Managing Role Identities on Various Social Network Sites

Analysis of the Use of Social Network Sites by Latvian Youth

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Abstract—Since the beginning of the Web 2.0 era, social network sites have been an important method of self-presentation in the digital environment. Although the result of self-presentation is often reduced to a distinct digital identity, it can also be seen as a reflection of the complexity of the individual's self, which includes various role identities one can possess. What makes social network sites as a research field interesting is the potential of context-collapse. In opposition to real life, where one can organize different flows of behavior for different audiences and situations of role identity activation, this environment exposes the individual to a combination of various audiences, thus, it is the individual's choice to select which role identities will be presented. This article offers a pilot research that focuses on the habits of presenting role identities on various social network sites, aiming to understand which role identities (for example, being a student, an employee, a friend, etc.) are more likely to be presented on which of the most popular social network sites (*Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*). The methodology includes an assisted paper-based survey (n = 76, first-year college students in Latvia), consisting of production task and Likert scale statements. The results offer an evaluation of the potential of the tested methodology and give insight into some differences between various social network sites in the context of role identity presentation, as well as help to understand some of the challenges of self-presentations that are perceived by the youth when trying to take care of their digital self.

Keywords-role identities; self-presentation; social network sites; youth.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, society has become much more complex; people tend to get involved in various activities and take on many status roles, therefore the number of life decisions to be made also continues to increase [1]. As education is available at various stages of life, multiple workplaces can be combined, and people can network while pursuing a common hobby or volunteering project. The increasing complexity of the society is tightly connected to the development of the social network culture where people maintain a few long-lasting ties and many accidental or temporary ties [2].

At the same time, the social media era has given a platform to social network sites that help individuals to construct their selves in the digital environments, as well as

to build virtual connections with people significant to them [3].

The theoretical approach of symbolic interactionism states that the individual chooses which part of self to communicate depending on the conversational partner [4] or the public; also, the performance of one's role depends on the presence of one's counter-part [5].

Yet, the communication environment defined by the use of social network sites makes the picture more complicated, as it is often described by using the term context-collapse [6], meaning that the social and physical borders of various groups of people disappear, thus the individual is exposed to an unknown audience, causing overlap of different social circles. At the same time, people, especially youth, often use more than one social network site; this leads to the fact that there are multiple facets of self presented on social network sites.

Taking into account the above-mentioned points, this paper advances the following research questions:

1. Which role identities are more likely to be presented on which social network sites (*Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat*)?
2. How do the youth perceive the presentation of role identities, maintaining a coherent image and avoiding contradictions between the meanings implied by the various roles?
3. How is the view of the youth influenced by the multiplicity of the social network sites they use?

This being a pilot research, the sample consists of 76 first-year college students in Latvia, all being 18 – 20 years old.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In section 2, the theoretical background of the research is described, which consists of the ideas of symbolic interactionism regarding self and identities, as well as differing approaches on separating digital self from real-life self. Section 3 offers an outline of the methodology used. Section 4 presents the most important findings of the pilot research. In section 5, the conclusion is given, as well as the limitations, and the advantages of the current research are evaluated.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The approach chosen for the paper is based on symbolic interactionism (opting for its structural direction, instead of the traditional one), as well as key insights about digital self and self-presentation on social network sites.

A. *Multiplicity of Self and Role Identities*

Symbolic interactionism sprung from the ideas of G. H. Mead [4], who spoke of self as a social structure born in social experience and reflected in communication. Although the meanings are conveyed through communication and conversation, later on, it can be a mere cognitive process, as the individual already has ideas about how he/she is perceived. What Mead also stated was that, in the communication, the individual does not reflect all of self, but rather a part of self - the aspect of the self that is relevant to the context.

Being affiliated to a group was defined by G. Simmel [7] not only as a component for the formation of an objective group, but also a forming aspect of one's personality, as each individual realized the participation in a group in a unique way; thus, the combination of multiple groups one is affiliated with "creates in a turn a new subjective element".

The idea of the role as a basis for an identity (a subunit of a multifaceted self [5]) was taken up by G. J. McCall and J. L. Simmons, who described role-identity as an imaginative view of a person of oneself that is based on what one thinks of oneself as an occupant of a specific position [8]. Regarding the specific meanings, each role identity includes idiosyncratic and conventional meanings, thus, the individual, on one hand, follows some of the societal norms, and, on the other hand, creates one's own performance of the role.

B. *Digital Self and Presentation of Identities on Social Network Sites*

The approaches on how to differentiate the digital self (or identity) from the "real-life" self have changed over time, as the role of social media in everyday life has increased and the meanings of both environments almost completely overlap. Yet, it is important to mention one of the first explanations of identity in cyberspace, given by S. Turkle. She used a metaphor of windows to emphasize that any opened site can offer a possibility of self-transformation and development of a new self, which is a great alternative to having just one real-life self [9]. However, when keeping in mind the complex personality one has described in the previous sub-section, it might be more rational to stick to the view of S. Zhao who used the term "digital self" to address the self, expressed in the digital environment, yet, which is not considered as a different part of a person, rather a dimension of communication [10].

All that being said, when an individual acknowledges the presence of various social groups in social network sites, he/she must make a decision (even if unconscious) of which role identities to present and fulfill in each of the sites, at the same time working his/her way through possible discrepancies. This problem is the focus of the paper.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research uses a survey conducted in person. Because of the complexity of questionnaire design, in person communication was needed. The sample consists of 76 first-year college students (18 – 20 years old).

The first part of the survey consists of a production task – a table where each person was asked to fill in the roles he/she considered to possess and all of the social network sites he/she used on a regular basis. Then, each person was asked to select which identity they considered they presented on each of the social network sites; also, each person was asked to evaluate how important each of the identities was (using a scale from 1 to 10).

The second part of the survey included 24 statements about the process of maintaining a coherent image on social network sites to be evaluated using a Likert Scale. Among them, there were statements about maintaining a united image, being aware of contradictions between various roles, trying to present most of the roles one possesses, as well as whether or not one reflects about the possible reactions of various audiences, etc.

IV. EARLY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

When considering the differences between various social network sites, some peculiarities could be observed. *Facebook* was most likely to be used for presenting the student role (92% of students using it considered this identity as presented there; whereas, for *Instagram* it was 64% and for *Snapchat* – 67%), as well as for professional, volunteer, child and relative identity. Yet, speaking about professional identity, it could be observed that when a person considered this identity to be important, he/she was more likely to present it on *Facebook*. In turn, if the importance of the role was evaluated as low, he/she was more likely to present it on both *Instagram* and *Snapchat*. This fact could be interpreted as willingness to complain about having a boring work or other similar messages to peers, instead of presenting oneself in a professional context (here, it should be mentioned that very few respondents claimed to use *LinkedIn*). Consequently, the representation of a specific role may rely on one's relationship with the role or attitude toward its realization.

Also, there were some significant correlations between some of the statements and the facts drawn from the production task. For example, people who tended to agree with the statement "It is complicated to take care of one's image in the digital environment" were also more likely to provide a greater number of various social network sites they used for self-presentations (.308; sig.=.007; here and further the Spearman correlation coefficient is used, where the first number is the correlation coefficient, while the second number describes the significance level – the smaller, the more significant), and to agree with the statement "Some of the roles I possess restrict what I can / want to post on social network sites" (.284; sig.=.011). It was also visible that more youth (52%) tended to agree with a statement that they feel worried about reactions to their content by people they did not want to show the content to, yet, fewer of them (37%) were worried that there were strangers who saw the content. This goes together with the view of D. Boyd [6], who emphasized that the youth see privacy as being protected from being observed by people they know (mostly authorities, for instance, parents or teachers), meanwhile

striving for publicity and being seen by broader audience of people they do not know.

V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The correlations help to understand that the maintenance of a coherent digital self is considered as a more complex task when more role identities and more social network sites are involved, as well as when this process is rather conscious (people tend to reflect about it).

However, the stage of life when one starts to attend a college is also a period when the set of role identities is not stable yet and a lot of transformation is experienced. Although these youth have more potential role identities than previously, during the school years, adults could have a wider range of role identities and a more complex approach to control their presentation. Having said that, a broader sample could bring many interesting findings, yet, the interpretation of the current results makes it clear that, in order to explore the process that regards identities, an integration of qualitative methods would be helpful to assign meaning to the various approaches of the individuals revealed by the quantitative data. Analysis of the content posted by the individuals to present each of the roles also could be of interest to gain more concrete insights.

Having that said, the pilot research aims to find a way to analyze the interaction and presentation of all the role identities one possesses, rather than focusing on some distinct ones. The data gathered serves as first insight in the exploration of the topic and can be used to understand the way the youth treat their digital self, possession of various roles, and being aware of the social network audience.

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