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Abstract

This article explores how young people – for whom issues of identity are particularly salient – conceive of the new opportunities for self-expression provided by digital media technologies. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 ‘digital youth,’ ages 15–25, who were highly engaged in at least one form of digital media activity at the time of their interview. Participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario designed to probe their conceptions of identity, both online and offline. The themes identified in the interviews are organized into a conceptual framework that summarizes the strategies young people use to reconcile the tension between multiplicity and consistency in a networked era. The framework comprises four ‘spheres of obligation’ – to self, interpersonal relationships, online social norms, and broad community-level values – that function as implicit limits on self-multiplicity. Participants varied in the weight they gave to each sphere when deciding how to express themselves in this networked era.

Keywords

adolescence, digital media, emerging adulthood, identity, internet, youth

Introduction

Meet Anne. She is a 21-year-old senior in college majoring in biology. On a typical day, she might be spotted in one of the campus dining halls, the lab, the library, or on the

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soccer field. Anne can also be found in a number of online spaces, such as Facebook, where she posts pictures and updates on her daily activities for friends and family members; on Twitter, where she tweets about her political opinions and posts links to news articles and blogs covering politics; and on LiveJournal, where she uses her online journal to document and reflect on both major and minor milestones in her life and to share these reflections with a group of close friends from high school.

Anne is a fictional person, but her profile of experiences is reflective of the multiple contexts that each of us encounters on any given day. In particular, her narrative underscores the central role that digital media technologies play in supporting the multiplicity of life in the 21st century. Reflecting on the consequences of this multiplicity, one might celebrate the many avenues that digital media create for someone like Anne to express the different aspects of her personality and to share them with others. At the same time, there may be disadvantages to Anne's multiple self-expressions. It is difficult both cognitively and metacognitively to monitor all of one's different selves and audiences. Some scholars also contend that multiplicity, when taken too far, can pose risks to self and others if one's identities are not bound by an organizing influence (Lifton, 1993; Suler, 2002; Turkle, 1995).

There appears to be a tension between the risks and opportunities associated with self-multiplicity. In this article, I explore how young people – for whom issues of identity are particularly salient – conceive of and approach this tension in their everyday lives. I report on findings from an analysis of in-depth interviews with 24 'digital youth' ages 15–25 who are highly engaged in at least one form of digital media activity, including blogging, social networking, gaming, and content creation. In these interviews, participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario that was designed to probe their conceptions of the opportunities and risks associated with online identity play (i.e. trying out different ways of presenting oneself to others), the relationship between online and offline self-expressions, and the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable online identities. The findings reported here represent key themes that emerged from an analysis of participants' responses. In this article's Discussion section, I organize these themes into a conceptual framework that summarizes the strategies young people use to reconcile the tension between multiplicity and consistency in a networked era. The framework comprises four 'spheres of obligation' – to self, interpersonal relationships, online social norms, and broad community-level standards and values – that place implicit limits on self-multiplicity. The youth in this sample vary in the weight they give to each sphere when deciding how to express themselves in this networked era.

Theoretical context

Identity as a social construction

The socially embedded nature of identity has long been recognized by social scientists. Goffman (1959), Cooley (1902), and Mead (1934) described the self as a product of social interactions. According to Goffman's dramaturgic analysis of social life, the self is a 'collaborative manufacture' between a performer and his or her audience. As such, its existence depends on the recognition it receives from an audience. In a similar manner, Cooley's 'looking-glass self' and Mead's 'generalized other' highlight the self's reliance on the surrounding social context.

Theorists of human development also underscore the social nature of identity, acknowledging the important roles that both broad social institutions and specific interpersonal relationships play in the identity formation process. According to Erikson (1968), the process of identity development – the central task of adolescence – begins when individuals start to consider contexts beyond their immediate experience and contemplate what roles they will assume in the broader society. Furthermore, he argued that one's identity does not come into existence until it has been recognized by others. In this way, Erikson conceived of identity as inhering not just in the individual but in his or her interpersonal relationships and position within society.

Identity in a networked era

With fast-paced technological advances and rising globalization, the social organization of Western societies has become increasingly complex over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st century. People today assume an increasing number and wide variety of social roles across diverse contexts, a state of affairs that many scholars contend affects the way individuals construct and experience their identities. Specifically, scholars observe that identity has become increasingly multi-faceted and fluid as individuals move from one social context to the other, adopting different roles in each context. This multiplicity and fluidity is reflected in Lifton's (1993) 'protean self,' Giddens' (1991) 'reflexive project of the self,' Gergen's (2000) 'pastiche personality,' and Zurcher's (1972) 'mutable self.'

Scholars were quick to recognize the potential for self-multiplicity afforded by the internet (e.g. Plant, 1997; Stone, 1991; Turkle, 1995; Waskul and Douglass, 1997). This early body of internet research describes the multiple and varied identities that people can assume in virtual spaces like chat rooms and multi-user dungeons (MUDs), identities that may have little connection to individuals' offline lives. While the technology has made it possible to fashion diverse and fluid identities, this research suggests, the motivation to do so is propelled by the feeling of anonymity that is fostered by some forms of computer-mediated communication.

Subsequent research indicates that online identities are perhaps not so multiple, fluid, or disconnected from offline contexts as originally thought (Davis, 2010; Hardey, 2002). Vasalou and Joinson (2009), for instance, found that when asked to create three personal avatars for three different sites, study participants tended to construct avatars that reflected their offline identities regardless of whether the online environment was described as a blogging, dating, or gaming site. Similarly, Kendall's (1999) ethnographic study of the online forum BlueSky revealed that participants strived to fashion online identities that were consistent with and connected to their offline identities. Other researchers have found similar connections between online and offline identities, including the reproduction of offline gender and racial dynamics and discourses in online spaces (e.g. Baym, 1998; Elias and Lemish, 2009; Grisso and Weiss, 2005; Herring et al., 2004; Kendall, 1998; Kolko et al., 2000).

In some cases, online identities are so rooted in offline contexts that they require knowledge of those contexts in order to be interpreted. For example, boyd (2011) has described adolescents' practice of 'social steganography,' or hiding in public, on social

network sites like Facebook. She explains how youth often phrase public messages in such a way that only their friends will understand their meaning. These messages might contain abbreviations or song lyrics that hold a particular meaning for a group of friends. Someone unfamiliar with these references, such as a parent, might infer an entirely different meaning from an exchange between two friends than the friends themselves. Such an example illustrates how online identities are sometimes not merely consistent with but actually dependent upon offline identities.

The affordances of online identity expression

Though online identities may be grounded in the offline world, it is not necessarily the case that they are exact reproductions of offline identities. For example, Bessi re et al. (2007) found that players of the online multiplayer game *World of Warcraft* created avatars that possessed more favorable attributes than the players said they themselves possessed offline. At the same time, however, these avatars were not completely disjunct from the players' self-concept; they reflected an ideal self, the self that the players aspired to be offline. Similarly, Bargh et al. (2002) found evidence to suggest that one's 'true self' is easier to access online. The true self constitutes personal traits that individuals believe they possess but do not feel able to express in everyday social settings. It stands in contrast to the actual self, which encompasses the personal traits that individuals both possess and express to others on a regular basis. Bargh et al., like Bessi re et al., attribute the differences they found between individuals' online and offline selves to perceptions of anonymity online. Though true anonymity is becoming increasingly harder to achieve online, it is nevertheless the case that people often *feel* a sense of anonymity when they share information online (Kennedy, 2006). This feeling may engender a sense of liberation from the social constraints that people typically experience when they interact with others in offline settings. Thus, despite the connections between individuals' online and offline lives, it appears that online environments may encourage distinct forms of identity expression.

The distinctiveness of online identity expressions can also be attributed to the purposes and structural features of particular online spaces, as well as the people who frequent them (Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Ito et al., 2009; Suler, 2002; Tetzlaff, 2000). Compare the purposes, design features, and typical users of a social network site like Facebook and a fantasy world like *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). Whereas Facebook users are generally motivated to interact with people they know from various offline contexts, *WoW* players are there to advance in the game by undertaking quests and challenges and may never know the offline identities of their fellow players. The different purposes of these two spaces are reflected in their distinct design features and the identities that these features support. It is common to see night elf hunters in *World of Warcraft*, because the game designers created this specific character and offered it as an option to players. Similarly, it is common to see photographs of one's friends on Facebook, because the designers programmed the ability to upload and share images into the site's architecture. It is worth noting, however, that users sometimes co-opt online spaces for uses unintended by the designers. For instance, the profile picture on Facebook, though intended to be a photograph of the individual who created and maintains the profile, is often used

to display pictures of cartoon characters, places visited, works of art, or other images that reflect aspects of a person's preferences and tastes. In this way, individuals appropriate the structural features of online spaces for their own personal uses (boyd, 2007).

The limits of online identity expression

Despite the opportunities associated with online self-expression, there may be important psychological reasons to limit multiplicity online. Larrain et al. (2007) found that university students who used online chat to experiment with different identities tended to report higher levels of identity diffusion. Turkle warns, 'Multiplicity is not viable if it means shifting among personalities that cannot communicate' (1995: 258). She argues that a healthy identity depends on the ability to coordinate the multiple facets of oneself into a coherent whole. Indeed, identity scholars maintain that a sense of self-coherence – where one's self-attributes are experienced as integrated and stable – constitutes a core function of identity (e.g. Adams and Marshall, 1996; Berzonsky, 2005; McAdams, 1997). Lifton (1993) argues that, although increasingly difficult to achieve in this highly differentiated and rapidly changing society, self-coherence is still attainable; indeed, it constitutes a key component of psychological vitality and personal agency.

Lifton (1993) contends that self-coherence is essential not just for one's psychological health but also for one's moral integrity. He notes that individuals whose multiple selves are not beholden to an organizing influence are less likely to feel a sense of responsibility for their actions. Proulx and Chandler (2009: 263) explain the importance of self-unity in the following way:

To be a citizen within a nation, an economic participant, a legal and moral participant who can sensibly be held accountable for her or his actions, we seem to require some kind of stable individual, some kind of selfhood that does not undergo a complete transformation from one context to the next.

The need for a self that does not undergo a complete transformation across contexts is easy enough to recognize in the realm of online dating. Though a certain degree of embellishment may be expected on such sites, the success of online dating depends, ultimately, on a couple's ability to bring their relationship offline. This transition cannot occur, however, if one or both individuals are unable to recognize each other's online selves when they meet offline (Whitty, 2007). It is not hard to see how such an experience could produce the feeling of having been deceived. Thus, it appears that self-multiplicity can in some cases cause harm to others in addition to one's self.

The current study

This collective body of literature suggests that, while self-multiplicity is a core feature of our networked era, it appears to have its limits. On the one hand, individuals today enjoy many opportunities to express a multi-faceted self. Yet, these opportunities are tempered by the recognition that one has an obligation to self and others to maintain a sense of consistency among one's multiple selves. Social norms also appear to limit the range of

identities that one can express in a particular online context. Little is known about how people – particularly young people for whom issues of identity are salient – navigate these tensions in everyday life. To address this gap in the literature, our research team conducted interviews with 24 young people between the ages of 15 and 25 years. All participants were highly involved in at least one digital media activity, such as social networking, blogging, content creation, and gaming. We asked each participant to respond to a hypothetical dilemma involving online identity expression. Through their responses, we sought to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do young people conceive of identity in a networked era?

Research Question 2: How do they navigate the tension between multiplicity and consistency suggested by the literature on identity?

Method

Selection criteria and sample

The current study is part of a broader inquiry into the ethical dimensions of young people's online activities. This larger study involved 61 young people ages 15–25 who were highly engaged in at least one type of online activity. Our research team purposely sought such 'digital youth' believing that their rich experiences would enhance their ability to reflect on the ethical issues and dilemmas with which we presented them. To identify these digital youth, we administered a pre-interview survey to 1686 young people attending school or working in the greater Boston area. Our school sites included a mix of urban and suburban high schools, as well as public and private universities. We recruited post-college youth from a variety of local companies with a focus on technology, as well as Craig's List and word of mouth outreach.

The pre-interview survey included a range of questions about the type and amount of respondents' digital media use. In reviewing the survey responses, we sought to identify youth who spent several hours on the internet each day and who reported having considerable experience with at least one of the following digital media activities: social networking (e.g. Facebook, MySpace), blogging (e.g. LiveJournal), content creation (e.g. creating webpages, podcasts, making computer programs/software), and gaming (e.g. *World of Warcraft*). We also sought to create an interview sample that was reflective of the larger survey sample in terms of age, race, socioeconomic status, and gender.

The current study includes the 24 digital youth who responded to a particular hypothetical scenario during their second interview (see below). This sub-sample comprised 13 males and 11 females between the ages of 16 and 25 years ($M = 19.9$ years). Sixteen participants were White, three Asian, one African-American, one Hispanic, and three identified their race as Other. Eight participants were selected for their blogging experiences, six were active users of social networking sites, six were gamers, and four were engaged in creating online content. These demographic characteristics and digital media activities reflect the overall sample of 61 digital youth.

Data collection

All participants participated in two interviews: an initial 'person-centered' interview that explored their personal experiences with digital media, and a second 'dilemma' interview that asked them to respond to two hypothetical scenarios. These dilemmas were selected from a group of five possible dilemmas¹ that were each designed to probe a different type of ethical issue, including identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation. Based on prior work, our research team identified these five categories as particularly ethically salient online (James et al., 2009).

As a data collection method, hypothetical vignettes are an effective way to gain insight into individuals' beliefs and values. They require participants to draw on their own experiences, knowledge, and understandings of group norms in order to interpret the actions and motivations of the actors presented to them (Hughes, 1998; Jenkins et al., 2010). Another strength of this method lies in its ability to broach personal topics in an unthreatening way, since participants are asked to react to a hypothetical scenario rather than to discuss their own circumstances. At the same time, Jenkins and colleagues (2010) observe that, in order to elicit rich and valid data, it is imperative that participants perceive the scenarios to be plausible. To that end, our research team piloted each scenario with several young people drawn from the same population as the study sample. We used feedback from these youth to improve the plausibility of all scenarios.

The current study focuses on participants' responses to the identity dilemma scenario, which was presented in the following way:

You and your circle of friends at school/work are very active on Facebook. You frequently post status updates, new photos, comments, etc. One day, you decide to browse LiveJournal just to check out the site, see how it compares to Facebook, etc. You are browsing through profiles when you come across one that seems very familiar. The picture is not very clear but resembles a close friend of yours. The profile does not list a full name but the user name is an old AIM user name this friend used to use. Upon closer inspection of the pictures and some of the interests listed, you become quite sure that the profile must belong to your close friend, Chris. You are intrigued because you had no idea that Chris had an LJ profile. As you start to look further at Chris' profile – and the blog linked to it – you are surprised at some of the content you read there.

What would be your initial reaction to this different profile? What do you think is happening here?

After eliciting participants' initial reactions to the scenario, interviewers proceeded to ask a series of follow-up questions. These questions were designed to probe for participants' conceptions of the opportunities and risks associated with online identity play, the relationship between online and offline self-expressions, and the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable identity expressions online.

Data analysis

In the first stage of analysis, I worked with two researchers to develop a coding scheme that included both emic and etic codes. Emic codes reflect participants' phenomenological

experiences, while etic codes represent the trained observers' interpretations of these experiences. To create our etic codes, we drew on the interview protocol – itself informed by our study's research questions, prior empirical work, and relevant theory – to identify broad themes. For instance, the protocol included a number of questions that required participants to compare either their or others' online and offline self-presentations. As a result, we included the etic code 'Online vs. Offline Self-presentation.' Our emic codes comprised themes that emerged directly from our review of participant memos and preliminary line-by-line readings of the interview transcripts (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For example, a series of emic codes was created to capture participants' various reactions to Chris's alternate profile.

Each researcher coded an entire interview transcript, drawn at random, using the initial coding scheme. We met to discuss areas of alignment and misalignment in our coding and to refine the definition of each code. After updating the coding scheme to reflect this discussion, we each coded two additional transcripts. In our second meeting, we determined that each researcher was in agreement about the definition and use of all codes. We then divided the codes among the three of us and coded all remaining transcripts.

Of the 35 codes included in our coding scheme, I selected four codes for the current analysis. These codes capture the following information: 1) the specific type of content found on Chris's alternate profile; 2) participants' explanations for the existence of and content on the profile; 3) participants' reactions to finding Chris's alternate profile and the content there; and 4) participants' reflections on the importance of maintaining consistency between one's online and offline self-expressions.

After selecting this sub-set of codes, I reread the transcripts, identified additional sub-themes within each code, and coded each transcript for these sub-themes. This second-level analysis provided a more nuanced picture of the data. For instance, in re-reading the content pertaining to participants' reactions to finding Chris' alternate profile, I identified four broad categories of reaction. In the first category, participants' reactions are driven by their consideration of how Chris's alternate profile might affect him personally, either positively or negatively. The second category includes participants' reflections about the interpersonal consequences of Chris's alternate profile. In the third category, participants react to Chris's profile by considering whether it aligns with or breaches online social norms. The final category consists of participants' reflections on the community-level effects of Chris's profile. These four categories of reaction form the basis of the conceptual framework that I present in the Discussion section. They emerged directly from the data and were not defined a priori.

Findings

What do you see on Chris's alternate profile?

After reading the dilemma to participants, interviewers asked, 'What type of content on Chris's alternate profile would surprise or upset you?' Whatever content participants identified became the focus of further questioning. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to react to different types of content that they had not yet considered. For instance, if a participant had focused throughout the interview on content suggesting that

Chris is depressed, the interviewer might have reserved the end of the interview to switch the focus to an entirely different type of content, such as the expression of racist, xenophobic, or other forms of hate speech. This pattern of questioning allowed researchers to analyze participants' reactions to a range of content on Chris's hypothetical profile.

Overall, participants discussed five categories of content that would surprise or upset them, including: 1) out-of-character or unfamiliar conduct (all 24 participants), 2) evidence of mental or physical health problems, such as depression or drug abuse (21 participants, or 88% of the sample), 3) gossip about the participant and/or the participant's group of friends (17 participants, 71%), 4) harmful or offensive conduct, such as racist comments (12 participants, 50%), and 5) outright lies or deception, such as claiming to be a different age or to live in a different geographic area (12 participants, 50%). Within the first category, participants differed in the specific forms of out-of-character or unfamiliar conduct they identified. These included: 1) unknown political or religious views (16 participants, 67%), 2) a different sexual orientation (13 participants, 54%), 3) unknown interests or hobbies (10 participants, 42%), 4) a more outgoing, gregarious personality (8 participants, 33%), and 5) other, general out-of-character conduct (6 participants, 25%).

Reacting to Chris's alternate profile

All 24 participants discussed a variety of likely reactions to finding Chris's alternate profile, reflecting both the complexity of their responses and the fact that they were asked to consider different types of content that Chris might share on his profile. In my analysis, I identified four types of consideration that guided participants' reactions: 1) effects on Chris; 2) effects on Chris's friends; 3) online social norms; and 4) broader community-level effects.

Effects on Chris: online outlets work best when brought offline. In reacting to the scenario, participants weighed the personal rewards and risks of maintaining an alternate profile online. Nearly all participants could point to at least one benefit that Chris might experience as a result of creating his LiveJournal profile. Some participants described the opportunities associated with expressing out-of-character or unfamiliar conduct. For instance, 15-year-old Brittany focused her interview on an edgier, more sexual LiveJournal profile and remarked, 'I think it probably helps him feel a little more free, maybe ... If he can't express himself in the world, he is able to on the Internet.' Here, Brittany makes a broad distinction between online and offline spaces, suggesting that Chris may find it easier on the internet to break free from the social constraints that circumscribe his behavior in offline contexts.

Other participants focused on the particular characteristics of LiveJournal that distinguish it from other online spaces. As an online journaling community, LiveJournal is intended to be used to express one's personal feelings. Facebook, by contrast, was described by 24-year-old Monica as a 'bulletin board of status updates,' reflecting the idea that the content posted on Facebook is less personal than the content shared on LiveJournal. The personal nature of LiveJournal is reinforced by the feeling of anonymity that users typically experience due to the use of screen names that tend not to reveal their offline identities. Connie, age 25, reflected on the freedom that such anonymity

provides, 'Some people use blogs just to be completely anonymous to the world and write completely unedited.' As a result of these distinct qualities, Todd, age 15, thought that LiveJournal may provide Chris with a unique space to work through the confusion he could be experiencing around exploring a different sexual orientation. Similarly, several participants discussed the benefits of using LiveJournal to talk about mental or physical health problems. Kathleen, age 20, commented, 'I guess if you have issues that you're not ready to deal with in real life, it kind of helps that out.'

Although participants acknowledged the personal benefits of having an online outlet to express oneself, they also worried about negative psychological effects. Indeed, of the participants who identified potential benefits of sharing mental health problems online, nearly all of them also discussed the harm that could befall Chris if he used his alternate profile in this way. For instance, while Andy, age 21, acknowledged that it may feel good to vent online, he expressed concern that Chris does not have a place to share these feelings offline. He reflected, 'I mean if he just continues to vent [online] and he doesn't feel like he has an outlet to go to [offline], I definitely feel like it would just end badly in any way.' The general feeling among these participants was that Chris needs to get help offline from his parents, friends, or a professional. As good as it may feel to vent online, he cannot ultimately solve his problems there.

While mental health problems were the most common cause for concern, four participants (17%) discussed the potential negative effects that maintaining an alternate profile could have on Chris' sense of self. Asked how she would react upon finding out-of-character conduct on Chris' LiveJournal profile, 15-year-old Brittany commented, 'I think you can sort of get confused even if it's on two different websites and sort of forget what you're trying to be.' Similarly, Becky, age 18, observed,

I feel like people need to accept who they are, and I don't think there is enough of that in this world ... people don't have confidence in themselves. There are a lot of things that I would like to change about myself, and I have that availability to do it online. But will I do it? No, because I should just accept who I am.

Comments such as these reflect a belief among some participants that expressing very different personalities in different contexts is somehow inauthentic and may even damage one's internal sense of self.

Indeed, when asked directly if it is important to them that people generally present themselves online as they would offline, 18 participants (75%) agreed that it is.² While they recognize that complete alignment is not possible – or always desirable – these participants nevertheless value the effort to achieve a certain degree of self-consistency across contexts. The reflections of 19-year-old Miguel exemplify this stance:

If you're trying to put yourself out there in a different sort of light on Facebook or on LiveJournal or on YouTube and you act the completely different way in person, then that kind of like makes you a closet case, kind of like, you know, actor. You're kind of like acting your life through that stage. Even though we all kind of put up – we are definitely different people where we are, depending on who we're with and what we're doing; there really shouldn't be that much discrepancy between your offline person and your online person.

Even among the six participants who explicitly stated that consistency between one's online and offline selves is not important to them, four of them made statements to the contrary in at least one other part of their interview. For instance, while 15-year-old Aaron claimed not to care about consistency between online and offline self-expressions, he nevertheless reflected, '[Online expression is] sort of a way to practice for real life, you know. Like a test being one person online, see how people react, then try it in real life.' It is apparent from this comment that Aaron perceives a connection between one's online and offline selves and values the attempt to bring them into alignment.

Interpersonal betrayal. Fully 21 participants (88%) expressed the belief that certain types of content on Chris's alternate profile represent a betrayal of their friendship with him. The content most likely to elicit this reaction from participants was out-of-character or unfamiliar conduct, particularly more outgoing, gregarious behavior. As Becky, age 18, noted, '[People] expect honesty from their friends, especially close friends.' Evidently, Becky regards Chris's more outgoing online persona as a form of dishonesty. Other participants expressed a similar sense of interpersonal betrayal over finding gossip about them or their group of friends, or outright lies or deception. Miguel, age 19, said he might not want to be friends with Chris anymore if his alternate profile included false information, because 'he's trying to pretend to be somebody he is not.' Speaking more generally about finding that a friend of hers had an online profile that she did not know about, 24-year-old Allison remarked, 'I think people would be, like, well, why? Especially if they're really presenting three different personas, you know, well, which one is right? Or, why am I friends with this one and not that one?' Because she finds that Chris is expressing a side of himself on LiveJournal that is not reflected in their friendship, Allison has cause to question the entire basis of that friendship. In this way, her comment is consistent with the other 20 participants who expressed a sense that Chris' profile does damage to their relationship with him.

Internet norms: a lot of leeway, but interpretation can be tricky. In their reactions to Chris's profile, 23 participants (96%) discussed particular contextual factors associated with online environments generally – or LiveJournal in particular – that would either justify or call into question Chris' conduct, or prevent them from passing judgment on him entirely. Fifteen of these participants (63%) pointed to internet norms to explain why they would assume Chris is joking and therefore would not be bothered by certain types of content. As Nate, age 24, commented, 'The Internet is a great place for jokes.' While all types of content were interpreted as a joke by at least one participant, the two types of content most frequently dismissed as a joke included more outgoing, gregarious behavior and harmful or offensive conduct.

Of the 11 participants (46%) who felt that Chris's alternate profile falls outside the bounds of acceptable conduct online, the majority of them spoke specifically about out-of-character or unfamiliar conduct. These participants explained that they would not expect to find a close friend behaving one way offline and quite another way online. For instance, 18-year-old Becky commented, 'If a person like holds back and is very quiet and conservative [offline], I'd be surprised if they had pictures of them partying and drinking on their site ... It's really strange.' At the same time, Becky did not rule out the

possibility that Chris's profile is simply 'playful banter.' In this way, Becky reflects the ambivalence that many participants expressed during their interview as they reacted to different types of content on Chris's alternate profile. Indeed, fully 17 participants expressed some hesitancy to pass judgment on Chris before they made an effort to ascertain his motivation for posting a particular type of content. Sarah, age 20, reflected the feelings of many participants when she commented, 'I wouldn't really dedicate myself to an opinion until I'd actually talked to them about it [offline].'

Community-level harm. It is noteworthy that when considering who might be hurt by Chris's alternate profile only two participants (8%) looked beyond the personal, interpersonal, and social contextual realms to the level of the broader community. Sarah, age 20, and Brittany, age 15, reacted negatively to finding hate speech against a particular race or religion. They expressed concern that such speech would cause harm to the community of people to whom it was directed. Sarah and Brittany distinguished themselves from the sample, since it was more common for participants to respond to hate speech by dismissing it as a joke or by claiming it was not their business.

Discussion

The findings from this study offer insight into the way young people experience identity in a networked era. In reacting to the Chris scenario, nearly all participants considered the benefits to Chris of maintaining multiple profiles online. Whether they focused on out-of-character conduct, mental health troubles, or hate speech, these participants noted that online spaces such as LiveJournal allow people to express themselves more freely than they might in offline contexts like school. These findings align with previous research suggesting that online spaces expand opportunities for identity expression due to their varied purposes, design features, and audience make-up (Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Ito et al., 2009; Suler, 2002; Tetzlaff, 2000). At the same time, all participants declared they would be disturbed to find at least one type of content on Chris's alternate profile. The reasons they gave for their discomfort fell into four broad categories: 1) personal injury; 2) interpersonal betrayal; 3) violation of online social norms; and 4) community-level harm. As depicted in Figure 1, I propose that these categories constitute a set of implicit criteria that participants used – to varying degrees – to identify the limits of multiplicity online. These four 'spheres of obligation' extend outward from the self to the broader community. The position of the spheres in the figure reflects their relative proximity to the self rather than a necessary sequence or hierarchical arrangement.

The first sphere – self – pertains to the personal harms that may arise from an individual's online self-expressions. While some participants acknowledged the benefits that Chris may experience from having an outlet for his pent-up emotions, most of them agreed that keeping these emotions compartmentalized is not, ultimately, the best way to work through them. This sentiment is consistent with Turkle's (1995) warning about the negative psychological effects of maintaining multiple selves that are not integrated into an overarching sense of identity that is experienced as coherent and stable. Further, a smaller group of participants were bothered by the misalignment between Chris's alternate profile and his self-presentation in other contexts. They allowed that perfect alignment between

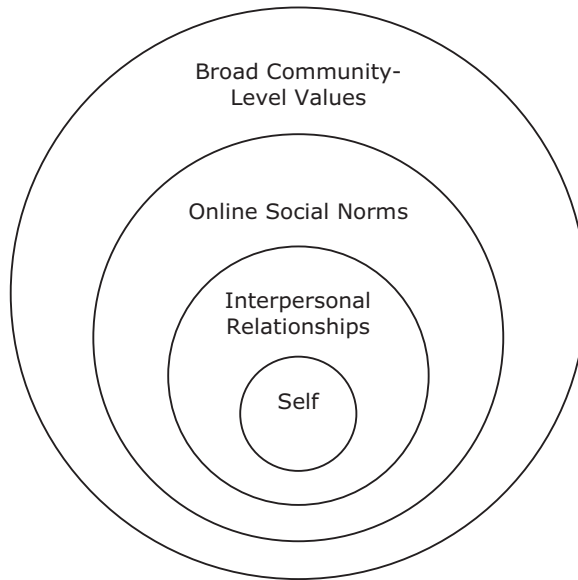


Figure 1. Spheres of obligation.

one's online and offline selves is not possible, but, like Lifton (1993), they expressed the belief that it is important to strive for a certain level of self-consistency.

Interpersonal relationships form the second sphere of obligation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, several participants expressed displeasure over finding gossip about them or their group of friends on Chris's alternate profile. They regarded such speech as a personal attack that would both offend them and undermine the quality of their friendship with Chris. Interestingly, many participants felt that Chris was in some way breaching their friendship even when his alternate profile did not reference them personally. The content most likely to arouse this feeling was out-of-character conduct, such as more outgoing, gregarious behavior. It disturbed participants that their close friend was unrecognizable to them in this new context. This sentiment is understandable if one considers it in light of the literature on the social construction of the self. According to scholars such as Erikson (1968), one's identity comes into existence only when it is recognized by others. Thus, one has an obligation to be recognizable to others. Chris failed to uphold this obligation, and participants responded accordingly with their disapproval.

The third sphere of obligation extends beyond relationships among specific individuals to the social norms that are defined and followed in particular online contexts. The youth in this sample perceived the norms of the internet to be quite broad, flexible, and somewhat more transgressive than offline social norms. Indeed, participants commonly cited online social norms as reasons why they would not be bothered by certain content on Chris's profile, such as out-of-character conduct or even harmful or offensive conduct. Many of them said they would interpret such content as a joke, since jokes constitute normative behavior online. Nevertheless, several participants did express the belief

that certain behaviors fall outside the boundaries of acceptable conduct online. In particular, they said that, while some differences between online and offline self-presentations are acceptable, people generally do not deviate dramatically from their offline behavior when they go online. This belief comports with previous research showing that people typically try to integrate their online and offline self-expressions (e.g. Hardey, 2002; Kendall, 1999; Vasalou and Joinson, 2009). Notably, however, many of these participants were hesitant to claim definitively that the content on Chris's alternate profile falls outside the bounds of acceptable conduct online. They said they would try to talk to Chris in person first before jumping to any conclusions, explaining that simply looking at his profile did not give them all the information they needed to interpret it. This finding underscores the fact that the interpretation of online identities often depends on knowledge of certain offline contexts (boyd, 2011).

The final sphere of obligation pertains to broad community-level values and standards of behavior that transcend both the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the social mores of particular online contexts. The disapproval that some participants expressed over finding hate speech on Chris's alternate profile falls within this sphere. Instead of considering the interpersonal or contextual dimensions of Chris's behavior, these participants focused on the harm that could result from derogatory remarks made against an entire group of people. It did not matter to participants if these people were known personally or whether they shared the same understandings of the norms associated with particular online spaces. Instead, participants reacted to Chris's conduct by drawing on their generalized understanding of the proper and just way to treat other human beings. Such abstract considerations form the outer sphere of obligation because they are the farthest removed from the specific concerns of the self.

It is notable that only two participants cited the community-level factors associated with the fourth sphere of obligation. This finding is consistent with earlier research showing that when confronted with hypothetical dilemmas regarding online life youth are more likely to focus on their personal well being than the well being of the broader community (Davis et al., 2010). It is possible that an older sample would show greater consideration of the fourth sphere, since Davis et al. (2010) found that adults were more likely than teens to propose community-minded solutions to the hypothetical dilemmas presented to them.

That so few participants condemned Chris for expressing hate speech on his alternate profile reveals that certain spheres of obligation may sometimes be in tension with each other. In the case of hate speech, focusing on specific online norms – as most participants did – to the exclusion of broader considerations of decent behavior can result in harm to an entire group of people. Similar tensions can be detected between other spheres of obligation. For instance, several participants recognized that Chris's alternate profile could provide him with a valuable outlet for self-expression at the same time as it might cause his friends to feel he had deceived them by hiding this different side of his personality.

The tensions among the spheres of obligation hold important practical implications for educators' and other concerned adults' efforts to promote youth's responsible conduct online. As an assessment tool, the spheres of obligation might be used to evaluate the relative weight that individuals give – or fail to give – to each sphere when they are engaged in various online activities. This evaluation could be accomplished by asking

students to explain why they followed a certain course of action online and then judging which sphere (or spheres) the students reference in their answer. The insight gained from such an assessment could then be used to draw youth's attention to and promote their critical reflection around certain neglected spheres, as well as tension points between specific spheres. In this way, the spheres of obligation would serve as suggestive categories to help youth become more thoughtful about who is impacted by their online actions, and how.

Limitations and future research. One notable limitation of the current study pertains to the sample make-up. As previously discussed, this sample comprised youth who were particularly active users of digital media. It is possible that youth who are less engaged with digital media would respond differently to the Chris scenario. For instance, it may be that less engaged youth would have less tolerance for Chris's alternate profile because they and their friends do not maintain multiple online profiles. Future research should assess the extent to which the findings reported here apply to a broader group of youth. It would also be worthwhile to repeat the current study with a group of older adults in light of earlier research documenting differences between adults' and teens' views of online life (Davis et al., 2010).

A second limitation of this study is its reliance on participants' responses to a hypothetical dilemma in the context of an interview. While this method of data collection has several advantages, as noted earlier, one drawback pertains to the issue of plausibility (Jenkins et al., 2010). If participants do not feel the hypothetical scenario is plausible, it is unlikely they will offer rich responses that reflect their personal experience. Indeed, interviewers noted that some participants in the sample appeared to be more comfortable with the Chris scenario than others.

Even when they are viewed by participants as plausible, hypothetical scenarios nevertheless remain somewhat removed from individuals' own lived experiences. In future studies, participants could be asked to take the researcher on a 'tour' of their online social networking profiles. During the tour, the researcher could ask participants to explain why they chose to post what they did, including what, if any, benefits and harms they perceive in their choices. This strategy of data collection would provide insight into the weight that individuals give to each sphere of obligation in their own lives.

Conclusion

Though scholars have known for some time that online and offline identities are more aligned than early internet research suggested, the findings from this study provide new insight into the various personal and social factors that contribute to this alignment and help individuals navigate the tension between multiplicity and consistency online. The youth in this sample draw, implicitly and to varying degrees, on four 'spheres of obligation' that define responsibilities to self, interpersonal relationships, online social norms, and broad community-level values. At times, certain spheres may conflict with each other; we saw, for instance, that participants' perception of the social norms surrounding the expression of hate speech online conflicted with broader considerations of decent behavior. Nevertheless, each sphere serves to limit multiplicity online and contributes to

the intertwining of online and offline identities. The spheres of obligation and the tensions within it hold important implications for educational efforts aimed at reducing harmful behavior online. Specifically, this framework could serve as an assessment tool to evaluate the relative weight that students give – or fail to give – to each sphere of obligation when they go online. This insight could then be used to draw youth's attention to and broaden their consideration of the effects of their online actions.

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Notes

1. Time constraints prevented us from presenting participants with all five dilemma scenarios. When assigning scenarios to each participant, we tried to ensure that the demographic characteristics and digital media experiences of the participants responding to a given scenario reflected the overall sample of 61 digital youth.
2. Due to the broad wording of this question, it is likely that participants drew on their personal experiences online, which, for most of them, involved social network sites. It is possible that some participants would have answered differently had the interviewer asked them about specific online contexts, such as fantasy settings like *World of Warcraft*.

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