Online Identity Analysis Model: Analysing the Construction of the Self in Digital Environments

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ABSTRACT

Social media is changing the way individuals collaborate, learn and express themselves, allowing for the construction of an identity and a reputation that encompasses over many other digital spaces. In a context where the online identity of individuals may reveal the sum of their experiences and skills, reflecting the path of their personal, academic and professional lives, this paper introduces a conceptual framework and a model developed to analyse the construction of the self in online environments. The model was used in a research study developed at University of Aveiro, Portugal, aiming to analyse how identity is built and managed in formal and informal digital environments and reveals the existence of two main online identity profiles—context driven and user-driven identity profiles.

Keywords: Digital Environments, Framework, Model, Online Identity, Privacy, Representation, Reputation

INTRODUCTION

The development of technology and social media is changing the way individuals learn, collaborate and express themselves (Chatti et al., 2007; Dawson, 2007; Richardson, 2006). By emphasizing the contribution of the user in creating, organizing and curating content and information, the web emerges as a place where knowledge is socially constructed and shared, reflecting a human dimension where networks of people, data and services grow towards a connective and innovative environment (Bryant, 2007).

Nowadays content, more than accessed, is created and transformed, and individuals use the web as a place where they can build a presence that reflects their interests and skills, a presence that encompasses the personal, academic and professional dimensions of their identity. Understood as a continuum (Warburton et al., 2010), online identity emerges as a concept that
encompasses the information published by and related to the individual in online environments. Either related to authentication – the information that validates user’s identity in digital systems – or content – information published by the individual in order to communicate and interact within the online environment –, online identity can be recognized in the publication of content (Coiro et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2008; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Greenhow et al., 2009; Costa & Torres, 2011); in the creation of profiles (Boyd, 2008; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009); and in the typology of participation (Fraser, 2007).

In this context, the construction of a presence over the web enables the individual to build a reputation on the network, where identity is seen as a puzzle, a work-in-progress concept that involves both personal and social dimensions.

About Identity

Although “identity” derives from the Latin word *idem*, meaning “the same”, the concept of identity embraces a multiplicity of meanings and purposes. Used to describe the differences and similarities between two entities (as in philosophy), to refer the set of information associated with the identification of individuals (e.g. name, social security number), or even to describe the conceptualization that the individual has of himself/herself and the way he/she presents to others (Boyd, 2002; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Zhao et al., 2008; Peachey & Childs, 2011), identity emerges as the product of a unique and personal autobiography that reflects the social context of the individual (Buckingham, 2008), a fluid and permanently negotiated concept where the “self” becomes a project constantly worked and shaped by individuals and the contexts where they are (Costa & Torres, 2011; Giddens, 1991, apud Buckingham, 2008).

Identity in Digital Environments

In the physical world, the body acts as medium through which information is conveyed: gestures, verbal and nonverbal expressions, posture, clothing and accessories, are elements of a contextual code that enables the demonstration of the individual’s identity. According to the feedback received in the interaction with others, the individual maintains or adjusts his/her behaviour, a process of performance, interpretation and adjustment that Goffman (1959) labelled as impression management. Goffman (1959) addresses the performative dimension of identity formation emphasizing the idea that the individual acts as an actor, playing different roles at different times to different people, and changing his/her behaviour in order to influence the perception that others have of him/her.

The emergence of Internet and computer-mediated environments, however, changed the traditional conditions of production of identity (Zhao et al., 2008): unable to represent themselves physically on the network, individuals resort to tools to create a digital representation of their presence: avatars, nicknames, email signatures, written word, profile pages or social networks (Boyd, 2002; Buckingham, 2008; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Peachey & Childs, 2011). The development, diversity and ubiquity of social media services and spaces reduced the gap between being online and offline, and are now presented as single spaces where individuals articulate their presence (Warburton, 2008) and test and work on the construction and reconstruction of the self.

The architecture that supports digital environments does not include the feedback and contextualization mechanisms that individuals are used to in the physical world (Boyd, 2002). While publishing content over the network, individuals are also producing a vast amount of information able to reveal aspects and dimensions of their identity that, once archived, can be easily recovered: posted content can be retrieved, processed, rearranged and reproduced in manners impossible to be controlled by those who have initially produced it. Boyd (2008b), in a study focused on the construction of identity by teenagers on the social network MySpace, presents as main differences between the representation of individuals in physical and online environments: the persistence of information
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