Chapter 9
Formation and Control of Identity:
In a Social Media World

Christine Yunn-Yu Sun
eBookDynasty.net, Australia

Steve Goschnick
Swinburne University of Technology, Australia

ABSTRACT
This chapter explores the construction of identity in online communities and websites for social purposes, and its consequences in terms of how one’s online identity may be utilized to such an extent that one’s real-world identity is either enforced or eroded. It does so by investigating the very nature of identity, coming predominantly from a cultural studies research and philosophical view, although it also cites some related findings and advances in computing and information systems (IS) research. The central argument across the chapter is two-fold: firstly, in promoting an initial shift in focus from the management of online identity to the nature and significance of identity itself whose construction may be conceptualized as a process of sense making and strengthening; and only then, armed with a better understanding of identity, one can focus back upon the management of it more effectively, with a view to the individual taking more control of their own identity within cyberspace, which is increasingly transitioning us all into a functioning global community, in both predictable and unforeseen ways.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the construction of identity in online communities and websites for social purposes, and its consequences in terms of how one’s online identity may be utilized to such an extent that one’s real-world identity is either enforced or eroded. We also present a case study with the aim of demonstrating that an individual’s identity can be methodically represented, so that they may be appropriately notified of information coming in from the online world from multiple sources; and, which may be used as both an aide in taking control of how one is represented in the online world, and in placing information in the context of one's own roles, interests and knowledge generation.

This chapter argues that identity is an imagined “site” the boundaries of which distinguish whoever is assigned within them, from those outside. Identity is flexible and ever-changing in nature, constructed on the needs of an individual to react to the demands of their political, economic, societal and cultural circumstances. As such, the formation, standardization and circulation of one’s identity within society affects not only how one understands and represents oneself to others, but is also the basis of how one is recognized and treated by others accordingly. Furthermore, from the individual’s point of view, having a model that represents identity, helps them stay orientated on the things that matter to them. In his book *The News: A User's Manual* philosopher Alain de Botton wrote, that immersing ourselves in the daily electronic news feeds and other news sources, is “to raise a shell to our ears and to be overpowered by the roar of humanity”. That there is too much of it for our own good, and that we are becoming “news junkies”. He suggests that one must know themselves well, to not be left disorientated and distracted by the constant flow of news and information.

To take this argument one step further, unlike the real world, the Internet is capable of enabling one to reach across nearly all political, cultural and sociological traits that are commonly used to construct one’s identity as an imagined “site”. What’s more, the Internet (also known as cyberspace) itself is an imagined “site” whose social functions, capacities and protocols are continually expanding and regularly redefined. The imagined boundaries of the Internet are therefore considerably different from those of the real world, creating the needs, opportunities and means for one to continuously present, reproduce and dynamically manage one’s online identity. Most importantly, in the case of online identity, it is more often a matter of one’s choice to actively construct a specific identity than being randomly assigned an identity by others. This presents one with ample opportunity and choice not only to represent oneself but also to have a significant bearing on how one is recognized.

As a result, there is a clear and urgent need to examine the formation, standardization and circulation of one’s online identity and how it impacts upon the ways in which
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