

Individualism and Social Capital in an Online Social Networking Community: 'MySpace' as an organising site for Identity Construction

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The valorising of individuality in Western society, which is exaggerated in youth culture, has been described as 'a cult of individualism' (Atkinson, 2006: 75). Indicators of such traits may function as commodities in social settings, which in turn could earn social status, increasing social capital (Allik, 2004: 29). Resonating with capitalist notions of the individual as the center of importance, and perpetuating anti-communist abhorrence of unification, individuality seems to be increasingly upheld in youth culture as virtuous (Traber, 2001: 30), to the extent that (within socially accepted boundaries and adherence to certain behavioural norms) perceived autonomy of an individual by others is related to the opportunities for social and community involvement they experience (Allik, 2004: 32).

For young people between the ages of 14 and 25, methods undertaken for the understanding of self and identity are likely to be especially important processes towards self-development and maturity (Striepe, 2003: 524). The extreme popularity of the recent phenomenon that is the social networking website 'Myspace' and its attraction to this age group might be explained by its role as a space for negotiating and experimenting with concepts of identity. I will discuss how MySpace allows identity performance, in terms of individualism in the form of personal 'profiling' including 'blogging', or as communitarianism in the form of joining groups and listing friends and affiliates. The common use of MySpace also involves: reviewing comments from peers on blog entries, photographs and all aspects of the user's current profile details; making comments in return; involvement in group discussion; reviewing invitations to offline events; updating of the personal profile. All these activities have the potential to affect the user's offline identity construction. An understanding of the self as an autonomous individual and as part of a group can be understood as separate influencing constructs towards a complete identity. Hobbes believes it is possible to have an autonomous identity separate from social influence or interaction, i.e.:

"who we are as human beings is not derived from our sociability; rather, we are social creatures because we are human beings" (Werhane, 1996: 18).

That is, the identity of a human being is not dependent on social interaction but exists as a more innate presence. On the other hand, Levinas proposes that social confrontations and interactions are necessary to a fuller understanding of, and construction of, self-identity, i.e.:

"who we are and how we define ourselves is clarified and realized only when we confront other human beings as human beings. ...this confrontation or exposure to another is the condition upon which subjectivity, the ego, the self, develops" (Werhane, 1996: 20).

– Although Levinas describes such social situations as "face to face", which would be generally understood as physically present, offline events, I propose that this theory is equally valid in online social communications, so websites such as Myspace are able to function as identity forming spaces by providing opportunities for such 'confrontation or exposure to another', i.e. allowing the experience of 'relational

autonomy' (Christman, 2004: 143). Ellis brings both models together, seeing them as mutually important to self-development:

"Ellis (1994) has argued that a failure to actualize both personal individualism and social collectivism is irrational and leads to maladjustment. ... This position suggests that neither individualism nor collectivism can be fully healthy alone, that the strengths of one might mitigate against the weaknesses of the other, and that the two types of self-functioning can coexist within the same personality" (in Watson, 1998: 173).

The experience of creating a personal profile on MySpace could facilitate the development of individualism, whilst the online communications and group activities satisfy the need for social collectivism. Since the MySpace profile is intended to be a relatively accurate and honest representation of the user's perception of their own offline identity, the experiences played out by the online identity and the effects of online behaviour on that identity become almost parallel to the offline identity of the user.

Most recent studies on online identity discuss the use of imagined or false identities in multi-user online environments such as MOOs, MUDs, chat-rooms and bulletin boards (Cherny, 1999: 247). The lack of visual cues in most online environments allow experimentation with identity categories such as age, sex and ethnicity (Holmes, 1997: 150). In non-role playing communities however, there are generally negative attitudes towards such behaviour, which is seen as devious and potentially manipulative. Additionally, the physical separation between an online identity and community and an offline individual and their community, can allow various personalities to be played out. This is where Myspace stands out as exceptional amongst the hundreds of online communities; a Myspace profile is intended to be an honest representation of an individual's identity; showing photographs of themselves; showing how they fit into their community being clearly visible by viewing a photo list of their friends, with links to their respective profile pages. Alongside the restriction of one Myspace profile per email account, there is a reduced likelihood of false profiles in comparison to purely text based communities. As members' offline friends connect their profiles online, Myspace directly connects aspects of the online identity to those of the offline identity.

There are standardised categories that are provided to be used to describe oneself when creating a profile, such as age, sex, location, marital status, sexual orientation, occupation etc. Space is provided to list specific preferences under the mainly media-oriented headings of music, film, television, literature and heros. This guidance of profiling allows cross searching of profiles to allow users to find others who share similar interests in the hope of forming friendships online and potentially offline. However, when analysing the process of profiling on Myspace in terms of identity construction offline, the importance of one's tastes in such areas to self-identity may be being embellished. Since these are the listed tastes that are seen to dominate a profile, it is within these areas that the owners of the profiles will be judged by other users who may have little or no previous experience of that individual's personality offline. For example, before creating a profile, an individual may feel that their political views are central to their identity, over and above how they place themselves into categories of gender, sexual orientation or relationship status. They may prefer to be judged on their political orientation primarily, and presumably this would be apparent in an offline meeting with such a person. However, when filling in the pre-set category choices in MySpace profile construction, gender, sexual orientation and relationship status are the categories you are invited to put in writing, not political

orientation. There is however, a more open 'About Me' section which invites varied descriptions of self identification. For young people especially though, their self-concepts may be immature so that they might be less likely to critically construct an alternative set of declarations and personal categories. Unintentionally, one would assume, the categories on which one is judged are normalised in the creation of a MySpace profile, in line with dominant ideologies of what should constitute the self. Using Levinas theory that exposure to others is influential in identity construction, it is possible to postulate that the importance to self-identity of the specific categories that are exposed, increases, in comparison to those that are not exposed. For example, taste in music is one of the first things listed on a Myspace profile; the thought processes surrounding the construction of a list of favourite bands and musicians, with the knowledge that taste in music is already regarded in Western youth culture as representative of identity, could actually cause the individual to feel a stronger emotional attachment to the bands (or genres) listed – whatever their taste in music is, it becomes more central to their identity. In this way, the creation of the online profile could directly affect the development of offline identity.

Such directing of identity presentation by the creators of Myspace.com could be criticised as having commercial intentions, especially in light of recent events. The importance of music within the Myspace community has grown, with bands now being able to have their own profiles and upload songs for people to download, stream, or post onto their own profiles. Many bands use Myspace as their main promotional tool, and as an alternative to a homepage or email, often listing their Myspace address on flyers etc. In July 2005, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. bought Myspace for \$580 million (Wikipedia, 2006). Soon after this, Myspace launched its own music recording label, which is heavily advertised on the site and which sources its artists through the site, being easily able to track the popularity of new bands through their profiles. Created in 2003 by Californian college graduate Tom Anderson and some programmers, Alexa Internet listed Myspace as the 5th most popular english language website in the world, receiving more hits per day than Google or Ebay (Wikipedia, 2006). The 67 million members currently receive all services for free, although certain unspecified as yet parts of the site are soon to become available only to paying members. Of all online advertising impressions, 10% occur on Myspace (Top Tech News, 2006). 150,000 new profiles are created daily as each new member encourages their friends to join (Top Tech News, 2006). A key tactic ensuring an exponential growth rate of the site is through the listing of members' friends on profiles, the number of friends who also have MySpace profiles serving as an index to popularity. Popularity is an obvious way to gain social status, especially amongst adolescents and young adults, and on Myspace the friend list becomes a site of much competition as new members race to build up their numbers of listed friends. They might do this by encouraging offline friends to join MySpace, or by communicating with new online contacts. Many people add other members as 'friends' without any prior contact, purely as a token of their approval of or admiration for that member based on their profile. Scepticism over the significance of such 'friendships' abounds in Myspace communications, where offline friendships are deemed to be more genuine and so carry more value.

The opportunity for approval by one's peers is provided on each profile in the form of a 'comment' section, where only a member's listed friends may add a comment. These are often screened by the member receiving the comments in order that they appear in a positive light. The approval of certain traits or characteristics of a profile may cause these to become more dominant in future editions of the profile than those

which maybe are not mentioned; when each member looks at their online self-created representation of their identity, those features dominating it could in turn become the dominating features organising their identity offline.

Editing and re-editing of profiles on Myspace is common and accepted as the norm. This provides constant opportunities for identity experimentation and for testing which characteristics are acceptable within one's peer group. Such recycling of a single profile suits the fluidity of identity.

Self-conceptions (and so "selves") change over time and vary considerably across contexts (Christman, 2004: 143).

Parts of one's sense of self which seem central at that point in a person's life can be expressed as the dominating themes of the profile as they change. The Myspace profile, then, is not trying to represent innate personality traits, but functions as a permanent display of chosen culturally specific affiliations and physical appearance. The popularity of Myspace took over that of its competitors such as Friendster largely due to its greater functionality and scope for individualising each profile page. With very basic HTML and CSS skills, the uniqueness of the Myspace profile is infinite. Colours, fonts, images and layout can be edited to personalise the profile to the user's liking and great attention is paid within the Myspace community to the attractiveness of individual pages. This strategy of user freedom over the appearance of the site has been described as 'design anarchy' (Top Tech News, 2006), and due to the poor standards of design education, the resulting chaotic appearance of many profiles has been criticised. Browsing through the profiles, it is clear that many users choose quantity over quality of content. The excessive use of high resolution images, video clips, and embedded music players can cause long loading times of profiles and older computers to crash. This disadvantage to the general usability of the site overall is the penalty for allowing such user design freedom. Although it is possible to completely alter the generic sections of the profile with overlays, this requires more extensive programming knowledge, and pre-customised layouts are more difficult to install; most users prefer to leave the standard sections in as they allow more direct comparison between individuals along the same themes, and the functionality of cross-searching members.

"Regardless of its aesthetic consequences, this customizability is one of the site's most attractive features, and the do-it-yourself sensibility of the site resonances with the audience's desire for self-expression" (Top Tech News, 2006).

The 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) characteristic of the site has made it particularly popular with youth sub-culture formations such as punk or straightedge. Both movements arose through people's dissatisfaction with their socio-political environment and both have focused on a specific genre of music to express their feelings. Myspace, then, is a suitable environment for their self-expression through music and image.

Straightedgers, who practice asceticism and see their lifestyle as a 'vocation of social distinction and moral superiority' (Atkinson, 2006: 76), often make this part of their identity explicit on their Myspace profiles, through the use of mission statements, iconic images and songs with Straightedge lyrics. Since "part of the cultural logic of ascetic ways of life is... to set a community example for others to emulate" (Atkinson, 2006: 74), Myspace is ideal for practitioners of Straightedge. Every standard profile declares whether its owner drinks or smokes, thereby allowing them to be judged on these factors prior to other parts of their personality. Since such lifestyle choices are likely to be important to Straightedge people when deciding who to make friends with, Myspace would be especially attractive to them.

The choice to become an 'outsider' from the mainstream has been described as 'self-

marginalisation' (Traber, 2001: 30). Traber explains the importance to punks of the opportunity for community building with like-minded others; "To escape the group mentality, they build their own group". This is in parallel to theories surrounding the concepts of individualism-collectivism and social capital, such as Durkheim's: "When individuals become more autonomous and seemingly liberated from social bonds, they actually become even more dependent on society" (in Allik, J., 2004: 29). For groups not finding support in their local offline community, Myspace offers a massive resource of potential support in an online community, making it easy to find hundreds of similarly marginalised individuals throughout the world. Traber has criticised alternative youth sub-culture manipulation of identity for being hypocritical, saying that "L.A. punk remains complicit with America's dominant social values by privileging the individual" (Traber, 2001: 32). If this is true, it makes sense that punks would be especially eager to take advantage of the opportunity to gain individual status through Myspace profiling, as well as using it to form groups and communities specific to their needs.

The fact that Myspace started in California, with a backdrop of Los Angeles culture is not insignificant. Offline, Myspace hosts parties for members of the site, the first of which was in L.A..

"Los Angeles in particular is censured as the final promised land of hyperreality where false surface is treated as reality" (Traber, 2001: 45).

The blurring of reality between online and offline identities might be more easily accepted within such an environment, making it perfect for starting an online community where many judgements of personality are made on the basis of photographs and lists of favourite bands.

A traditional method of self-analysis has been to write diaries so that one's own life narrative can be read back and understood critically. Generally diaries have been written for purely personal use, without any intended audience other than the protagonist. Online diaries – blogs, such as LiveJournal are not a new phenomenon, but now that blogging is incorporated into MySpace it might have a different function. Again, this is due to the direct connection between most MySpace profiles and the writer's offline identity and community. Because LiveJournal is an online blogging-oriented community, LiveJournal bloggers may be less likely to have their journal read by their offline friends, so their blog posts are able to discuss private thoughts or feelings about happenings in their offline lives, enjoying the opportunity to get impartial advice from distant online contacts. However, since MySpace is a social-networking oriented community (whether online or offline), most MySpace blogs are available to be read by complete strangers as well as being likely to be read by many mainly offline friends who also have a MySpace account and may even be subscribed to their friends' MySpace blogs. MySpace blogs are inevitably censored with this knowledge in mind. If such public blogging habitually replaces private diary writing, this may have negative consequences on the level of self-analysis occurring in the process. Additionally, since there is space on each blog post for comments from connected friends, critique or appraisal of previously private thoughts and feelings about one's life could have dramatic identity-shaping influence. In this way, excessive use of MySpace by young people still developing their sense of self could be placing previously unseen importance in the judgements of others.

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