Achieving self-congruency? Examining why individuals reconstruct their virtual identity in communities of interest established within social network platforms

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ABSTRACT

In communities of interest established within social network platforms (such as QQ in China), some people reconstruct a virtual identity different from their physical identity for various reasons. Prior studies have investigated identity reconstruction in less anonymous environments, such as online dating sites and Facebook, and also investigated the more general topic of "self-presentation" in online settings. A comprehensive and systematic investigation of identity reconstruction in anonymous social network communities, however, is still called for. Using a qualitative approach, this study investigated 47 community members through interviews or questionnaires to explore the reasons for reconstructing virtual identity in communities of interest established within the second largest social network platform of the world: QQ. Content analysis reveals that people reconstruct their identity in anonymous social network communities due to vanity, disinhibition, enjoyment, access to new social networks, escape from old social networks, privacy concern, and avoidance of disturbance. These factors are interpreted based on self-discrepancy theory and regulatory focus theory. The theoretical contributions of this study are discussed and practical implications are also presented.

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1. Introduction

With the amazing development of the Internet, various new ways have been developed for people to communicate and socialize (Moore & McElroy, 2012). Adopting the social computing technology as a coadjutant tool, social network platforms influence people's daily lives tremendously (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010; Powell, 2009; Tapscott, 2008), and the user population keeps growing. Successful examples of social network platforms include Facebook and QQ (China). At the end of 2014, Facebook occupied the dominant position (with approximately 1.39 billion monthly active users worldwide), and QQ followed closely behind (with approximately 815 million monthly active users) (Facebook reports, 2014; Tencent announces, 2014).

Within social network platforms, members can create communities based on common interests (also referred to as social network communities) (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009). People can join such communities of interest and get connected to others who share the same interests (Hu, Zhao, & Huang, 2014). Members participate in community activities, join discussions, and help each other solve problems. Community members are not necessarily defined by a particular geographical area, but rather come from across the globe; they may be strangers and may remain strangers (Hu et al., 2014). Given that many social network communities are very large and the members are geographically separated strangers, the personal profile is the very first channel to get some knowledge about others. The profile includes basic personal information such as name, age, address, email, and a list of interests (Stutzman, 2006); a member can manage his/her profile through the functions provided by the social network platform. Because profiles are created by users themselves, the validity of the information is not guaranteed (Livingstone, 2008). Some members' identity in the community may differ from their identity in the physical world. For example, some may hide certain information (e.g., age and address), and others may fabricate personal information (e.g., providing a fake name, gender, and email address). In other words, some individuals may reconstruct a virtual identity in the social network community. This behavior raises an interesting question: why do individuals reconstruct their identity in social network communities?

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As an interesting phenomenon in online environments, identity reconstruction has attracted much attention. Prior to the year 2000, researchers had noticed the phenomenon that Internet users might build an online identity that differs from their offline identity (see, for example, Myers, 1987; Poster, 1995; Tambyah, 1996; Turkle, 1995). The main focus of early research was on the differences between online and offline identity (Burkhalter, 1999; Kendall, 1998; Turkle, 1995), and on the ways (e.g., personal home pages) through which individuals established virtual identities on the Internet (Chandler, 1998; Myers, 1987). However, the reasons why Internet users reconstructed their online identities had not been explored sufficiently. Virtual identity has become important when Internet users use such an identity to make friends with others. For example, in online dating sites, individuals use a virtual identity to present themselves strategically to increase their attractiveness to potential romantic mates (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005). Given that their purpose is to eventually date the romantic mates in the physical world, individuals in online dating sites have to be "realistic and honest" when presenting themselves online (Ellison et al., 2006; Yurchisin et al., 2005). Although these individuals may highlight their strength or hide their weakness, the extent to which they manipulate their personal information is far away from reconstructing a virtual identity. Virtual identity has become even more important since the emergence of social networking platforms (such as Facebook and QQ). Researchers have found that individuals tend to engage in self-promotional behaviors in Facebook, such as uploading selected photos (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Hum et al., 2011; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Ong et al., 2011; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011), posting photos of friends, and quoting thoughtful sentences, which can help them build a social desirable identity (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). However, Facebook is regarded as a non-anonymous ("nonymous" in their terminology) social network platform (Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2009; Zhao et al., 2008), the research on identity reconstruction in anonymous social network communities is still lacking.

Addressing the above mentioned gaps, the present study is distinguished from the previous research in the following ways. First, this study investigates the reasons why individuals reconstruct their identity in a more anonymous context in which individuals are more likely to fabricate their identity than in the above-mentioned contexts (i.e., Internet dating sites and Facebook). Second, this study uses self-discrepancy theory and regulatory focus theory to interpret why individuals reconstruct their virtual identity in social network communities. While self-discrepancy theory (which explains the different domains of the self (Higgins, 1987; Higgins, 1989)) can be used to explore the construction of identities, regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1998) reveals how a member's identity reconstruction matches his/her different goals in social network communities. These two theories are distinct from the theories that have been used in prior studies, such as social information processing theory (Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006; Walther, 1992), "now self" and "possible self" theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Yurchisin et al., 2005; Zhao et al., 2008), "performed self" theory (Goffman, 1959) and Big Five theory (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). To the best of our knowledge, it is the first time that regulatory focus theory has been used to interpret this phenomenon. Using a qualitative approach, the current study aims to provide a comprehensive and systematic investigation of the reasons why individuals reconstruct their virtual identity in interest-based social network communities.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section presents the theoretical background. Then the research methodology is explained, followed by the data analysis. The results are further interpreted based on the two theories. Finally, the contributions of the study, its possible limitations, and future research are discussed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Identity reconstruction

In face-to-face communication in the physical world, an individual cannot reconstruct his/her identity as s/he wishes because s/he faces three main constraints (Zhao et al., 2008), namely: (i) the corporal body (including physical characteristics such as gender, race, and looks); (ii) the social background; and (iii) personality attributes. For example, an individual might try to hide his/her personality and background to reconstruct a new identity when interacting with strangers face-to-face in places such as bars; however, this kind of identity reconstruction will still be restricted by the corporal body in the physical world (Zhao et al., 2008).

In the online world such as social network communities, however, the constraints on constructing one's identity are not in place because the corporeal body is separated from the interactions over the Internet. In particular, the text-mode interactions in social network communities propose nothing about one's physical characteristics. Even if a member has a portrait in his/her profile, nobody can guarantee that this picture is his/her real photo. An individual can easily construct a virtual identity by hiding or fabricating his/her personal information, including his/her name, gender, address, and institutional affiliation (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Sometimes an individual may hide his/her undesired physical features and fabricate his/her biography and personality to make the virtual identity more favorable. The virtual identity constructed by hiding real information can also help the individual to avoid evaluation and be free of real-world restraints such as social norms, legislation, and responsibilities. Moreover, the reconstructed virtual identity can protect the individual's privacy and prevent certain threats and risks. If such a virtual identity is entirely fake, this individual becomes totally unidentifiable or anonymous in the social network community. Correspondingly, anonymity is defined as "not identifiable within a set of subjects" (Pfitzmann & Hansen, 2008, p. 8). Actually, anonymity in social network communities does not necessarily mean "without a name", but rather means a fake name or fake identity, because it is typically a compulsory requirement in social network communities that a member must have a user name (acting as a user ID) no matter if it is fake or not. When constructing his/her virtual identity, how different this virtual identity is from his/her real identity is left to this individual's own discretion. How different the virtual identity will be and what kind of virtual identity an individual would like to reconstruct in social network communities may be explained by the following two theories.

2.2. Self-discrepancy theory

In essence, one's identity is an embodiment of oneself. There are three basic domains of the self: actual, ideal, and ought (Higgins, 1987, 1989).

(a) The actual self, which represents the traits or characteristics that someone (self or other) believes an individual actually possesses (Strauman, 1996).
(b) The ideal self, which represents the traits or characteristics that someone (self or other) wishes or aspires an individual would possess (Bizman, Yinon, & Krotman, 2001).
(c) The ought self, which represents the traits or characteristics that someone (self or other) believes an individual has the obligation, duty, or responsibility to possess (Bizman et al., 2001).