Chapter 4

It’s My Site, and I’ll Do What I Want: Performing Female Identity through Digital Identity Curation in Online Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is based on a qualitative case study that researched the perceptions of nine male and female pre-service English teachers’ in regards to their preparedness to mentor positive digital conduct in Social network sites (SNS). These sites enable individuals to perform public representations of identity, consumed by virtual audiences, with various degrees of perceived privacy. The chapter frames what we call “identity curation” through three theoretical lenses: of performativity, customisation and critical literacy. This chapter discusses one of the themes that emerged from the research, which is the way in which “normalised” and naturalised representations of femininity on SNS were judged more harshly than masculine representations.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on a qualitative case study that researched the perceptions of nine male and female pre-service English teachers’ in regards to their preparedness to mentor positive digital conduct in social network sites (SNS). The central research question was “what do we understand about the ways in which young people curate their identity in digital spaces?” These digital online sites enable individuals to perform public representations of identity. SNS users access platforms via a range of technologies, including internet-enabled mobile technologies (IEMT), to produce enduring digital texts that are instantly published and consumed by virtual audiences, and with various degrees of perceived privacy. The chapter is framed through the theoretical lenses of performativity (Butler, 2011a, 2011b) which considers how gender and identity is constructed by users and interpreted by audiences, as well as how users curate their representations of identity through the customisation (Papacharissi, 2011) of their digital texts. Users practice customisation on content that either does not effectively inform their perceived or ideal self, or content they assess as not enhancing their representation of identity to other users. Customisation describes how users enact the process of virtual representation, which we are calling “identity curation.” One of the themes that emerged amongst others, was the way in which “normalised” and naturalised representations of femininity were judged more harshly than masculine representations. For this reason our primary focus for this chapter is on representations of female identity curation on SNS. These concepts emerge from a third theoretical lens of critical literacy which the Pre-service teachers understand as a way of approaching their teaching of English.

The Research Context

Participants were drawn from a cohort of pre-service English teachers (7 females and 2 males) enrolled in the final English curriculum unit of their degree, who self-identified as active users of social media, and had completed eight weeks of practicum in Queensland secondary schools. This ethnographic case study used focus group interviews to code, analyse and identify what pre-service English teachers know and understand about identity, SNS, digital literacy and online digital conduct. Participants discussed their observations of the performance of identity and gender in social media.

Background

The emergence of participatory web cultures and user-generated content, particularly through SNS, has raised a number of issues affecting young people which have been studied extensively. These include privacy concerns, online safety and cyberbullying, which can take previously school-based concerns into the home environment. Less attention, however, has been given to the impact of the digital texts generated by SNS users on representations of the user’s identity, and how the creation of digital texts will generate a lasting representation of the user that may have long term effects on the user’s identity. The public domains of SNS enable readers beyond the user’s assumed or known audience to access and view representations of self on SNS performed and curated by the user. This chapter will investigate one theme that emerged from the study’s findings: the perceptions of the performance of female digital curation in online public spaces.
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