Generation Y in cyberspace: How do digital natives manage social stigma on MySpace

by

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Abstract

The current generation of young adults, widely known as Generation Y or digital natives, is a technologically savvy demographic who have learned to navigate and locate themselves in the virtual world in ways that previous generations find difficult to fathom. The "information" or "digital" age, in which Generation Yers are highly influential, poses many questions and problems for the social sciences for conceptualisations of selfhood and relationships. I intend to explore, here, one of the key elements I consider to be central to such conceptualisations. Social stigma, I suggest, take on new meaning and significance for digital natives of the information age.

As a Gen Yer myself, I intend, in this paper, to explore and understand the ways that Generation Y make sense of, present and express digital identity and selfhood, by drawing on my own experiences. Specifically, I intend to investigate the strategies young people may use and some of the opportunities for the management of social stigma in virtual space. I suggest, through a qualitative content analysis of MySpace, that Gen Yers engage with a variety of techniques for managing, disclosing and concealing social stigma on the popular social networking website MySpace.
As we enter the ‘information’ or ‘digital’ age, characterised by the globalisation of information communication and the development and expansion of tools for engaging with virtual technology, the social sciences need to explore new ways of understanding and locating a variety of social issues that account for the drastic changes to the nature of our society. I suggest that the internet has emerged as a key tool through which relationships, selfhood and human encounters are managed. This is particularly so for people born in and after 1982 – widely known as Generation Y or ‘digital natives’ (Huntley 2006; Prensky 2001). Generation Yers are widely considered the most digitally and technologically savvy generation of young adults that the world has known (Huntley 2006). Today’s young adults, particularly those living in ‘western’ societies, have grown up with a range of technologies, such as the internet, which have had profound influences on their perceptions of the world and the ways they relate to themselves and to others (Huntley 2006). The term digital native, often used simultaneously with Generation Y, is, according to Marc Prensky (2001), appropriate for categorising today’s youth because of the distinctive styles with which they learn about, construct, internalise and make sense of their social worlds. Navigating through digital spaces, such as cyberspace, is a kind of second nature for Generation Yers, because they were surrounded by these forms of technology in their developing years (Prensky 2001).

Following the expansion of Web 2.0, characterised by “the move to the internet as platform” (Flew 2008: 17-18), virtual spaces such as social networking websites have
emerged as a central means by which individuals may create and participate in embodied cultural and social networks. I suggest that social networking websites generate and support online, cyber, virtual and digital selfhood. MySpace is one of the most well-known and frequently used social networking websites boasting over 230 million members worldwide. MySpace provides a space for individuals, political groups, organisations, music artists and many others to create online profiles that feature carefully constructed information about the profile creator and supports interaction and networking between users. The profile creator may select a profile layout, which includes a wallpaper, text font and colour, and particular order and style of text, and visual and auditory information. The format chosen is then displayed on the page and data is input onto the page by its creator. The profile layout and any textual, visual or auditory information can be changed at any time by the creator. Creativity and self-expression, I argue, are central to the creation and maintenance of a MySpace profile. I suggest that, through websites such as MySpace, meanings constructed about many important aspects of social life are influenced by ongoing and strategic engagements between selfhood and internet communications technology.

In this paper I endeavour to explore some of the key elements I am investigating in my wider research about impression management in cyberspace. Here, I will explore the ways that digital natives manage social stigma in virtual space, with a clear focus on the role of social networking sites in this process. I will also discuss the nature of creative practices of online selfhood, using the works of Sherry Turkle (1995; 1996) and Jean Baudrillard (1994) in my analysis. I am interested in exploring and understanding the
strategies that young people in the twenty-first century, which I will now refer to as either ‘Generation Y’ or ‘digital natives’ (and I do so quite deliberately interchangeably), employ when situating and managing their cyber-selves. I am both a member of Generation Y and a regular user of MySpace. My understanding of the impact of internet social networking on the lives of Generation Yers is first-hand. I experience, on a daily basis, the phenomena that I intend to explore in my research. Therefore, in this paper, I will focus on one crucial dilemma that Gen Y confronts on MySpace – How do I manage my identity/selfhood and confront social stigmas within virtual worlds?

‘The Internet as platform’: The virtual café of mediated experience

I will use some of the key ideas offered by Erving Goffman on impression management (1959) and more specifically on social stigma or spoiled identity (1986) in formulating my analysis. In defining the term stigma, for the purpose of this paper, I will adopt the definition offered by Goffman (1986), as his key ideas are central to my argument. According to Goffman (1986), stigma can be regarded as any form of physical deformity or bodily abnormality, character flaws or identification with a particular race, religion or subculture. Goffman (1986) has suggested that stigmatisation has profound effects on the conceptualisation of the self, relationships with others, and the ways that stigmatised individuals present the stigmatised self in social encounters.
Of course, Goffman did not consider how the stigmatised self manages impressions in the context of the virtual world. Hugh Miller (1995) has situated Goffman’s key works on impression management and self presentation in such a context. Miller (1995) argues that the use of behavioural mechanisms with the purpose of manipulating impressions is central to the creation and maintenance of online identities. Miller’s use of Goffman’s work in the context of the internet allows me to suggest that Goffman’s work may be an important ally in considering the regulation of stigma by digital selves in the virtual worlds of online social networking.

Sherry Turkle (1995; 1996) is one of the first academics to consider selfhood and identity in the context of the virtual world. In the twenty-first century, it could be said that Turkle’s key ideas about self-expression, creativity and self-presentation in online contexts remain useful for investigating the methods used by digital natives for managing selfhood and stigmatisation in cyberspace. The creation and maintenance of an online self, or multiple selves, the regulation of relationships between users of internet sites, and the centrality of role-playing and acting in the formation of digital selfhood are some of the fundamental points made by Turkle (1995;1996) that I intent to draw on in my analysis.

In her research Turkle (1995) highlights the hyperreal nature of cyberspace. Identifying a link with the work of Jean Baudrillard on the concept of hyperreality, Turkle (1995) likens the experience of online gaming and identity creation to the hyperreal nature of social life today. According to Turkle (1995), cyberspace constitutes a
public space no different to the shopping complex or the street. Present in these places are ‘simulations’ – which Baudrillard understands as the mass production of imagery by the media, to the point where the ‘copy’ becomes more authentic than the original (Baudrillard 1994). Baudrillard (1994) suggests that the process of distinguishing between the real and the virtual, and representations and what is represented has been broken down by media’s use of imagery, a process depicted as ‘hyperreality’. Virtual space, according to Turkle (1996) is merely another dimension in which generation Y can participate in mediated and simulated experiences, such as friendship, political debate, romance or sexual exploits.

Methodological Approach

I intend to employ a qualitative research methodology in my research, with a focus on my reflexive role as both a researcher and member of the demographic I am investigating. I suggest that a qualitative methodological approach best allows for an interpretation and analysis of the regulation of social stigma on personal MySpace profiles. The rich, descriptive and interpretivist nature of qualitative social research allows for an analysis to be drawn about the meanings and importance of social phenomena people experience (Punch 2005). In applying the theoretical perspectives offered by Goffman and Baudrillard to the virtual world of MySpace, I suggest that an analysis that incorporates multiplicity, relativism and ambiguity in self-construction and self-presentation will best serve my purpose. I suggest that situating my research within
the qualitative methodological tradition will allow for a rich, descriptive and reflexive analysis of MySpace profiles.

My research method will take the form of a qualitative content analysis of selected features of the MySpace profiles of four Gen Yers. I have selected the categories for a qualitative content analysis of MySpace profiles based on my own experiences as a MySpace profile creator, and on my own interpretations of the key tools and features that allow digital natives like myself to creatively manage social stigma in cyberspace. The first of these categories for analysis is the “Default Pic”, which is a visual representation of the profile creator, featured on the profile homepage. The second of category is the “Display Name” which accompanies the Default Pic. This feature of the profile allows the creator to generate a ‘name’. The third category is the “About Me” feature of the profile. This aspect of the profile provides a space for the creator to disclose personal information about themselves that is made available to visitors to the page. The final category of analysis is the “Default Song” which is a audio track that can be easily uploaded to the profile using digital infrastructure contained within MySpace. The audio track begins playing for visitors when they arrive at the MySpace profile. These particular features of the MySpace profile, I have found through my own use of the social networking site, allow for creative approaches to virtual selfhood and the management of social stigma to take place.

Generation Y-ed to cyberspace
A key issue for selfhood and identity management lies in the ability to control and manipulate the information disclosed during social encounters. Perceptions of the self by others can be greatly affected by stigma, which Goffman (1986: 6) suggests are fundamental to the credibility of one’s identity. Goffman (1986) notes that the key differences between a “discredited” and a “discreditable” identity can be significant for the way that non-stigmatised individuals react to the stigmatised or spoilt identity. The “discredited” identity, according to Goffman (1986) refers to the identity of an individual who may be labelled with stigmas which are immediately obvious, either visibly or otherwise, upon social encounters with the individual. When the stigma is not immediately recognisable or not known before social contact is made, Goffman (1986) suggests that the identity is “discreditable”. This is because if, and only if, the stigma is disclosed or made known, the individual’s otherwise untarnished identity will be discredited. In the case of the discreditable individual, Goffman (1986) argues that the choice to disclose or conceal social stigma becomes a key issue of stigma management, which may have profound effects on the various relationships a discreditable individual may have with those whom they may share social encounters.

Goffman’s research focussed primarily on face-to-face social encounters. The internet poses a range of issues, breaks down boundaries and opens a space for many new opportunities for social interaction that are inapplicable to face-to-face contact, as identified by Miller (1995). I wish to suggest here that the management of social stigma in online environments such as social networking websites is of considerable importance
for the virtual selfhoods of digital natives, and the relationships they have with each other in cyberspace. Sherry Turkle (1995; 1996), in her research about Multi-User Dungeons and practices of virtual identity, has suggested that cyberspace provides opportunities for users to experiment with creative practices of multiple identities. Many of the participants of Turkle’s (1995; 1996) research were young people on the cusp between Generation X and Y, who were discovering the freedom and opportunity that the internet provided them in terms of both social and cultural practices of selfhood. Some of Turkle’s (1996) participants reported being social outcasts or ‘losers’ in the non-virtual world, but popular, attractive and sexually desirable in the worlds of the online games in which they participated. According to Turkle (1996), many of these young people sought refuge in cyberspace for the comfort, sense of belonging and heightened self-esteem that was not available to them outside of the virtual world. The internet, therefore, allowed for otherwise socially stigmatised young people to manage their social stigmas and selfhoods in new and creative ways.

Turkle’s (1995; 1996) research has centred on practices of selfhood among users of online games, rather than among users of social networking sites such as MySpace. I suggest, however, that there are some key similarities between the management of social stigma in online games and on social networking profiles. Both allow for the creation of a self, which may be an accurate representation of the self in the non-virtual world, or entirely and deliberately fictional, or somewhere in between. Generation Yers feel more secure with the knowledge that there are fewer perceived consequences for their decisions to engage in virtual self-representation.
In my own research, I have found that MySpace users have access to a number of opportunities for the regulation of social stigma that are unavailable in the same ways outside of this context. This has become apparent through my choice of categories for analysis. The findings of my investigation suggest that profile creators strategically disclose or conceal personal information about the self, particularly information that is visual and textual in nature that allows for the regulation of social stigma in digital environments. In one of the MySpace profiles I have analysed, a profile named “Corza”, I suggest that the profile creator employs a variety of techniques which allow the creator to portray a particular desired image of themselves as a particular type of person. Corza, who reports as being a 22-year-old male - so I will now refer to him as such - has displayed as his default pic an image of a young, tanned male standing beside a swimming pool on a sunny day. Wearing sunglasses, a baseball cap back-to-front and no shirt, Corza presents himself visually as a sports-loving, active and relaxed character. Visible signs of social stigma are not apparent from his default pic. Of course, the image displayed on Corza’s profile may not even be of his physical self, but a digitally enhanced photograph, or of a completely different person. The nature of internet social networking sites allows for visual representations of the self to be utilised that are as realistic or fantastical as one’s imagination.

It is the widespread use of distinct imagery on MySpace profiles such as that displayed on the profile of Corza which leads me to suggest that social networking profiles provide hyperreal representations of selfhood. As Baudrillard (1994) has argued, the production,
reproduction and dissemination of popular imagery has resulted in a breaking down of clear and seemingly unproblematic distinctions between reality and fantasy, to the point that images no longer represent reality, but ‘copies’, simulations, or simulacra. In the virtual world of MySpace, the default pic, I suggest, comprises a simulacra in many respects. It simulates something which may be real in the non-virtual world, but which may be treated as a legitimate and ‘real’ source of information in the context of MySpace. On Corza’s profile, the imagery of a young, athletic and attractive man may be considered a ‘seduction’- using Baudrillard’s terminology – with the purpose of portraying a particular desired representation of the self that Corza has created in MySpace. As default pics are changed (which is often on a regular basis), the imagery presented on the profile is continuously recreated in the process of hyperreality, with the repeated dissemination of similar imagery to those viewing the profile.

The default pic provides but one way that MySpace profile creators can manage social stigma in virtual space. The ‘About Me’ feature on MySpace profiles, which is usually placed near or next to the default pic, allows for the textual input of information about the self. I suggest that in the ‘About Me’ section, the profile creator is faced with a choice to disclose or conceal social stigma which may not be apparent from the default pic. To return to the concepts of discredited and discreditable identities articulated by Goffman (1986), it seems justifiable to suggest that the MySpace profile presents a discreditable identity, because of the availability of various strategies which allow for the concealment of social stigma in the virtual world. If the ‘About Me’ section, however, does not fit the visual representation of the profile creator in the default pic, the possibility of being
discredited by viewers is imminent for the creator. Therefore, in inputting textual information about the self in the ‘About Me’ section on the MySpace profile, I suggest that Generation Yers, like Corza, consciously input information that attempts to provide a representation of the self portrayed in the imagery of the default pic. On Corza’s profile, he states in the ‘About Me’ section that he is “very sporty and luv to club it up”. He also discloses information about the various sports he plays or has played and enjoys watching. I suggest that by making such claims on his profile, Corza is engaging in a deliberate attempt to demonstrate to viewers that the imagery portrayed on his profile is an accurate representation of himself. I suggest that this is common among Generation Yers who regularly communicate with and engage in various types of relationships with one another in virtual spaces such as MySpace.

**The diabolical seduction of the ‘default pic’**

In this paper, I have intended to argue that digital natives have been equipped with a means of managing social stigma that previous generations have not had access to. Internet social networking profiles provide opportunities for Generation Yers – the largest demographic of internet users – to creatively and strategically manage their selfhood and identities so as to prevent stigmatisation among peers. The virtual world allows for the self to be recreated or overhauled, in the search for social acceptance and belonging among young people.
I have also argued that the hyperreal nature of the internet, and particularly of imagery displayed in online environments, is a determining factor in the regulation of selfhood and the management of stigma, and especially visible stigma such as physical deformities. As imagery is reproduced in the context of the default pic, I have suggested that creators of online social networking profiles produce a simulacrum of the self that is portrayed in particular and purposeful ways by their creators.

In continuing and conducting my research, I intend to demonstrate that, for Generation Y, the internet is a central means of managing selfhood, communicating among peers and conducting meaningful relationships which may or may not exist outside of the virtual world. The opportunities that are available and the strategies that are used in virtual space for the management of social stigma represent one crucial way that the internet is changing the ways that young people understand and present the self and behave in social contexts.
Reference List


