EXPLORING ONLINE IDENTITY RE-CONSTRUCTION IN SOCIAL NETWORK COMMUNITIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Many studies have investigated social networks. So far little work has been done to explore the virtual identity construction in social network communities. The virtual identity that an individual constructed in the social network community may not be exactly same as his/her identity in the physical world. Using self-discrepancy theory and social capital theory as theoretical foundations, this paper reports a qualitative study by interviewing members of communities (or large groups) on one of the largest social network sites in the world: QQ. The results of this study suggest that some people do indeed construct a virtual identity different from their identity in the physical world. Findings from this study reveal the complexity of virtual identity re-construction and people’s motivations to do so in social network communities. Theoretical contributions and implications for practice are described.

Keywords: social networks, online communities, virtual identity, identity construction, self-discrepancy, social capital, qualitative study, interviews.
INTRODUCTION

With recent advances in Internet technology (especially Web 2.0 applications) over the last decade, a new world of collaboration and communication has emerged. People are connected with more than a billion users around the world when they surf the Internet. Based on the wide diffusion of the high-speed Internet, new generation of online social networking and community websites have become a significant way for people to communicate and interact with others in their daily life (Cheung & Lee 2010). Social network sites have become an extremely popular “social force” (Posey, Lowry, & Ellis 2010), especially for young people. For example, the monthly active users of Facebook have reached 1.11 billion by March 2013, increasing 23 percent compared to 901 million in March 2012 (Facebook’s Growth 2013). At the same time, the popular Chinese social network platform “QQ” has also been developing rapidly. At the end of October 2013, the monthly active users of QQ were 815.6 million, growing 4 percent over last year (Tencent announces 2013).

Additionally, social network sites (such as Facebook, Twitter and QQ) provide mechanisms to help people create online communities based on common interests (so called social network communities) (Fogel and Nehmad 2009). Specifically, a social network community represents and connects people that share common interests in a certain area. The common area of interests enables users of the community website to meet new friends and like-minded people. Users connect with each other, rate peers and objects, ask questions, get answers, discuss relevant topics, and also help each other. In many cases, community members are strangers situated in different places of the world. The members of a social network community can manage their profiles through the functionality provided by the social network website they use (Stutzman 2006). The profile contains basic personal information such as name, age, gender, nationality, interests and so forth. Typically, the construction of these personal profiles is based on the input of users; the veracity of this personal information will not be assessed (Livingstone 2008). Especially, in many large communities on the social network sites, members are typically strangers; some members’ virtual identity in the community is not necessarily same as their identity in the physical world. Some users choose to construct an identity in the virtual setting that is partly or totally different from their identity in the physical world. For example, some people hide certain information (e.g., age, working organization, home address, etc.), while others may manipulate personal information (e.g., providing fake name or gender). In so doing, people hide, fake or re-construct their identity in the social network community. The larger the community, the more likely people may re-construct their virtual identity because the larger community typically means a larger amount of strangers to interact with.

This is an interesting phenomenon in social network communities, and thus is an important research topic. In this case, the current study seeks to explore people’s motivations to re-construct their virtual identity in social network communities. Specifically, the research question is: What motivates people in social network communities to construct a virtual identity that differs from their identity in the physical world?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the literature review section presents a brief introduction about the definition of identity and identity re-construction, followed by two important theories that can be used to explain the motivations which cause identity re-construction in social network communities. Then, we choose one of the most popular social network platforms in China – QQ – to collect field data. Finally, we analyze individual motivations based on the theoretical foundations of this study, followed by a discussion of the contributions, limitations and conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW (THEORETICAL BACKGROUND)

2.1 The Consist of Identity

Do you know who and what you are? Individuals’ identity is the combination of cognitive and affective understanding of who and what they are (Schouten 1991, p. 413). According to the “symbolic inter-actionist perspective” (Blumer 1969; Cooley 1902; Mead 1934), individuals’ "reflexive evaluation" may affect part of their understanding of who or what they are (Solomon 1983,
p. 321), or how other people view them. Markus and Nurius (1987) argued that the identity of people consists of many different self-conceptions that mean the different ideas about the people she/he thinks that she/he is. At the same time, self-conceptions can be divided into two parts: now selves, which describe the self that present in the real life and can be perceived by people, and possible selves, which are images of the self that have not yet been perceived but that are expectations or fear (Markus & Nurius 1986, p. 957).

Compared to the face to face communication in physical society, the interaction in the virtual setting is quite different. In localized face to face communication, the physical identity consists of three basic parts: the presence of corporal body, social background and personality attributes (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin 2008). The presence of corporal body refers to the physical characteristics that are visible to others, including sex, race, and looks, etc. The social background and personality attributes determine the inner characteristics of a person and can be perceived during the face to face communication. In this case, identity construction mostly contains the manipulation of physical setting (e.g., furniture and decoration) and “personal front” (e.g., appearance, language, and manner) which could generate a desired impression on others (Goffman 1959). In addition, some people may try to hide their background and personality to re-construct a new identity when the face to face interactions take place among strangers (e.g., in bars), but the embodiment of the corporal body will still limit this kind of identity re-construction (Zhao et al. 2008).

This kind of traditional conditions of identity construction in the real world has totally changed after the emergency of Internet (Zhao et al. 2008). In the online world, the corporeal body was totally separated from social environment. In some cases, people interact with others in online social network communities in fully disembodied text mode that proposes nothing about their physical characteristics. Apart from this, even audio and visual mode is used to present the corporeal body in the interaction of online environment, some people will still keep re-constructing discrepant identities through fake or hide the information about their personal background (e.g., name, residence and institutional affiliation) (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason 2002).

2.2 Introduction of Identity Re-construction

According to definition of identity, an individual’s identity will be formed from some combination of both now selves and possible selves at any time. Moreover, an individual’s identity will not remain purely the same over time (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005). Thus identity re-construction in the social network communities can be seen as a different combination of both now selves and possible selves. People may present more possible selves that they expected in the virtual setting.

Identity re-construction in online environment is the tendency for people to play-act at being someone else or to put on online personae that differ from their “real life” identities (Stone 1996; Turkle 1995). In the virtual setting, people can hide their undesired physical features and re-construct their biography and personality to make their physical identities unknown to others and thereby become anonymous. In other words, people can reinvent themselves through the re-construction of discrepant identities in the cavitory and anonymous online environment (Zhao et al. 2008). For example, in social network communities, a man can pretend to be a woman, a nerd to be a star athlete, and an introvert to be an extrovert.

2.3 Self-discrepancy Theory

One’s identity is a manifestation of oneself. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins 1987, 1989) postulates three domains of the self (actual, ideal and ought).

2.3.1 Three Domains of the Self

- The actual self, which is the representation of the attributes that someone (self or others) believes he/she actually is. This self is born and influenced by environment, education, and experience
throughout the life. This self is presented in the real life and can be perceived by others. It reflects the current status of individuals.

- The ideal self, which is the representation of the attributes that someone (self or others) would like he/she, ideally, to possess. This self derives from the wishes, aspirations, or hopes of an individual and/or others which the individual wants to attain or the others want him or her to attain.
- The ought self, which is the representation of the attributes that someone (self or others) trusts that he/she should or ought to be. This self presents the sense of duty, obligations, and responsibilities of an individual or others.

The identity construction comes from the different combination of the three domains of the self. For the physical identities in the real world, due to the embodiment of the corporal body and the constraint of laws and social norms, the physical identities may include more “actual self” and “ought self”, and less “idea self”. In contrast, due to the released constraints in the online world, people have less duty and responsibilities. Therefore, the virtual identities may include more “ideal self” and “actual self”, and less “ought self”.

### 2.3.2 Standards for Self-evaluation

Among the three domains on the self, the actual self could typically present a person’s self-concept (Wylie 1979). The remaining two (ideal self and ought self) are self-evaluation standards or self-guide (Higgins, Klein, & Strauman 1986). According to self-discrepancy theory, every people have their own self-guide that they are especially motivated to meet; that’s why people have different personality. Not everyone is expected to possess all the self-guides: some may possess only part of ideal self-guides, whereas others may possess only ought self-guides (Higgins 1987). However, the self-guide is really difficult to meet in daily life, then people choose to re-construct a different virtual identity in the virtual setting (e.g., social network communities) to accomplish their wishes.

### 2.4 Social Capital Theory

Social capital is a set of actual and potential resources rooted in relationships. Individuals or social units can access the resources through the processed network of relationships (Nahapet & Ghoshal 1998). Thus, social capital consists of both the network and the resources embedded in that network. Social capital could be interpreted in three dimensions: the structural, the relational, and the cognitive (Nahapet & Ghoshal 1998). The structural social capital refers to the overall pattern of linkages between individuals, describing the density, connectivity and hierarchy of all the connections (Burt 1992). The relational dimension of social capital focuses on the specific relationships people have, referring to the resources derived from relationships. The cognitive dimension refers to the assets that provide “shared representations, interpretations and systems of meaning” (Cicourel 1973) among individuals. The three dimensions of social capital are highly interrelated. For example, the structural strong ties are closely associated with relational trust (Nahapet & Ghoshal 1998). Previous studies indicated that social capital can be formed not only in real life, but also on social network sites (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe 2007).

### 3 METHODOLOGY

In this study, we aim to explore a contemporary phenomenon of human behavior about why people choose to re-construct identity in social network communities. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1995), the most suitable methods that can be used to explore and understand the complexity of human behavior and perceptions in naturalistic circumstance were qualitative research methods. And qualitative research methods were good means of trying to analyze this kind of fast-moving Information Systems (IS) research topics (Klein & Myers 1999). Additionally, the case study approach is the most cogent technique for pursuing “how” or “why” research questions within real-life contexts (Yin 2003). Therefore, a qualitative case study was adopted in this paper (Stake 1995).

**Research sites:** The social network communities investigated in this study was selected on the most famous social network platform in China: QQ, owned by Tencent Company. Through Qzone and
Pengyou (two specific sub-sites tightly bundled with QQ), users can post messages and pictures, and share information with others, just like in Facebook. Within the communities on QQ, people can create their profiles based on their own idea, such as using an interesting net name or uploading a funny image as head portrait. The information in the profile will not be validated by the system. That is, users can build an identity as they wish. They can either use real information in the profile, or create an identity totally different from their real life.

**Data Collection:** “Interviews are an essential source of case study evidence since most case studies are about human affairs (Yin, 2003).” Semi-structured interviews were adopted to collect data. Before designing the questions for the interview, there is a need to identify the boundary of identity reconstruction in QQ communities. In QQ, the user profile consists of eight attributes of basic personal information, including name, gender, age, birth place, occupation, education, contract information and living address. We sent out a message to invite volunteers in three QQ communities: a game community, a car community and a book reading community. And 15 participants in different age groups were selected. To protect the privacy of the interviewees, we use number 1-15 to represent them in this paper. The interviews were conducted individually over online audio call or telephone, and each lasted 30-45 minutes. Among the eight attributes of basic personal information mentioned above, participants were required to choose the ones for which they revealed real information. According to their responses, if there were any attributes for which they didn’t reveal real information, it means that they have re-conducted their virtual identity to some extent.

To answer the research question (i.e., what motivates people in social network communities to construct a virtual identity that differs from their identity in the physical world?), we use open-ended questions to explore participants’ motivations to re-construct their virtual identity. Open-ended questions are commonly used methods in survey, which allow participants to provide answers in their own words (Geer 1988). Many researchers argue that by allowing individuals to answer freely to the questions, it is easier for the researchers to find out respondents’ prominent concerns than using the close-ended questions (that make people to choose answers from a set of responses) (Repass 1971; Kelley 1983; Wattenberg 1998).

### 4 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Interestingly, all of the 15 participants (that we interviewed) used certain fake information (among the eight attributes of basic personal information mentioned above) in their QQ profile. In other words, to some extent, each participant has re-constructed his/her virtual identity in QQ communities. Then content analysis was utilized to analyze the responses from all the participants. Specifically, content analysis is a method that aims to elicit concepts or categories to describe a phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs 2008). The main feature of content analysis is to classify words or text into smaller content categories (Weber 1990). The unit of analysis in this study is the thematic unit. Each answer to the open-ended questions was read and comprehended in the context and then divided into various thematic units and analyzed. We coded the thematic units and compared the coding labels, and then classified the similar ones into groups. Totally four categories were generated from the groups.

#### 4.1 Vanity

According to definition from Oxford English dictionary, vanity is defined as “the excessive belief in one's own abilities or attractiveness to others.” Six participants indicated that they re-construct their identity because they wanted to act in the way they dreamed of. For the people who are unsatisfied about themselves, they may re-construct an “ideal self” to fulfil the vanity. As respondent 14 elaborated, “I can describe myself in any way I like, because others don't know me.” Additionally, people may re-construct a fake identity to act as a successful person while participating in social network communities. Then it may make the excessive belief come true in the virtual setting. Respondent 12 mentioned, “It is easier to pick up girls in this way.”
4.2 Disinhibition

The online disinhibition effect refers to the pervasive phenomenon that people feel less restrained, loosen up and express themselves more freely and openly (Suler 2004). Constrained by laws and social norms, some people feel inhibited in the physical world. Throughout the data collection process, eleven respondents stated that they feel free to talk when they are hiding their physical identity or using a fake identity in the virtual setting. With the legal and moral pressure in the real world, most people are attracted by the virtual setting where there are fewer regulations; thereby the “ought self” standards are released to some extent. When being anonymous, people usually feel less pressured. They can express their thoughts freely, without being recognized and punished by others. With the reconstructed virtual identity, they can do whatever they want without any responsibility. As respondent 3 said: “I feel more relaxed when chatting with strangers, because they don't know who I am, I won't be held responsible for what I said.”

4.3 Access to New Social Networks

Four respondents expressed the willingness to meet new friends with different identities. They think that their current network is saturated. It is more likely to encounter new friends with a new identity. For example, the friends of a nurse are mostly doctors or other people who work in the hospital. If he/she joins a community of writers, and construct his/her identity as a writer, the friends he/she meets online will be different. As respondent 13 indicated, “I can meet different friends with different identities.”

4.4 Privacy Concerns

Information privacy was identified as the ability of individuals to decide when, how, and to what extent his/her personal information is interacted to other people (Stone, Gardner, & Gueutal 1983; Westin 1967). As the information technology develops, individual privacy has become one of the biggest concerns in the virtual setting. Most respondents have stated that they hide or re-construct their identity online due to privacy concerns. Most people, who choose to re-construct a new identity, do not want strangers to know who she/he is and what she/he is doing. Some people also don’t trust the service provider and they are afraid that their personal information will be in danger. For example, respondent 6 indicated: “The social network may steal my personal information.”

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Self-discrepancy Theory

In what follows, three factors are interpreted based on the self-discrepancy theory.

Drawing on the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins 1987, 1989), the identities come from the different combination of the three domains on the self. For different motivations that cause identity reconstruction, individual may construct various virtual identities which include different percentage of the three domains of the self.

5.1.1 Vanity

For people who choose identity re-construction due to vanity (Netemeyer, Burton, & Lichtenstein 1995), they may re-construct the virtual identity which includes more “ideal self” in the virtual setting. For these people, most of them are unsatisfied with their own physical identity or their physical identity cannot match their self-guide (Higgins et al. 1986) in the real world, so they choose to re-construct fake identities based on their wishes, aspirations, or hopes. These fakers may act as successful person or ideal person while they using social network. As a consequence, these fake “ideal self” will help to attract more people to make friend with such fake identities, because most people would like to make friend with successful person rather than normal people.
5.1.2 Disinhibition

If a person feels inhibited when he or she interacts and communicates with others in the real world, he or she may choose to re-construct a fake identity that comprises more “actual self” and fewer “ought self”. In virtual setting, there are less legal and moral pressures than the physical world. So people have fewer duty, obligations and responsibilities than the physical world. And they can do whatever they want with less responsibility in social network communities. In this case, these people choose to re-construct identity to release the inhibition that they have in the physical world, taking advantage of either benign or toxic disinhibition effects of the Internet (Suler 2004). For instance, due to social pressure, it may be not proper to discuss sensitive topics in public. But in social network communities, individuals can comment whatever they think, because no one knows who they are.

5.1.3 Privacy Concern

In the virtual setting, there are many malicious people who attempt to do bad things using new technology. When people are exposed to the Internet, the privacy concerns arise. They are worried that their personal information will be stolen and used improperly, causing unnecessary troubles to them. Due to privacy concerns, people re-construct a virtual identity to hide and protect their real information. In other words, they may construct a virtual identity which includes less “actual self”, thereby protecting their personal information as far as possible.

5.2 Social Capital Theory

Access to New Social Networks

Social capital could be considered from three dimensions: the structural, the relational, and the cognitive dimensions (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998). When people re-construct their identity to meet new friends, they are actually expanding their social networks. With the new friends, the network ties of the individual increases, and thereby the structural social capital increases. Taking advantage of the new structural social capital, the individual could develop and manage the relationship with new friends to increase the relational social capital. And eventually, he/she can have access to the resources embedded in the new network.

5.3 Categorize the Factors Based on Motivations

Further, all these factors could be summarized and compared based on users’ intrinsic motivations and extrinsic motivations (see Figure 1). Deci and Ryan (1985) distinguished the difference between these two types of motivations based on the different reasons or goals that cause the action.

Intrinsic motivation is defined as an individual process an action because of the inherent satisfactions rather than some separable consequence. This kind of motivation motivated a person to do something for the fun or challenge rather than for external prods, pressures, or rewards (Ryan & Deci 2000). Thus, vanity and disinhibition could be categorized into intrinsic motivations. For people who re-construct identity because of vanity, they are mainly trying to fulfil their vision of themselves. For inhibited people, they re-construct identity in social network communities to release themselves from pressure, and enjoy the freedom in the online virtual setting.

Extrinsic motivation is defined as an individual process an action because of the separable consequence, such as the rewards and income of the activity, rather than inherent enjoyment and satisfactions (Ryan & Deci 2000). Therefore, the other two factors (i.e., access to new social networks and privacy concerns) belong to extrinsic motivations. For people who try to make new friends with re-conducted identity, the reward they obtain is the new network and new resources embedded in the network. When people re-construct their identity due to privacy concerns, the direct outcome is safety. Otherwise, if their real information is used by a malicious person, this will entail real loss to them.
6 CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper explored people’s motivations to re-construct identity in social network communities. The results of this study indicate that the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins 1987, 1989) is reasonable in interpreting the intrinsic reasons for people to re-construct their virtual identities when interacting with others in social network communities. The new virtual identities are recognized as different combinations of three domains of self (Higgins 1987), rooted in different motivations. People use different combinations to re-construct virtual identities to fulfill their different needs in social network communities. For example, for people who choose identity re-construction due to vanity (Netemeyer et al. 1995), more “ideal self” is presented when they re-construct their virtual identity. This study validates the self-discrepancy theory in online environments. Moreover, social capital theory (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998) is used to explain that people re-construct their virtual identities to access to new social networks. Using the re-constructed virtual identity, an individual can make new friends in the new social network, thereby increasing their social capital.

Furthermore, the factors identified in the interviews were categorized into two types of motivations (intrinsic and extrinsic) (Ryan & Deci 2000), thereby painting a more complete picture of virtual identity re-construction in social network communities. Two factors (i.e., vanity and disinhibition) were recognized as intrinsic motivations, while the remaining two factors (i.e., privacy concern and access to new social networks) were categorized as extrinsic motivations.

The finding of this study offers important implications for practitioners. For example, the motivations identified in this research, especially intrinsic motivations, provide a direction for the operators of social network sites to effectively attract and retain users. Among various social network sites, users may choose the one that can better fulfill their needs.

As a qualitative case study, this research shares similar limitations with other studies that adopted case study method (Yin 2003). The results were interpreted in the specific context; and thus should be cross-validated in other contexts (Detlor et al 2013). Additionally, this study was conducted in a particular culture. A cross-cultural study will also validate the factors identified in the current study.

7 CONCLUSION

In social network communities, individuals may construct virtual identities that differ from their identity in the physical world. But there is a clear paucity of studies that have investigated why people construct a different virtual identity in social network communities. To address this concern, we have conducted a qualitative study by interviewing members of communities from QQ platform. Self-discrepancy theory and social capital theory were used to frame this study. The results of this study suggest that some people do indeed construct a virtual identity different from their identity in the physical world. Findings from this study reveal the complexity of virtual identity re-construction and people’s motivations to do so in social network communities.

Note: The three authors contributed equally to this paper.
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