

Community Building in Cyberspace: Social Interaction and the Presentation of Self

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Abstract

The emergence of the Internet Age represents a shift from industrial to postmodern society and the transformation of traditional community relations as people develop online communities. The present research provides an exploratory case study analysis using qualitative data from twenty open-ended surveys posted online in the virtual community "MySpace.com." The research explores the nature of cyber interaction and the presentation of self in cyber space, drawing from Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective on *impression management*. Findings indicate that for many people online interaction is less constraining than traditional face-to-face interaction. For most respondents online interaction enhances but does not replace traditional forms of interaction. Reasons given for choosing online interaction ranged from convenient communication to keeping in the know. Although participants sometimes deliberately misrepresented themselves online, most were unaware of their efforts to manage impressions.

Introduction

American culture has experienced an influx of technological innovations that have transformed the nature of communication and information retrieval through the Internet. This shift to the postmodern Internet Age has transformed traditional community solidarity as people develop online communities without social and geographical space limitations. Online communities provide a new medium for social interaction, decreasing the need for traditional physical interaction and thereby creating a new form of virtual solidarity (Hornsby 2001). A traditional community can be understood to consist of a group of persons who share a cultural background or common economic and political roots that tie them together in time and space (Williams and MacLean 2005). In contrast, internet communities create a virtual reality of inclusiveness encompassing international, national, and local areas that easily transcend geographic proximity. The emergence of cyber-communities offers a new area of research for exploring the nature of community building and the social construction and presentation of self through virtual interaction. In this research three questions are explored: How does cyber interaction compare to that of traditional social interaction? Why do some people choose cyber interaction versus face-to-face contact? Does the online presentation of self represent the techniques of impression management described by Goffman (1959)?

Interaction Rituals and the Online Presentation of Self

Cyberspace serves as a platform for communication and the presentation of self wherein communities are created via online interaction. Erving Goffman extended the classical theories of Emile Durkheim ([1893] 2005) that emphasize the importance of

ritual behavior in building communities. Both theorists recognize that through interaction rituals individuals become better integrated and regulated in society. Extending the macro-oriented theories of his predecessor, Goffman's work focuses on micro-level social interaction and the day-to-day rituals that make community and the presentation of self possible. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman developed a dramaturgical theory of impression management in which he likens everyday life rituals of interaction to those of performing, in a play on a stage. Everyday social life requires that people as actors master performances in constructing a presentation of self to others. Daily performances of the self are enacted "front stage" when others are watching a performance. As with a play, daily performances are supported by a "back stage" where actors are able to exit their front stage performances, let down their masks, express their frank opinions, and be untidy. Goffman presents a fluid notion of the "self" arguing that there is no true core self, but that the self is merely a performance that is accomplished through daily rituals of interaction. In order for the self to be constructed, an audience is required and actors must present themselves to others in an effort to manage and to manipulate how they are perceived.

Also building on Durkheimian theory, Anne Hornsby (2001) coined the phrase "cyborg solidarity" to describe postmodern social organization. Cyborg solidarity is a type of social organization that combines and blurs the boundaries between humans and machines, and where machines take on human qualities in the collective consciousness of users. Hornsby states that cyborg organization stems from,

...technological advances... contributing to the consolidation of the new International Division of Labor and . . . to changes in the collective

consciousness. Brand new ways of thinking and feeling about the relationship between humans and machines are appearing, all of which illustrate the use of online interaction and how important the role of the Internet is in developing this new type of society (Hornsby 2001:109).

The notion of cyborg solidarity provides an apt description of how current societal trends and technology enhance ritualistic behavior on the Internet. The super information highway paves the way for individuals to create, recreate, and alter their presentations of self. In cyber interaction it may be easier to "save face" when a performance is not going well, or at least, it may be easier to exit the stage altogether with little embarrassment when one can hide behind an alias and a computer screen. We can expect, however, that in cyberspace (as in physical space) the majority of individuals do not have the inclination to misrepresent themselves in daily interaction. Indeed, Goffman noted that people are not always aware of their efforts to manipulate their presentation of self during everyday life interactions. "At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality" (Goffman 1959:18). Goffman's theory raises questions about the extent to which the anonymity of computer interactions encourage the deliberate manipulation of self presentation, for example, through profiles created or pseudonyms and identities adopted. When building online profiles, or during online interaction, people are able to selectively disclose and to falsify information about themselves in ways that may not be possible in face-to-face interactions. People can pretend to be of a gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, ability, or professional/occupational status of their choosing. An illusion is created by the user where an "...individual's own belief in the impression of reality that he attempts to

engender in those among whom he finds himself” can be easily constructed or altered (Goffman 1959:18).

Goffman’s term “role distancing” can also be used to explain how people manage their front stage and back stage performances when interacting online. In role distancing people “dissociate themselves from, rather than wholeheartedly embrace, the role” that they are uncomfortable or dissatisfied with (Kivosto and Pittman 2001:327). A person confined to a wheelchair, for example, may describe his or her life without the limitations or prejudices that full disclosure of a disability might impose. The back stage is essentially the computer monitor that protects the individual from "losing face," allowing a person to distance him or her self from the role(s) of choice. Through a computer alias a person is able to portray the front stage persona constantly. Of course, in non-computer mediated interaction, people also selectively disclose aspects of their past. For example, if possible, an ex-convict may keep a past life of crime in the backstage area only. Similarly in other ways, such as through Internet gatherings, there is the possibility that a person can be embarrassed by other users posting controversial comments about his/her personal profile. This type of Interaction known as "flaming" is not unlike certain face-to-face rituals typically used when cutting remarks are made about a person in the presence of others. “When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude toward them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc.” (Goffman 1959:1). In online interaction such information is easily obtained from individual

profiles although, as in face-to-face interaction, credibility may be questioned.

“Linguistic messages can be 'about' anything in the world, the sender and the subject matter having no necessary connection, coinciding only when autobiographical statements are being made” (Goffman 1963:13). In effect, during online communications people have the ability to connect on either false or true premises. Nonetheless, genuine connections are made (even if under false premises) when one offers information about him or her self, and whenever that information is received and reciprocated. The community building aspect of online communications then allows for a manipulation of who and what we are, and how we present ourselves. Just what motivates people's interests in exchanging information through this medium of communication and the extent to which online participants use techniques of impression management has yet to be explored.

Methods

An opened ended survey (Arksey and Knight 1999) was posted online on the website MySpace.com in the summer of 2005. Twenty responses were received over a three-week period. The survey included questions to gather demographic information from respondents. Other questions queried about the amount of time respondents spent in virtual interaction, what motivated participation in online communities, whether cyber interaction was preferred to face-to-face interaction, and whether respondents reported honestly in the construction of online personal profiles. Major themes identified in the narrative responses to the question items were related to two categories: 1) motivations for participating in Internet interactions, and 2) presentations of self. Direct quotes are

used to illustrate and support the major themes identified. The participants in the research were primarily white (14), with one Hispanic, one African American, and four of other ethnicities. Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 35, with the majority ages 21 to 25.

Findings

Most of the respondents reported that they spend one to five hours a day on the Internet. Even respondents who prefer face-to-face interactions stated that they, nonetheless, dedicate time to online-interactions. The most common motivation for using online communication was that the Internet provides a convenient method for accessing information about people in order to make selective contacts and friendships through cyberspace. Additionally noted is the importance of Internet communications for "keeping in the know." Information was shared with friends and other contacts about what is going on in people's lives and in community activities. Both of these forms of interactions illustrate that online communication promotes social cohesion and community-building among users. However, in keeping with ritualistic behaviors described by Goffman, time-use was clearly monitored. Some interactions were limited to providing mere polite attention. For example, Bill, a 33-year-old male from Tennessee stated, "...If it is someone I do not want to talk to, I will limit the time to 20 minutes or less."

Other reasons given for participating in online communities include: curiosity, convenience, following the lead of friends, staving off loneliness, seeking romance or sexual expression, and communicating with people locally, nationally, or

internationally. According to Micah, a 29-year-old female from California, “I prefer to meet new people online because online communities allow you to screen certain types of people. E-mail allows for gradual ice-breaking and finding commonalities.” She continued to explain how she has made different types of contacts, whether for business or finding old classmates, and she stated that online interaction “enriches [her] daily experience.” J, a 30-year-old male from Miami, Florida, described the comfort he finds in pursuing relationships. He is clearly aware that he is presenting himself in a particular way to create a desired impression.

This sort of poetic masquerade of self . . . a possibility of connecting in a way that doesn't happen in normal . . . person to person interaction. There is a kind of ability to communicate with a person that is easier that happens through the Internet. Because you are typically isolated in a room alone with your computer there is less apprehension; there is less fear involved. . . . You are able to take more time in presenting yourself. . . . If you were to . . . approach somebody in human to human interaction and sit there stumbling with your words, as many of us do when we feel insecure, your first impression would come off a lot different.

J described further the greater freedom from inhibitions during interactions when other people are not physically present:

So it gives a certain ability to refine your presentation it allows you to present yourself with as little insecurities as possible because you essentially can do or say anything without the social repercussions, the judgments you would get from other people. . . . In some ways it is easier to not deal with their reaction to you, it is easier to blow off inharmonious interaction.

When asked whether interaction on the Internet is more meaningful than, or as satisfying as, face-to-face interaction and if it offers the same sense of community, responses ranged from those that prefer Internet interaction exclusively to those who prefer face-to-face interaction. Most respondents indicated that they do not receive the same sense of community as they do with direct human contact. Despite this response,

the same individuals became members of online groups within the My Space Network. However, they typically created blogs on their profile pages that are open to “friends only,” groups inclusive of selected online users. J described his perception of online social interaction and community,

...It still wouldn't make me feel personally more connected to society in the context of community. Because community to me involves the word communion, becoming one and extending beyond one's sense of individuality into a larger extension beyond the limit of one's identity into a communal identity. Online interaction is only a reflection of one's own sense of self. . . . Online interaction does not provide for me . . . [a] . . . sense of community, or union or solidarity. It simply provides a sense of networking in which many individuals get a sense of other individuals.

Most respondents combined both online and offline types of interaction in pursuing relationships. Other themes emerged that identified differences in online and face-to-face communications. Participants noted that computer-mediated communication lacks tone inflection, body language, and the ability to pick up subliminal messages, that are more typical in face-to-face contact. In the absence of these silent forms of communications in human interaction, computer users have developed a symbolic language in the way of "emoticons" to communicate emotions such as laughter, anger, and sadness.

When asked whether people find the categories for setting up online profiles to be limiting, and whether participants report about themselves honestly, most respondents indicated that they report honestly. Typically, however, most went on to note that they sometimes subtly manipulate information, distort their representations of self, or limit how much personal information they divulge. For instance, Rah Meat, a 25-year-old female from Missouri, stated “I tend to post a truthful profile; maybe a bit exaggerated. I

don't want to lie about things in case I do end up meeting a new friend." In contrast, Loretta a 24-year-old female from Tennessee stated, "...What's fun about being exactly who I am when I have the luxury of creating alter egos and making people wonder?" Maude a 25-year-old female from Tennessee stated, "I report truthfully [about half of the time], for instance, I list myself as married. I do this because I find the existing categories limiting...." Several participants described the structured options given for setting up personal profiles as "superficial." Bathle, a 29-year-old male from California noted, "For me, I find that the categories of ethnicity and religion are too limiting. To me these are complex issues." For Arpeggio, a 26-year-old male from Tennessee, "...when selecting a gender, if one is transgendered and does not fall into the male or female category, the choice must be made to continue with the profile that does not quite encapsulate the individual." Others, like J, readily acknowledged that information given out was done so selectively.

I always hope to be appealing...I won't tell them my entire sexual history. I won't divulge the entire depths of my character. There are not enough megabytes of computer space nor is there enough time or interest...you have to selectively disclose

The responses illustrate the fact that manipulation of profiles is almost unavoidable, especially when building an online identity. It is often not possible to create an accurate portrayal of self when one is given pre-specified and limited options. A person creating a profile doesn't have the option of leaving a profile category blank. Clearly some individuals would rather not divulge their relationship status and may knowingly choose erroneous answers. Another influence in creating distorted profiles of the self is a growing awareness that stalkers do use Internet profiles and online

communications to locate victims. Beyond these types of constraints, however, consistent with impression management techniques described by Goffman, users clearly described how they manipulated their presentations of self through selective disclosure.

Regardless of the many limitations and constraints in creating online identities, however, online social interactions clearly offer these individuals the opportunity to create a space where they can appeal to other users. Many participants emphasized that most of their online contacts were already friends prior to interacting with them via MySpace.com. Another sub-theme that emerged was that it is somewhat stigmatizing to admit that you met someone online. Participants indicated that it was more acceptable in urban areas than rural areas to meet people through Internet communities. Finally, younger participants seemed less aware than older ones that online interaction represents a new form of daily ritual; they seem to take this type of interaction for granted. Older respondents were more likely to note that instead of asking for your telephone number people are now asking for your e-mail address. Older respondents also noted that communication was enhanced by computers and that they also provide more convenience in communicating.

Discussion

The virtual community provides an arena wherein the presentation of self is easily manipulated at the user's discretion, whether consciously or unconsciously, since face-to-face interaction is absent. In cyberspace there are no physical boundaries in the traditional sense of how Goffman describes back stage and front stage performances. Yet there is a tangible source of entry, which is the computer hardware that serves as a

gateway to the imagined community. With computer-mediated communication the mechanisms of presenting the self are altered. With face-to-face contact, one may be held accountable when attempting to alter back stage and front stage personas. During Internet interaction, on the other hand, presentations of self are much easier to manipulate. Online performers are able to create a front stage self, and are able to use Goffman's techniques of impression management more directly, and deliberately, than when interacting face-to-face. With anonymity as a key factor, online interaction makes it possible to present the self in multiple ways and even to falsify one's identity. In fact, typical forms of online interaction rituals emerge that encourage and make normal the misrepresentation or fictional presentation of the self, such as through the construction of make-believe pseudonyms. To some people the security of anonymity may even make online interaction more attractive than face-to-face interaction as some may feel more self-confident absent the direct observation of others.

Classic theories of the self and social organization can be applied in the postmodern era and to a concept of virtual communities where there is an absence of conventional communication among people. Computer-mediated communication has become integrated into the everyday rituals of life, and with the introduction of multiple user domains people have the opportunity to build communities online. New technologies, however, have given new meaning to Shakespeare's "all of life is a stage." Indeed, the fact that through the Internet the stage itself is created in the minds of users allows for endless possibilities for different forms of communication and identification among the users. In this research online interaction was found to "augment" face-to-face

interaction and the Internet was found to provide new tools for community building. The online community did not replace physical space but became a convenient way of maintaining contact with friends and occasionally meeting new contacts. Staving off loneliness, curiosity, staying in the know, and conveniently obtaining information about people were all motivators for people to join the online community. Many merely followed the lead of their friends. However, online interaction for the majority of respondents was not a satisfactory replacement for face-to-face interaction.

In considering, "the presentation of self," respondents generally stated that they reported honestly, although many of the same respondents provided instances in which they withheld certain information or deliberately reported falsely. Cyberspace clearly allowed respondents the freedom to explore different presentations of self. However, blatant misrepresentations were used only when the participant deliberately made a game of play-acting and were used to the harm of none.

Conclusion

Although online communities are a relatively new and trendy phenomenon, it does not appear that traditional forms of daily interactions as we know them will cease to exist; computer-mediated communications will likely continue to enhance traditional forms of interactions and relationships. It is clear from this research, however, that new forms of consciousness are emerging in relation to computer-mediated communication, particularly among the young. Virtual reality takes a local space and transforms it to a global place. By giving individuals a space to create, connect, and unite with like-minded others, the Internet has become part of an everyday and taken-for-granted stream

of consciousness for its users. Traditional social interaction is geographically limited; whereas the entire concept of cyberspace and virtual interaction is limitless, giving online communities multiple avenues for creating and building a sense of cohesion or “cyborg solidarity.”

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