

Students' Online Identity Management

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Abstract: *Acknowledging the inevitability of an online identity in today's digital culture, where much of the social interaction has moved online, this paper places the concept of online identity amidst a highly commercialized Web, the epitome of our late-capitalist market logic. As such, online identity is seen as the expected response of individuals that are exposed to a highly promotional environment which views self-identity as a valuable commodity – both a product of labor and of market exchange. In a quantitative study on 945 students, we measure the level of interest in online identity management, using a scale developed by the authors; at the same time, we look at several indicators that are likely to signal an increased interest in online identity management (OIM). Our findings show that students who are more materialistic, who have higher levels of self-efficacy, who spend more time on Facebook, and who believe that employers browse their online self-presentations are more interested in OIM.*

Keywords: *online identity management, self-commodification, identity capital, materialism, self-efficacy.*

Introduction

More than ever, the self has become a project. Not only has society become increasingly market-oriented, accommodating “a more strategic outlook on matters of personhood” (van Halen & Janssen, 2004, 391), but it has also seen the transformation of the World Wide Web into a social experience, opening up completely new possibilities for self-construction. As such, individuals are now seen “curating, rearranging, and recirculating what they consider to be their best pictures, videos, and status updates in multiple venues online while dropping off their worst, carefully cultivating what in a professional venue would be a concerted audience-segmentation strategy” (Senft, 2013, 349).

The self has also gained mass exposure. The *Social Web* (Rheingold cited in Quittner, 1996) prompts individuals to share more today and to consistently and consciously engage in this sharing as their real-life selves. Gone are the days when the Internet was viewed as a different (virtual) reality, a space of infinite possibility for anonymity or identity play, as depicted in the works of early cyberculture scholars. Nowadays, the Internet is recognized to be an established manifestation of reality. Against this background, online identity can no longer be regarded as a separate construction, in antithesis with offline identity, but as an integral part of the individual’s identity system, being influenced by and at the same time influencing the whole. “The real name web” (Hogan, 2013) is already a fact: online users operate as their real-life selves, as they “post content that is linked to their offline identity and is available either publicly or to a publicly articulated list of individuals” (Hogan, 2013, 301).

Moreover, with social life increasingly unfolding on online social media, large parts of the daily routines of individuals “become accessible, traceable, analyzable in real time” (Fuchs and Trottier, 2015, 130). As a consequence, “everyone who uses the internet has a detailed, persistent digital footprint, created knowingly or unknowingly, actively or passively” (Marwick, 2010: 367), in other words, an online identity. Every piece of information available online about an individual carries relevant identity clues. The fact that two billion of the world’s individuals are online – connected and interacting – means that vast amounts of personal data are constantly released and stored. At the same time, they can be easily traced back to those who have produced them. With a little help from a search engine, self-identity information can be accessed by virtually anyone, and reassembled to form the individual’s imagined identity.

As entire life narratives can now be reconstructed based on various types of data available online (to higher or lower degrees of accuracy), online identities gain material value. This affirmation can be interpreted from several perspectives. For commercial companies, online identity data is vital, as it can be repurposed into marketing intelligence and used, for example, to better target advertising.

Hence, their constant effort to persuade individuals into producing more self-identity data, by offering them an increasingly engaging online experience. For the individuals themselves, online identity data can be a driver of personal value, or – the opposite – of digital irrelevance or even stigma. Hence, the digital labor put into producing an online identity able to potentially generate social or economic advantages for the individual.

Online Identity Management and the Commodification of the Self

In light of “the late capitalist economy where anything and everything is potentially commodifiable” (Wee and Brooks, 2010), the fate of self-identity seems to have been sealed. Society’s generalized promotional logic has permeated the individual’s consciousness, turning the self into “a persona produced for public consumption” (Wernick, 1991, 193). The idea that self-identity has been subtly (or less so) transformed into a commodity is openly endorsed by several authors (Giddens, 1991; Hearn, 2008; Lair, Sullivan and Cheney, 2005; Senft, 2008).

The reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991) includes today a materialistic component, if we agree that it represents “a distinct form of labor meant to produce cultural value and, potentially, material profit” (Hearn, 2008, 198). For Giddens (1991: 200), “commodification, in the context of consumerism, promotes appearance as the prime arbiter of value, and sees self-development above all in terms of display”. Self-identity is thus subservient to its image, which is, in its turn, interpreted through the frames offered by society.

Against this background, packaging oneself for market consumption has become, in many ways, normalized. Lair, Sullivan and Cheney (2005, 320) discuss the difference between the “commodification-as-dominance thesis offered by Marx” and the consensual commodification that takes place as individuals engage in “their own self-packaging all the while celebrating their sense of personal efficacy”, though self-presentation and impression management.

Without too much error, we can affirm that no other social milieu has had such a rapid and dramatic effect on the project of the self than the *Social Web*, nowadays a main site for self-presentation and impression management. Here, generalized connectivity and unrestricted access to digital tools, combined with the aspirational role models offered by the marketing and promotion industries have made online identity management (OIM) not only possible but expected: “The growing popularity of social and digital media means that users are held accountable to how they appear online” (Trottier, 2014, xi).

Indeed, in situations when individuals are not physically present, self-identity can be equated or even substituted for online identity. As Marwick (2010, 396) observes, “in the absence of face-to-face cues, people will extrapolate identity and relational information from any available digital information” (Marwick, 2010, 396).

Referring to Facebook, Gosling et al (2011, 486) reported that “observers can make effective use of observable profile information when they form their impressions,” being able to draw at least partial accurate conclusions regarding the individual’s personality traits. In a research study investigating inconsistencies between on-line and offline self-presentations, DeAndrea and Walther (2011, 819) have demonstrated that “the content of online self-presentations can shape interpersonal perceptions, even if strong positive impressions have been established offline and especially if they have not.”

A system connecting individuals to their online performances is already set in place. Using search engines or online social network profiles to verify and validate the identity of an individual has become a routine practice for both private users and companies (Ivcevic and Ambady, 2012; Vorvoreanu, Clark and Boisvenue, 2011). Vorvoreanu, Clark and Boisvenue (2011, 1) document this phenomenon from the perspective of employers seeking talent: “Information available online about an individual, whether of a personal or professional nature, and whether posted by the individual or the individual’s contacts, is often subject to review as part of hiring processes.”

Naturally, the more social actors understand the role their online identity plays in this new social reality, the more they become involved in its construction. Literature supports the idea of individuals growing more aware of the importance of their online identity and actively engaged in managing it through the system of platforms available (Madden, Fox et al, 2007; Madden and Smith, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013, Vorvoreanu, Clark and Boisvenue, 2011; Young, 2013). Through self-presentation and impression management online, individuals become engrossed with the project of the self, performing OIM to varying degrees of awareness.

The diversity of subjects depicted by online self-presentation scholarship does not lack common threads. Perhaps the most enticing one is that individuals are operationalized as “rational and strategic beings” (Rui and Stefanone, 2013, 1288). Supporting this view, van Dijck (2013, 202) notes a transition from self-expression to self-promotion in the communication of online identity, alluding to the idea of a willing self-commodification: “Roughly after 2009, the self turned into an object of marketing and promotion now that connectivity could transform online social value to real rewards in the offline world.”

This type of identity work is labor-intensive and, most often than not, requires a long-term effort. It involves “creating a detachable, saleable image or narrative, which effectively circulates cultural meanings”, whose goal is to produce “cultural value and, potentially, material profit” (Hearn, 2008, 198). The expectation is that strategic impression management increases the likelihood of desired outcomes and circumvents undesired outcomes (Leary and Kowalski’s, 1990). Desired outcomes may vary greatly, according to individuals’ particular contexts. Some are interpersonal, while some can be material (Leary and Kowalski’s, 1990). From at-

tention, reputation or network power to a better salary, or actual revenue from advertising on one's personal web page.

Identity labor in the form of self-presentation and impression management thus promises to build long-term value for the individual – what Côté (1996) calls *identity capital*. The notion of *identity capital* is meant to denote “what individuals ‘invest’ in ‘who they are’” in order to “potentially reap future dividends” on “identity markets” (Côté, 1996, 425). The variety of personal resources needed to consolidate one's *identity capital* accounts for both sociological assets – such as professional and educational credentials, memberships, other significant associations, personal style –, and psychological ones – “commitments, ego strength, self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility and complexity, self-monitoring, critical thinking abilities, moral reasoning abilities” (Côté, 1996, 426).

OIM, as the digital labor meant to produce *identity capital*, is thus a strategic process, whose outcome depends equally on motivation, commitment and skill. While determining the level of interest in OIM is one way to look at this phenomenon, it is worthwhile to connect it to traits, values and behaviors that make OIM more likely to occur successfully for the individual.

Purpose and Hypotheses

This study focuses on examining students' interest in OIM. At the same time, it seeks to establish links between OIM and what we have called agentic dispositions towards self-commodification, understood as the set of traits, values and behaviors needed in order to strategically perform OIM.

Based on assumed relevance, we chose to explore four main variables in relation to OIM:

1. a materialistic outlook – signaling motivation to perform OIM in the hope of social or material goals;
2. self-efficacy – granting the expectation of success, persistence and commitment to OIM goals;
3. time spent online – indicating involvement with the online medium: we chose to refer to Facebook as it is the dominant platform of our informants;
4. audience monitoring – showing awareness of one's stakeholders: given the profile of our informants, we looked into perceived employer scrutiny.

We then formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: *Students who are more materialistic are more interested in OIM.*

H2: *Students with higher levels of self-efficacy are more interested in OIM.*

H3: *Students who spend more time on Facebook are more interested in OIM*

H4: *Students who believe that employers are interested in their online self-presentation are more interested in OIM.*

Additionally, we decided to check the influence of gender and university major on OIM.

Method

Sample

The sample (n=945) comprised both undergraduate (n=568) and master students (n=377) from three universities in Bucharest: National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (n=530), University of Economic Studies (n=203) and Polytechnic University (n=212). The undergraduate students were enrolled in on-campus classes, while master students were enrolled both in on-campus (n=244) and distance learning (n=133). A survey was conducted in May, at the beginning of the second semester. Questionnaires were administered collectively during class and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Anonymity was guaranteed.

Measures

To measure the level of interest in OIM, we used a four-item scale (built by the authors). Respondents recorded their agreement to each of the four items on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reliability of the scale was .79. We used SPSS to run the principal component analysis, with the varimax rotation (Table 1). The factor analysis shows that the Barlett's test of sphericity is significant ($p < .01$), the KMO that measures sample adequacy is high (.76), and the average of the communalities is higher than .5.

Table 1. Factor Solution with Varimax Rotation for OIM

1. Factor solution	Component
It is very important for me that others see me the way I want them to.	.797
Through everything I post, I want to send a certain message about myself.	.791
I am aware of the impression I make on online social networks.	.784
I post only information that puts me in a good light.	.757

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 component extracted.

Materialism values were measured with a six-item scale developed by Marsha L. Richins (1987). Students expressed their agreement with each statement on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability of the scale was .73.

Self-efficacy was measured with a ten-item scale available at <http://ipip.ori.org/>. Respondents expressed their agreement to each of the items on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability of the scale was .76.

To test if students' core areas of study influence OIM, we created a dummy variable coded with "1" for students in communication and marketing (from two universities) and with "0" for students in engineering and computer science (from a third university). Similarly, the "sex" variable was recoded with "1" for female and "0" for male.

Findings

The first step of the study was to analyse the descriptive statistics of the OIM scale (Table 2). Results show that students are rather interested in managing their online identities. The mean and the negative skewness of the scale reveal that students tend to agree with statements that highlight the importance of their online image. Moreover, a subsample of students (N=35) strongly agreed (chose the highest level of the scale) with all the items of the scale.

Table 2. Statistics of OIM Scale

Mean	4.5252
Std. Deviation	1.41494
Skewness	-.413
Std. Error of Skewness	.081
Kurtosis	-.303
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.163

Regarding the relationship between materialism – as the valorising of possession and acquisition in self and others (Richins and Dawson, 1992: 304) – and OIM (H1), results show that students who are more materialistic are more interested in managing their online identity (Table 3). This result is in line with previous research (Christopher and Schlenker, 2004; Mick, 1996) that has pointed out a positive relationship between materialism and impression management concerns.

Moreover, people who score high in materialism place similar importance on interpersonal relationships and financial concerns. Thus, the correlation of OIM with materialism can have *inter alia* a pragmatic reason, online identity being an asset administrated by its owner. Another argument for this logic is given by the observation that people with higher OIM scores are more aware that employers are interested in their online presentation across the web. This finding is consistent with previous research which claims that individuals concerned with impression management try to control employer access to potentially harming self-identity information online (Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011; Madden and Smith, 2010).

Table 3. Correlations between OIM and materialism, employers' interest, self-efficacy, and time spent on Facebook

		Materialism	Employers look for how graduates presents themselves online	Self-efficacy	Time on Facebook
OIM	Pearson Correlation	.20**	.26**	.13**	.25**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As expected, self-efficacy has also proven relevant for analysing OIM, increased self-efficacy levels leading to a higher interest in OIM among our sample. In the context of impression management, self-efficacy “can be described as the expectation that people will be able to engage in successful self-presentations” (Krämer and Winter, 2008: 108). Our results are in accordance with prior research that explicitly identifies self-efficacy as an important prerequisite for successful impression management (Krämer and Winter, 2008). Moreover, previous research implicitly links self-efficacy to the practice of online self-presentation: by encouraging “self-promotion and viewing oneself as a product”, the Internet puts forward a self “in line with the values of enterprise culture: entrepreneurial, positive, information-rich and self-motivated” (Marwick, 2010: 348).

If we consider all the independent variables from our hypotheses, multiple linear regressions show that all explanatory variables have a significant impact. The highest standardized coefficient belongs to those related to the opinion that employers scrutinize online self-presentations of potential employees, and to time spent on Facebook (Table 4). This finding is another evidence that OIM has a pragmatic reason.

Table 4. Linear Regression with OIM as Dependent Variable

	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.927	0.451		2.052	.040
Materialism	0.312	0.067	0.149	4.678	.000
Self-efficacy	0.262	0.060	0.136	4.326	.000
The opinion that employers look for how graduates present themselves online (on Facebook, LinkedIn, blog personal)	0.237	0.040	0.190	5.893	.000
Time spent on Facebook	0.228	0.04	0.185	5.694	.000
University	0.331	0.122	0.100	2.717	.007
Sex	-0.406	0.112	0.134	3.617	.000

(Adjusted R Square .20)

Additionally, we found out that both gender and study major also influence OIM. Students pursuing communication and marketing majors proved to be more interested in managing their online identity ($t(901)=6.995$, $p<.001$) than students pursuing technical majors. Assuming that students in communication or marketing are more aware of the importance of impression management for image construction, given their academic background, it is understandable that they are also more drawn to OIM.

On the other hand, we found women to be more concerned about OIM compared to men ($t(462.47)=6.584$, $p<.001$). This information is in fact in antithesis with traditional strands of research that depict women to be less assertive than men in pursuing impression management (Bolino and Turnley, 2003). One explanation

may be that women are interested in OIM but not actively engaged in consistent OIM practices.

Conclusions

We have witnessed how, in today's society, self-identity is planned and managed more than ever before. Amidst this reality, the belief that the online medium is granting regular individuals unprecedented means for self-affirmation is almost unanimous. But even with such means at one's disposal, social media users manage their online identities neither with equal consistency nor with equal outcomes. Our study has pointed out that there are in fact pre-requisites to successful OIM.

Our four initial hypotheses were confirmed: interest for OIM strongly correlates with time spent online, perceived employer scrutiny, self-efficacy and materialism. Additional insights surfaced: women are more interested in OIM than men, while students from universities that include advertising, marketing or PR in the curriculum are more interested in OIM than students pursuing technical majors.

The significant relationship between materialism and OIM reinforces the idea of online identity commodification under a promotional, consumption-driven culture.

While the consensual commodification of the self is, as we have seen, regarded as a natural occurrence, the extent to which active users are in fact engaged, motivated and apt to perform OIM can represent a subject for further research.

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