

Modeling Cultural Acquisition in Online Social Networks

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Abstract

This research proposes to study the relationship between audience, context and disclosure in online social network sites. Studying a population of college students, this survey will explore how social maturity, perceived friend network size, and long-term goals affect the identity presented in SNS. This project attempts to theorize a new process of identity formation in online social networks; in this model, individuals choose strategies of identity presentation based on notions of in-group awareness, future-selves and social leverage. This model will be tested with survey methods.

Introduction

Online social network sites¹ play an important social and functional role in the lives of millions of individuals. On these sites, individuals construct a digital identity through the creation of a profile, they articulate their personal social networks, and they engage in relational formation and maintenance. Individuals *write themselves into being* (boyd, 2006) through a dialectical identity disclosure process (Donath, 1999).

Studies of campus social network use describe both high market penetration (Acquisti and Gross 2006, Stutzman 2006) and exceptional measures of use (Lampe et. al., 2007). Facebook, in particular, serves as somewhat of a *digital nexus* on the modern academic campus, illustrating the important role played by the online social network.

Research to-date has explored the social network as a place of signaling, disclosure, impression formation; studies have also show that online social networks are vectors for social capital (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Uniting these research strands is the user and their situated state in the network; this paper will explore how the user's social state and social maturity affect processes of identity disclosure, formation and discourse. In essence, how does the user's *habitus* interact with and affect practices of disclosure and identity-shaping in online social networks?

¹ Popular social network sites include Facebook.com, Myspace.com and LinkedIn.com.

Review

This research will be situated on the college campus, exploring undergraduate online social network cultural acquisition. Students use online social networks for a variety of purposes: The sites address social and informational needs, but they also provide a space for amusement and time-wasting. This dual purpose is informed by the unique social-informational situation of the college student, characterized as a state of social flux. In a state of transition, a *real-world* social network is a space of support and encouragement for students. The *online* social network provides a space of mediation and access to these support networks, offering new opportunities for connection and interaction between emergent and extant friend networks,

Relational formation is an important factor in successful student adaptation at university (Boute et. al., 2006). On the college campus, friendships are initially sparked offline, but the social network provides a digital space for continued interaction. Studies by Lampe et. al (2006) revealed that the directional nature of Facebook friendship on the college campus is offline to online. This indicates relational interplay between *offline* social space, where users interact physically as classmates and neighbors, and the *online* place of social network sites where create (or re-create) social structures in virtual space.

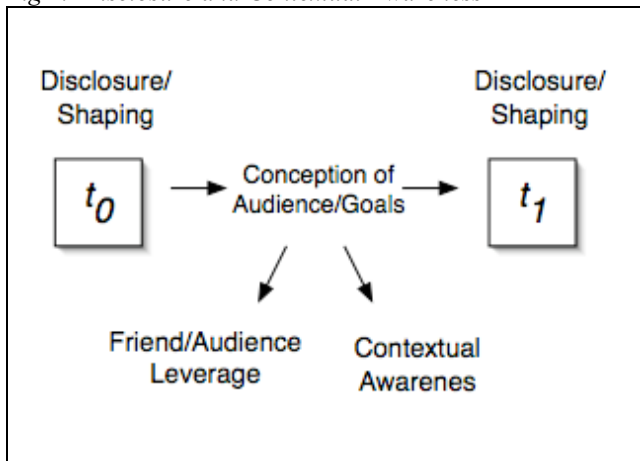
Model of Cultural Acquisition

In the context of this study, we theorize identity as an iterative process, in which the self is continually being recomposed, represented and reimagined in response to changing circumstances. Vygotsky (1978) describes identity as a continuous dialectical process, with the self emerging in response to and with terms and limits imposed from the environment.

This environment, according to Goffman (1959), consists of *scenes* one performs in tandem with others. In the context of a social network site, the scene is a multi-faceted; one performs identity with differing groups of peers or contacts. As one develops a more static sense of self and peer group, the performance of identity is reshaped and refigured for the context.

Figure 1 presents the model of disclosure based on contextual awareness. In this model, we explore the shaping of performative identity based on cultural awareness. For individuals, the process of identity presentation is shaped over time by a self-conception of audience and goals. This conception is influenced by the one's friend network or audience size, and one's awareness of the context of presentation. For the research population (undergraduate students), one can imagine that presentation choices are influenced by social state and contextual awareness. That is, if one is currently expanding their real-world social networks, sharing of identity information is based on both goals and the limitations imposed by context. If the student is a freshman, she or he may feel more freeness with presentation as opposed to a job-market senior class member.

Fig 1. Disclosure and Contextual Awareness



This model presents identity performance as function of contextual awareness. Over time, individuals shape their presentation based on audience and goals. This is mediated by audience size and contextual awareness.

Methods

This model will be tested using survey methods; we propose to explore disclosure and contextual awareness on the college campus. Using a random sample, we will solicit online questionnaire responses from 2,500 UNC undergraduate students. We predict a rate of participation of 20%, producing an analytic sample of 500 individuals. Those who decide to participate will follow a link to a web-based survey.

Subjects will be presented an informed consent dialogue, to which they must agree before participating in the survey. In the survey, participants will respond to 35 questions and submit their responses. To stimulate participation, respondents will be offered a chance to win one of four iTunes gift certificates (valued \$10 each).

We are currently piloting this survey with a convenience sample to test internal consistency and ease of use. The main paper will employ a regression model to develop a predictive path analysis of audience perception development.

Future Directions

We believe that this study fills a critical gap in the online social networks literature, examining the extent to which audience, goals and contextual awareness affect in-group disclosure processes. While this study is situated in Facebook, we hope that it can provide a model for examining in greater depth the well-developed patterns of use of long-time online social network users in different networks.

The authors acknowledge that this research is only a part of the overall picture of online social network use and cultural processes, but it stands to explore critical dimensions of the space. Our hope is that this research inspires further explorations of communities of practice situated in like times and places.

Citations

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