

Playing With Social Network Sites: Actual & Ideal Selves

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Abstract

Digitally mediated social network sites can be conceived as ‘sandbox games’ where users can play with and perform identity in a variety of ways. This paper will look at the ways in which *Facebook* and *Pinterest* offer two different platforms for identity play with both actual and idealized forms of selves through the posting and framing of personal information and the (re)appropriation of pre-existing content on the internet. In doing so, it will be demonstrated that it is possible for hybrid-identity to emerge and stabilize through the archival nature of the internet.

Keywords

Identity; Play; Social Network Sites; SNS.

Introduction

While it has been acknowledged that play is an integral part of identity development in research on both youth and adults (Pelligrini, 2009; Piaget, 1962), identity in a digitally mediated, networked society has become an increasingly complex concept, straddling both the physical and digital world, pushing the boundaries of the self, identity (both social and individual) (Robinson, 2007), and established identity theory (Burke, 2003; Eriksson, 1959/1994; Stryker, 1994). As our leisure and social interactions become increasingly mediated by technology, we must reassess the process of identity construction and performance to reflect the new ways people interact and play in and with a technologically mediated world.

Understanding digitally mediated play as an assemblage of ‘actors’ (Taylor, 2009) within a cybernetic process (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Hayles, 1999), the contributing elements of the networked process of play in online environments include, but is not limited to, the user, the individual specificities of the technology that facilitates play, and the social and structural context of the online environment and other users that share the network. In order to distinguish potentially new types of identities facilitated by online play, it is imperative that we disentangle the elements within the network to determine their potential contribution to the complex process of identity development in online play.

Networked & Hybrid-Identities

Through research on the player-avatar relationship in massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPG) (Boudreau, 2007) and single-player videogames (Boudreau, 2012), it has been established that “hybrid-identity” has the potential to develop given certain perimeters and conditions. Boudreau defines hybrid-identity as an identity that emerges through the networked process of videogame play which exists **between** the player and the avatar (or player-character), but does not reside in or belong to either. During videogame play, hybrid-identity is often ephemeral, unstable and intangible. It is difficult to point to a particular moment in gameplay and identify the presence of hybrid-identity, yet its presence is undeniably felt as something ‘more than’ the player or the avatar as distinctly unique entities.

Employing the analytic framework presented in Boudreau’s work (2007; 2012), this paper will examine the ways in which people ‘play’ on and **with** the social networking sites as opposed to

playing structured, pre-defined games that are most often associated with ‘social gaming’ on social networking sites (such as Pioneer Trail, Mafia Wars, etc.). Through a content analysis of ten (10) *Facebook* profiles and the users’ *Pinterest* accounts, accounting for similarities and differences between user content on both sites, it will be demonstrated that different forms of networked and hybrid-identities can exist for the same person in different contexts online.

Facebook & Pinterest

While videogame-play typically offers players a defined purpose, goals, and delineated tasks, set within a contained narrative, social network sites such as *Facebook* and *Pinterest* could be considered ‘sandbox games’ where users can create and play with content without the limitations of a pre-packaged game. Although bound by the technological and structural constraints of each site, the user is able to present their interests, thoughts, and aspirations through text, images, and the re-appropriation of online content. Whether or not the user is consciously playing with their identity, (their every-day, fictionalized, or idealized versions of self, or any variation in-between), through the selection, organization, and presentation of content, users play with both the social networking site as well as with a constantly changing version of various selves and identities.

For almost 10 years, *Facebook* has been enabling individuals to upload images, post status updates and share a broad range of information all of which form versions of their online identity. Structured around the concept of ‘friends’, users invite people to have access to their account and accept (or deny) invitations to be friends with other users. Users have control over who can view and interact with the content they share by being able to create varying levels of access for different groups of ‘friends’. This gives the user the ability to manage what parts of their identity is shared with which group at any given time. Drawing on research that focuses on identity and impression management on *Facebook* (Back, Stopfer, Vazire, Gaddis, Scmukle, Egloff, and Gosling, 2010; Farnham and Churchill, 2011; Hogan, 2010; Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011), it can be argued that content posted to *Facebook* is often connected to the user’s actual or ‘everyday’ identities. While the research on identity and impression management and *Pinterest* is limited and often interwoven within other topics such as digital literacies (Tekobbe, 2013), a quick glance at the content posted by users tells a different story.

Organized by thematic interests such as fashion, technology, architecture, and art, etc., *Pinterest*, is structured around the concept of bulletin boards where users are able to ‘pin’ images (either uploaded or found on the internet) and add a 500 character description of the image. Although predominantly open (public), *Pinterest* does have a several privacy tools such as the ability to lock a board or to block specific users. When looking through topical pins and other users’ boards, users can opt to “like” or “re-pin” other people’s images as well as post a comment. In the case of repining, users re-appropriate images for their own purposes, often changing the description from the person the pin was appropriated from to reflect the user’s interest in and context of the image. In this way, it could be argued that content on *Pinterest* is still connected to the user’s everyday identity in that pins reflect the user’s interests. However, *Pinterest* can also be seen as a place for user’s to map out ideal versions of self, expressing potential future identities through the pinning of images of dream homes, weddings, bodies, technologies, etc, rather than (re)creating or sharing an archive of an existing self as is often seen on *Facebook* with photos of family vacations, social parties, home renovations, etc.

Conclusions

Both sites act as an archive of complex identity performances through the creation and sharing of content, but in two distinctly different ways. Facebook offers users a place to share content (and in turn, identities) with selected users often drawing on past and current lived experiences. Whereas the structure of *Pinterest* promotes a more public platform where users can browse strangers’ pins through the topic-driven menu built into the user interface able to view and share idealized versions of themselves and others. In both cases, the digital archive of images and text can be seen as a tangible, stable – albeit ever-changing – hybrid-identity that exists **between** the user, the content they choose to create and share, and the network within which they share it.

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