

Identity and Agency

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Identity is a complex concept, and the way it is defined has important implications across personal, political, legal, and other contexts. It is variously used to consider the way in which one is recognized as an entity (philosophy), how one conceptualizes and expresses the self either individually or collectively (psychology and the social sciences), the sum ownership of the tangible and intangible assets of the self (whether creative, physical, biological, digital, or otherwise; law), a stable and unchanging element (mathematics), and the sum of self-referential claims or claims about others made by a digital subject (computer science).

Each of these disciplines crosses boundaries on the internet, and their definitions are occasionally in conflict. For example, the digitally stored identifiers collected using biometric devices may not encompass the self-definition that an individual might consider essential to who s/he is psychologically or philosophically, but they may be legally binding. Claims made about the self or others and collected by a social network that are required for the system to function may raise privacy concerns if these identifiers unexpectedly appear in another context; the self expressed in an avatar or other online identity in a game, a virtual community, or other digital environment may represent a psychological investment that the individual loses without compensation when a company closes the digital service down; and photographs, videos, blog posts, and other creative expressions of self uploaded to a web can be included in a deceased person's legal estate. These are just a few of the interconnected and

occasionally conflicting definitions of identity in the digital age.

This entry deals primarily with the social science definition of identity which philosophy, psychology, and legal definitions draw from. But it is important to distinguish between this and digital identity, a feature used by mathematicians and computer scientists to build the web.

Digital Identity

A digital identity is a set of data that acts as a unique reference to a specific object, where that object can be a person, a thing, a concept, a group, or any other definable entity (Windley, 2005). This set of data might consist of one single identifier – a chemical's name or a webpage's URL, for example – or a set of information that placed together points to a specific thing: the title, album title, track number, and band name, combining to unambiguously reference a specific song recording.

These data may be explicitly offered by the object in question, such as where a human user creates a username in an online community, or it may be derived from the object itself, such as a filename, or the length of a recording. Additionally, a digital identity might be a reference to a second definable entity that is culturally accepted to refer to the primary subject, such as where one might use an email address (which is itself the digital identity of a person's mailbox within a specific email system) as the digital identity of a person on another, unrelated service. This can make digital identities more accurate because, while many people may share the same name, presumably none of them will share the same telephone number.

Digital identity's main role is authentication – ascertaining whether an entity is who or what it is believed to be, and therefore worthy of trust. Although this is true of online identity, in the case of digital identity authentication is binary: it is either entirely true or entirely false.

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Online Identity

While digital identity answers the question, “Are we sure that x is y ?,” online identity continues the statement, “ I , y , consist of a , b , and c .” It relates most closely to the offline definition of personal, ego, or self-identity described initially by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson in the mid-twentieth century. In Erikson’s (1950) approach, self-identity is the set of unique characteristics that defines who an individual is. Other psychological theories of identity propose that the ability to express the self is essential for psychological well-being; if individuals are unable to do so (for example, she or he is inhibited by social factors), they will either attempt to reject that part of themselves completely, or will seek other environments in which to perform that aspect of the self. Breakwell’s (1986) work with people with “stigmatized” or “spoiled” identity highlighted the conflicts that individuals experience in keeping the identity a secret, the behavioral mechanisms used to cope with the desire to express the self fully (e.g., “passing,” violence toward the self or toward others who choose to express that identity), and the mental health issues that arise from the belief that an identity is inappropriate or should be hidden.

Online identity is the expression of this self-identity as mediated by the computer-assisted environment. This mediation changes the nature of this expression, as has been found since the study of online identity began in the 1980s, though it appears to change neither the nature of identity itself, nor the motivations for expressing it.

Research History

Initial research tended to focus on the realization that the online environment provided the individual with both the tools and the ability to adequately express her/himself, and that online groups could have strong enough membership identities for the individual to identify with. Ronald Rice’s work (e.g., 1993) applied Daft and Lengel’s (1984) media richness theory to computer-assisted work environments, and thereby helped to establish a perception of the

variability of the characteristics of different virtual spaces along the spectrum from lean to rich. Almost as quickly as the ARPANET established the connection between the four first universities in the United States, anthropologists and sociologists observed behavior they described as “identity play.” The online versions of identity that Sherry Turkle, Katelyn McKenna, John Bargh, Amy Bruckman, and others wrote about were curiosities to be defined, usually considered within existing offline structures, like gender and age.

In the mid-1980s, researchers began to explore the ways people on the network created unique and personalized persona that they expressed through their choices of evocative usernames, profile descriptions, group membership, and writing style. Even before a visual interface was supported on the network, the virtual world was populated by a rich descriptive landscape and many expressions of online self. There was an emphasis on distinctiveness – how people were able to use the primarily text-only facilities of the online environment to represent themselves as unique (Siegel et al., 1986), as well as the ways their online behavior in text based forums, listservs, and communities gave clues about offline identity markers.

Online identity research continued to evolve with the internet as more users went online with the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1994. Increasingly, researchers’ questions moved away from describing the mechanics of expressing the self, and toward the relationship between the online identity and offline attitudes and behaviors.

It was argued that, on the web, identity could be freely expressed without offline structures. Despite its “leanness” (a term used to describe how much information can be conveyed via a medium), the psychological sense of self could be realized via text based communication. An interest could be detected in what this offered the individual behind the screen. Anonymity played a big role in inquiry at this time; if the network was creating a social world, how could a community form when there was no way of knowing who was on the other side? Finally, research began to ask whether a difference between an individual’s online and offline identities could be symptomatic of something problematic. Investigators

at this time, like Sherry Turkle (1995), Katelyn McKenna, and John Bargh (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimmons, 2002), studied how the offline self was liberated from its social constraints by the online world. Joshua Berman and Amy Bruckman (2001) described the opposite, identifying where the online self's agency was still restricted by imported structures. Barry Wellman's work explored the online iterations of networks originating offline (Wellman & Gulia, 1997), and the social processes created by virtual structures for the individual to adhere to. Russell Spears and Martin Lea's (1992) research on the effects of anonymity on the individual laid the foundation for the study of online influence.

As the internet and web became more prevalent as social media through which to extend existing offline relationships, the field continued to explore the relationship between the user, the online self, and the online community. Online identity was increasingly considered a healthy extension of the inner self, and the virtual world was considered as a place in which to gather: thoughts turned to the subjective place of the individual within his or her network and the implications for the perceptions of the offline individual and social actor. Barry Wellman continued his work on "networked individualism" (Ranie & Wellman, 2012), while Manuel Castells (1997) and Henry Jenkins (2006) delved into the social evolutions of online-offline public performance, describing identity in both spheres as a continuum, and exploring the personal and the group implications. In Europe, Tom Postmes expanded on Spears and Lea's work (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998), looking at the influence of online messages for offline attitudes and behaviors; and, more recently, danah boyd's (2008), Mimi Ito's (Ito et al., 2013), and Sonia Livingstone's (2009) research has begun to explore offline identity development in tandem with online, as the first generation to grow up with the web is reaching its second decade of life.

Expressing Online Identity

There are necessary differences between the expression of identity in the offline world, and the expression of the same online.

An exchange of identity expressions between two people passing each other on the street would consist of an information-rich mix of appearance, fragrance, facial expression, gait, accent, and so on, with each of those categories made up of a collection of apparent choices made against a cultural context: the style of clothing, the apparent designer label, and so on being an implicit signal of identity understood almost instinctively by those with the same cultural knowledge.

Online identity expression, however, contrasts with this in three ways. First, online signals are much less information-rich than in the physical realm; second, the cultural context within which they are received may not be mutually agreed upon by the two parties involved; third, the meanings of the signals themselves are, in many cases, not yet agreed upon by society at large. Whereas an accented speech might provide a good deal of information about the speaker's identity, accented written words – by spelling or syntax – provide far less information, may be produced because of their context, and are likely to act only as an identity signal for those who recognize it as such.

The exchange of identity expressions can be viewed on a spectrum denoting the symbolic richness of the interaction. An intimate, lengthy, physical encounter is at one end. An anonymous, brief, text-only interaction is at the other. Information processing theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) would describe interactions on the internet, due to the limitation of the technologies, as being toward the information-poor end of this scale. The web's "lean" medium necessitates attempts to proactively express the self by co-opting the available editable features of a site or service in order to maximize their expressive capabilities.

A username, for example, may be a site's most obviously available identity marker, and so will, within the context of that site's culture, develop a richness of meaning that it would otherwise not have in either the physical world or on another site. A profile on a social network will often include information about location, preferences, and online and offline networks, and this provides more identity information. An avatar adds more richness with nonverbal/text cues, and the corpus of online activity through participation in communities, whether text based or video, adds more.

Identity as Performance and the “Super Me”

There is an additional difference between the online and offline self: an online identity is an essentially performative act in contrast to the more ambient nature of physical world identity. Because online interaction sits on the low-information end of the spectrum, to be entirely successful as a public identity it is necessary for any clues to that identity to be made explicit, declaimed loudly and clearly, rather than simply “allowed” to happen unconsciously as might be the case in the physical world.

Even an online identity that the individual considers to be faithful to that of her/his offline self is inevitably a “super” version of her/himself. Online dating profiles, for example, typically add a couple of inches to height, lose a couple of pounds in weight, and describe someone fitter, wealthier, and generally nicer than they actually are, even when the author has attempted to be completely honest. Since communication between the individual and the beholder is mediated by technology, the individual must create an identity that can be expressed in the ways that are available to communicate it, and this necessitates editing. The online self is a more explicit construction of the intended projected “me” because it is mediated by a machine.

What this means for online identity is that persistent online self-representations (whether pseudonymous or named) coalesce into a “super-me” or idealized self that is presented to the digital audience. In this form, the “negative” features of the self are demoted and the best features promoted, leading to the criticism that the online identity is an idealized expression.

Multiple Selves

The online self can easily become online “selves” when an individual maintains separate accounts in different online services. These can be similar constructions to one another or different expressions of any aspect of the self or interest. An early observer of this feature was Sherry Turkle, whose 1995 book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* drew on theories of

identity from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology to explain the apparently fragmented experience of being different “selves” in different internet contexts at the same time. Her work described the experience of fragmenting the self into isolated segments, emphasizing the prismatic, multiplicitousness of identity rather than the idea of finding one’s “true” self. Specifically, she explained why it was possible for a man to concurrently present as a woman in a chat room, as a “swarm of bees” in an online game in another window, and as an expert in Renaissance art in a forum in another window. Rather than consider this psychologically problematic, she argued that this compartmentalization was a playful way of recognizing inner diversity. Further, it was seen as an opportunity to role play various possible identities in the security of an anonymous environment to see if they “fit,” before trying them on “for real” in the offline world. She described this as an identity laboratory.

It is not only the online environment that produces multiple identities. Offline, people also develop, try out, abandon, and replace different identities both in the long term, as they develop and age, and, in the short term, as they live out their lives from hour to hour, context to context. The online world simply makes these identities both easier to construct and maintain distinctly, and more obvious to others if there are sufficient data to show connections between currently known identities and these new experiments. This might be seen as both tactical and strategic.

Tactically, a person will project a different identity to his or her lover in the evening than he or she does to a boss that afternoon. Individuals read the social cues provided by the environment and act accordingly. This is mirrored by the distinct selves performed within each online environment, demonstrating that the virtual context can be as distinct as the offline.

Strategically, as proposed by Markus and Nurius’ “possible selves” model (1986), a person may develop and experiment with new identities in order to test and fulfill her desires for her future selves: they act so that they may become. The application of strategic identities has been demonstrated across the lifespan in online environments, in which participants adopt more or less dominant roles in gameplay and

other interactions depending on the desired outcome.

Turkle's identity laboratory and Markus and Nurius' possible selves model may explain why successfully auditioned online identities may be adopted in the physical world. A feature of anonymity is that it removes the apparent risk of social reprisal within the contexts of other identities held by the individual, online or offline. For people wishing to express, for example, political or sexual views that are considered unacceptable by an offline identity's cultural context, anonymity provides an apparently consequence-free arena for self-expression. But with support and encouragement from one's online community, a person may choose to take the identity offline. The online group can continue to act as a reference during offline incorporation.

To be resilient offline, however, the online identity must represent a significant emotional investment by the user. There is evidence of a deep emotional connection to online identities, even to the point of an anthropomorphic empathy.

Journalist Julian Dibbell describes this phenomenon in a very lean online environment, the text based online community LambdaMOO. In his 1996 book *My Tiny Life*, he wrote about an incident in which one user hacked the accounts of two others and "forced" their avatars to perform sexual acts on his avatar in view of other users. Although this situation is interesting with regard to boundary transgression and its implications for online communities, it also highlights the identification that individuals behind the screen can have with their online counterparts. The two women whose accounts were hacked reported that they were emotionally affected by the online experience, despite the virtual acts having no physical component. The women perceived the online personae as directly related to their offline identity, and that to violate one was to violate (or make vulnerable) the other. Other research in the area of identity deception has emphasized similar offline effects: those who have been deceived by an individual claiming to be someone he or she is not experience similar upset.

Agency

While an arena for great experimentation, self-expression, and role playing, online identities are not limitless in their expressive abilities. Unlike the self-signals shared between strangers on the street, each identity marker on the web is proactively constructed using the tools available, and online identity is not without systems and structures that constrain the individual, both socially and technologically. There are two such bounding forces.

The first is an inherent quality of online identities: that the available expressive vocabulary is limited by the potential capabilities of the platform upon which the identity is being constructed, and by the personal capabilities of the individual to use that platform. An online identity represented by a series of question and answer fields in a fixed design may be less rich than one expressed through a free-form editable webpage, although this is not always the case: a skilled writer might be able to construct a fine online dating profile, but be incapable of designing a page from scratch. However, the use of a prescriptive tool to build an online identity (for example, an online dating profile with standard questions) reduces the agency of the individual to choose which parts of an online identity she wishes to express, and gives this choice to the designer of the platform itself. In this way, the designers of online services directly influence the way that their users construct their online identities, and with that, insert themselves into the feedback loop where the online identity is absorbed by the offline. Online identity-enabling software is, arguably, political and culturally active by its very nature (Bell, Blythe, & Sengers, 2005).

The second bounding force is that of social structure. While the culture of the early internet was self-consciously flat and hierarchy-free, now, using the ability to reinvent oneself as any identity, with a degree of anonymity impossible in the physical world, the social structures of the offline world are triggered by the corresponding online identity. These systems become more apparent through interaction, as each interaction gives away social cues that might cause an online identity to be perceived as, for example, old, or

female, or of a certain class, and thus, discriminated against even if there is no other evidence or reason for an adverse reaction to the online identity. In fact, so sensitive are people to such cues that online identities can be used as tests to highlight the very existence of social structure and privilege that might otherwise be impossible to perceive.

Pseudonymity

Experimental online identities may or may not be temporary, and may or may not be incorporated into the offline self to become part of one single, self-actualized representation that is identical in both the online and offline worlds. Eventually, the online, pseudonymous identity may come to possess a history and reputation that is wholly separate from the offline identity. Indeed, many online identities can persist for years, with no crossover with the offline self. They can be as much an expression of the person as his or her legal name, position in the workplace, and role as father, husband, mother, or daughter. Although two deeply connected members of the same online community may not recognize one another if they meet in the street, within the context of the online community they would be instantly recognizable, be embedded in a network, and have a deep social history.

Online Social Identity

Self-identity is not created as a tabula rasa. Within the social sciences it is assumed that many (if not all) identities are taken from constructs that already exist within the cultural context. This happens through identification with a group. In this way, a “social identity” acts as a reference for what should and should not be considered part of the self. It allows a group to predefine the most important parts of the new identity.

Social identity, theorized by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979, is the part of the self-concept that is derived from membership in social groups. It places the individual in a context that provides the reference for attitudes and behavior. For example, an individual wishing to

have an identity as a supporter of a particular football team does not have to develop for herself a mode of dress, or a pattern of match-day behavior. She simply adopts the identity premade for her by the in-group and rejects anything that might be a characteristic of the out-group. This adoption into a new identity of the expressions predefined by the group is useful in two ways: first, it makes identity experimentation easier for the individual, in that she adopts group references for attitudes and behavior; second, it makes it easier for others to decode the new social cues. Thus, being part of a group makes it easier to know how to behave, and easier for others to know how to respond.

Further, commonly accepted social identities help those who receive them to understand who they are dealing with and, therefore, to act appropriately. Without this comprehension of the other’s identity, appropriate action becomes difficult, and tentative, and so people will try very hard to determine who the other is, even if the clues are slim.

Anonymity of the self and the development of multiple identities means that an individual cannot be certain what is a reference group and whether or not it is appropriate to align with it. Tactics have developed to do this as efficiently as possible. Early in the internet’s history, a common question found in chat rooms was “A/S/L?,” asking for the correspondent’s age, sex, and location, giving at least some cues to the identity of the other and, thus, the behavior considered appropriate.

The drive to express one’s identity via any means possible, however, can be matched by the recipients’ desires to ascertain another’s identity through the little information available. Users may attribute meaning to data that would, in a more information-rich conversation, go unnoticed or unremarked. Deep meaning may be given to, for example, speed of response, figures of speech, frequency of questioning, and so on, that may or may not produce an impression that is accurate with “real life” but nevertheless builds up the way one’s identity might be received by another.

Deindividuation

The few signals that are conveyed can take on great importance when seeking to identify an in-group in the anonymous online space.

Philip Zimbardo described deindividuation in 1969 as the phenomenon a person experiences in a context in which he or she experiences a loss of self when there are no apparent identity markers: the person loses their identity and becomes part of a greater whole. This may happen in a crowd or when costumed or otherwise made anonymous.

The concept of deindividuation has been applied to the digital media space by Reicher, Spears, and Postmes (1995), who describe the effects of the absence of self in online environments using the social identity deindividuation effects (SIDE) model. Specifically, they propose that the drive for group belonging, or an anchor for one's own experience of self, leads to emergent conformity. This can lead to social flocking behavior, where people who perceive themselves as being part of the same group assume identifiers based on cues that they read from past online statements, actions, or even randomly allocated group assignments. This group membership guides them in how to behave and the identity of the group begins to solidify. The moral or ethical flavor of the actions normalized by this emergent group does not necessarily reflect the beliefs and values held by the individuals that make up the group (Zimbardo, 1969).

Other Research Areas

Over time the concept of online identity has deepened, but digital identity, rooted in logic and computer science, has remained the same. They necessarily overlap: for an online identity to continue to be meaningful over time, it must come from a system with a trusted digital identity system because the environment in which it operates is anonymous. Thus, the identity must be introduced, forged, and performed in a virtual vacuum. The social history and reputation of an online identity is dependent on the trust that it has always referred to, or been authored by, the same entity. And it is the digital identity system of an online service that provides that trust, even if the online community itself is barred from

knowing the “real life” identity of the person behind the identity. For example, an online community may have a user whose username of “NetUser1234” will gradually gain a social standing, and will evolve to develop a social identity within a network of relationships. All of these depend on the community being sure that NetUser1234 has always represented one online identity of a specific digital identity, and their trust in the authentication system that this digital identity relies upon.

There is a clash, however, between the understanding that a digital identity is necessary to an online identity, and a belief that a digital identity and an online identity must be the same. Digital identities are fixed and binary; online identities are fluid, and contain multitudes. This is an area of emerging research.

One strand of work explores the conflict between the evolving psychological and social identity and the perpetuating, singular digital identity (e.g., Raynes-Goldie, 2010). Offline social science theories of identity consider the self-concept as an evolving process of understanding, in which aspects are discarded when they no longer fit the individual in a given context. However, the nature of some contemporary constructions of digital identity (notably, for search or social networking applications) does not account for this evolution. Rather, it incorporates all aspects of the self (self-reported or algorithmically generated) and delivers it upon request. Social and legal scholars and computer scientists are working toward solutions to incorporate the nuances of the experience of the self-concept over time into computer constructions of identity.

A related area of research is how Big Data are being used by individuals, corporations, governments, and others in constructing both online and digital identities. There are questions about the extent to which the information accurately represents the self and the extent to which processes used to make sense of it are able to do so.

A final area of inquiry concerns the ethical treatment of individuals and their online identities in research that takes place via digital technologies. Several organizations (e.g., the Association of Internet Researchers) have published guidelines to protect the individual from potential harm (Markham & Buchanan,

2012) which recognize the symbiotic relationship between the offline and online self.

Overall, the digital environment offers an excellent opportunity to examine online identity. As a platform, it is a controlled and observable place in which users perform the same constructions of self as they do offline when they are implicit. Participants adapt to the platform's anonymity by generating – using the tools available – distinct strategic and tactical personalities according to the context in which they are played out. These may operate between the online and offline spheres, but do not need to. Participants construct social identities and formulate reference groups based on perceived in-group and out-group status.

Yet, the digital world remains a computer-mediated space and it demands binary translations of philosophical and psychological experiences of the self-concept. As the web and other digital technologies continue to weave into twenty-first-century life, the conflict between the online and offline identity becomes more apparent and is, therefore, increasingly a topic for research. The study of identity in a digital age is a philosophical pursuit of “I.” The many players who take part in its construction – from the individuals who occupy the space to the corporations who construct it – must work together to represent the self for the benefit of all.

SEE ALSO: Anonymity and the Law; ICT and Gender; Impression Management in Social Media; Mobile Lifestyles in the Business World; Online Games, Addiction and Overuse of; Online Games Characters, Avatars, and Identity; Online Games and Children; Online Games, Effects of; Online Games, Gender and Feminism in; Online Games and Role Playing; Privacy and Social Media; Social Media; Social Media and Relationships; Social Media and Social Capital

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