Building identity in online environments: an Information Science perspective

Frances VC Ryan, Peter Cruickshank, Hazel Hall, Alistair Lawson

How do individuals use information to build identities for themselves online?

Creation and use of online “ personas” and identities
- Based on offline identities and “personalities”
- To showcase aspects of “real world” selves
- Based on “appropriate” persona for platform
- Different personas for different audiences
- Identity creation is not necessarily intentional

Deploying anonymous accounts and pseudonyms
- Complete anonymity is rarely used
- Pseudonyms associated with “real” identities
- Pseudonyms as “ usernames”, not new identities
- Consistent pseudonyms or usernames across platforms
- Some pseudonyms used to “ hide in plain sight”

Managing the blurring of information
- Blurring between private and professional selves
- Blurring between offline and online environments
- Level of blurring varies across platforms
- Privacy settings and “selective sharing” used
- Often as a way of managing reputation

Conclusions: There are some strong alignments between the findings from this research and that of prior research. For example, this research supports the literature related to self-censorship and the regulation of online information sharing practices (Hagger-Johnson, Egan, & Stillwell, 2011), the blurring between private and professional personas based on platform use (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013), and the presentation of personas for different audiences (Goffman, 1959). However, there are also some weaker alignments between these findings and the literature, such as the use of anonymity to “ experiment” with identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) and the deliberate concealment of personal information in online profiles (Ingel & Boyd, 2013).

The use of information for “ building identity” is not an intentional act. Instead, these findings suggest that rather than using information to create online identity, individuals manage the dissemination of information (that may convey reputational markers) according to different target audiences.

For more information, contact: Frances VC Ryan | fryan@napier.ac.uk
www.FrancesRyanPhD.com | @FrancesRyanPhD

Research background and study design

- Full doctoral study investigates how online information is used in the management and evaluation of personal reputations
- These findings relate to one of four research questions: How do individuals use information to build identities for themselves online?
- Qualitative study following the tradition of research into everyday life
- Information seeking (ELIS) (2003)
- Interdisciplinary research themes with relevant literature found in a number of academic domains (Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall, & Lawson, 2015)
- Includes a large body of research on the role that information plays in academic reputations, such as citation practices (Covin, 2001; White, 2002)
- Matching aspects of identity building academic reputation using citations with online behaviours and activities that social media users undertake in everyday life environments

Data collection tools: Participant diaries and in-depth interviews

Recruit: 45 participants (Sep–Dec 2015)
Pre-diary questions (Demographics and social media use) (Oct–Dec 2015)
Design data collection tools for main study (Nov–Dec 2015)
Data collection for main study (Nov–Dec 2015)
Conduct pre-diary interviews (Oct–Nov 2015)
Conduct and transcribe interviews (Nov–Dec 2015)
Conduct face-to-face interviews (Dec 2015–Jan 2016)
Recruit: 45 participants (Sep–Dec 2015)
Pre-diary questionnaire (Demographics and social media use) (Oct–Dec 2015)
Design data collection tools for main study (Nov–Dec 2015)
Data collection for main study (Nov–Dec 2015)
Conduct pre-diary interviews (Oct–Nov 2015)
Conduct and transcribe interviews (Nov–Dec 2015)
Conduct face-to-face interviews (Dec 2015–Jan 2016)

The sample
- 45 UK-based social media users
- Aged 22–50
- Engage in heavy networking
- Moderate to heavy social media use
- Gender balanced
- Identified as education related
- In employment or recently retired

Conclusion: There are some strong alignments between the findings from this research and that of prior research. For example, this research supports the literature related to self-censorship and the regulation of online information sharing practices (Hagger-Johnson, Egan, & Stillwell, 2011), the blurring between private and professional personas based on platform use (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013), and the presentation of personas for different audiences (Goffman, 1959). However, there are also some weaker alignments between these findings and the literature, such as the use of anonymity to “experiment” with identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) and the deliberate concealment of personal information in online profiles (Ingel & Boyd, 2013).