Self Presentation in Blogs and Social Networks

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**Abstract.** Recent approaches to the study of identity in online contexts underline how people on the Internet have multiple identities and are at risk of identity fragmentation. Subjectivities are context-specific, negotiated with other people and actualized in Self Presentations. The aim of this study is to investigate how social media users deal with choices regarding their Self Presentation and how different profiles of the same person relate to one other. Thirty-six users with accounts on two blog-hosting services and one social network website answered an online structured interview and elaborated on the different choices of Self Presentation for each service. Content Results show users accurately and consciously choose the way they present their Self according to their aims, actual and potential readership, and the technical possibilities of the media. Answers also show that people online are conscious of the multiple presentations they enact, and they feel an underlining sense of unity and coherence, which may be traced back to the concept of Self.

**Keywords.** Internet, Web 2.0, Identity

*Introduction*

Online identity studies often underline that a person using the Internet with different profiles and contexts at the same time may be the fragmentation of both online and offline identity in incoherent, unrelated, and often fake pieces [1]. The aim of this study is to verify if different profiles created by the same users are linked to different identities and to investigate how users choose the different structural elements to present their Self.

1. **Self, Identity, and Subjectivity**

Theoretical framework [2] consists of the following:

- Subjectivity: contextual, negotiated during interaction, and guided by goals of presenting the Self in a strategic way;
- Plural identities: set of actions and convictions that are activated by the situation the person is in;

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• Self: set of all the representation a person has of him/herself, which helps give the person a sense of coherence and stability within the many Self Presentations acted in interactions.

1.1. Web 2.0: Blogs and Social Networks

Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs and social network websites (SN) allows people without any particular technical abilities to be present online and to express their Self in an easy and prompt way through different channels. Subjectivity can be communicated in two different ways on blogs and SNs: content of posts and messages and design choices of the blog or the profile. This last feature is explored here as a significant element able to communicate the users’ subjectivity.

2. Method

A structured interview regarding the choices in Self Presentation across three different social media (LiveJournal, GreatestJournal and MySpace) was created. Main areas of the structured interview were focused on textual structural elements (i.e. personal information, interest list), visual structural elements (i.e. header, icons) and interactive structural elements (i.e. email address, chat) [3]. A link to the structured interview was posted in two LiveJournal communities and on the private blogs of a facilitator [4]. Content analysis was performed on answers provided by participants to find patterns among different answers.

3. Results

Thirty-three women and three men took part in the study. Overall participants revealed to make conscious choices about every structural component of their blogs and profile on MySpace (i.e. “I want my profile to reveal a little bit of who I am and what I can do with the images, colors, etc. that I use,” Female, 18 - UK). Examples of verbatim for each category explored in the questionnaire are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of verbatim for the three areas of investigation of the questionnaire: textual, visual, and interactive structural elements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textual Elements</th>
<th>Visual Elements</th>
<th>Interactive Elements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both journals express different parts of me (Female, 19, USA)</td>
<td>The “pics” I use on LJ and GJ are graphics I made. The “pics” on MySpace are actual pictures (Female, 18, UK)</td>
<td>I don’t want my RL friends trying to add my LJ, so I just don’t link it anywhere (Female, 18, USA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I know people offline on MySpace who know me by that nickname (Female, 23, Australia)</td>
<td>LJ images are about what I like, MySpace images are about my physical self (Female, USA)</td>
<td>I don’t want people I knew […] to find my LJ, since it’s more personal (Female, 22, USA)</td>
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Choices seem to be guided by the perception of the general relational contexts of LiveJournal, Greatest Journal, and MySpace: while LJ is a familiar and trusty environment (defined as “personal” and “familiar”) and where there are specific rules, MySpace is perceived as dangerous and unfriendly (defined “creepy” and “a slum”). These perceptions consequentially drive the choices regarding Self Presentations: on LJ users present their self freely, on MySpace they will be more conservative in disclosing and presenting interests and personal information. GreatestJournal often is seen as a backup for LiveJournal and therefore is used only in case LJ is unavailable. Actual readership also helps users to determine their Self Presentation: LJ is linked to online activities and friends, while MySpace is linked to Real Life. Personal abilities (no knowledge of HTML or CSS) and technical boundaries of the Social Medium may limit Self Expression through graphics and blog design. Users are conscious to modulate their Self Presentations according to context (“I am catering to a different set of friends and interests”, Female, 21 - Canada), but they stress that they feel an underlying sense of unity and coherence (“I don’t change”, Female, 51 – UK; “I use the journals for different reasons so I didn’t put exactly the same things”, Female, 23 - Spain).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Results propound that MySpace, LiveJournal, and Greatest Journal users enact with different identities on different media outlets through several Self Presentations. While LJ is connected to a mainly online life and to people who are considered to be friends-never meeting in Real Life, MySpace is all about Real Life, though the two Self Presentations change accordingly. As already reported in literature [5], it seems that presentations are influenced by contexts and the people who inhabit them. From the answers to the interview, it is evident that behind the multiple presentations there is something, the Self that allows users to feel a sense of coherence and uniqueness, multiple Self Presentations notwithstanding. This suggests that the risk of identity fragmentation is slight, or at least it is not built into virtual environments, as often claimed by literature. The results of the research also support the theoretical framework, which seem consistent with the complexity of the field of study.

References