

Social Networking Sites: How and why they mediate identity performance

Abstract:

It is the purpose of this paper to discuss some of the ways that social network's mediate identity performance and engineer those performances towards their own goals. In encouraging and directing users towards 'authentic' and unified representations of self, social networking sites fulfill their own needs of acquiring accurate and therefore sellable data rather than situate their users respectively into post-modern ideas of identity. This paper examines how SNSs are used to collect personal data, how the networks themselves position a user towards authenticity, how the identity performances contributed become lasting artefacts of self and lastly the intentions of SNSs to use those performances for profit.

Keywords: Social networks, identity performance, personal data, communication, authenticity

Social Networking Sites (SNS), commonly referred to as social media, have grown to articulate how we connect and communicate in the online world. They have changed communication for the better in that they have broken down old barriers to communication between disparate and spatially separated peers and family, allowed old friends to reconnect and share in their lives together and facilitated a space for public debates, among others. Though, while they have evolved along with our desires to share ourselves online, they also have played their part in shaping those desires to further fulfill their own needs. By their definition, SNSs disseminate their user's identity performance. Converse to the freedoms of other web based social forums, SNSs position their users into their platform beliefs of authenticity. The aspects of identity that a user contributes with their communications on an SNS platform are accounted to a user's offline identity; they become fixed in time, lasting artefacts of past identity portrayals. With this consistent information in hand SNSs are effectively situated to market and define online behaviour towards their own profit. This paper will examine how social networking sites innocuously urge their users to share and express themselves inline with the affordances of their platforms, and how these identity performances can have a lasting effect on everyday life.

Social networking sites are online platforms enabling communication amongst their users, with a strong emphasis on the sharing of personal data, which when created through a social platform's frameworks, is representative into aspects of a user's identity. Dutton, Ellison, and boyd (2013, p. 8) in their reframed definition of social networks describe these sites as affording a user to: create a personal profile, to publicly find other users to connect their profile with and to allow the sharing and interaction of user generated content. The most common use case of an SNS is that a user provides the platform enough personal data to identify them and create their own profile linked to that identification (Dutton et al., 2013, p. 4). They can then begin adding other users as friends, often with people they have connection with in offline life (p.6), further solidifying their profiles authenticity with their offline self, and then begin contributing data about their lives, interacting with their friend connections and the content that they contribute. Hampton (2016, p. 103) refers to this style of one-to-many connection as *pervasive awareness*, that by sharing aspects of a person's everyday life, anything from a major life event to what they are eating, that this kind of connection takes on the subtle quality of allowing an audience into the minutia and detail of their lives. In doing so, users are navigating and sharing identity performances. Erving Goffman (1990) (as cited in Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 101) uses the analogy of a theatre stage to illustrate how a person's identity is performed, delineating between their performances of self-to-others as being on stage and their private inner-world unmediated self as being off stage. The personal profile page, which in terms of an SNS like Facebook can constitute a timeline of events a user has broadcast to their friend connections (Brusseau, 2019, p. 3), can be likened to Goffman's stage, showcasing a user's identity performance. When a user signs up for an account on a SNS, they are given access to multimedia tools that allow for the distribution of mediated and potentially creative expression of a their identity (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 307). And so, by participating in a chosen form of SNS, a user creates meaningful representations of themselves online. To Hampton (2016, p. 109) SNS's have placed an emphasis on transforming people into networked individuals, facilitating user to user communication and creating the digital space to do so; they are equally about connecting with others as they are about portraying yourself to those others.

Social networking sites direct identity performances through their platform's media specialisations and in so doing engineer those portrayals towards their own uses. Zizi Papacharissi (2010, p. 304) describes performance of identity as an ongoing process, where a person mediates and presents certain aspects of themselves to fit amongst the various social and cultural considerations of their audience. This natural, human tendency to provide some arbitration between inner and outer worlds, or as Goffman (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 102) described it, to wear a mask, can be amplified in the physically freeing digital space of online communication. Without physical considerations, users can represent themselves in any way they wish (Dutton et al., 2013, p. 3), an affirmation of post-modern theories of identity as performance. Conversely though, the largest social network, Facebook ("Global social media research summary 2021," 2021), and its CEO Mark Zuckerberg, have a strong inclination towards what they see is user *authenticity*. Zuckerberg has said that mediating and performing different aspects of your identity in consideration to the expectations of your audience is an example of a lack of integrity (Brusseau, 2019, p. 2). This highlights the platforms pursuit to direct the SNS's users into presenting a 'unified person' (p.3). Though this ideal unification almost ironically works against itself. As SNS's afford and encourage online connections to a user's physical world social circles as a way to authenticate and solidify them into their online identity (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 304), the worlds of a user where they are perhaps expected to act differently, between family, professionals, romantic partners, peers or even strangers, all begin to amalgamate into a unified audience. A user is positioned into their natural tendency to mediate themselves with relation to their audience, or what Fawkes (2015, p. 677) calls *impression management*, on a much grander, persistent and harder to maintain scale. With the ultimate potential to gentrify and stilt a user's portrayal of self into forms that are comfortably digested by their personal and newly integrated publics, representations that are perhaps far from authentic. Fawkes references this conflict with the work of Carl Jung (as cited in 2015, p. 4), in this context, representing the intricacies of the relationship between persona—the mediating mask representing what a user will deem publicly acceptable—and the shadow—all the aspects they wish to conceal with their mask. A dissonance between persona and the shadow can lead to conflict between the two, when the public facing forms of identity have become inauthentically aligned with a user's sense of self. SNS's quantify and showcase these authentically regarded, though generated through constraint, representations of self.

Social networking sites, having positioned their users into a place of 'authenticity' create lasting and navigable artefacts of identity that are resistant to change. As is typical amongst most SNSs, when someone posts to their social site, the post becomes logged into the chronology of the user's profile. Though, to return to Hampton's (2016, p. 114) concept of pervasive awareness, which has emerged with SNSs to describe the proximity of communication they afford, it also explains that on an individual level, proportionally, users of SNSs see the posts of others more than they contribute their own posts. This feed of communication creates on one hand, aspects of identity performance of the poster and on the other, a type of surveillance from the connected audience to that post—termed *sousveillance*, where in the case of a SNS, friend connections watch the posts of their friend connections, who in turn also watch the posts of their own friend connections (Hampton, 2016, p. 114). In the *sousveillance* framework of an SNS, where posts are archived into a lasting position and associated with a user's profile, these identity performances are stored and presented in a way that they can be called to attention at a time well after their original posting (p.114). As James (Brusseau, 2019, p. 3) points out, as these posts are digital, they do not lose anything with time, and become in affect locked representations of identity. Unless action is undertaken by a user to circumvent a social platform representing them in this past light—such as deleting old posts, maintaining an ever stricter routine of impression management or practicing the kind of cryptology that Crystal Abidin (2021) highlights takes place amongst her theories of *refracted publics* existing below the radar— then posts and interactions that are left on an SNS, can become a lasting artefact of a user's identity, to be seen and perhaps have their accuracy taken for granted well after the post itself has lost its relevance to the poster. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche accounts the chaotic underlying nature of reality as fundamental to understanding why our identities change with time (Brusseau, 2019, p. 6), as sure as we get older, we change. When we perform identity for a given section of our peers, the fact that the representation that we leave behind could become irrelevant to who we are later, is self-evident. But, while the users of a particular SNS practice a mutually agreed upon form of *sousveillance* with each other, the platform itself surveils its users.

A focus on featuring accurate and authentic identity serves another purpose for a Social Networking Site, that of being reliable data about a person's thoughts and desires. This paper has effectively focused on what Hampton (2016, p. 111) calls person to network communication, but an SNS operates with the opposite intention as well, network to person (p.117). It is here that SNSs locate themselves within the world of profitability and markets. Papacharissi (2010, p. 311) acknowledges how collecting the data of its user's identity performance, and connection with others, not only is the force that gives their networks life but is also a resource for the company to make money, especially as this data becomes richer with personal subtleties as technology converges with everyday life. In the overseer facilitation of a Social network, large scale surveillance of its users provides information that among some of its uses can be used to direct market advertising to them, provide location statistics to other companies or even to shape political campaigns. As (Thatcher, 2017, p. 2703) shows the data is used not only to provide insight into what users want but also to shape their desire to what the network wants of them. This underlying use can be seen in how the algorithmic approach to delivering content to a user, prioritises or limits data according to its programmed whims, allowing users to fall within mediated bubbles of activity where they only see what the network wants them to see (Hampton, 2016, p. 117). To Papacharissi (2010, p. 314) this shows that SNSs can place their users inside specialised spheres of affirmation where their beliefs and values on any number of topics or leaning can be influenced by making sure algorithmically that like minds only see the posts of like minds. SNSs, effectively situating themselves as collectors and dealers of their user's identity performances, place themselves in a position of power over the individuals they know and portray.

In positioning their users towards 'authentic' portrayals of self on their platforms, social networking sites fail to understand the intricacies of identity performance. They move full steam towards this ideal data collection because it suits profitability to have accurate representations to monetise. In the wake, users are left to manage themselves towards a unified portrayal of their identity, leaving static representations—of—self archived behind them, in contrast to the nature of identity as explored in postmodern thought. Inside us all is an ineffable core beat of life and identity, when we communicate, we convey representations of that identity to others which are mediated through our consciousness, language, social and cultural expectations, and physical and digital frameworks. But emphasis should be

on its ineffability. We change by the moment, but we are always ourselves. SNSs are businesses situated inside capitalism, they must make money to survive—and users do enter willingly to contribute to their networks, forming their offline worlds into their digital counterparts—but SNSs make money off a human desire to connect to others and can subtly shape user behaviour to the network's own wants. It should be an emphasis for further discussion that users of SNSs should engage critically with the platforms they are representing themselves on, and how then they can encounter more transparency about how these platforms are in turn shaping them. Social networking sites, through striving to elicit authentic representations of identity from their users have a moral responsibility to affect everyday life only for the better and not just for the market.

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