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Fraping, social norms and online representations of self

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This paper reports on qualitative insights generated from 46 semi-structured interviews with adults ranging in age from 18 to 70. It focuses on an online social behaviour, 'fraping', which involves the unauthorised alteration of content on a person's social networking site (SNS) profile by a third party. Our exploratory research elucidates what constitutes a frape, who is involved in it, and what the social norms surrounding the activity are. We provide insights into how frape contributes to online sociality and the co-construction of online identity, and identify opportunities for further work in understanding the interplay between online social identities, social groups and social norms.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we consider *fraping*, an activity that involves the unauthorised alteration of information on an individual's (the *victim's*) online social network site (SNS) profile by a third party (the *"frapist"*). This alteration of information happens in an offline context, when the victim leaves their phone or computer unlocked and the frapist uses the device to make changes to the victim's profile without their knowledge. It can be understood as a performative social activity within a technologically mediated society, involving the presentation of selected facets of an individual's identity for a chosen audience.

Our analysis of fraping emerged out of an exploratory, qualitative program of research,, Charting the Digital Lifespan, which examined how participants live out their lives in online contexts. Data from interviews with participants ranging in age from eighteen to seventy gave us insights into what fraping is, who is involved in it, the implicit social norms that govern fraping, and the sanctions that are applied when these norms are violated. We situate these findings in the context of existing research in social identity, online representations of self and social norms.

The paper therefore contributes a definition of fraping that is grounded in our qualitative data, plus insights into social norms and the role that fraping plays in online sociality and the co-construction of online identity.

2. Background

2.1. Social identity and representations of self

The social identity approach to group behaviour specifies that one may have multiple social identities with associated social norms that become salient in different social contexts (Taifel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Goffman argues that the representations of these social identities are achieved through performances that involve the construction of an edited, perhaps inaccurate, version of self that is crafted with an audience in mind (1959) He also identifies the involvement of a co-operative team of actors in co-constructing and presenting this crafted impression to an audience in any given social context. This team of actors share a sense of familiarity and solidarity, and keep each others' secrets from the audience when such action is deemed appropriate.

The Internet offers multiple social environments in which to perform representations of social identity. Social media tools facilitate these performances, both extending offline sociality (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001) and also providing opportunities to represent oneself and interact in ways

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that are uniquely digital. For adolescents in particular, such tools can boost or diminish their interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences (Davis, 2013). Online representations of self are increasingly kaleidoscopic. Individuals construct different versions of themselves depending on "*the function of each online space; the social norms governing interaction within that space; and the perceived audience that one may encounter*" (Emanuel & Stanton Fraser, 2014, p. 147). These representations may be co-constructed, with the very social nature of many digital involvements lending themselves to "*a coherent sense of aggregate self with friends*" (Belk, 2013, p. 487). The information disclosed online varies across these representations of self, influenced by the goals of the discrete context of the online space. For example, Emanuel et al. found that individuals disclosed more conservative and factual personal information on job-seeking websites, and more personal attitudes, preferences and subjective qualities on dating websites (2014). Positive audience responses to online representations of self can boost social self-esteem and well-being, as shown by Valkenburg et al. in their study of adolescents (2006). Performative representations of self are not necessarily truthful. Page (2014) describes multiple instances of hoax online identities that are used in performances of self, including hoax blogs by (purportedly) a teenage US leukaemia sufferer and a lesbian girl in Syria.

2.2. Online social norms and sanctions

The construction and deployment of online representations of self in online enactments of sociality is accompanied by an emergence of social norms and sanctions that govern the content and use of these representations (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012).

Social norms are shared beliefs within a social group regarding the appropriate ways to feel, think and behave (Reynolds, Subašić, & Tindall, 2015; Turner, 1991). While social norms can operate at an individual level, they are more commonly social rules that function in relation to shared group identities(Neville, 2015). For example, one might have various social identities (e.g. parent, academic, football supporter) that are salient in different social contexts (home, office, stadium), and each has different social norms governing how one is expected and ought to behave in each setting (being caring, objective or partisan) (Turner et al., 1987). Moreover, social norms are the mechanism by which social groups can influence their members' behaviour (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). First, where the correct behavioural choice is potentially ambiguous, behaviour can be shaped by perceptions of how fellow group members feel and act. This is because members of one's social group are seen as credible guides to the appropriate (i.e. normative) way to act in a group-relevant situation. Second, groups can exert social control upon their members by threatening exclusion or sanction if group norms are violated (Turner et al., 1987).

Social norms vary between social groups, including online groups (Emanuel et al., 2014; Neville, 2015). Individuals develop their understanding of acceptable norms through the groups that they belong to, are familiar with, or aspire to join, and different norms apply for different groups. For example, gossip, joking and arguing online are framed as normative, gendered activities under a banner of 'drama' by teenage group members, yet these same activities can easily be perceived as 'bullying' by non-group members (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Normative online behaviours can also be observed amongst parents, where gender affects the number of photos that they post on Facebook of their baby after the birth - with fathers usually posting far fewer images than mothers (Bartholomew, Schoppe-Sullivan, Glassman, Kamp Dush, & Sullivan, 2012). As children grow up, parents usually adopt further norms around (e.g.) how many photos they post on social media of their children, and the nature of the photos, with fathers particularly concerned about posting photos that showed signs of physical maturation in their young daughters (Ammari, Kumar, Lampe, & Schoenebeck, 2015). As children mature and move towards adulthood, their views of normative representation of self online may be at odds with those of their parents (Yardi & Bruckman, 2011). People's choices in how they represent themselves online are affected by age, and also by their motivation for having an online presence. They may be motivated, for example, by a desire to belong to a (virtual) community and to have a sense of companionship, or to maintain pre-existing relationships (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2015). Whilst there are many differences in online behaviours across groups and individuals, there are also commonalities across the lifespan. Young and old (even the oldest old) hope that their posts will be met with responses from the target audience (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). There are also common concerns over trade-offs between privacy and sociability (Brandtzæg, Lüders, & Skjetne, 2010) and the value placed on privacy (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012).

Many of these social norms are not articulated as official 'rules'. Instead, they are understood by individuals either through observing the actions of others online and their consequences, or by carrying out actions online and experiencing the consequences directly (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2009). Positive feedback is seen as a motivating factor (ibid). We suggest that an example here is the 'Like' button on Facebook, which gives useful feedback to Facebook users (both those who post content, and observers) over what content is appreciated by members of their social network on Facebook. A large number of 'Likes' for a post may serve to encourage posts of a similar nature. An absence of 'Likes' – or a flurry of negative comments – may discourage creation of posts that are less popular, reinforcing tacit norms over the kind of content that the social network appreciates.

2.3. Fraping

Against this background of how individuals represent themselves socially online, and the accompanying social norms, this paper considers the phenomenon of fraping, which has only gained currency very recently (Graham & Mathis, 2013). In the limited existing scholarly literature on fraping, Lumsden and Morgan, 2012 associate the phenomenon with antisocial activities of cyber bullying and trolling[1]. Outside of academia, politicians and the judiciary have also interpreted fraping as deeply antisocial (McInerney, 2013). At least one judge has found a defendant guilty of criminal damage for fraping an ex-girlfriend's Facebook page, after charges were brought by police (Barrett & Mishkin, 2014). The tabloid press has focussed attention on humiliating frapes involving spurned lovers – e.g. (Curtis, 2016). Even the numerous contemporary definitions offered by the Urban Dictionary conflict (Graham & Mathis, 2013): frape is defined both as a "*combination of the words 'Facebook' and 'Rape' …*" (which sounds extremely negative), and as a (rather more innocuous) activity whereby "*Profile pictures, sexuality and interests are commonly changed however fraping can include the poking or messaging of strangers from someone else's Facebook account.*"[2]. There is confusion over what fraping actually is.

We contend that fraping may be seen as a modern form of practical joke or prank. Some scholars argue that such jokes and

[1] Trolling is "the practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet …to make users appear overly emotional or foolish in some manner" (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014).

[2] http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Frape.

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