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## Online Identity

Alice E. Marwick

**Introduction**

What constitutes “identity”? If I am asked about my identity, I might describe myself as a woman, a New Yorker, or a feminist. Other people may mention their ethnic or racial background, politics, sexuality, or religion. Still other people would talk about their personality traits, emphasizing who they “really are” or their “true selves.” Identity can mean subjectivity (how we think of ourselves), representation (how different facets of identity are depicted in culture and media), or self-presentation (how we present ourselves to others). It can refer to our personal identity as an individual, or our social identity as a member of a group.

Online, most research on identity has focused on self-presentation (Wynn and Katz 1997; Papacharissi 2002; Baym 2010; boyd 2010). Social media such as social network sites, blogs, and online personals require users to self-consciously create virtual depictions of themselves. One way of understanding such self-representation is the information and materials people choose to show others on a Facebook profile or Twitter stream. But identity is also expressed through interacting with others, whether over instant messenger or email. Since there are fewer identity cues available online than face to face, every piece of digital information a person provides, from typing speed to nickname and email address, can and is used to make inferences about them.

In this chapter, I discuss some basic theories of identity, apply them to new media contexts, and look specifically at social network sites, blogs, and microblogging services such as Twitter to examine some of the major issues surrounding identity and new media today.

**Theories of Identity**

We typically think of identity as something that is singular, fixed, and unchanging throughout a lifetime. This classic liberal humanist subject consists of what Sandy

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Stone calls a “body unit grounded in a self” (1996: 85) – a single, essential personality tied to an earthly body, which remains constant. Thinking of identity as static makes it possible to group people based on characteristics such as race, class, and gender, whether for demographic or political purposes.

This model is not really how most people experience identity. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) concluded that people present themselves differently based on *context* (where they are) and *audience* (who they’re with). Someone hanging out at a bar with friends will speak and act differently from how they would in a job interview. In fact, research in “symbolic interaction” shows that we present ourselves slightly differently to different people. Identity is flexible and changeable, and people are highly skilled in varying their self-presentation appropriately. Identity is thus socially constructed in tandem with the people around us. Cultural studies theorists such as Stuart Hall (1987) and Angela McRobbie (1994) proposed a *pluralist* subject that was not only socially constructed rather than biologically essential but also flexible and changeable over time. Terms such as “women of color” or “queer” were strategically constructed to encompass many different facets of modern identity for political action or affinity politics (Hall 1987; Lister et al. 2003). The concept of a multiple self explains why people vary identity performance based on context: multiplicity is an inherent property of identity rather than somehow dishonest or false (Baym 2010).

Another aspect of the social construction of identity was pioneered by queer theorist Judith Butler (1990), who maintains that popular understandings of gender and sexuality are constructed entirely through discourse and social processes. She argues that gender is *performative*, in that it is produced through millions of individual actions rather than being something that comes naturally to men and women. Similarly, anthropologists have long viewed race as a social construct rather than something rooted in the body. The implication of these theories is that the way that “race” or “gender” operates in society, both offline and online, is ideological – in other words, to maintain or further a particular balance of power (in this case, structural sexism or racism) (Omi and Winant 1993). Despite this, “race” and “gender” remain powerful concepts with very real effects on people’s lives.

An alternative approach to identity construction comes from postmodern theorists, who theorized that people construct identities for themselves using mass media and consumer goods. Anthony Giddens (1991) famously referred to identity as a “project,” something that can be actively worked on. According to this perspective, people construct their identities through the media they consume, the clothes they wear, how they adorn themselves, and even how they transform their bodies through exercise or plastic surgery. In other words, people differentiate themselves from their peers by buying and displaying goods that serve as symbolic markers that signal something about who they are (Woodward 1997). A Chanel bag, a Jay-Z sweatshirt, and a tweed jacket with elbow patches all mark personal identity. This concept of identity as project is exemplified by the makeover, a trope of popular culture in which people are actively transformed into “better” versions of themselves. Television shows such as *The Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Wear* are

predicated upon the idea that people can improve aspects of their personality and appearance to correspond with prevailing social norms.

### Social Media and Online Identity

When computer-mediated communication became common in the mid-1990s, it consisted primarily of textual conversation that took place through early social technologies such as Internet relay chat (IRC) and multiuser dungeons (MUDs): people met and talked without seeing photographs or videos of each other. As a result, some scholars theorized that this “disembodied” communication could free society from discrimination based on race, sex, gender, sexuality, or class. They speculated that communicating without traditional identity cues might enable people to experiment with different identities and personalities, making it obvious that categories such as gender were social constructions (Turkle 1995). More radical theorists posited that cyberspace would liberate people from their bodies, blur the lines between human and technology, and potentially evolve into a higher type of consciousness, becoming “post-human” (Stone 1996). Thus, new media would fundamentally change the way people thought about identity.

There are three primary reasons that the idea of the Internet as an “identity workshop” did not come to pass. First, most people did not create radically different selves, instead opting for relatively similar online personas (Baym 2010: 106). Second, forms of discrimination such as racism and sexism are not solely based on appearance. Oppression is structural, meaning it is fundamentally part of society, existing in everything from institutions to speech patterns. Early papers on textual chat frequently observed sexist speech or derogatory slang, as people communicating through chat rooms or IRC were still people (Herring 1999; Soukup 1999). Even if users couldn’t see who they were talking to, their beliefs remained intact.

Third, the move to commercial social software such as social network sites, blogs, and media-sharing services has brought with it an impetus to adhere to a single, fixed identity. Rather than letting users choose nicknames such as “SoccerGuy91,” Facebook asks users to provide a real name, such as “Jason Smith.” Sites with similar policies claim that this design decision prevents deception and assures safety, but it also benefits their business model. Most commercial sites collect user data and aggregate it with information collected elsewhere, creating sophisticated personal dossiers (Nissenbaum 2010). Other technology companies sell advertising based on demographic information. If people maintain several different profiles on the same site or use obscure nicknames, they are difficult to track and there is no indication that the information they provide is accurate, making it less valuable for marketing purposes. The fantasy of the single, verifiable identity that follows a user from site to site is very appealing to advertisers and data-collection companies, and it is becoming possible with technologies such as Facebook Connect (Stone 2008).

Still, identity expression through media differs both across and within platforms based on several factors. First, the technological affordances of particular types of

information and communication technologies constrain and enable different types of self-presentation. A telephone call allows for synchronous communication and tonality, but it is difficult to record or forward to another person and is missing gesture and facial expression. Second, groups of people hold different “idioms of practice” (Gershon 2010: 6). An idiom of practice is a set of norms around the use of technology. For instance, is it acceptable to call someone during dinner time? Should you share your sonogram pictures on Facebook? How someone’s friends and family frame appropriate technology use will influence how they in turn use it. Third, different types of software invoke different social contexts. For example, in environments such as virtual worlds and gaming communities, anonymity, playfulness, and role-playing are typical, whereas it is normal on LinkedIn, a career-oriented social network, to post accurate and verifiable information. Finally, identity expression is influenced by the perception of audience. Posting to a community of close friends is different from the sprawling mass of contacts most people amass on Facebook, and will affect how people present themselves.

The term “online identity” implies that there is a distinction between how people present themselves online and how they do offline. But any split between “online” and “offline” identity is narrowing, for two reasons. In contrast to the Internet of the 1990s, people today use social media primarily to communicate with people they know in “real life” contexts such as home, work, and school (Ellison et al. 2007). Second, wireless networking and portable devices such as smartphones and tablets make it easy to access social media as part of day-to-day life, rather than having to formally “log on” to the Internet. People often use multiple social sites simultaneously, creating an ecosystem where they maintain the same username and basic information across social platforms, further complicating self-presentation on each site. Given all these complications, what can be said about how social media affect identity?

### Identity Construction

Identity in social media sites is often expressed through customization. People who create blogs, homepages, and online profiles can use a variety of digital tokens such as pictures, avatars, icons, nicknames, fonts, music, and video to represent themselves. These items become symbolic markers of personal identity (Papacharissi 2002) that serve a function similar to clothing or bumper stickers: to establish and display one’s identity. Just as postmodern identity theorists argue that people construct “face-to-face” identities through a bricolage of consumer goods, media, fashion, and styles, online profiles allow people to use the language of media to express themselves to others. The online presence becomes something to be “worked on” and perfected (Perkel 2008).

The first personal homepages were created before templates became widely available and, as a result, varied considerably. Despite the ability to represent themselves however they wanted, homepage owners defined themselves through a process of negotiation with others, establishing interpretive context for their

online selves by linking to the homepages of friends, employers, and educational institutions (Wynn and Katz 1997). These personal homepages were gradually eclipsed by blogs and social network site profiles, which used HTML templates and standardization to facilitate web publishing. MySpace pages, for instance, required users to adhere to a template but allowed for a great deal of customization and personal expression through design. In contrast, Facebook profiles cannot be altered and thus all adhere to the look and feel of the site. As a result, user customization is restricted primarily to filling out predefined fields, such as favorite books, music, television, and films. These categories become “taste performances” (Liu 2007) in which items are chosen as symbolic markers based on how others will view them. For example, to appear artsy and sophisticated, a student might list obscure indie bands on his MySpace profile although he primarily listens to Top 40.

Judith Donath (2008) has applied signaling theory to social network sites to explain this phenomenon. Many people have been concerned about widespread intentional deception in social media, given the lack of face-to-face cues. Donath argues that social media such as Friendster and LinkedIn contextualize people within webs of social ties. If users significantly misrepresent themselves on these sites, their reputation and trustworthiness suffer and their social status drops accordingly. These social ties also provide clues on how to “read” a profile. Customizing and personalizing profiles signals status and cultural affiliation.

## Identity and Difference

Another way to think about identity is to use categories such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and ability. Identifying oneself as a member of such a group can be individually empowering or used tactically for activism or politics. While some people argue that such identity politics are overly contentious, others maintain that they are necessary, as structural oppression still cleaves along lines of difference in most social contexts.

In day-to-day life, most people do not experience solely gender *or* class *or* sexuality but rather an identity that encompasses all of these things. For example, a working-class, older, white lesbian will experience gender discrimination differently from a straight, upper-class, Asian teenage girl. The concept of “intersectionality” is used to describe these multiple overlapping facets of identity and how they affect experiences of power and privilege (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality also demonstrates how forms of structural oppression such as sexism and racism are intertwined, making it impossible to separate one from the other. More recently, scholars in queer and feminist theory have advocated for a theory of assemblage rather than intersectionality (Puar 2007). Assemblage, a term borrowed from French theorists Deleuze and Guattari, indicates a grouping or network of interwoven pieces, in contrast to intersectionality, which (critics claim) implies that these lines of power can be disassembled. In other words, the experience of identity is less the intersection of stable, concrete categories such as “race,” “age,” or “religion” and

more an unstable, incoherent set of feelings, emotions, and information that may be different for each person. While this is a sophisticated theoretical model, it makes it difficult to understand and resist the political and social frameworks that depend on conventional understandings of “race,” “class,” and “gender.”

Social media can be a powerful tool for expressing solidarity, talking with like-minded people, and engaging in activism. Unfortunately, it can also be used to further oppression, such as white supremacy or sexism (Herring 2000; Daniels 2009). For example, Lisa Nakamura has extensively examined different representations of Asians and Asian-Americans online, including video game characters, website discourse, and instant messenger “buddies.” She found that they adhered to stereotypical and racist stereotypes such as the geisha girl or martial artist. Nakamura argues that, online, the typical subject (or user) is assumed to be white, male, and straight unless “marked” otherwise. This means that what seems to be a context *unmarked* by race is actually strongly marked as heteronormative (straight) and normatively white. If a user indicates that he or she does not fit this profile, through a user picture or nickname, they may be criticized for bringing race into a conversation or inviting racist backlash (Nakamura 1999, 2008). While online interaction can be helpful for coalition-building, structural oppression still very much exists.

### Context Collapse and Privacy

Maintaining a verifiable online identity brings with it a new set of problems and concerns. One of these is “context collapse,” the theory that social technologies make it difficult to vary self-presentation based on environment or audience (Marwick and boyd 2011a). Large sites such as Facebook and Twitter group friends, family members, coworkers, and acquaintances together under the umbrella term “friends” (boyd 2006). While in real life it’s possible to alter self-presentation depending on with whom one is interacting, in broad social sites one transmits information to many different types of people simultaneously. This creates conflict when the norms of these groups conflict. For instance, a joke between two teenagers could be misinterpreted negatively by one teen’s mom, or a photo of a wild party could be used as evidence to fire an employee (as happened to a woman who lost her teaching credentials over a MySpace photo labeled “drunk pirate”).

While some social media sites provide the ability to filter content to a specific subgroup of friends, these settings can be tricky to configure and often change without notice. As a result, people have developed a variety of techniques to handle context collapse. Some people maintain multiple accounts: one “safe for work” and one more personal. Others use nicknames that only their closest friends are familiar with. Still others use large sites such as Facebook for generic messages and save more personal interactions for text messaging, instant messenger, or niche communities. Some users create content appropriate for multiple groups simultaneously, or vary their messages to appeal to different audiences (Marwick and boyd 2011a). These creative strategies demonstrate both the significance of context collapse as a problem

and the different ways in which users compensate for a lack of needed functionality in an application.

Because social media sites encourage people to share a great deal of social information, they bring up several issues around data privacy. People not only have to monitor the information they consciously and directly give to others but also the information that other people “give off” about them (Nissenbaum 2010). For example, Flickr and Facebook make it possible to tag photos with the names of people who appear in them. On Facebook, these photographs will show up on a user’s profile unless the user specifically “untags” him or herself. On Twitter, @replies create affiliations between users even if one of them has no desire to be associated with the other. Because online interactions lack the rich feedback of face-to-face communication, any and all digital traces left by a person may be interpreted by curious viewers to augment their perceptions of the user.

### **Authenticity**

A primary difference between mass media and new media is that new media allows for direct interaction between media producers and consumers. Sites such as YouTube and Facebook are full of videos, pictures, and text created primarily by “regular people.” Some people have become very well-known as the result of a popular blog, YouTube channel, or Internet meme. These “microcelebrities” often use social media to strategically increase their popularity with their audience (Senft 2008). Unlike traditional celebrities, who remain sequestered from the public by a coterie of agents, managers, and bodyguards, people who use social media to stay in touch with their fans are expected to be accessible and “real” (Marwick and boyd 2011b).

The expectation of authenticity can be quite difficult to manage, as authenticity itself is never absolute and is always positioned in distinction to something else (e.g., a real jazz club rather than a corporate chain) (Grazian 2003). People practicing microcelebrity must uneasily navigate between revealing personal information to seem truthful and real to their fans and revealing something that could harm them personally and professionally.

### **Conclusion**

Since the Internet became popular in the mid-1990s, people have asked whether new media changes identity or the way people express themselves. Certainly it has provided a new set of tools for self-expression, from blogs to tweets. Moreover, sites such as Friendster and MySpace have made the social construction of identity self-conscious and visible. People know that they must choose what facets of themselves they want to present online and – unlike in face-to-face environments, where it is possible to switch self-presentation strategies quickly – this must be determined in advance. While there are currently no tools to manage context collapse, people use

a variety of creative strategies including obfuscation, multiple accounts, posting coded messages, and retreating to smaller sites for private conversations.

It is clear, however, that the Internet has not liberated people from the structural oppression of difference, and structural sexism, racism, heterosexism, and so forth are just as prevalent online as they are in face-to-face contexts. The fantasy of the Internet as disembodied playground is just that, a fantasy.

At the same time, social media's tendency to make identity construction explicit may have far-ranging effects that are yet to be determined. For instance, the Internet offers a plethora of tools for self-improvement, from exercise and diet trackers to study aids and educational materials. Sites such as RunKeeper, SparkPeople, OpenCourseWare, and Khan Academy combine a strong focus on one's own progress with support drawn from Internet-enabled interpersonal connections. These tools let people explicitly work toward desired identities in front of an interested audience, but they also further specific ideas of what it means to be an accomplished, modern individual – namely, fit and educated. Similarly, people draw from global networks to choose trends, fashions, and fads they want to follow, sometimes overshadowing local connections. For instance, fashion bloggers are often influenced more by other bloggers than the people around them, creating trends that spread via the Internet but play out in face-to-face display. Such interactions muddle the distinction between identity expression online and off, complicating our understanding of identity co-construction and performance. These changes suggest that multiplicity can be both encouraged and bound by social technologies.

Contemporary Internet users can find people to talk to about virtually any subject. It is easier to learn about punk rock, veganism, transgender issues, libertarianism, environmental activism, high fashion, bicycling, or any other pastime or identity position than ever before. The resources available to use to construct, perform, and mobilize identity make it possible to try out different lifestyles and subjectivities. However, sites such as Facebook that emphasize “verifiable” identity and the persistence of online content, facilitated by search engines such as Google, make it difficult for people to experiment with subject positions without leaving a permanent record. This back and forth between concepts of singularity and multiplicity is likely to remain in sharp focus, for Internet users, technology creators, and Internet scholars.

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