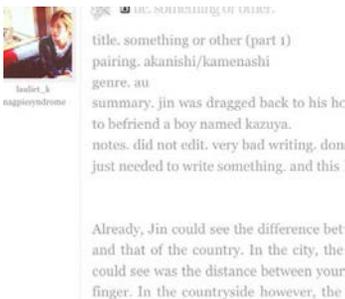
Deborah started her first blog at 13. *"I just vomited on this page, I didn't censor anything. It was just about anything ... An online diary... But I grew up."* People



Sarah's first blog



Some of Kei's Islamic apps



Kei's unreleased story's draft

started reading her blog and she read the blogs of others. "When I knew people were reading, I started to be a little conscious about what I wrote."

Our participants all started similarly, talking about everything under the sun but became cautious on realising their posts are being read. Some even privatized their page, or like Deborah, moved to different sites altogether.

"I keep moving sites either because I find the old one too boring or my parents or people I don't want reading my posts find it."

By 17, she started to care more about what others say and how she represents herself as her blog got more and more popular, in her words, she "became more reflexive ... I packaged my entries to look nicer. I made it more consumable... I made sure all my photos were edited before it got uploaded."

- Sarah, 21, Undergrad

remember a time when social media was not a part of her life, she feels that she needs it. Other than posting about, according to her, "whimsical fairy" things like food and unicorns, she joins online communities interested in politics to interact with others and gets different perspectives on political issues. Her first blog was mainly pictures and posts about herself and her friends. It was an "online diary" which she felt was frivolous and stood for nothing when compared to what she posts today on her Tumblr account.

"I was talking about nothing. I'm so embarrassed about it that it's private now ... Only some of my closer friends

can read it. These are precious memories since most of them have gone overseas."

- Kei, 26, Graduate

Kei is a "closet bisexual" and until recently wrote homoerotic fan fiction or original stories for a huge community on Livejournal. Fan-fiction is basically stories about characters written by fans of the original work, rather by the original creator. For example in her slash version of Harry Potter, "Harry Potter would have a relationship with Draco Malfoy." Unlike the other respondents, Kei works completely anonymous online. She said her parents are religious and would be concerned, "I do not want my parents to know I write homoerotic things, they won't be happy if I wrote anything sexual. They don't know I am bisexual either."

She felt her religious identity conflicted thoroughly with that of a bisexual writer and that made Kei feel guilty. Further, her then-boyfriend found out about these stories and told her to stop as it goes against their religion. So she did, "I agreed with him and did not want to encourage people in this sexual manner anymore. I even stopped a 1 year relationship I had with a girl ... I believed this is a more refined me ... That girl (Kei) was too sassy and sexual online."

This illuminates how one's online identity might affect one's offline life. The once private space where she enjoyed writing homoerotic stories for her "fans" was compromised. Her identity as a homoerotic writer was deleted. As she put it, "I really can't write like that anymore, I have forgotten how."

Discussion and reflection on identity

These online sites are the author's spaces to create, to voice opinions, to test identities. They can be seen as a place to develop these identities just to try and see if they fit. Kei is an excellent example of how she used an online platform as a safe haven to enjoy an identity she deemed too deviant to let others know about. But once people found out, it led to the virtual death of this persona and an overt projection of her more religious side. The co-existence of the observant Muslim with several religious apps was managed by her as she projected an on- and offline identity which clearly conflicted.

This initial research has raised a number of questions relating to the nature of identity as it is hosted online and lived offline. Whilst the notion of presenting different faces in different contexts is not new, we see how some take advantage of the online world as a means to portray varied identities. The departure from previous identities, the balancing of conflicting ones, and the evolution of notions of self throughout came to

Acknowledgements

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the fore during this research. Why people use media in this manner, how they view themselves, the consistency that appears absent, and the effort that is expended in doing so has again shown how we cannot conceptualise a simplistic seam of on and offline lives.

We initially asked who are you? The answer very much depends on who you are answering, the medium you choose, who you want to be seen as, and the purpose of the 'identity'.

Social media and personal content that people upload on different platforms may last a long time and its longevity was not fully understood initially. It is modern proof that that person in that particular time, with those identities and thoughts existed. As Goffman argued, we have multiple identities linked to different roles and shaped by context [1]. He was arguing for the offline lives of people but as we can see from this simple study, the multiple identities that Goffman referred to can be made even more explicit online.

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