

Chapter 16

Privacy and Identity

Management in Social Media: Driving Factors for Identity Hiding

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ABSTRACT

Social networking media are becoming more widespread as educational learning sites. For this reason, it is important to investigate how concerns about identity management can interfere with or influence the planned learning processes. This chapter engages initially with current research that investigates the use of social media with a particular focus on issues of identity management. It then provides a close analysis of identity management among student users of dedicated Facebook pages in tertiary education settings, as part of a larger study into contextual language learning and the educational potential of mobile technologies and social media. The study concludes that issues around publically sharing information with classmates (whom you might or might not “befriend” on social media sites), and the exposure that comes with sharing one’s background and potentially contentious political views are probably experienced by students worldwide.

INTRODUCTION

Facebook, Twitter, and other social media have become powerful tools in connecting people, but are also linked to new concerns about identity protection of their users. As these media become

more widespread as educational learning sites, it is important to investigate how concerns about identity management can interfere with or influence the planned learning processes.

As a contribution to understanding the limitations and possibilities of new media use in

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education, the following chapter presents a study conducted in a tertiary English language learning setting in Saudi Arabia. The study focussed on the role of social media in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons and investigated aspects of using the social media network Facebook as a mobile teaching site on students' mobile phones. The complete study is currently under examination as a PhD thesis, and the chapter in this volume draws from student interview data that focuses on identity management questions.

This chapter engages initially with current research that investigates the use of social media with a particular focus on issues of identity management. It then provides an overview of those details of the study that are relevant for the purpose of this chapter, a close analysis of identity management among student users of dedicated Facebook pages in a tertiary education settings. The chapter then offers a discussion of research findings from this study, followed by suggestions for the management of identity questions when social media are used in tertiary education.

BACKGROUND

Social Media Use

According to Kolb (2008), students outside of school are immersed in social networking and interactive websites. Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin (2005) found that about 87 percent of young students are online most of the time. Emailing, instant messaging, and gaming are the leading mobile phone activities for young students (Kolb, 2008). Blogging, chatting, and music-sharing are some of their popular online activities (Rainie, 2006). Students are also professional users of social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace (Botha, Vosloo, Kuner, & van den Berg, 2011; Boyd, 2008; Godwin-Jones, 2008). Owen, Grant, Sayers and Facer (2006) argue that a person in cyber-culture has the opportunity to

be someone other than who s/he usually is. They continue that although actual identities may be revealed, online social networking provides the users with more freedom from age and physical appearance. Indeed, creating digital self-representations (avatars) has become a common online behaviour for many young students (Boyd, 2008). As this argument revolves around identities of usual users of such websites in this learning context, many of the reasons behind "identity hiding," particularly among a group of students who already knew each other, is still unclear.

Social Media in Second Language Learning

According to Boiros (2012), social media has become an integral element of the blended learning paradigm. In this chapter we also accept this author's further statement that social media can increase participation in learning, particularly if the task is significantly self-directed. We agree with Baghdasaryan's (2010) conclusion that using social networking sites in EFL classrooms enables students to learn the language collaboratively, learn it in more authentic situations, and helps students become enthusiastic and autonomous in their own learning processes.

The use of social media is also embedded in broader educational streams in the language learning field. As part of the pedagogical debates in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), the move from CALL (or computer-assisted language learning)-related research to a stronger research attention on CMC (computer-mediated communication) resulted from the potential of computers and the internet to promote conversational and collaborative skills of language learners rather than focusing on the personal dimensions of language learning (Stockwell, 2007; Ciekanski & Chanier, 2008). As part of this new focus, online social networking has had a strong appeal to language learning researchers and instructors in an attempt to transform the way

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