

Identity in Online Communities

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Abstract. In our paper we review through literature on identity in online communities. Our focus is on the relation between self and online identity. Our theoretical background is in social identity theory. This is a working paper of research in progress.

Introduction

On the Internet, online communities have become common and millions of people are daily contributing online. People meet at online communities instead of, and in addition to, traditional face-to-face interaction. Usenet and the WELL are online communities that were established in the early 80s. These forms of computer-mediated communications (CMC) establish social groups or social networks online. Typically, these online communities have an idea, a common interest or a goal that they want to achieve. How individuals interact with each other in the community, interact with the community, and why they contribute to these communities has been a subject for researchers since the mid-1990's (e.g. Turkle 1995, Stone 1992, Donath 1999). One of the main topics that are discussed in this literature is identity (Wang and Fesenmaier 2003, Culter 1996), but often with different definitions on identity and with different approaches. This made us raise the following research problem:

How is identity discussed in the online community literature?

We will in this article study how the literature discusses identities in online communities. The term identity is often discussed both in everyday language and in the research literature without further explanation. In information systems and internet applications the technological definition of identity is often very narrow. Identity is seen synonymous to identifying an user, e.g. having a login name and a password. However, in our study we look at identity in broader view. Identity is derived from the concept of "self" from social psychology and philosophy. We will in this article present our view on identity, in which is based on a short philosophical presentation and the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

To be better able to understand the contribution to and the behaviour in online communities, the literature would benefit from using a more concrete definition on identity, and the different aspects of it, thus to contribute to this, our aims of this paper are twofold. First, to discuss and clarify how identity is treated in the online communities and set a standard for how these questions may be handled. Second, we present suggestions for future research.

In the next section a presentation of our view of identity is presented. Section 3 contains an introduction of the social identity theory, and in section 4 a short review of online communities is given. In section 5 the relation between self and online communities is discussed. Finally, suggestions for future research are presented.

Identity

When Locke (1975) in the late 1600's focused on personal identity, he viewed identity as something continuous and homogeneous. You have one identity, often referred to as the biological identity, and this is lasting from as far as the individual's "consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought" (Locke 1975, pp 6) and throughout your whole life. From being continuously and homogeneous the view of identity has changed radically. In Bauman (2004) essay on identity the new way of thinking identity is clearly shown. He means that committing oneself to one identity throughout your whole life, or even for longer periods is a risky project. He means that contemporary individuals are consumers that look at identity as objects being consumed. The way the society has changed, in which the creation and formation of identity has such high focus, it is correct to talk about identity "shopping" (Bauman 2004). As Bauman expresses it:

"Identities are for wearing and showing, not for storing and keeping"
(Bauman 2004:89).

From Philosophical discussions on identity, several identity theories have emerged. Hogg et al. (1995) compared two major identity theories: the identity theory (e.g., Burke 1980) and the social identity theory (e.g. Tajfel and Turner 1979), and concluded that each of the theories have benefits over the other. However, they commented that the theories should be used in different areas; identity theory in interpersonal social interaction, and social identity theory in exploring intergroup dimensions.

Social Identity theory

Using Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, which has later been developed into the self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), we may better understand how identity is composed rather than created. This theory is based on a categorization of one's identities. As shown in figure 1, the biological identity is the baseline of the identity hierarchy, and can be viewed as the consistent part of an individual's identity. Above this identity there may be a set of identities categorized hierarchically.

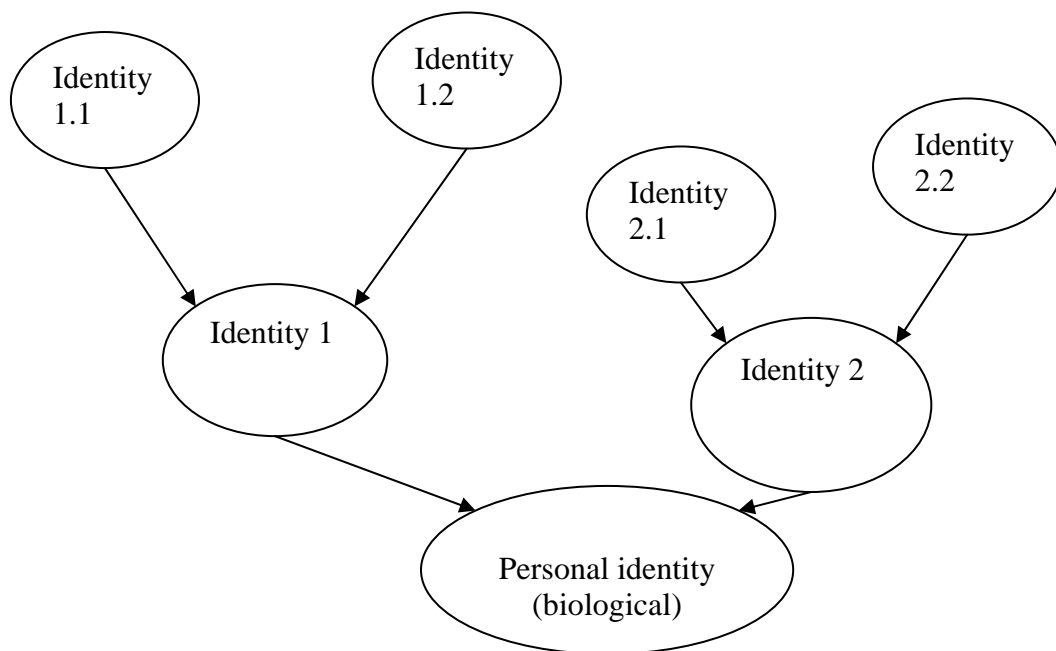


Figure 1 Simplified model of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory. Identities are categorized and placed in a hierarchy, where the personal identity is placed at the bottom level (biological)

Which identity that is expressed at which time depends on the situation and where in the hierarchy the identity is. Let's look at an example. You are out with some friends for a beer, you meet a colleague, whom you usually have a professional relationship with. Together with your friends you usually express one identity and with your colleague another. You are not sure how to behave in this situation, but according to the theory you will express the identity which is highest in your identity hierarchy. This theory has a lot in common with Goffman's (1967) ideas about identities and self. The expression of an identity is dependent on the situation. Even though Goffman (1967) never explicitly discussed an inner consistent self, one may implicitly draw this conclusion from his ritual metaphor in which he says that the energy you get in a ritual is brought with you to your next ritual.

Another question is whether it is possible to separate personal and social identity. In many situations people use the term social and group identity, suggesting that a group has a common social or group identity (Kline et al. 1993). You create a common identity together with other people. But is this not another level in the identity hierarchy? In some social settings it is required that you "put on" a particular identity. But this identity will in some way have a connection to or be a part of your personal identity. It is not possible to completely separate them. In different situations you can express different identities. A group is often associated with expressing group-specific identities, for example punks, business professionals etc. But these expressions will never be separated from the individual's personal identity. One should never say never in these settings, but generally social and personal identities are blurred. When Bauman (2004) says that keeping an identity throughout your whole life or in period of your life is a risky project, we suggest that Bauman (2004) means that you don't change your biological personal identity, but that identities higher in the identity hierarchy change over time.

Online Communities

Online communities are internet websites that facilitate people to communicate and collaborate with each other. The users form a community using computer mediated communication (CMC). Online communities are also known as virtual communities. Closely connected terms include participative web, social web, community web, web 2.0, social computing. The product of communication and collaboration is often described as user-generated content (UGC) or user created content (UCC).

There is not a clear definition for online community. Most of us believe we know a community when we see one (Mann 1978). As Jenny Preece (2000) puts

it, “superficially, the term online community isn’t hard to understand, yet it is slippery to define”. According to Preece (2000) an online community consists of:

*“**People**, who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs to perform special roles, such as leading or moderating.*

*A shared **purpose**, such as interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community.*

***Policies**, in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws that guide people’s interactions.*

***Computer systems**, to support and mediate social interactions and facilitate a sense of togetherness.”*

According to Demiris (2006), an online community is “a social unit that involves members who relate to one another as a group and interact using communication technologies that bridge geographic distance”. Howard Rheingold, the author of *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier (1993)* defines online (virtual) communities are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace".

Relations of Self and Online Identity

The literature about online communities discusses identity with different approaches. We have identified five different approaches in the literature: identity expression, identity nondisclosure, identity verification, identity deception and identity construction. We will present each approaches with reference literature in this section.

Identity expression

What is identity expression and how is identity expression related to online communities? First we want to look further into the question “what is identity expression?”. In Stryker and Burke’s (2000) paper about the identity theory they discuss the expression of identities. The research on identity theory has had two different directions; one “*examining how social structures affect the structure of self and how structure of the self influences social behaviour*”, while the other “*concentrates on the internal dynamics of self-processes as these affect social*

behaviour” (Stryker and Burke, 2000, pp. 85). The meeting point of these two directions is according to Stryker and Burke (2000) the behaviour that expresses identities. The identity theory has its theoretical ground point in structural symbolic interactionism, thus the expression of identities in the identity theory is often connected to interactions with others. In online communities “the behaviour” that expresses identities can be contribution of information or comments in the community.

But how can identity expression be related to online communities? Thorbjørnsen et al. (2007) defines expressiveness as “the consumers’ perception of a given product’s or service’s ability to express both social and personal identity dimensions” (pp. 765). Even though Thorbjørnsen et al. (2007) examines the adoption of Multimedia Messaging (MMS), several similarities can be seen with online communities. They point out that if behaviour results in an expression of identities the service (in which in our case is online communities) must facilitate some element of identity expressiveness. Thorbjørnsen et al. (2007) apply the term identity expressiveness with the following focus : “*the importance of behaviour as something that may be interpreted by others in the social construction of identity and by oneself in the repeated self-construction of identity*” (pp. 766). According to Wang and Fesenmaier (2003) individuals fulfill a number of psychological benefits joining online communities. They argue that online communities enable individuals to express their identities and thus are able to fulfill some of their psychological benefits.

Identity nondisclosure

In face-to-face discussions, you can easily evaluate and judge your discussion partner by her looks. For example age, color of skin, gender, height and weight are factors that are most often revealed immediately in “real life” contexts.

Self-disclosure is defined as “talking about oneself” and it greatly contributes to the construction of identity knowledge and impression building. Self-disclosure is a telling of private stories in public space (Lee 2006). In online communities, what people know about others is based on the disclosure of information that one wishes others to know (Cutler 1996). If one’s age is not relevant to the persona one wishes to have others perceive, then one need merely not reveal this information to prevent skewing others’ perceptions one way or another (Wood & Smith 2005).

Bowker and Tuffin (2002) have researched online community behaviour among disabled people. They found that disabled people like to contribute to online communities as “they can be treated on their merits as a person, rather than disabled person” (pp. 327). A ‘choice to disclose’ repertoire has been identified and was organised around three key resources: relevance, anonymity and normality.

Information that is once put on the internet, might remain there forever, with no possibilities to take it away. Most people in online communities are conscious of this fact, and therefore are careful about what they want to disclose. Especially sensitive is to link your real name to your online activities. Daniel J. Solove (2007) describes this in his book *The Future of Reputation*:

“Want to know about a person? No need to hire a private investigator. Just go to <http://www.google.com>, type a name into the search box, hit the search button . . . and presto, you’ve got a list of Web pages with information about that individual. Google is so popular it has become a verb. To “google” someone doesn’t mean anything kinky — instead, it means to do a search for his or her name on the Web. Everybody’s googling. People google friends, dates, potential employees, long-lost relatives, and anybody else who happens to arouse their curiosity.” (pp. 9)

Identity verification

Stets and Cast (2007) discuss identity verification from an identity theory perspective. They suggest that self-verification is an important goal for individuals, and they examine how individual controls the flow of resources to achieve this goal. Stets and Cast (2007) focus on the interaction between individuals in specific situation. These situations can among other, be online communities.

Ma and Agarwal (2007) examine the role of different IT artefacts in online communities and how these artefacts enhance perceived identity verification. They also examine how the perceived identity verification influences satisfaction which again influences contribution to the online community. They theorize that

“a key driver to knowledge contribution in an online community is the accurate communication and verification of identity that can, in turn, yield extrinsic benefits such as recognition, and intrinsic benefits such as an amplified sense of self-worth” (Ma and Agarwal 2007, pp. 43)

To test their model they examine four different IT artefacts, virtual copresence, persistent labeling, self-presentation, and deep profiling. In their article they define identity verification as “the perceived confirmation from other community members of a focal person’s belief about his identity” (Ma and Agarwal 2007, pp. 46). They find that the artefacts have a positive influence on perceived identity verification, and that perceived identity verification is strongly linked to satisfaction and knowledge contribution.

Identity deception

In the end of Bauman’s (2004) essay on identity, he is asked a question about the use of Internet as a communication medium. The question focus on playing with identities and creating what they call “false identities” in communication with others on the Internet. The creation of false identities on the Internet is often referred to as identity deceptions (Donath 1999, Joinson and Dietz-Uhler 2002). In this literature the example of “Joan” (Stone 1992) is well known. Joan did not want to meet people face-to-face, but engaged in several relationships in the community. Joan was created by a male psychologist named Alex. When this was known to the community, several feelings were expressed (Stone 1992, O’Brien 1999).

Joinson and Dietz-Uhler (2002) examined reactions to deception in virtual communities. They reviewed the literature of deception on the Internet and found several examples of how members of communities were exposed to deception and individuals playing with identities. They also did a case study in which they examined the reaction to an identity deception in the context of three related explanations: social identity, deviance, and norm violations (Joinson and Dietz-Uhler 2002). As Donath (1999) puts it: “the deception is quite harmful to those deceived.... however it is beneficial to the deceivers” (Donath 1999, pp. 3).

In Demiris’ (2006) review of health care communities he discusses identity and deception. He writes about different identity cues that members of a community are able to use to identify an individual. These cues are divided into two categories, specific identity cues (IP address, domain name, browser type etc), and more general cues (writing style, tone, and language). He discusses identity deception from four different angles, trolls, category deception, impersonation, and identity concealment. Demiris (2006) refers to a game about identity deception when he uses trolling. The troll (which refers to the individual creating a fake identity) is playing with the others on the community, understands the identity cues, and can be costly for the community in several ways. They give bad advice, disrupt discussions, and damage the feeling of trust. There are many varieties of category deceptions. The troll is one, gender deception and status

enhancement is other examples. Joinson and Dietz-Uhler (2002) examine three explanations for category deceptions, psychiatric illness, identity play, and true self. Impersonation or claiming to be a particular individual is relatively easy in online communities. Individuals posts signed by another name (or the target name), without changing their login name, letting viewers believe they are somebody else.

Identity construction

The tradition of social constructionism, and the work of such researchers as WI Thomas, Peter Berger, Erving Goffman and Howard Becker, rejects any category of identity that sets forward essential or core features as the unique property of a collective's members (Cerulo 1997). This tradition is continued in the internet-related research where identity is seen in anti-essentialist way. Identity construction means that identity is built through social processes.

Sherry Turkle (1995) explores online communities and their impact on personal identity construction. She follows members of a virtual community as they interact in MUDs ("multi-user domains" or "multi-user dungeons"). Testimony of MUD members, along with Turkle's insights, provide a unique picture detailing the building and experiencing of online persona. Further, Turkle documents the ways in which individuals negotiate online identities relative to other facets of the self. By probing the balance between "virtual" selves and "real" selves, Turkle's work forces us to question any perspective that places virtual experience second to the concrete (Cerulo 1997).

Future Work

Identity in online communities is a complex phenomenon. From the literature we have studied we have identified five different relation-types between physical self and online identity.

This paper is just the first version of our research in progress. The link between the social identity theory model and the different versions of identity relations has not yet been presented in a clear way. We acknowledge this and will work to improve it.

The next step is to build a stronger and more rigorous literature review (Webster & Watson 2002). The phenomenon of identities in online communities has been studied by several researchers, but many concepts of identities have not been tested empirically in a quantitative study. Thus we will design a quantitative driven mixed method after the review. In the book "Handbook of Mixed Methods in behavioral research" Morse (2003) discuss different principles with mixed methods and different research design in this context. She defines mixed methods design as follows:

"This is the incorporation of various qualitative or quantitative strategies within a single project that may have either a qualitative or a quantitative theoretical drive. The "imported" strategies are supplemental to the major or core method and serve to enlighten or provide values that are followed up within the core method" (Morse 2003, pp. 190).

In a mixed method research project you have different methods, both qualitative and quantitative, but as the definition says one of them is the driven method and the other is a supplement for the driven method. If you compare this definition with triangulation, where you also use more than one method in a project, but here the methods are treated equally and each of the method are more rigorous conducted and the result of them can stand on there own. We first will use a qualitative study to both confirm that our assumptions discussed in this paper are worth studying further, and to create a comprehensive instrument to be tested in the next phase. On of the outcomes of this qualitative study will be a set of hypothesis. In the next step we will design a quantitative study to test our hypothesis with the instrument that we developed in the qualitative study.

In the introduction we raised the following research problem: How is identity discussed in the online community literature? In our literature review we found five different elements of identities discussed in online community literature: identity expression, identity nondisclosure, identity verification, identity deception, and identity construction. We have in this article presented and discussed these elements and from our view these are all different aspects of identity that are important to include in online communities behaviour research.

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