Remote Encounters:

Connecting bodies, collapsing spaces and temporal ubiquity in networked performance

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I'll be your mirror
Identity reflections on the two sides of a computer screen[1]

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Abstract

Digital communication, and social media in particular, have brought enormous changes in the way we establish connections and maintain relationships. At the same time, providing us with a space that is entirely constructed around us, social networking sites have also introduced a new way of representing and making sense of ourselves. Through online profiles, in fact, as well as usernames, or avatars, we can give birth to true digital identities, allowing us to circulate our private information and fulfil our needs for self-expression. However, given the complete interdependence of the 'real world' with the Web, exemplified by the overwhelming presence of connected devices in our daily lives, reflections on our identities online become urgent and necessary. In fact, as the boundary between online and offline grows thinner and more penetrable, it might be useful to think of the interplay between our digital and physical selves as two sides of the same mirror, each one influencing and reflecting elements of the other.

The scope of this paper, therefore, is to explore the concept of digital identities, focusing in particular on what might drive self-representation on the Internet, considering both strategic objectives and spontaneous, emotional needs. In order to

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[1] The present paper, titled I'll be your mirror: Identity reflections on the two sides of a computer screen, stands as the conceptual basis of my doctoral dissertation, which focuses on how technologies, and social media in particular, affect the manner in which we see and represent ourselves in our everyday lives.

provide a stronger conceptual framework, the first section of the paper will provide an introduction to how identities have been studied in the social sciences, before the Internet. In the second section, rational and emotional elements within digital identities will be presented, aiming to provide an overview of why online action is so important to make sense of ourselves today. In the conclusion, digital identities will be contextualised in the broader field of Digital Humanities, expanding the reflection on how we relate to, and through technology.

Introduction

In the last two decades, we have seen technology enter our lives in a manner hardly experienced before. The World Wide Web, social media and mobile communication have redefined the rhythms of our actions, the ways in which we interact and our priorities in terms of how our time should be spent. The speed of communication and the ease in producing, reproducing and sharing information, have had an impact on society by blurring the boundaries between roles, spaces and concepts. For example, thanks to easy-to-use technology, consumers can participate in the production and diffusion of their favourite content, such as uploading their videos on Youtube, or promoting pictures and news across social media sites. Due to instruments promoting flexible productivity, work can happen anywhere, and at almost any time. Because of mobile technology, our lives online are increasingly present within our daily offline routines. The mere idea of being 'connected', so popular at the beginning of the 2000s, is nowadays somewhat out-dated: our devices are never off, and our 'real' life is almost impossible to separate from what happens on the Internet.

This significant change in how we relate to technology and, as a consequence, in how we relate to others *through* technology, has certainly had a strong impact on how we make sense of our identities. Social media, in particular, have amplified this phenomenon promoting networks constructed around individuals, using their personal narratives as a starting point and targeted towards their relevant audiences, actual or imaginary. In their engagement with others, through their social media profiles and in interaction with technology, individuals approach and change their self-concepts, question their ideas over who they are and give new spaces to their emotions and bodies. The online and offline realms are growing more and more interdependent: relationships exist in various forms across the online/offline border and desire survives unaltered in digital worlds. It seems evident that the consequences of online actions might expand far beyond what stays on social networking websites (boyd and Ellison, 2008), and that the virtual might influence the real as much as the opposite. The extent to which such a phenomenon might happen remain however still under studied.

As far as the social sciences are concerned, the use of social networking sites for presenting oneself enters into a broader analysis of how identities are defined through performance. In fact, as offline boundaries, such as the one dividing friends from acquaintances are redefined on the Web, we simultaneously question the vision we have of ourselves and 'perform' our identity differently depending on the audience we are addressing. Online messages about ourselves are immediate and feedback received from friends, for example through gratifying 'likes' on Facebook, are instantaneous and powerful. The way in which we represent our identities is oriented towards the repetition of positive feedback from audiences we care about or consider relevant. In this sense, almost sixty years after its conception, Erving Goffman's metaphor of self-presentation as a theatrical performance applies wonderfully to social network sites (1959, 5-14). In fact, on social media, as if on a stage, users perform who we are on a daily basis (e.g. using profile pictures and usernames), select their audiences (e.g. limiting the accessibility of their profiles) and involve fellow 'actors' in their personal plays (e.g. tagging friends within their pictures). At the same time online, just like offline, individuals can influence the way in which they are perceived: a success or a failure in representation will be re-elaborated as part of the next performance.

Within the social sciences, the study of how individuals present and communicate themselves is to be viewed within the larger spectrum of identity studies. Exploring this foundation allows for a better understanding of how identity studies might be applied to social media and of why digital technology might be changing our ways of seeing and relating to each other.

Identity before the Internet

Erving Goffman was perhaps the first scholar to address self-presentation as a mechanism of interaction among humans. In his vision, individuals are permanently engaging in a cyclical performance of themselves. A personal message is transmitted to an audience, which responds with a reaction, which is in turn implicated within the next play. The creation of individual performances takes place through "the given", i.e. the information purposefully shared in order to positively influence how the audience perceives the actor, as well as "the given off", i.e. what the audience understands about us from our appearance, from the setting, or from our involuntary gestures and blurts (*ibid*, 2-3). The influence of audiences is such that this process, in an everyday interaction, shapes individual action by imposing different roles: we might act a bit more childish while talking to children or stress our professionalism while at a corporate meeting. And despite our best efforts, there might always be something we fail to control: emotions and feelings that enter our communication without our consent or expressions of our state of mind that bypass our control. Interaction with others also plays a significant role; within the contact

with each other everybody is simultaneously performing and trying to influence each other's perception. In Goffman's words, individuals are "a product of the scene that comes off, and not a cause of it" (*ibid*, 252).

Other scholars have approached the practices of communication of the self as an important component within the conceptualization of personal identities. The act of storytelling, for example, has been considered crucial for the construction of a person's sense of self. Through the act of narration individuals define themselves chronologically; they elaborate memories and bring them to life (McLean and Jennings 2012, 4-5). By choosing the narrators and defining the details of their own characters each person progressively constructs an image of herself to be projected to the outside world. Through the enactment of their story, protagonists place specific parts of their existence under the spotlight (e.g. 'I find life difficult, as a single parent') signalling a higher salience of such identity compared to other coexisting ones (Stryker and Serpe 1994, 17-19). Such salience is representative of the importance of such a role for the specific audience. In the act of narration, individuals choose the role they want to be identified with and shape the identity they ultimately embody.

One valuable concept in the consideration of how the communication of oneself takes place in everyday practice is that of Impression Management. Defined as the "efforts by an actor to create, maintain, protect, or otherwise alter an image held by a target audience" (Bozeman and Kacmar 1997, 9), Impression Management is thought to regulate much of existing human interaction. In fact, in the process of self-presentation, individuals will attempt to communicate the type of information that is capable of bringing the ideas others have of them as close as possible to the image they wish to project (Leary and Kowalski 1990, 35-39). Such a process takes place through the alignment of the impressions generated in others with how individuals think they should be seen within a given context. Much like the "given" element within Goffman's theatrical metaphor, Impression Management takes place through a constant comparison of self-representational expectations with the feedback emerging from their performance. This cycle allows individuals to put in place strategies aimed at influencing how they are perceived in relation to others.

As in Goffman's theoretical framework, where the strategic "given" is compensated by a spontaneous "given-off", Impression Management is only capable of controlling a part of the overall communication of personal identities. Emotional states, fears and meanings attributed to relationships play a role in the interaction between individuals, limiting their control over how they present themselves to others. Emotional Attachment, the bond that connects individuals to objects, places, memories and persons they relate to, deeply impacts how each person performs her identity, leaving a space for feelings, fears and other human expressions within one's representation.

All of these elements, the strategic and the spontaneous, find an application in online identities. In a space where users themselves construct identity signals, such as social networking profiles, the management of impressions, and the consequences of Emotional Attachment, influence the shape of interaction, and the evolution of relationships.

Constructing the Digital Human

There was a time, within the evolution of the Web, in which communication stopped being 'about the message' and started being 'about the people'. Scholars pinpoint this stage at the time in which messages stopped being anonymous and started requiring the choice of a username in environments such as chat-rooms and interest communities (Bechar-Israeli 1996, 1-4; Manago et al. 2008, 452-54). This can be considered, in many ways, the first example of a digital self. In fact, disguising oneself behind usernames, customized pictures and quotes, allowed a user to "express identity through a dialogic process of co-construction" (Subramanyam, Smahel and Greenfield 2006, 403), in which other participants were involved in the conversation. Furthermore, thinking of online relationships as stages for self-representation, the choice of an explicit name defines a character, in a way that makes it instantly recognizable to the outside world. Gradually constructing their persona, individuals become involved in their digital selves, forming a bond between person and profile.

With the diffusion of explicitly personal social networking sites, requiring names to be real or realistic, the border between real and represented has become even blurrier. Personal profiles are now self-imposed documents including accurate self-descriptions, private pictures and often details of an intimate nature, such as physical addresses, work positions, telephone numbers. The extension of platforms like Facebook from its original crowd of university students to the entire world led to a shift in paradigm in terms of the audiences that can be reached through social media. The stage for representation is now boundless, and so are the potentials for identity experimentation (Strano 2008, 5). The Web, in fact, offers an opportunity to portray different characters in front of different audiences, leaving space for identities relatively unexplored in daily life. Online more than offline, in fact, individuals have the option to set up different parallel 'temporary identities' (Ibarra 1999, 766-67). Through such a process, serendipitous discoveries can be triggered, leading to important consequences for life offline, especially for individuals, such as teenagers, who are undergoing similar processes of identity construction in their 'real life' (Livingstone 2008, 6-10). The achievement of an unprecedented connectedness cannot be conceived without consequences on exposure: a vulnerability that seems different from the one experienced offline, and subject to lesser control. In fact, just like offline, online relationships from different parts of our lives merge

and change nature becoming part of our personal network. Unlike offline, however, they do so at tremendous speed and without much possibility to diversify or control the flow of information. This has contributed to a largely polarized view of social media as a vehicle for self-expression and for reflection on identities. On the one hand, social networking sites are praised for their experimental and de-marginalizing potential (Simpson 2005, 120-22; McKenna and Bargh 2006, 691-93). On the other, however, they are looked at with concern, due to the privacy threats (Christofides, Muise and Desmarais 2009, 343-44), their push to conformity (Ata, Thompson and Small 2013, 477-80), and the problems arising from waves of online hate (Binns 2012, 3-5). Despite value considerations over how digital communication might have affected society, it appears evident that, while technology has become a companion to our lives, online identities have started blending with our offline existence, and each is influenced by the other.

In this respect, the interpretation of digital self-representation from research has been mostly two sided. The focus has initially been exclusively on the creation of profiles with relationships as their objective. The establishment of new connections, for example through dating sites, or the reinforcement of existing friendships, seemed to be the whole purpose of digital interaction. Seen through such a lens, online profiles tend to be the result of an exercise in self-rationalization. Furthermore, Impression Management seems to derive from a controlled and precise reflection of what we wish others to see in us.

The experience of Second Life, however, has changed much of what was known about interaction in a digital space. Since characters started to be 'materially' constructed by users, bodies started to matter, and researchers started exploring the emotions connected with interacting online as an avatar (Wolfendale 2007, 2-3; Martey and Consalvo 2011, 166-68). Although generic social media profiles might not provide users with the same potential for self-invention, or abstraction from their real names and physical appearances, still they connect to users in a way that is both rational and deeply emotional.

Through the exploration of meanings behind online identities, therefore, we are given an opportunity to reflect upon ourselves at this given point in time. Exploring our digital identities means considering both the self-promotional, strategic construction of profiles and the ways in which bodies, either physical or virtual, are involved, constructed and reinvented. Through rational self-construction techniques such as the management of impressions (Ellison, Hancock and Toma 2012, 47; Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin 2008, 1817-18) and with emotional by-products of the process, such as the attachment to an avatar (Wolfendale 2007, 115) we create and relate to, images of ourselves blur the edges between the real and the virtual (Ducheneaut et al. 2009, 1152-54). In the following sections, both sides will be explored, constructing digital humans for both their objectives in terms of relations, and for the feelings that connect them to their human bodies.

Managing Impressions Online

One of the strongest streams of social media research emerges from the self-promotional value of social networking sites. Especially when users appear online with an objective such as that of maintaining old relationships (at the centre of the Facebook claim since its very beginning) or finding new ones (as in the case of online dating), digital identities allow individuals to embody the role that best allows them to send out a specific message to a chosen audience. Within this mind-set, research has concentrated on the experimental value of being online; on the possibility, in other words, to exist on the Web as several parallel identities, representative of different sides of the same person (DiMicco, Morris and Millen 2007, 383-86). This aspect of fragmentation of the online self was more evident in early manifestations of social media, such as IRC chats and online forums: with fewer requirements for identifying information, the potential left for the definition of a role was definitely larger (Bechar-Israeli, 1996). Furthermore, the freedom coming with pseudo-anonymity would allow for a fuller manifestation of identity traits not necessarily explored or expressed outside of the platform. This left plenty of room for the sharing of radical or non-mainstream characteristics, which could more easily find support and recognition (McKenna and Bargh 2006, 683).

Considering more recent, and more explicitly personal social networking sites, the concept of Impression Management helps us understand what drives the diffusion of personal information online. In fact, interaction mediated through a computer seems to introduce one layer of control: personal information that is shared can be erased, edited, or re-elaborated. Compared to real-life conversations, social networking dialogues are more similar to posed pictures or portraits as such images can be modified and perfected ex-post. In a similar way, social media users can modify their posts at any time after they have been published, through revising or deleting them. In their extensive work on dating sites, Ellison and colleagues state this property, termed "asynchronicity of communication" (Ellison, Hancock and Toma 2011, 3), is one of the key elements differentiating Impression Management online and off. "Context-specific expectations" are another concept considered crucial in this distinction: in fact, while in real life context is often taken for granted, online platforms impose shared understandings about what is the 'norm' and how users should behave. This can deeply influence individual representations. Perhaps most important in differentiating Impression Management on social media from outside, however, is the idea of "reduced identity cues" (Ellison, Hancock and Toma 2011, 7). In fact, most social networking profiles force a restriction of the identity elements that can be displayed into pre-determined fields, such as name, profession and profile picture. This leaves users with important room for the selection of the type of information they disclose about themselves, which can be used towards the achievement of a specific ideal image (ibid, 4-5). Referring to concepts elaborated

much earlier than the emergence of social media, scholars call this process Impression Management, or the "efforts by an actor to create, maintain, protect, or otherwise alter an image held by a target audience" (Bozeman and Kacmar 1997, 9).

The exploitation of reduced cues leads us to reconsider the meaning of authenticity on the Web. In fact, despite a huge potential for deception, the online world has been proven to inspire honesty in its participants (Rosen et al. 2008, 2127-28), who often express details they'd rather leave out of daily offline conversations. While exaggeration and deception take place occasionally, studies have proven that most self-presentation on the Web tends to be realistic, at least to the users themselves (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs 2006, 418-20). This suggests that self-presentation online might simply have to be interpreted through a different idea of authenticity, contextualized to the platform and its language and etiquettes. In this sense, considering all self-representation taking place on the Web as unrealistic would be a mistake: Impression Management is an outside-oriented mechanism as much as an individual process. Through the creation and maintenance of digital selves, individuals are free to explore what *their own* image expectations are, triggering processes of self-monitoring (Joinson 2001, 179-81), leading to an exploration of idealized selves, to extents hardly achievable offline.

All in all, a view of digital identities exclusively based on Impression Management seems to define the Web as a place for the immaterial and the incorporeal. Social Media appear as a space where individuals perform themselves in a fully rational and objective-driven manner. If this were true, then the process of self-representation would be exclusively mind-mediated, even before being mediated by a computer. However, in order for such a case to apply, users would have to be completely emotionally detached from their online profiles, which would hardly motivate the time and effort spent in their construction, and in ensuring that they are coherent with one's image of self. Furthermore, users are faced everyday with the risk that what happens on the Internet might not remain on the Web, a set of concerns which hardly leaves anyone indifferent, and which has consequences on how individuals feel about the information they share. It seems clear that emotions also need to be taken into account while exploring online identities.

Attached to a Digital Body

One of the most debated effects of the sometimes invasive presence of technology into our everyday lives stands in the redefinition of boundaries. The performative nature of social media, for example, has drastically reduced the distance between 'public' and 'private' (Livingstone 2008, 393-95). In a parallel, the rising employment of 'telework' has shortened the distance between 'work' and 'home' spaces, leading to difficulties in identifying what belongs to each realm. At the same time, ever-present mobile technology has increased the permeability of the border

between 'online' and 'offline'. With mobiles accompanying each moment of our existences disconnectedness is hardly experienced anymore.

All of this increases the impact of self-representation online, as it becomes no longer distinguishable from the daily happenings in our everyday life. It seems safe to say that, in many ways, our digital selves have become a defining part of our analogic lives. The fact that Web use, and especially personal communications (through e-mail and social networking sites) have been identified as 'gratifying' (Indeok et al. 2004, 386-90) to the extent of potentially becoming addictive (Koc and Gulyagci 2013, 280) further proves this point. In the establishment of digital identities, the focus on strategized self-representation through Impression Management only tells us one side of the story.

Research on social media use, particularly focusing on teenagers and young adults, has witnessed an increase in the presence of emotions both as one of the drivers to user self-representation and as the object of academic attention. Largely left out of the conversations around digital communication, seemingly so incorporeal and detached from reality, feelings such as envy (Krasnova and Wenninger 2013, 11-13), lack of belonging (Barker, 2009, 210-11), or willingness to deceive (Hancock and Toma 2009, 368-70), have recently started to be analysed in connection with social media use and digital self-expression. This, rather than a signal of increasing discomfort with the digital world, should be seen as symptom of the fact that our online profiles, despite the reduced cues and our opportunities to manipulate them, depict us largely for who we are, emotions and feelings included.

Bodies and corporeal experiences also seem to increasingly matter while creating or maintaining digital identities. Profile pictures, for example, are important vehicles of personality within social media (boyd and Ellison 2008, 226-28; Strano 2008, 3-5) to the point of reinforcing existing old-media body ideals or purposefully establishing entirely different ones. By constructing and potentially hacking personal images, individuals are free to bring their bodies once again to the centre of the digital discourse. The greatest contribution in this sense has definitely been the experience of Second Life. While the virtual world, in fact, has represented a very important performing stage for artists, a testing ground for engineers and a tool for education and play, it has also represented a space for the expression of user identity, which is the focus of this paper. In fact, with its immense potential for customizability of avatars and actualization of a separate reality, Second Life has had the great merit of introducing video game dynamics into social media interaction (Martey and Consalvo 2011, 165-71). In fact, the possibility to choose an appearance and perform an identity was, up to a point, a prerogative of multi-player online games, in which the bodies of players, in many ways, define and shape interactions and stories. In this sense, Second Life provides an important ground for identity experimentation where the boundaries of life offline (names, origins, genders, and even bodies and standard human appearances) are systematically deconstructed

until they become substantially irrelevant for the characters constructed online. Every element in a Second Life avatar, from the choice of skin colour, to hair, furs, clothes, tattoos and hangout places, is identity material for the users, and builds into their very complex personal narratives. Such narratives, constructed over the skin of the characters, also become distinctive features for the player (Robinson 2007, 97), establishing an in-game/out-game connection, driven by the investments in time and creativity necessary to bring the avatar to its (virtual) life. Furthermore, a Second Life profile is linked to the specific client. It is not transportable to other browsers nor is it as ubiquitous as other social media. This contributes to increasing the identity value of players, creating an experience that is unique and all encompassing: a world separate from reality, where reality can be reproduced or re-created.

There is, however, more to the relationship between user and avatar than the mere entertainment in seeing a potential self perform in a separate world. Jessica Wolfendale has defined the bond between "me on the screen" and "me outside" as a type of "Emotional Attachment" (2007, 114). Such connection represents a true alignment of emotions and feelings: a mechanism strong enough to put users in the position of feeling pain, or love, or desire, through their constructed digital bodies (*ibid*, 3-4). Just as video game players get so absorbed in the game and forget reality, because the game *becomes* reality, inhabitants of Second Life *become* their avatar, allowing for elements of their physical body to influence their digital actions, and vice versa. Nowadays, while Second Life represents a past experience for most of its users, a question remains regarding whether a similar emotional bond might be happening when a digital body is not present, i.e. within a more generic experience of social networking. Certainly the differences between Facebook and Second Life, are substantial: direct action is replaced by a narrative and the room for bodily reconstruction is minimum, mostly taking place through pictures. However, a connection similar to emotional attachment can still be hypothesized. Considering for example the dramatic consequences of phenomena such as cyber bullying (Smith et al. 2008, 377-80) the results are striking: if it really is just pixels, if social media could be entirely separated from real life, some of the tragedies witnessed in the last few years would be completely inexplicable.

The consideration of Emotional Attachment as happening within 'generic' social media profiles, as well as within Second Life, should further support the consideration of online authenticity as something heavily contextualized (Hancock and Toma 2009, 370). In fact, as relationships with others take a different, less physical meaning, we could consider emotional coherence between users and their digital alter egos to prevail in importance against realistic bodies and un-manipulated pictures (Gunkel 2010, 11-13). In this sense, an authentic performance merges elements of real and ideal selves, not necessarily however leading to a dishonest representation: in some ways, online more so than offline, an organic self-performance can

emerge. Never forgetting that any performance of self online entails great potential, but also greater risks: the emotional investment in the representation exposes individuals to vulnerabilities that leak from the online world into reality, in a manner unthinkable even a few years ago. In this sense, the challenge for the future might be that of balancing the need for self-expression with the risks connected to exposure, in an equilibrium that should transcend the boundaries between online and offline.

Conclusions: Connected to one another

Seen under the broader context of Digital Humanities, the exploration of how users perform their identities on the Web opens a wide array of fascinating questions. In fact, the exploration of what might determine the choices behind the creation of an online self easily becomes a broader reflection on the impact of such profiles and narratives on our self-concepts, feelings, and offline bodies. In this perspective, making sense of the meaning behind our Web-based interactions is not only a quest that is individual or personal in nature; it is rather 'cultural', as it affects the way in which we construct and interpret relationships. The increase in the speed and reach of the words we share online makes the exploration of digital identities an even more interesting and urgent task. Daily trade-offs, such as the one opposing the gratification emerging from sharing personal information and the necessity to defend our privacy, are part of our everyday lives.

Furthermore, just as messages travel further and faster, relationships among individuals change in distance and intensity: independently from their depth and from their ability to generate social capital, or contribute to our well-being (Putnam 2001, 22-30), they exist, and their importance extends beyond the boundaries of the Web. Despite the decrease in popularity of Second Life, and the rise of less physical (and less inventive) social networking sites, the potential of digital self expression remains that of a substantially infinite palette of potential identities, through which users get to experiment freely. Advocates of the liberating power of social media argue in favour of an overcoming of the hierarchy regulating the identity choices of individuals (Stryker and Serpe 1994, 16-21). Rather than permanently choosing who we'd rather be in front of a specific audience, we should embrace the fact that, on the Web, we can be all things all the time. The potential for re-invention, re-definition and experimentation of potential selves seems large, and only explored to a very limited extent.

There is however another side to this story. Communication on the Web, and particularly personal narratives online, require a certain level of skills, which can make sure that the desired audience is reached, and that no exploitation takes place. If we can suppose there to be some sort of emotional connection between our bodies outside and inside the network, then the damages coming from the misuse, or

the theft of our information can be truly dramatic. Especially younger users, who find enormous self-expressive potentials in social media interaction, should be aware of its limits, its dangers and risks. Support aimed towards a critical interpretation of both digital and old media should progressively become the centre of the agenda of educators and parents alike.

Overall, as much as other types of content flood from the Web to older media, and enter everyday conversations, social media-based identities are often cited when we speak of ourselves offline. Although the impact of digital identities might be minimal right now, we can assume that its influence in the way we represent ourselves, and interact with others, will grow as technology becomes increasingly part of our lives. Furthermore, if the emotional bonds take place in the manner that would be suggested by both the extraordinary support and the vicious hate (McKenna and Bargh 2006, 681; Smith et al. 2008, 377-80) which can be found on the Web, then digital identities can be the trigger of an important reflection on the way in which technology participates in, and shapes our relationships. This might help us make sense of an increasingly connected world, made of infinite digital connections, making us not a little less human.

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