

Identity in Communities and Networks

How Identity can be deceived in the Virtual Community

Abstract

Shaping your own identity has become so common through the online world, with never-ending opportunities to manipulate our individuality and to create this ideal version of ourselves has never been so easy. Through so many different social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat you can now separate the good from the bad and expose only the successful parts of your day to your followers to construct this happy, healthy and successful persona that we all dream of. This paper will explore the theme “identity in Communities and Networks”, which focuses on the place of identity in communities and social networking. This paper observes an extremely popular micro-celebrity named Steph Claire-Smith, who is known to the public for her influential opinions on maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The paper will investigate the many techniques used by Stephanie and will inform you on how you can form this idealized persona we assume these women live every day. With the online world covering more opportunities than ever before, the digital tools that help influence these viewers/fans are strategically contributing to gain a reaction from the online public sphere. In saying this the identity these people create through social media is not always a true indication of their reality, but they still attract the attention of these millions of followers no matter what.

Key Words: Instagram, Identity, Influencer, Individuality, Social Media.

Introduction

Wouldn't it be crazy if there was an app that allowed you to instantly post pictures and videos to the online world, so you can create this 'ideal' persona?

Well with social networking apps such as Instagram you can... Reflecting on the online domain we understand that now days it consists of digital platforms where people can expose themselves through social media in any way they wish. A major platform that stands out the most is 'Instagram', Instagram was created back in 2010 and since then has upheld over 300 million users a month (Ferwerda, Schedl & Tkalcic, 2016). The networking app functions as a site for sharing photos and videos to your followers so they can engage with others and build this amazing visual representation of yourselves, which sometimes reflects a different truth in the virtual world. In saying this we are regularly manipulated by micro- celebrity identities because we do not usually get an insight to their identity in the offline world. Social media's influence on identity will be examined through establishing how Instagram is used as a representation of identity and how micro-celebrities use these sites as a voice to express their so-called knowledge and interests with their followers. Additionally, the goal of this paper is to recognize how identity is established in an online community and to examine the consequences this may have on people. Lastly the paper will clarify on how these online personalities have a huge influence on such a large audience and the visual tools Instagram offers its users, this will help portray the impacts of how this creates the confusion of identity being deceived in the Virtual Community.

Digital identity VS Offline identity

Identity plays a key role in virtual communities. Communication being mainly activity, by knowing the identity of those who you may communicate with is recommended for understanding them as a person and interpreting and responding to the message they deliver (Donath, 1999). Having the freedom of expressing yourself in different ways such as pictures, videos, stories and comments, helps create a space where you can construct your online identity through social media that is not possible to present one's self in the offline world (Mashcheroni, Vincent & Jimenez, 2015). The main idea behind these social networking sites is to 'communicate' with one another, however this has not only helped us interpret and understand another person's individuality, but also helped them shape their own identity as mentioned above, an example of how social media is prominent for this is through the growth of micro-celebrities. We live in this world where you wake up and the first thing you do is check your phone and scroll through Instagram, constantly being surrounded by all these micro-celebrities gives us no option but to compare ourselves to these bloggers. Every day on social media people present such strong characteristics through their profiles that help them achieve fame based on strategic self- presentation, the profile being created is the desired image one wants to be represented by.

Comparing both digital and offline identity, we understand that digital identity is something that fluctuates from reality as Donath states "in the physical world there is an inherent unity to the self, for the body provides a compelling and convenient definition of identity" (Donath, 1999, p.29). This suggests in the real world it is harder to be blinded by people's perceptions and how they portray themselves, however in the online community it is a lot easier for someone to generate lots of different personalities that could physically not represent them at all. Micro- celebrities are known for expressing themselves through their social media accounts to their huge followings, it is easy to do this in the digital world because they have this platform available where they can voice their opinions on

the world and reach out to people on certain things they believe in. As Svantesson mentioned “internet users may have different identities for different purposes” (Svantesson,2011). As said above one physical person may use a particular digital identity or persona in relation to Twitter for example to voice their opinions about the world or Instagram to share their day to day life and possibly Facebook to connect with family and friends. Svantesson also states “Where this approach is accepted, identity can perhaps be viewed as *an external manifestation making the person distinguishable from other persons*” (Svantesson,2011). Furthermore, identity can be compared to related concepts including character and personality, Svantesson describes identity as something external and personality is something internal.

Successful Online social media influences

There’s no questions that you can alter your identity through the online world, social networking helps fade that line between the online world and reality. Through the use of these digital features this allows people to choose how they wish to expose themselves in the digital realm. Individuals implementing their identity is not a radical concept (Pearson,2009), often referred to as ‘performance’ it is seen as the movement of social interaction as people construct identity performance fitting their environment can reflect far from the truth. The online world is a space that allows people to create ideal self-profiles that display this persona they invent which attracts these large audiences from all around the world. These platforms help people create these relationships with people they may never have had the opportunity to do if it was face-to-face, but because of the material they publish it creates bonds and connections with other people giving you the feeling of knowing these accounts personally (pearson,2009). There are many micro-celebrities on Instagram with strong personas that are surrounded by a huge online community, examining star Steph

Claire-Smith, well known for her social media account and promoting her businesses through them.

Steph Claire Smith is a female influencer on Instagram with 1.4 Million followers and 50,000 subscribers on YouTube. Steph is a great positive role model to her followers by providing them with a deep insight into her daily routine and life, she promotes her happy, healthy lifestyle as well as one of her many businesses 'Keep it Cleaner' through her social media. Steph created this massive audience through displaying her identity as a real woman with also a successful modeling career and an ambassador of well established brands known across the globe. She shares videos on her Instagram stories everyday connecting with her following on a deeper level to make them feel as though they are part of a community. Many people that follow Steph are well educated about her 'Keep it Cleaner' business she runs with her friend, a program that helps people in particular young girls achieve their fitness goals in the healthiest and natural way possible just like Steph does. Steph states she uses Instagram today in the most naturalist way she can, whereas a few years ago she would use apps such as 'Face Tune' to remove spots and other imperfections, as well as reshape their bodies and fill in bald patches (Pavlovska,2019). Furthermore, Steph helps people realize that influencers on social media are not always sharing the bad things that could be going wrong in their life. 'Anyone with large following as an influencer has put themselves in a position where people will be influenced by their posts, so why not remind everyone that what young girls see on Instagram isn't always real life?' Steph continued, 'I feel the responsibility to be a good role model to young girls.' Demonstrating how identity can be deceived in the virtual community. Steph lastly states, 'we all put up some sort of shield before sharing things with others, and that's okay but I think anyone with a certain amount of following should remember it's important to be real and relatable... and show that life isn't always as perfectly put together as we post it to be on our feeds.' (Pavlovska,2019).

Figure 1:



Reality Through Micro – Celebrities

Growing up today for teens and pre-teens, the online and mobile social networking community has become an essential part of managing one's identity (Boyd,2007). It is inevitable that there are conflicting pressures that come within social media and who is to say what is considered appropriate or inappropriate to share on your personal accounts. We discovered in offline contexts of communication, identity management and self-presentation are not humbly an individual's success, but somewhat a social process.

We are aware that Instagram is filled with micro- celebrities with numerous followings that create themselves a community but in the offline world they feel alone, this gives a deceiving perception to the people we follow because we are constantly comparing ourselves to their life and are jealous of things they have but how do we know it's all true?

With websites such as 'Idigic' you can now so easily purchase your followers or buy likes and comments with as little of \$1 because of websites like these how do we know social media world is all genuine?

Relating back to influencer Steph Clair Smith there are defiantly positive ways to use online success, however there is still the underlying characteristics of how these platforms allow only the sharpened edited versions of peoples posts that manipulate their identify.

Conclusion

After examining social media platform Instagram, social networks offer an opportunity for identity management that is more noticeable than in the offline community. The digital environment is where people can achieve to portray themselves in any way they request without having to physically interact with the people they are manipulating there identify too. It is proven that after examining how identity can be deceived in the virtual community just how easy it is to do so without even realizing we are doing it. What can seem like reality to your followers we now understand how one can so easily present themselves in the online world strategically how they desire. With a clear indication that micro-celebrities have become a major reflection of creating their own identities through these platforms supporters can now stop comparing themselves on a level where they are not happy with their own offline personas.

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