

Social Identity in Facebook Community Life

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ABSTRACT

Social identity is a key construct to understand online community life. While existing online identity studies present a relatively static conception of identity, grounded in user profiles and other personal information, in this paper the authors investigate more dynamic aspects of identity, grounded in patterns of social interaction in Facebook community life, drawing on social science research on identity theory and social identity theory. The authors examine the tensions experienced by people between assimilation and differentiation with respect to group identities and role identities. The study provides a framework for understanding how users construct self-presentations in different online social interactions, actively managing identity, rather than merely declaring it in a relatively static profile. The authors speculate on how social computing environments could more effectively support identity presentation.

Keywords: Facebook, Group Identification, Online Community, Online Identity, Role Verification, Social Identity

INTRODUCTION

Online community life has increasingly become a significant part of our social life, and become an arena of research in domains such as sociology, information science and organizational studies. Studies in community informatics recently have been directed to social network websites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, etc.), an Internet phenomenon that grounds on a simple idea that social actors being connected to one another benefits. In this paper, we investigate

social identity, a key construct in traditional community life, in an online community based on a social network website, Facebook.

Nowadays, no term has been so pervasive and abused like “community”. Now any group of people who are physically or virtually related can be named a community. For example, there are university community, corporate community, district community, academic community (e.g., CHI community, ACM community), sports community, customer community, and even user community (e.g., Facebook community). Such a circumstance implies that the “community” is significant to our social life while its definition and boundary are pretty vague.

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Community is important in that it provides a mediating social mechanism that relates the individual to the larger society, helping to satisfy the need of each. As Sanders (1958) pointed out, the institutional concreteness endues community critical significance in our social life. While society is usually understood primarily in terms of abstract concepts, in community, people confront the tangible manifestations of society's major institutional complexes. People are social in the way they engage in activities in schools, companies, golf course, pubs, homes, or even virtual groups that are of communities. On the other hand, the definition of "community" is rather vague, especially in the era of information age. Are those so-called "online community" really communities? Are social network sites such as Facebook a community? Or are the social groups that are constituted in Facebook communities?

Identity theories provide us a perspective to understand these issues. Social identities, as self reflected answers to the question "who I am" or "who we are" drawn from experience of previous social interactions, help people define themselves and give them guidelines for proper social intercourse with others in social life. According identity theories, a community can be viewed as a set of people who share certain distinctive identities (i.e., community identities). By providing relative stable, consistent and enduring answers to the question "who we are", community identities serves as a coherent bonding for all community members, which also helps discriminate themselves from other people outside the community.

In sociology and social psychology, identities have been of interest for decades (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Turner, 1985). Advanced information technologies help create new forms of social life, from technology-mediated communities to even entirely virtual communities whose operations are mainly carried out over the Internet. Recently, researchers in information science began to give attention to identities, and a few studies are emerging (DiMicco & Millen, 2007; Hewitt & Forte, 2006; Zhao, Grasmuch, & Martin, 2008). However,

scrutinizing current studies, we found most of them only touched the surface of the subject matter by grounding identity only in user profiles, and ignored social interactions in which social identities are constructed and enacted. Appealing to us is the issue of how identities are embedded and enacted in social interactions in online community life.

In this paper, we report our qualitative study on Facebook, the most popular social network website, with regard to social identities embedded in Facebook activities. We discuss people's tension between assimilation and differentiation as implied by social identity theory and self-categorization theory (Turner 1985). We argue that people are trying to be different not just in inter-group level as suggested in self-categorization theory. They are also trying to be different inside the group. We also discuss how Facebook can uphold community life by supporting social identities.

IDENTITY: A KEY CONSTRUCT

Identity has been a key construct in studies of various social units ranging from individuals, neighborhood, social groups, organizations, communities, to societies (Stryker, 1968; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), affecting both the satisfaction of the individuals and the effectiveness of the social units. Identity deals with the question "Who am I", which usually refers to further questions of belongings and of locating oneself in social contexts. A relatively stable, consistent and enduring answer to them invoke coherence and continuity of self fundamental to mental health, which also ensures the coherence and distinctiveness of social units.

Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory

There have been two main theories of identity: identity theory (Stryker, 1968) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Identity theory takes a symbolic interactionist view that society affects social behavior through its influence on self (Hogg, Terry, & White,

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