

Communities, Networks and People:  
Shaping our identity to fit the environment

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### Abstract

Everybody is connected to at least one type of community or network. This could be family, work associates, social networks, and online communities. None of us behave in exactly the same way in each of those communities because what is acceptable in one may not be acceptable in other for a number of reasons. This paper argues that our identity is fluid and adaptable and can change according to offline and online environments. The fluidity of identity enables us to engage with different types of communities and networks, either as ourselves or anonymously. There are positive and negative aspects for both, but a major benefit of online anonymity is the protection of personally identifiable information and the preservation of privacy.

*Keywords:* identity fluidity, community identity, online anonymity

### Communities, Networks and People:

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Everybody is a member of at least one community or network. Family groups, church groups, the workplace, physical social networks, online groups and social media platforms, are all different types of communities populated by individuals with something in common. Group membership with others who share similar values and interests will provide a sense of belonging and have a positive effect on self-esteem (Kowert, 2015, as cited in Kaye, Kowert, & Quinn, 2017; Ratanakosol, Pathumcharoewattana, & Kimpee, 2016) through social interaction with other members. Exposure to a number of different groups, particularly online groups with international membership, will introduce group members to cultural diversity and a greater range of different worldviews (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Membership of a variety of different communities will also require individuals to *perform* and present varied aspects of themselves (Goffman, 1956) that will be acceptable in that particular group. Feedback from other group members will enable an individual to adapt and adjust their social identity in order to maintain a favourable impression (Aresta, Pedro, Santos, & Moreira, 2015).

Our identity is a combination of how we see ourselves and how we present ourselves to others (Aresta et al., 2015). This was described by boyd (2002, as cited in Aresta et al., 2015) as an internalised version and projected version of self. It is fluid and adaptable, influenced by the individual's personality, as well as those that they associate with, and their community membership. Our personal identity serves to both identify us in a group, and differentiate us from other group members (Buckingham, 2008; Corsaro & Eder, 1990, as cited in Mascheroni, Vincent, & Jiminex, 2015). Goffman (1956, p. 10) likened personal identity to a performance in which the audience is "asked to believe that the character they

see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess”. The *front* is how we present ourselves to others, and the *backstage* is where the performance is planned and constructed (Goffman, 1956). This *backstage* may also be representative of each separate community that we are members of e.g. the workplace, home, church or social groups. We behave differently in each and adapt our identity according to the group’s rules and expectations.

There are a number of different opinions about what constitutes a community. Kant had a very idealised utopian idea of community as a place where everybody would be equal and treated with respect, and all interactions “would be based on dynamic reciprocity and responsibility” (Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta, & David, 2004, p.318). Jung defined community as a collective unconscious, or a “set of universal symbols, responses, and mental conditions that all human being share” (Katz et al., 2004, p. 318), although it would be difficult to find evidence to support this version of community. Rousseau believed that community was an altruistic concept, with “common interests and values, which transcend the different wills of individuality” (Katz et al., 2004, p. 318). Rousseau also believed that social life, egocentric desires, and civilisation were corrupting influences due to their individualistic nature (Katz et al., 2004). Locke believed that “the power of community was in humanity, as a natural right or state” (Katz et al., 2004, p. 318), and that people cooperated, by way of a social contract. This social contract meant that the collective community yielded greater power than that of the individual members of the community (Katz et al., 2004). These definitions are indications of the dynamics involved with community participation that necessitate fluidity of identity for successful community membership (Colombo & Senatore, 2005).

Communicating with other people in the community enables us to associate with those who are similar to us, and also provides the opportunity to learn more about those who

are dissimilar (boyd, 2007). Community membership also enables feelings of belonging and solidarity (Katz et al., 2004), and can be described as having strong or weak ties with other members of that community (Pearson, 2009). These ties are dependent upon the level of engagement; whether the other person is a family member, close friend, or acquaintance; the amount of time spent together; level of intimacy, and level of reciprocity (Pearson, 2009). Weak ties can strengthen over time as people get to know each other better, and strong ties can weaken for various reasons such as geographic distance, family break-up, and less time spent together with others.

Some characteristics of a physical community are similar to those of an online community in that they are a group of people who share common beliefs, interests, and similar values (Katz et al., 2004). The main differences are that physical communities enable face-to-face interaction, participation that is often involuntary, and organisational engagement, whereas participation in an online community is voluntary, accessible via technology, and self-organised (Katz et al., 2004). Membership of online communities, especially gaming communities, has been found to have a positive effect that can offset real life social isolation (Kaye et al., 2017). Identity plays an important role in any community setting and the way people present themselves will contribute towards, or detract from, acceptance within that group, regardless of what type of community it is.

Community membership that encourages belonging can increase positivity in social identity that leads to increased feelings of self-worth (Branscombe & Wann, 1991, as cited in Kaye et al., 2017). Social network sites online are a form of community that allows users to have friends, make a profile, allow comments from others, and comment on other people's profile posts (boyd, 2007). Mobile technology such as mobile phones and tablets have made social media communities even more accessible for people (Mascheroni et al., 2015) as they

can update their profiles and upload photographs moments after the photograph is taken. Hu, Zhao, and Huang (2015) found that self-discrepancy theory i.e. the actual, ideal, and ought self, and regulatory focus theory i.e. promotion-focused and prevention-focused representation influence how people reconstruct their identity on social networks. These influences could be vanity, changing from an old social network to a new one, and privacy concerns (Hu et al., 2015). Self-representation will influence how we are perceived by the other members of our social networks.

Goffman (1959, as cited in Pearson, 2009) believed that individuals *perform*, and shape their identity through social interactions by adapting to suit the environment and their network of associates. Performances are evident on social media platforms and social networking sites where individual users have control of what image they want to portray to others through photographs, social media posts and comments (boyd, 2006, as cited in Pearson, 2009). These social performances, particularly on celebrity profiles, are easily accessed online because they are generally available to the public (Pearson, 2009). Kim Kardashian West's *Instagram* (<https://www.instagram.com/kimkardashian/?hl=en>) site is an example of a social media performance filled with highly-stylised fashion 'selfies' and 'perfect family' images. *Instagram* is just one social media site where self-promotion and the posting of selfies takes place, and according to Mascheroni et al. (2015) this type of representation is all about exaggeration as the profile owner attempts to present an ideal gendered image. Highly idealised imagery may assist with preservation of personal privacy, but it also raises questions about authenticity of representation.

Identity is formed and presented according to context and the taking on of social roles in communities (Althusser, 2008, as cited in van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Social identity theory supports the notion that a person's identity, or sense of self, is shaped by community

membership whether it is the home community, workplace, social network, or involvement with other communities like online groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1978, 1979, as cited in Kaye et al., 2017). Online identities are generally fluid in nature, enabling individuals to present different aspects of self to others in relation to the particular group they are involved with, without placing themselves at risk of exposure (Pearson, 2009).

According to Turkle (1997, p. 161) an online identity “is the opportunity to play ‘an aspect of your self’ that you embody as a separate self” in the virtual community that you are a member of. Crowe and Watts (2014) found that online gamers had greater power over their identity online because they could modify and personalise aspects of their avatar, including the gender, and still retain their anonymity. This gives the gamer the freedom to explore the game environment and socialise online (Crowe & Watts, 2014) with others without having to reveal their real identity.

The use of a real name or pseudonym online largely depends upon the individual community rules (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Mark Zuckerberg, one of the original founders of *Facebook*, does not support anonymous *Facebook* membership, and believes that all *Facebook* users should use their real name (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015) as this promotes honesty and integrity. The premise may seem simple enough, but any regular long-term user of *Facebook* would know that it does not work as intended due to people duplicating the profiles of others or making profiles with obviously fake names. The use of a real name online can also have negative consequences for security reasons, as it does provide potential hackers and trolls with personal information that could make an individual’s online experience less safe (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Having to use a real name may also inhibit people from engaging in some communities online, for example homosexual individuals may not be able to come out to their family and need to communicate with others

who have had a similar experience (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). They may be at risk of exposure if they are not allowed to use a pseudonym, while others who may be well-known community members might also prefer to use a pseudonym for online activities for privacy reasons. The adoption of a pseudonym to safeguard anonymity may be vital for people who risk exposure and loss of reputation in other communities that they are involved with.

The use of a pseudonym can be viewed in a negative way, and people who do this may be perceived as hackers, or trolls who deceive others and cause problems on social media sites (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Online identity deception has the potential to be harmful to others, but it can also be harmful to the deceiver who attempts to troll others and disrupt group conversations (Donath, 1999). Much of online communication and presence contributes towards a community member's reputation within that group so exposure as a troll will reveal that the person is not a legitimate participant (Donath, 1999) and this is quite likely to lead to being banned from the group. According to Marwick (2013, p. 356) our identity is "socially constructed in tandem with the people around us" and we act differently in different situations. Reconstruction of online identity according to the community can help to prevent problems by enabling the participant to interact with others in a way that is acceptable within that group.

Many people who use pseudonyms do so to enable them to fit in with the various online communities that they frequent (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015) without having to provide personally identifiable information. Two supporters of online anonymity through the use of pseudonyms are danah boyd and Bernie Hogan who believe that anonymity enables more freedom with online participation and provides greater security for internet users (boyd, 2011; Hogan, 2013, as cited in van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Anonymity in the gaming



environment preserves personal privacy and online security, and also enables obligation-free interaction within that group (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006).

Gamers who are members of gaming communities online tend to have a high level of social and psychological investment in the group that raises their self-esteem and gives them a sense of belonging (Kowert, 2015, as cited in Kaye et al., 2017). These online gaming communities are often similar to offline role-play activities (Turkle, 1997) and they provide social interactions that are separate from home and the workplace (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). They also provide an alternative means to communicate with people that they would not normally get to meet in real life. This can be seen as a negative effect as most of this social interaction takes place inside the home rather than outside, but it can also provide opportunities for collaboration and conversation, as well as providing a neutral space that is available at any time (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006).

An example of an online community that uses pseudonyms, or screen names, is the KWSN Orbiting Fortress. This message board style forum is the home of *The Knights Who Say Ni!* (<http://www.kwsnforum.com>), a distributed computing team that is involved with numerous scientific research projects such as SETI@home (<https://setiathome.berkeley.edu>) and World Community Grid (<https://www.worldcommunitygrid.org>). Team members who join the message board are required to use a screen name that provides them with anonymity and preservation of privacy, and many choose something humorous that reflects the Monty Python inspired team name. When *Facebook* started to become popular internationally some of the team members who were also *Facebook* users began a *Facebook* group (KWSN, 2007) where members could communicate. The formation of this *Facebook* group changed the dynamics of the team communication because *Facebook* users are required to use their own name. The level of anonymity and personal privacy was reduced substantially as team

members began to add each other as *Facebook* friends, but in many cases stronger ties were formed as team members began to communicate on a different level.

Being a part of a community, regardless of whether it is a physical or virtual online community, provides an individual with a sense of belonging and can elevate feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. Physical community membership enables group members to engage in face-to-face communication and there are less opportunities for identity deception. Online communities do not enable individuals to engage in face-to-face communication, although there may be opportunities for those who are geographically close to meet up in a physical environment. Due to the nature of these virtual groups, identity deception is easily achieved through the use of pseudonyms. *Facebook* is one site that requires users to sign up with their real name, but not all do. There are privacy concerns with regard to using personally identifiable names on the internet and this problem can be resolved by using a pseudonym. Social networking sites allow individuals to become part of an online community, create a profile, add friends, give and receive comments, and upload photographs for others to view. Gaming and other online communities also enable individual members to create profiles and communicate with others. These sites enable individuals to *perform*, or show another aspect of their personality, depending upon which groups they are members of.

The ability to alter aspects of identity and self-presentation will enable us to behave in a manner that is acceptable in each community that we are involved with. We all perform differently when we are with different groups of people, regardless of whether we are offline or online, because it would not be acceptable to behave the same way in the workplace as we do when we are socialising with friends or playing games online. Online anonymity and the use of a pseudonym can make this easier to achieve while maintaining personal privacy, but sites such as *Facebook* prefer users to use their real name. They feel that it provides

authenticity, but it can also reduce personal privacy and place some individuals at risk of hacking, trolls, or exposure of personal issues. There are many reasons why a person would choose to present themselves anonymously, and these are not always negative. Adapting our identity to fit in with different communities or networks is something that we all do in order to fit in and gain a sense of belonging.



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