

The Journal of Social Media for Learning 2022

Identity on Social Media.

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Abstract

In this short piece I talk about identity on social media and compare it to a performance. I highlight the importance of an audience for online learners and emphasise that the connections that we forge in our online interactions are as real as the ones that we make in our off-line lives. I end by thanking my online communities for all of the support they continue to give me.

Keywords

Identity, performance, community, audience, open.

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How did you develop your online identity? Did you make any conscious decisions about what sorts of things you would and would not say, or did you just jump in with both feet and make it up as you went along? How did you decide what to write in your Twitter profile, or choose your Twitter avatar? When we consider questions like this, it seems plausible to suggest that an online identity is to some extent constructed, in the sense that we can decide who we want to be on social media. Sometimes people take this to mean that our online interactions are only virtual and not real, so we do not need to take them seriously. I always feel the need to push back at this line of thought because I know that my online friendships are as real as any of my relationships.

A paper that got me thinking about online identity is Erika Pearson's *All the World Wide Web's a stage: The performance of identity in online social networks*. Pearson begins with Goffman's theatrical metaphor of 'identity-as-performance' – which is the theory that we adapt our personalities according to the social situations that we find ourselves in, that our online personas are "deliberately constructed performances". As Pearson says, the thought that we can choose to some extent how we portray ourselves, either on or offline, is not a radical idea. For example, we can decide before we set up our profiles the sorts of things we will and won't share, and then present ourselves online as we would like others to see us. We can, if we like, hide parts of our lives (for example, not sharing pics of our family on Twitter, and not engaging in discussions about religion and politics) and emphasise others.

However, Pearson suggests that we should be careful in how we apply Goffman's metaphor to social media. As she points out, in a theatre there are front and backstage areas with physical separation between them, and much of the literature about identity-as-performance focusses on the on-stage aspect of the metaphor. On social media, the separation between public and private, between visible and invisible, is not as clear cut. This means that understanding identity as being a performance might seem plausible when we think about social media as being a platform like a stage that we walk on an off as we want, but there is a difference between being actors on a stage and identities on social media. On social media the lines between front and backstage are blurred - our social media personas are not as easy to pick up and put down as characters in a play – we often bring our 'backstage' selves into our online performances.

And this can make us vulnerable - for those of us who play in open, online communities, our practice is to share our 'makes' publicly when they are rough, unfinished, tentative – and doing this can be unsettling, even terrifying to do. I might look self-assured and confident as I share my doodles on Twitter, but I am still vulnerable, and I care deeply about what others think about them. Likewise, those who participate in tweet chats like #LTHEChat or contribute to a Tweetposium like #SocMedHE20 are sharing personal opinions in an open space without knowing who might see them.

Knowing that there is a potential audience can be a double-edged sword – on the one hand, knowing that there is someone watching motivates me to post; on the other hand, not knowing exactly who might see it can stop me from sharing because I worry about my 'professional' image. I might forget that they are there in the heat of the moment, when I get caught up in a conversation or a game, but in some sense the knowledge that an audience (might) be there keeps me accountable because I care how others view me, and I hope they also care about me.

This is where hashtag communities are so important. To paraphrase the film *Alien* sometimes it can seem that ‘on the internet no-one can hear you scream’ and that you are tweeting into a void. When I see something that interests me, I share it to one of my communities by using an appropriate hashtag because I know that others are likely to see it then. When someone ‘likes’ a post, or responds to me, it gives me a boost. The more I share, the more my confidence grows. I feel connected to others in my network. I care, you care, we all care. This is how we build a community.

Two of the communities that are most important to me are #CLMOOC and #DS106, creative communities with a common practice of remix. Come and join us, if you like.

References

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.