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Abstract
Wikis and social networking sites (SNS) are arguably two of the most popular tools used by young people as part of their everyday social interactions. We propose that the concept of the wiki may be useful for understanding the kinds of virtual identities that are constructed, visually presented, and narrated in online contexts, such as MySpace. The term wikidentities is used in this paper to encapsulate the kinds of identity work which may occur through SNS. We argue that wiki–like behaviour has consequences for reconceptualizing identity as something that is mediated by (rather than at odds with) technology. Our research opens up ways for considering new forms of agency for young people appropriate to a high–tech era that encourages collaboration, negotiation, and risk.

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Introduction
Wikis and social networking sites (SNS) are arguably two of the most popular and important pillars of Web 2.0 applications. Both blur “the boundaries between Web users and producers, consumption and participation, authority and amateurism, play and work, data and the network,
reality and virtuality” (Zimmer, 2008). Wikis are collaborative or cumulative knowledge endeavors that allow a user “to add material and to edit and delete what previous users have done.” [1] SNS are Web–based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi–public profile, create a list of “friends”, view and interact with other “friends” and connections made by others within the system [2].

The concept of the wiki, as we currently know it, has prompted a revolution in the way we understand information and knowledge creation processes. The concept of authorship is radically reworked: the process of knowledge creation and refinement is located within a group, and therefore claiming individual ownership of parts of a wiki runs counter to the way that wikis operate. In applications such as Wikipedia, the validity of content is not guaranteed, but as Sunstein notes, through the operation of the Concordet Jury Theorem, the large audience of Wikipedia tends to ensure a reasonable degree of accuracy over time (Sunstein, 2006). The wiki develops some of the basic principles of Web 2.0 technologies and reflects a significant shift in contemporary understandings of knowledge, as it removes the role of the expert or hierarchy as the most valid source of knowledge, and relocates expertise within the group.

This paper contends that the Web 2.0 principles and democratic social philosophies behind wikis impact well beyond their interactive applications. We propose that the concept of the wiki may be useful for understanding the kinds of virtual identities that are constructed, visually presented, and narrated in SNS. We coin the term — “wikidentities” — to encapsulate the kinds of identity work that may occur through SNS. In order to explore our concept of “wikidentities”, we focus on teen engagement with MySpace.

Internet–active young people are not only the highest users of social networking applications, they are arguably the most creative in their use of the technology and innovative in the ways that they incorporate social networking applications into their identity re–presentations and social practices (Lenhart and Madden, 2005; 2007). By far, teenagers’ preferred social networking site is MySpace, which has become “the civil society of teenage culture” (boyd, 2007). Consequently, this generation’s engagement with social networking may indicate the developing trends for the technology, particularly in terms of how the technology may evolve to influence the ways we make sense of ourselves and the social world around us.

We begin by considering how identity construction is changing in an increasingly technologically–mediated world. We frame our discussion within cybercultural research on technology and online identity. Drawing on our research on high school students in Queensland (Australia), we examine how young people undertake identity work that relies on collective intelligence and creativity. Such wiki–like behaviour has consequences for reconceptualizing identity as something that is mediated by (rather than at odds with) technology. It also opens up ways for considering new forms of agency more appropriate to a high–tech era that encourages collaboration, negotiation, and risk.
Technologically-mediated identities: Wikidentities

Conventional understandings of human identity and agency are being revised in the light of technological mediation (Yaszek, 2002). By considering technological mediation as a productive rather than a disabling experience, writers such as Yaszek and others (Alexander, 2008; Sunstein, 2006; boyd and Ellison, 2007) have begun exploring how a range of online relationships offers positive and enabling outcomes. These outcomes are possible because of the changing technological consumer relationship that marks culture industries where the Web is a significant player.

We are living in an era where culture industries “seem to transform experience itself through replication, simulation, and re-presentation.” [3] Web 2.0, with its heterogenous and accessible platforms and services, is very much a part of a new generation of culture industries that not only manages the activities Yaszek describes, but, as we argue, enables new forms of collaborative identity work to be undertaken. Wikis, along with other Web–based services such as blogs, social networking sites, podcasting, and photo–sharing, have greatly increased connectivity by providing users with the tools and spaces to connect “based on their interests and personality.” [4]

The democratic philosophy behind wikis extends connectivity to the way in which information is user–driven as contributors participate in a cycle of continual updating, shaping, and reshaping information. While the “identity” of an individual contributor may be disguised, unknown, or revealed, there is nevertheless a “wikidentity” that comes with participation. This optimistic vision offers a real possibility of citizen subjects becoming active rather than passive consumers of information defined by the economic interests of the culture industries.

A more dystopian view is that the user remains a passive consumer of content created by unknown and heterogenous sources. Both views, however, converge at the point that these applications produce a wikidentity that is located at the interface of diverse bodies of information and communication.

A similar situation occurs with SNS. boyd and Ellison [5] contend that “SNS constitute an important research context for scholars investigating processes of impression management, self–presentation, and friendship performance.” While one purpose of SNS has always been one of social connectivity, another serves as a means for identity validation. As boyd and Ellison note, SNS also “serve as important identity signals that help people navigate the networked social world, in that an extended network may serve to validate identity information presented in profiles.” [6] In terms of the illusion of consumer power that culture industries like to promote, this validation process can be seen as a new spin on the “try before you buy” mantra of consumer awareness campaigns.

In terms of Yaszek’s point about culture industries transforming experience through various strategies of re-presentation and simulation, self–representation, SNS such as MySpace enable users to “fake” identity by renegotiating “authentic” re–presentations of the self [7]. In one sense, this creative textual production of the self subverts the validation process argued by boyd and Ellison. However, the more apposite point is that the narratives of identity and agency
that have traditionally been available to young people are being replaced by new ones that are the direct outcome of the larger technologically mediated world we all now inhabit.

A concomitant feature of Web 2.0’s ability for connectivity is its enabling approach to identity construction that extends notions of how identity is constructed within language and discourse. The collaborative approach to identity construction undertaken in SNS provides a space whereby an identity is “assembled” by drawing on a diverse set of materials and tools. When an individual or a group constructs an online profile, the resultant “identity” gives a particular interpretation or representation. Consequently, this "wikidentity" becomes a particular, collaborative process that changes according to purpose, context, and form. Drawing on data from our current research project, we consider these three aspects with respect to profiles on MySpace, in particular to their collective design and intelligence elements.

The study: Background and methodology

This paper draws on data from our research project investigating the networked spaces that "tech–savvy" youth inhabit, and in particular, from transcripts of focus groups and reflexive interviews conducted with 150 high school students (12–17 year-olds) from two urban and two regional Queensland high schools. The overarching aim of the project is to increase fundamental theoretical and professional knowledge about youth identity formation and sociality in online and off–line spaces. Specifically, our project is interested in exploring the ways in which young people develop a sense of personal and collective identity and membership in Internet–supported spaces.

Focus groups were conducted in all four schools in the first half of 2007, with five groups in each school, consisting of 12 students in each group. In the second half of the year, the research team drew on this pool of students again for reflexive group interviews, conducting one group interview in each school consisting of 14 students in each group. Focus group interviews concentrated on general areas of interest relating to the online and offline lives of teens, but used a video clip of American teenagers discussing MySpace as an initial prompt or talking point. Reflexive group interviews asked more specific questions about students’ understanding of creativity and creative pursuits, particularly as these may be influenced by Web 2.0 tools.

All focus group and reflexive interview sessions were tape recorded, transcribed, and reassembled according to clusters of themes that emerged across the data samples. In the light of the subject of this paper, our approach to data assembly was similar to the construction of a wiki in that it provided a convergence point of data which detailed collective (across the four research sites) and individual (from the students) points of view. Although the document was not available on a Web site, a feature which will be used in subsequent research by the team, it was computer generated and allowed for additional data to be checked in, edited, annotated, and tracked by the research team.
MySpace: Producing wikidentities

The idea that identity work occurs in a social context — in the interactions of the self with others — is not new (see for example, Cerulo, 1997; Valentine and Holloway, 2002). However, as we argued above, SNS provide new spaces and ways for virtual identities to be constructed, visually presented, and narrated. For boyd (2007), the act of creating and maintaining profiles on SNS serves as “an initiation rite” into these spaces, which have become an important part of contemporary youth culture. Albrechtslund (2008) makes a similar point by suggesting that participating in social networking “about the act of sharing yourself — or your constructed identity — with others.” From our research it would seem that many young people are aware of the impact of SNS for identity construction and representation. For example, students in the focus group interviews described the MySpace profile in the following ways [8]:

Female: ...it’s just like a personal page about yourself.
[Urban School 1 02/03/07]

Male: It’s a statement.
Male: Whatever makes you look good.
[Urban School 2 09/05/07]

Male: It’s what you really want everyone to think of you.
[Urban School 2 09/05/07]

Male: It is like your identity ... It is sort of everything you think you are, I guess.
[Urban School 2 09/05/07]

MySpace not only provides spaces for identity construction to take place in the representation of the self as an individual and as a member of a social network, it also structures this identity work according to the site’s own internal logic. The site design and philosophy may influence the ways users perform identity work in these spaces, but such interactions are more complex than they may appear. For instance, users may subvert, reinterpret or challenge the internal logic of the technology through such strategies as code manipulation, creative visual representation, and collective distribution of usernames and passwords. However, in other ways, MySpace enables collective identity work to occur through the tools and functionalities of the site. The following discussion explores these strategies that students in our study used, in conjunction with the functionality of MySpace for setting up profiles. In particular, we examine four distinct areas of profiles — content and design, profile images, Friends lists, and comments — where Web 2.0 and specifically wiki philosophies contribute to the construction of wikidentities.

I. Content and design
Construction of a profile is a central and necessary part of a user’s experience of SNS. MySpace provides a range of prompts that users can complete to depict their personalities; these include categories like Blurbs (About Me, Who I’d Like to Meet, etc), Details (Occupation, Zodiac Sign, Ethnicity, etc.), and Interests (Films, Television, Music, etc.). As boyd (2007) notes, many of these categories are holdovers from earlier generations of social networking applications, which aimed to provide spaces for people to meet new people for friendship or dating. Users may also create a blog, add music, video or photographs, publish updates on a bulletin board, or note their mood. These profiles function as avatars, which Bardzell and Bardzell [9] suggest may be “poor as literal representations of users, but they are rich as performed expressions of how users perceive themselves and/or desire to be perceived.”

While the MySpace profile attempts to structure identity work according to the application’s own logic, social as well as technological factors are responsible for shaping user practices [10]. As stated above, the students in our study often imposed their own values and logic onto the designs and content of their profiles. For example, they reported wide variations in the kinds of content they put on their profiles:

Male: I don’t know. Just stuff about me, where I live, [if] I’m single or occupied, stuff like that.
[Regional School 1 15/03/07]

Facilitator: … Tell us what you have on your MySpace. What do you put up there?
Male: Pictures. Like music that I like and things that like describe me as a person.
Facilitator: Would you put pictures of yourself up?
Male: Yeah.
Male: I’ve got pictures of myself on MySpace. I’ve got a video of me playing cricket and that’s the only video I’ve got on there. I’ve got music.
Male: Movies and stuff … favourites down.
Female: I have pictures of friends and stuff.
[Urban School 1 12/03/07]

Male: For those people who use it a lot that’s all well and good. Mine, there is pretty much nothing there except for one song. That is only because I use to keep in contact with this one person.
[Urban School 2 09/05/07]
Despite the prosaic nature of these comments by the students, they nevertheless demonstrate an “understanding of identity as self-presence” [11] and also give evidence of the social factors that frame identity negotiations (Williams, 2008). Photographs, “stuff about me”, a video, favourite music, friends, all of these visual artefacts and autobiographical descriptions offer temporary, contextualised accounts of the students at a moment in time. The ephemeral nature of their profiles, which is apt to change regularly or be disbanded, is in step with the nature of a wiki which can be changed, edited, culled, or replaced.

In addition to inputting information which builds a picture of the user’s unique identity, MySpace users can also express aspects of their personalities by customising the “look and feel” of their profiles with background images, layouts, banners and modifications inserted with direct HTML coding. This creative re-coding is enabled by a loophole in the MySpace architecture and has become a highly popular way of personalising one’s profile and creating an overall aesthetic (boyd 2007). Code for banners, layouts and other design elements exist on a wide range of Web sites, and are often free. However, inputting these elements into a MySpace profile requires some knowledge of HTML coding, and consequently represents a specialised computer skill that many young people have not previously needed to develop. Respondents in our study reported three main ways for inputting the content and design of their profiles: trial and error; getting advice from friends or from online sources; and having a third person (such as a friend or a sibling) design the site. This latter option — third-person design — is of most interest when considering the implications of collaboration for identity work on social networking sites, not only because this was a common response among our students, but also for the ways in which our students talked about it. The following excerpts illustrate these options that students take up:

Female: I didn’t even make my profile, my friend did. ’Cause I had no idea how to do it. So, it’s basically what my friend thinks of me, not myself. [Urban School 1 02/03/07]

Female: I only got MySpace about three weeks ago. Everybody’s had it for a really long time. But, even when I got it I didn’t know how to use it, so I had to get my brother to make it for me. [Urban School 1 09/03/07]

Male: I set one up and then my friend set my actual one up. But my computer wouldn’t let me put things onto the page. Facilitator: So when your friend constructed your site, did he do it with you? Male: I was on the phone with him. Facilitator: So you were telling him the
sorts of things you wanted to put on?
Male: Yeah.
Facilitator: And were you happy with what came up?
Male: Yeah.
[Regional School 1 03/05/07]

Facilitator: So how did you learn to make a MySpace?
Male: My friend did it for me.
Male: You just learn over time.
Male: Yeah, my brother did it for me.
[Urban School 2 09/05/07]

Female: I didn’t set mine up. My friends set mine up for me.
[Regional School 2 29/03/07]

Facilitator: … When someone else designs your profile and you look at it is it like do you think if someone saw this, this is like me or do you think no this isn’t really like me?
Female: Oh well my sister was pretty good with it but yeah.
Facilitator: So your sister did it pretty well; when you look at it you go yeah this is me.
Female: Yep.
Facilitator: What about for you [Male]?
Male: Yeah it was good. He just put like half-naked girl in the background [laughter], I was happy so [laughter].
[Regional School 1 30/10/07]

A number of themes are evident in these and other similar responses from the students. Firstly, students were often motivated to get others to design their profiles because of technical limitations or their own lack of coding knowledge, but it is also possible that having one’s friends set up a profile may function as a peer–bonding exercise. Secondly, the widespread trend among students to have friends or siblings design or co–design their profiles suggests that this is a very common kind of collaborative identity work young people are engaging in. Yet it should be noted that this particular kind of identity work is not specifically enabled by the MySpace functionality: the content and design sections of a profile are not areas that “anyone can edit” (as per the Wikipedia philosophy). Rather, it is a secure page that only the user, logged in with a username and password, can alter or add to. Thus, collaborative design work is not built in or encouraged by MySpace, but is arguably a function of young people’s wider understanding of sociality and identity. Finally, students had differing views on how these third party designs impacted on the kind of identity presented in the profile, ranging from an understanding that
the presented identity is the friend’s perception, to an acceptance that one’s sister may well understand and accurately portray one’s identity, to pleasure because a third party included a ‘cool-marker’ in the profile’s background, which may impact positively on ways that others subsequently perceive the user.

This collaborative design work may be understood in wiki terms: multiple people come together to build some information or application. Each participant brings different knowledge and skills to bear on the endeavour, and through negotiation and collaborative work, a product emerges (in this case, the profile). At the same time, the product is never in a final state, at least until its removal, and there continues the possibility of constant design alterations by any potential interested party (although limited to people of the user’s choosing). Thus, the “performed expressions” of the users’ identities [12] are both individually and collectively constructed, and this collaborative design phenomenon makes a particular statement about the user’s identity, which can be expressed as: “This is who we understand ‘me’ to be.”

II. Profile images

An integral part of the MySpace profile is the user image — an uploaded image file which is displayed as a public element of the profile. The image file is designed to function as a form of “authenticity” reinforcing the link between a “real” identity that can be captured in an image and the virtual identity presented in the profile. However, the technology cannot ensure that the image uploaded is a true and accurate representation of the user. Consequently, the profile image may attempt to give the appearance of substance, or the “real thing”, but the process of signification is not fixed, despite the internal logic of the MySpace platform (that is, the guiding perspective or view of the world which forms the rationale for MySpace’s architecture). The image then is open to resignification through substitution or transformation (e.g., users could use a photograph of someone else, or of multiple people, or a drawing of themselves, or an abstract image).

The students in our study usually noted that they used images of themselves on their profiles, but this was not universal. Decisions by some students to not to use a photograph of themselves (or if they did, then only in as part of a group) were linked to issues of risk-taking behaviour or fear of unknown consequences (this aspect is taken up later in the discussion). Using a group photograph is a common trend amongst young SNS users, and may suggest that young people are developing an understanding of their identities within the context of their social networks. In itself, this is not a revolutionary concept as adolescence is notably a time in which peer bonds become an important part of young people’s understandings of themselves. Perhaps, ironically, the architecture of MySpace encourages individuation through profile construction, even though its rationale is related to the establishment of collaborative social networks. Within this architecture, a preference for group photographs takes the collaborative element further than MySpace is structured for, and suggests that young people are likely to understand their profiles as a way of constructing identity as part of a collective of friends rather than as an individual in his or her own right.

III. “Friends” list

The third area of the profile in which collaborative identity work takes place is the “Friends” list on MySpace. As boyd [13] notes, “MySpace Friends are not just people that one knows, but
public displays of connections.” Indeed, the articulation of friendship links may serve as markers of identity for the user [14]. When discussing social networking contacts on MySpace, boyd and Ellison (2007) make the distinction between offline “friends” and online “Friends” (to indicate MySpace’s official term for this list of contacts). However, we follow Beer’s counter to boyd and Ellison noting that there are often overlaps between online and offline friends, and indeed, young people’s notions of friendship may be recursively “informed by the connections they make on SNSs” [15]; thus in our discussion we choose to refer to the MySpace Friends list but indicate no distinction between MySpace friends and other friends.

The MySpace Friends list was extremely important to the students in our study, because it demonstrates popularity, proves membership of a social group, marks one’s status and also provides a way of getting to know new people. The process of adding a friend to one’s list involves asking them for permission to be added, so the list shows evidence of complex decision–making processes. Participant responses from the study support the notion that “teenagers are more focused on socializing with people they knew personally,” [16] with students primarily adding people they already knew as the following students comment:

Female: I haven’t made friends through it because I only add my friends, like people that I know. [Regional School 2 29/03/07]

Male: ... I think that all the friends you have online you’ve met in person, you don’t just go online and go, “I’m gonna make some friends today, let’s go and search friends.com” or something. [Urban School 2 09/05/07]

By contrast, other students were keen to report how many friends they had on their Friends list:

Female: I only have 67 friends.
Female: ... have 300.
Female: Yeah. Like Melanie has like 200 and something.
Female: I have 67 friends. Most of them go to this school and most of them are in this grade or the grade below or above me. [Regional School 2 29/03/07]

Female: I’ve got 153 there. Most of them are people I know. People who’ve left Cairns and stuff who I keep in contact with and my family who’s overseas and everything. [Regional School 2 30/03/07]
Field observations during focus groups also noted that there was keen interest within the participant groups to find out how many social networking friends each participant had. This may be because “[t]he desire to be cool on MySpace is part of the more general desire to be validated by one’s peers” [17] and the number of friends a user has may indicate connectedness to the social network. Yet the quality of connections is also important: having a large number of close friends and acquaintances who also translate into social networking friends is a cool marker.

The issue of increasing one’s number of friends by adding random people may be perceived negatively by one’s peers [18], but in our study, only a small number of students reported adding people they did not know, or barely knew, as friends on MySpace or other social networking applications such as MSN. Nevertheless, the size of the Friends list was generally understood as relating to a person’s popularity or status. As one male student said: “I am just being honest you know. But, it is just cool for someone like when you are on MSN but you get 200 friends, and you are like ‘yeah’.”

The students’ discussions of MySpace Friends suggest that the inclusion of a Friends list on a user’s profile contributes to a collaborative depiction of his or her identity, particularly when the Friends list is understood in terms of a record of social interactions and decision-making processes. How many friends one has, what kinds of relationships they have with the user and their connections to each other all impact on the kind of identity a user is able to portray.

A Friends list may impact on a user’s identity representation to a significant degree, and it may have far-reaching implications. Each user makes decisions about representing their identity in their profiles, and when taken together as a searchable Friends list, all these profiles influence how one may perceive the owner of that list of friends. In other words, a third party can potentially search one’s Friends list and extending networks to gain a closer sense of what kind of person the user is by what their friends are like (see Walther, et al., 2008).

The Friends list functions in a way similar to some of the wiki functionality. In a Wikipedia entry, for instance, the individual entry is supported, validated and contextualised by a hyperlinked network of external links and cross-textual references from a range of disparate sources, which together create a cohesive body of knowledge. In MySpace, the Friends list functions as this contextualising framework, and the larger and more cohesive the framework, the clearer the depiction of the user’s identity may be.

Such frameworks have important practical applications, especially for young people, because they provide a strategy for evaluating both potential friends and potential threats. As Donath (2007) notes, membership of a linked social network implies that the information contained in a profile has, to some extent, been vetted by the group, although this veracity is defined according to the group’s social norms. While many of the students in our study reported using MySpace mainly as an adjunct space for offline friendships, making new friends through friends on MySpace was still a commonly reported activity. One male student described it as “a big chain.”

One of the fears that many adults hold about young people’s use of SNS is the threat implied by this “big chain” (see also Hinduja and Patchin, 2008). While the students in our study seem to think that being added by a friend was safe, they also reported drawing on a wide range of
information available to them through the MySpace functionality, including looking at the person’s profile photograph, their friends, mutual friends and, by implication, the look and feel of their profile:

Female: I just deny the scary people.
Female: Yeah. One’s whose pictures look scary.
[…]
Male: I try to stick to friends of friends.
Female: Yeah. That you see on your friends’ sites.
[Urban School 1 09/03/07]

Male: You can block people and stuff.
[…]. Then there’s like the paedophiles that go on and stuff. So you don’t have to add them.
Facilitator: So how do you know?
Male: Whether they’re a pedo? [group laughter]
[…]
Male: You can just like add your friends. Then if you add them — if they look a bit suss. Like if you’re one of their only friends and stuff. Because some people create new accounts. They say that they’re one person and to another person they might say that they’re another. So they’ve got to put that information on.
[Urban School 1 12/03/07]

Male: You can tell, when someone adds you, like who they got it off. Like it’s a little maze. So so–and–so from here, here, here and here.
[Regional School 1 15/03/07]

The strategies these students report using to evaluate potential online threats echo similar kinds of strategies used to verify information in a wiki: following trails and mazes of references and hyperlinks, cross-checking information against reputable sources, assessing the validity of the information based on attitudes of others within the network, and getting a general sense of whether the content and design adheres to the correct aesthetic for the alleged source. It should be noted, however, that no individual element in a profile can guarantee the safety of the person in question, and even taken cumulatively, profile information is not absolute proof of someone’s veracity.
Indeed, the wikidentity is not without risk; however, just like a wiki entry, the cumulative effect of profile image and information and Friends list and comments may contribute to a communally negotiated truth, where verification strategies such as searching for mutual friends can help establish a reasonable degree of veracity to the information presented. This degree of veracity accords with Sunstein’s (2006) point mentioned earlier, that the large audience of *Wikipedia* tends to ensure a reasonable degree of accuracy over time.

**IV. The Comments Section**

The final and perhaps most collaborative area on the MySpace profile is the comments section. This area allows asynchronous conversations to take place between the user and friends and is visible to anyone with access rights to the user’s profile. Friends will make a comment on the user’s profile, which will be displayed together with the friend’s profile image thumbnail and the date and time of the comment’s posting. When responding, the user’s own comments appear on the friend’s comment area. To a third party, the comments may appear as a series of disjointed conversational comments by the user’s friends, but if the profiles are open, or the third party has access to the friends’ profiles as well as the user’s own, then the full branching of conversations and comments can be followed, in a “public display of interpersonal commentary.” [19]

Like the Friends list, the comments area adds to the identity represented in the profile, particularly through the kinds of comments, the number of friends commenting, and the information revealed about the user. This section of the profile reflects the collaborative principles of wikis because it is the area least controllable by the profile owner: “social networking sites to some extent obviate an individual’s rules, negotiations, and disclosure decisions by placing discretion at the mercy of their social networks.” [20] Specifically, comments social networking friends make on a user’s profile contribute to that user’s presented identity so that social network users are indeed known by the company they keep (Walther, et al., 2008).

According to the students in our study, receiving comments from friends was generally perceived to be a significant attraction of using social networking sites like MySpace. The following explanation by a male student captures the general feeling of excitement and anticipation other students spoke about with respect to receiving comments:

Male: You crave the new comments. Say you’re away for like the weekend down the coast. Oh, I can’t wait to go check my MySpace and you’ve got like new picture comments, new messages, new comments, new friend requests, new birthdays and all that. You’re like oh yes! It’s pretty cool. [Regional School 1 15/03/07]

New comments are important to the students because they provide ongoing personal and collective validation of their currency within their social networks. Donath sees this as a form of “social grooming for the information age.” [21]
At least some students, however, were wary of the ways that comments can encourage users to attach notions of self-esteem to currency in the network, as the following student response suggests:

Male: I think it’s sort of a self-esteem thing too. Because if you log in and you see all these people commenting and stuff, you feel good. Then you log in and you’ve got no friends, then you’re like, “oh damn.” Like if you have self-esteem issues. But if you don’t, then you’re like, yeah, who cares? Like me personally, I’m just like “stuff it. Youse are all gay anyway.”
[Urban School 1 09/03/07]

The same student goes on to discuss a related issue with the MySpace comments function: the desire for recognition within the social network can prompt users to solicit comments. Solicitation may be achieved by regularly commenting on others’ pages in the hopes of reciprocation, by directly asking for comments, or by constantly updating one’s profile. However, this can place a burden on the user’s friends to respond, which may not always be welcome:

Male: Personally, I know people that were like “Why didn’t you comment me back?” and “I commented you. Why didn’t you comment me?” They send out little [...] Bulletins and new pictures. Please comment me. Go away! If I want to comment you, I’ll comment you. You know what I mean?
Facilitator: Do you feel that’s sort of harassment?
Male: It’s not really harassment. It’s just like ...
Male: Annoying.
Male: Yeah. We’ll comment if we want, stop asking us to!
[Urban School 1 09/03/07]

Finally, the lack of control users have over the comments friends make influence some students’ decisions to add or keep friends. In other words, some of the students were aware that these public comments impacted on their presented identities:

Male: Yeah, I usually allow anybody to [access my profile]. Or, like, say if they start harassing me or doing stupid stuff
on my profile then I’d probably delete them.
Facilitator: And have you had any people harassing you?
Male: No. Not that I know of.
[Urban School 2 09/05/07]

While what friends say matters in any context, online comments have a significant level of impact in that they are part of a distributed network that has the potential to extend well beyond the limits that off-line networks can manage. As the comments above indicate, it is not just a matter of what is said, but that something is said. However, despite this need or desire to be recognised, the content of the comments is also significant. As Walther and colleagues contend, whether comments are sanctioned or not, they can enhance or diminish an individual’s profile and perceived social standing within the MySpace friends’ network.

In theorising the recognition process that occurs through the comments area of MySpace, we suggest that when comments are made about someone it is similar to being interpellated into a discourse community whereby the action is one of citation or “hailing” in the Althusserian sense of calling out “Hey, you there!” [22] In terms of wikidentities, this interpellation confers and assumes certain identities during the action of “hailing” (that is, by the comments). However, individuals can resist being hailed and in doing so there can be a degree of satisfaction or sense of control.

From the instances reported above, students appear to derive this feeling of being in control by deleting comments or in refusing to comment further, thus breaking the momentum and chain of reciprocal commenting. While these actions might seem a logical course to take to stop annoying or harassing behaviour, they nevertheless demonstrate how a wikidentity is not one-sided. In order for a wikidentity to be effective, individuals either need to recognise him/herself as the one who is being “hailed” or take action to oppose such hailing, if required. This proposition is different from the findings by Walther and colleagues in that it allows for agency to occur at the technological interface. Our view concurs with Yaszek’s point made earlier that technological mediation can be a productive experience offering positive and enabling outcomes.

Conclusion

There seems little doubt that SNS like MySpace are providing many young people with new arenas for socialising with friends as well as new tools for performing identity work. Our research suggests that young people are not simply adapting their identity work to fit these technological applications. Rather, they are engaging creatively with the principles of Web 2.0 and manipulating identity presentation applications to suit their needs. Collaboration, both at a functional and conceptual level, is a vital part of this process. Functional collaboration occurs when young people work together to create content, and conceptual collaboration can be seen in how young people understand their identities as collaborative enterprises worked on by multiple members of the social network.
In this paper, we have identified four key areas of the MySpace application which encourage collaborative identity work or "wikidentities": the profile content and design, the profile image, the Friends list, and the comments section. Students in our study often considered the wider issues and implications of their engagement with these sites, and of their membership in these publicly articulated social networks, which suggests a strong level of engagement and a growing critical awareness. We also argue that students derive agency in subverting the internal logic of MySpace applications to suit their needs, and in taking action to stop harassing or annoying behaviour from others. The concept of "wikidentities", then, as identities subject to collaboration and constant evolution, offers an insight into young people’s perceptions of themselves as networked entities. It also offers a way of understanding how Web 2.0 and wiki philosophies are having a wider social impact beyond the technologies themselves.

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Notes


2. boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 211.


8. MySpace was by far the most frequently mentioned SNS across all four schools in our study, and findings indicate that most students either had a MySpace profile or had had one at some time in the past. Less popular SNS mentioned included Bebo, Hi–5, Piczo and Flixster. Facebook did not appear to be used by the students in our study.


18. Ibid.


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