

# The importance of anonymity and pseudonymity in youths' exploration of identity online

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## Abstract

This conference paper investigates the importance of anonymity in social networking sites. It first tackles the problematic statement by Zuckerberg that to have more than one identity online is to lack integrity by using Goffman's (1959) impression management to unpack the statement. It will then analyse the ways in which anonymity and pseudonymity are used by youths to explore their identity through the social practice of 'Rinsta' and 'Finsta'. Conclusively, it argues that although there are problems to anonymity and pseudonymity online, promoting an 'authentic' self and real name among users is not the proper solution to fixing these issues. Anonymity is an integral feature of the Internet that enables young users to explore their identity amid the context collapse of social network sites (SNS).

## Keywords

Youths, social networking sites, anonymity, pseudonymity, Fake Instagram, performative identities, context collapse, mirror networks, impression management

## **Introduction**

In discussing the debate about the anonymity v. real name movement on the Internet, Van der Nagel and Frith (2015) argues the importance of anonymity on the Internet as it adds texture to being social on the Internet. The 'real name' movement, Van der Nagel and Frith (2015) discuss is the promotion of using real names of social networking sites (SNS) to prevent anonymous trolling and flaming as it forces users to connect their offline identity to their online one. One of the main arguments against pseudonymity and anonymity on social network sites is it protects online trolls and attracts anti-social behaviour (Zhuo, cited in Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015). Furthermore, Mark Zuckerberg, in defence of the real name movement, denies that an individual can possess more than one form of identity suggesting that to possess more than one lacks integrity (Lovink, cited in Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015). This conference paper will analyse the importance of anonymity in social networking site by first unpacking the problematic statement by Zuckerberg and then analysing the ways in which anonymity and pseudonymity is used by youths to explore their identity. It will conclusively argue that although there are problems to anonymity and pseudonymity, promoting real names is not the proper solution in fixing the issue as anonymity is integral to the exploration and navigation of identity in the context collapse of computer mediated space.

## Performative identities

Goffman (1959) is most notable for his work on impression management. Goffman (1959) uses the concept of front stage and backstage as an analogy for how identity is performed as if for an audience and how an individual prepares for this performance backstage (p. 2). In his work, Goffman (1959) discuss how the self is performing a character on stage generated by the social setting or environment of their surroundings and the people around them (p. 9). This performance has grown more so with SNS as it provides users areas that are "...disembodied, mediated and controllable, and through which alternate performances can be displayed to others" (boyd, cited in Pearson, 2009). Pearson (2009) uses social ties to understand why users use SNS as a performance stage for their identity. She notes how in cases with weak ties – ties which are weaker in terms of emotional intensity, intimacy and reciprocity, a user can play more with their identity. They can choose which tropes of performances they want to incorporate in their profile or private chats (Pearson, 2009).

The most notable example of this performance is through the case of youths using SNS to explore their identity. In the days of MySpace, youths were notorious for creating and writing their profile in a way that made them 'cool' to their peers and friends (boyd, 2007, p. 13). As ties among peers and online friends (whom they have never met offline) are often weak, youths are more playful with their presentation of identity. boyd (2007) discuss that teens were likely to present a side of themselves which would be well-received by their peers. This type of constructing identity is also present in today's popular SNS such as Facebook. In a study by Carmody (2012), she found that youths do not necessarily use SNS to explore their alternative selves by creating a profile with a different identity, but they do omit certain parts of their identity when they are online (pp. 43 – 44). This is an important discussion when unpacking Zuckerberg's comment (Lovink, cited in Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015) about how an individual should only have one identity. It is an excellent example of how an individual online is never presenting their 'real' identity and how there is always an element of performance or omission to it.

Furthermore, one can also look at how identity is performed offline to understand why the idea of authentic self is not possible online. To begin with, Goffman's (1959) impression management is based on situations before social networks and he used social situations such as business meetings to discuss how a team may put up front or an act based on their knowledge of their opposition (p. 5). As Goffman (as cited in Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015) notes, there is a territorial boundary in the presentation of self in offline situation; a woman out with her friends has them as the audiences and would therefore present herself in a way that allows her to connect with the audiences. In the same manner, in a social setting with her family, she would present a different self; one which connects to her family alone (Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015). Therefore, our identity is always a performance, even with those

whom we have strong ties with, and our authentic self is never as fixed as the real name movement would imply it to be.

It is important to note the 'context collapse' which occurs in SNS. So far, this paper has analysed how different version of one's identity is performed online and offline, depending on their audience. However, with SNS there is a 'context collapse' (Marwick and boyd, as cited in Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015) taking place where an individual's social network is not segmented like it is offline – they are all intertwined in the same social network platforms.

### **Finding escape from the context collapse of SNS through pseudonymity and anonymity**

Context collapse in SNS intertwines and connects one's social network rather than segment it (Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015). The problem with this is, in terms of performing an identity, an individual is no longer performing with one type of audience but rather their whole social network including friends, families, co-workers and acquaintances. That is why many teenagers were against the idea of their parents being on MySpace and monitoring their profiles (boyd, 2007, p. 16). As boyd (2007) note, teenagers go online to find and seek validation among their peers or online connections (p. 15) and to do so, they would need to conform to peer-pressure and follow the latest 'cool' trends (p. 17). However, as adults rarely connect with the latest trend among youths, boyd (2007) discuss that young teens are then are forced to choose between doing what is 'cool' for their peers or 'lame' for their parents (p. 17).

An example of how teens navigate exploring and expressing their identity with a pseudonym is through what boyd (2007) terms, 'mirrored network'. boyd (2007) uses the term 'mirrored network' to explain how teenagers create new profile which expresses the identity they want to present to their peers and friends, while keeping a G-rated profile for their parents (p. 16). As Christopherson (2006) points out, anonymity can be used to retain their autonomy for the sake of gaining privacy in a very public space (p. 3040). The same case is done regarding the practice of Rinsta (real Instagram) and Finsta (fake Instagram) today. Having gained popularity over the years, 'Finsta' is a social practice done among Instagram users where they create a second, secret Instagram account so they do not need to conform to the self-presentation beauty standards of Instagram (Kang and Wei, 2018, p. 1). Kang and Wei (2018) elaborates that the difference between Rinsta and Finsta is; Rinsta is for friends, families and close acquaintances to show an individual is living a happy life (p. 1). Whereas on Finsta, users do not need to present a homogenous presentation of their identity as they do on their Rinsta. They use a secret account for their closest friends so they can express the other unattractive, humiliating or embarrassing side of themselves (p. 2).

To navigate through the context collapse of Instagram, Instagram users are creating a mirror network to present themselves in a way that is meant for their closest friends. McGregor and Li (2019) found that teens often use Finsta to connect with their peers in a controlled space and freely express themselves (p. S39). However, Kang and Wei (2018) found that users' rate Rinsta higher for self-expression than Finsta (p. 7). Kang and Wei (2018) theorise this could be due to the expectation that a Finsta is a designated space to be silly (p. 7) and there is the pressure to be funnier than they are (Duffy, as cited in Kang and Wei, 2018, p. 7). Therefore, although mirror network is used to present an individual's 'true' identity to their closest friends, there is still the peer-pressure to exaggerate one side of themselves to appeal to their friends. Further showcasing Goffman's (1959) impression management and how our 'authentic self' is subjective according to the social context we are placed in.

In addition, Van der Nagel and Frith (2015) uses the subreddit, r/gonewild to argue the importance of anonymity of women posting their nude selfies online as it protects them from potential harassment. They discuss how with anonymity, women are given the opportunity on the subreddit to explore and share their sexual identity with strangers online without worrying about their close friends and family seeing the photos (Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015). The case of r/gonewild is important when considering the double standards which exist for young girls today to post or send provocative pictures of themselves online (Mascheroni and Jiminez, 2015). Both boys and girls tend to eroticise their performance in pictures (Tortajada, Araña, & Martínez as cited in Mascheroni and Jiminez, 2015, p. 10). However, as Mascheroni and Jiminez (2015) found, boys tend to shame girls who post provocative pictures of themselves and there have been cases of girls being publicly shamed because boys would publicly share their private picture. The protection anonymity grants to women on r/gonewild is important as girls today are being socialised towards a post-feminist idea where they are encouraged to be sexually attractive and active (Lemish as cited in Mascheroni and Jiminez, 2015, p. 4). Although, the point of this argument is not to encourage promiscuity among youths, it nevertheless remains a social problem. Young girls and women face enough harassment online (i.e. GamerGate) that it is important to consider their safety first.

### **Anonymity does not equate anti-socialness**

If one is to look at anonymity as being the gateway to anti-social behaviour online, it should also be noted that anonymity is not connected to such behaviours. Chui (2014) notes in her article how although anonymity "creates perception of anonymity and lessens inhibition", it does not mean anti-social behaviour is exhibited (p. 8). Chui (2014) discuss how there are other factors which need to be considered when talking about anti-social behaviour through anonymity. Other factors including the individual, their socio-economic situations, motivations for flaming or trolling (pp. 4-5), or the media

channels which controls how much the individual can behave in an anti-social manner (p. 6). This has also been theorised by Spears and Lea (as cited in Christopherson, 2006, p. 3050) who proposed the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) theory to suggest the condition in social situations are more important to take into consideration when talking about anonymity and anti-social behaviour.

Therefore, it is important to recognise that there are different individuals and groups online who uses anonymity to their own advantages. In the case of those who troll or flame through an anonymous name, although anonymity enables such behaviour, this display of anti-socialness is dependent on the individual, their social background and motivation for doing so (Chui, 2014; Christopherson, 2006). In the cases of young teens, it is evident how they use anonymity and pseudonymity to freely explore their identities in the context collapse of mediated space rather than behave in anti-social behaviour.

Furthermore, in a study by Rosenberry (2011), he found that although users believed anonymity promotes anger and negative comments, they also support keeping anonymity online citing that it promotes a freer and livelier conversation (p. 16). As Rosenberry (2011) notes, "the audience [users] may dislike certain aspects of the forums but nonetheless see anonymity as worth maintaining in spite of its deleterious effects" (p. 17). These results are in line with Van der Nagel and Frith's (2015) conclusion that although anonymity has its detrimental effects, it adds to the experience of being social online.

## Conclusion

This paper has analysed the importance of anonymity and pseudonymity in the Internet by arguing how it is essential for youths to navigate through the context collapse of computer mediated space. It first discussed how identity is, contrary to Zuckerberg's statement, performative and multi-faceted. Basing the analysis on Goffman's (1959) impression management, it explored how the identity youths present online is not often a true representation of themselves and why it is unreasonable to force users to create an 'authentic' profile of themselves when identity is performative even outside the context of SNS. Amid the context collapse in a computer mediated space, pseudonymity and anonymity are useful for youths trying to explore their identity, free from the restraints of their parents' watchful eyes. By being able create mirror networks, they are freely able to perform the identity which they want to perform only with their friends, carving that territorial boundary of self-presentation Goffman (as cited in Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015) notes within an online space.

In addition, as Van der Nagel and Frith (2015) argue, anonymity and pseudonymity allow women to explore their sexual identity without the risk of embarrassment among their close social ties and this itself is beneficial for young adolescent girls growing up. By being able to hide behind the anonymity

and pseudonymity granted by the Internet, young users can explore their identity and girls can stay safe from any harassment they may receive with their private photos. Lastly, this paper argued against the main arguments the real name movement has against anonymity by discussing how anonymity does not automatically invite the anti-social behaviours they are concerned with. As Chui (2014) notes, although anonymity does enable such behaviour to take place, it is often the social factors around the individual which affects how they use anonymity to their advantage.

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