Are they Acting their Age? Online Social Interaction and Identity in the Elderly

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The paper reports on a study which combined quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the relationship between Internet use and identity, particularly age-identity, in older Internet users. It has a theoretical basis in symbolic interactionism – particularly the theories of Erving Goffman – and conceptualises identities as roles that are negotiated during social interaction.

The focus on older users was motivated by the strong focus of prior Internet research on younger users. Few studies have examined older users specifically, and fewer still have examined age-identity.

Thus, the focus is on how changes in social interaction that occur due to Internet use affect the identity negotiation process. The research is focused around two key areas: whether older users experience the same kinds of online identity processes as younger users, and the impact exposure to novel audiences has on identity negotiation.

The study consisted of two phases. In the first, a quantitative survey was administered in which a measure of age-identity was assessed and compared with measures of audience novelty. Results showed that a significant increase in variance of age-identity is associated with communication with people from other countries. This finding supports the theory that identity is formed in negotiation with the audience with whom one communicates, and that expanding this audience may lead to identity effects.

To investigate this issue more deeply, a qualitative phase was conducted in which participants were interviewed using rapid ethnography techniques, and at the conclusion of which a model of the interaction between age-identity and Internet communication was developed. This model was then verified with follow-up interviews with key informants and with field observations from sites of online social interaction among seniors.

The model developed during the qualitative stage identifies three ways in which age-identity is influenced by social interaction on the Internet. First, the Internet is used in response to emotional or practical consequences of ageing. Second, older Internet users could take advantage of the ability to manage their personal front online to achieve agelessness, and third, the Internet is used as a backstage area to discuss age-identity issues. The context of these claims is all-important; each individual's unique circumstances, emotions and motivations influence the way in which they will use the Internet and respond to others encountered through it.

The extension of Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor to age-identity on the Internet and to include the concept of character development, in which identity evolves over time in response to inner tensions and external events, is a tentative but powerful finding. It poses a challenge for future research into the nature of identity change, both online and offline.

1. INTRODUCTION

Long fought over by philosophers, sociologists and psychologists, self and identity are "cornerstones of well-being" (George, 1998). Despite this significance, they are often poorly distinguished. The distinction is perhaps best explained as that of the difference between a process and its outcome – the *self* is a process, while *identity* is the outcome of that process, described by many in terms of roles. Some roles are adopted while we are very young, *e.g.* gender, but others are not adopted until much later in life, *e.g.* professional roles or those that come with adulthood (such as mother or father). Self and identity are not only cornerstones of our well-being; they are practically a cornerstone of our existence. Socially constructed, they cannot develop in isolation. Communication is critical to personal development and the development of society. Social interaction shapes who we are and how we relate to others.

This raises a key question: what changes in the nature of people have resulted as the Internet has diffused through western society? Since its commercial adoption in the early 1990s, the Internet has altered the way we interact in many ways, from online church services and to the massive growth of online dating and electronic commerce. If one understands the changes to identity, one can better understand human behaviour. It is an enormous undertaking to fully appreciate the diverse implications of Internet use, and what follows here is a record of a research project investigating a single aspect of this problem – the impact of Internet use on age-identity in older adults.

Australia – and likely many other, similar countries – is faced with an increasingly aged population, and a growing proportion of the aged that use the Internet. Clearly, the potential for changes in identity and the self due to online social interaction is also likely to grow, yet little is known about how online social interaction affects the elderly in general, and practically nothing is known about how it affects identity.

This is not to say that policies which aim to promote Internet access for the elderly are undesirable or ill-advised; indeed, access should be promoted. What is lacking is a wider understanding of the consequences of such policies. In Australia, Internet use among the

55-64 and 65 and over age groups continues to grow (ABS, 2005). Further, Internet use among older users is overwhelmingly for personal and private use, *i.e.*. 91% (ABS, 2005).

The paper uses Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor to include a concept of character development and applies Goffmanian social theory to an area in which it has previously not been applied, and in doing so demonstrates that the development of ad hoc theory to explain online social behaviour is unnecessary. In fact, by using Goffmanian dramaturgy, it is possible to explain previously contradictory results surrounding uninhibited communication online.

For Goffman, identity is a person's "subjective sense of his (*sic*) own situation and his own continuity and character that an individual comes to obtain as a result of his various social experiences", is socially negotiated, and is based on the roles an individual plays in social situations (Goffman, 1963: 105). The aspect of identity that is considered in this study is age-identity, which is often provided as exemplar but is rarely the focus of analysis and discussion. Levy *et al*. (2003) suggest that defining who qualifies as an older adult is a methodological challenge because ageing is a process. Logan *et al*. (1992: 452)'s definition of age identities as "labels that reflect how people perceive themselves in terms of age" is used as it does not exclude any particular age groups. It is assumed that social interaction on the Internet is a relevant factor for role identities.

2. THE INTERNET

Research and commentary about the Internet have followed a progression from simple, polarised utopian and dystopian reactions to richer, more nuanced understandings over time. Utopian and dystopian visions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and for most people, the impact of the Internet and also the information society as a whole is likely to be somewhere in between both extremes. Noting that the Internet may be beneficial at some times, and detrimental at others, Katz and Rice (2002) coin the term syntopia – a "together place" that can be either positive or negative.

In contrast to the earlier hype surrounding the Internet as either an egalitarian and prosocial, or isolating and antisocial, later work takes a middle ground. After sufficient time for

reflection had elapsed, these simplistic reactions to the Internet were succeeded by more nuanced understandings (DiMaggio *et al.*, 2001), termed "technorealism" by Fisher and Wright (2001). A similar progression in the theories have been proposed to explain behaviour in computer-mediated environments such as the Internet. From simplistic theories based on the Cues-Filtered-Out (Carlson and Davis, 1998) perspective to approaches that emphasise the social aspects, such as Social Information Processing (Walther *et al.*, 1994) and the Hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1997), Internet theories have become increasingly sophisticated.

Regardless of this progression, however, all these theories have their analytical basis in the varying degrees of anonymity present in mediated interaction in comparison to face-to-face interaction. Yet there are many dimensions to social interaction, and many characteristics of mediated interaction that may affect interaction, such as perceptions of time and space. Rather than endeavouring to develop new theories, Internet research can benefit from the rich body of theory from disciplines such as sociology and social psychology that already exists, and take advantage of the opportunities to apply these approaches to Internet-mediated interaction.

In particular, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework, based on theatrical metaphors, has been used as a basis for past research into both webpage construction and other Internet-based forms of communication (Dell and Marinova, 2002). Users exploit language as a key way of performing identity in text-based computer-mediated communications (CMC), and people play both within and with language. Creating web pages is another way of performing identity, and authors of personal web pages are able to create an idealised self.

The same strength cannot be claimed for the body of theory developed to explain behaviour in computer-mediated environments. The bulk of empirical research on Internet use has focused on younger adult or student populations (e.g. Brignall and Van Valey, 2005; Leung, 2001; Bortree, 2005). Little empirical research on various other age groups has been conducted, including older people – particularly in the relationship between Internet use and social support (Wright, 2000; Eastman and Iyer, 2004).

This is in a context of societies that are ageing (Foskey, 2001) and in which Internet use by older users is increasing (Barnett and Adkins, 2004). Yet the technological infrastructure to support increasingly aged populations is largely absent; Coughlin (2001) describes this as the "longevity paradox". Only recently have governments and other agencies begun to investigate seriously the technological needs of aged societies, and in the case of the Internet, this must be attempted in the face of the dearth of relevant research. This problem is made all the more urgent by modern societies' increasing reliance on the Internet to provide services, activities and functions. Also, while it is tempting to assume that this problem is only temporary, pertaining only to the current elderly generation, it is likely that the speed of change and introduction of new applications will ensure this problem persists. Tomorrow's elderly – today's middle-aged, basic Internet users – will likely find themselves in a similar position.

3. THE STUDY

3.1 Internet and the Elderly

Although not universally accepted (*c.f.* Findlay, 2003), a large body of literature suggests that computer and Internet use can be of benefit to older people in many ways (*e.g.* Namazi and McClintic, 2003), yet older people have historically been reluctant to take up the use of ICTs (information and communication technologies). Although this reluctance has begun to change in recent years, the elderly remain under-represented in ICT use in many countries. One possible explanation is simply that older people perceive new technologies to provide little benefit (Vuori and Holmlund-Rytkönen, 2005). A more common perspective interprets the reluctance of elderly users to adopt ICTs as apprehension and according to Ito *et al.* (2001: 18), it appears that "age identity probably trumps other cultural categories" when it comes to stereotypes about technology capabilities. This is entirely consistent with social construction theories of the self (Goffman, 1959), which take the position that behaviour is greatly influenced by socially constructed self-identity. The myth that seniors are incapable of using computer technology affects not just their behaviour; it is also institutionalised in policy, research and service sectors, leading to it becoming a "self-fulfilling prophesy" (Hazzlewood, 2004).

Nevertheless, those older people who *do* use the Internet are more likely to believe that the elderly are capable of learning new skills, particularly computer skills, than those older people who do *not* (Blit-Cohen and Litwin, 2004). These findings, considered together, suggest that lack of belief in their own capability may inhibit some older people from using the Internet. Well-designed training programs can result in large, positive changes in attitude towards the technology, at least in terms of searching the web (Kubeck *et al.*, 1999). Groups such as computer clubs are a highly effective way of increasing older users' skills (Barnett and Adkins, 2004).

Once they become regular users of technology, the ability of older users does not differ from that of other age groups (Bucur *et al.*, 1999). After adapting to its use, many older users may become less anxious, and in some cases extremely positive towards computer technology (Campbell and Wabby, 2003).

A large proportion of the available research into older people's use of the Internet also investigates health and well-being aspects, particularly in the areas of illnesses and diseases more common in older populations. This is not surprising as health often becomes a more important issue for people as they get older (Madan and Bodagh, 2002).

Another key reason that older adults begin to use the Internet is to use e-mail to keep in contact with family and friends (Adams, 2001), although it should be noted that this is a key driver not just for older users but for the Internet population in general. Another factor attracting older users to the Internet, as well as other computer-mediated systems, is that this facilitates social interaction with a diverse range of people, including those of other generations, and can help older people feel more integrated into society (Wright, 2000).

The availability of social support for the elderly in the West is likely to decrease in general due to the decreased fertility of "baby boomers" and as these generations grow older. Thus, it is increasingly valuable to understand how elderly users use the Internet to prevent future problems stemming from social isolation. It is also important to recognise the national and cultural context in any study of Internet use (McCurry *et al.*, 2002). One of the advantages of employing

Goffman's theoretical framework is that his "core sociology" is not specific to any particular culture (O'Neill, 1992).

3.2 Research Questions
Internet research conducted to date has neglected different sections of society; in particular older adults have been largely overlooked. This study attempts to fill in some of these gaps within an Australian context by asking the following two questions:

(1) Do older Internet users experience the same identity processes as younger users when online?
(2) What effects does Internet use by elderly users have on their identities?

3.3 Quantitative Findings
A quantitative on-line survey of 82 Australian older Internet users (Figure 1) was conducted in 2006. The analysis identified computer-mediated interaction with people from other countries (Figure 2) as an area in which identity effects are likely, supporting the theory that interaction with people from novel audiences can affect the identity negotiation process. Using a technique based on the Burke-Tully method (Burke and Tully, 1977), seven factors out of a range of perceptions about old age (Figure 3) which might be affected by interactions with novel audiences were identified: Activity, Value to others, Respect from others, Health, Strength, Energy, and Outward appearances.

3.4 Qualitative Findings
Domain analysis (Atkinson and Abu El Haj, 1996; Spradley, 1979) was used to interpret the information from ethnographic interviews with 14 Australians and field observations on CMCs. The relationship between the identified domains and theoretical concepts as they relate to identity is shown on Figure 4. It must first be stated that the model is not linear, and illustrates three ways in which ageing, identity, and Internet communication are interrelated (by a number enclosed within a circle). This cyclic, iterative character indicates that there is a temporal aspect to identity change, as each individual's age-identity evolves in response to online events that occur over time.

First, health problems and physical decline can restrict a person's activity and can alter the degree of social isolation they experience, leading to emotional responses which can be positive or negative or an ambivalent combination of both, and may be characterised

by feelings of fear, contentment, boredom and loneliness. Varied responses such as these affect an individual's motivation to use the Internet; in other words, ageing affects the purposes for which users' access the Internet. For example, loneliness may lead to friend-seeking behaviour, whilst contentment with one's relationships and social connections is less likely to produce such an outcome. Boredom may motivate online activities such as using the web chat rooms to pass the time, while concern about health might motivate the user to seek out health information.

Internet use can in turn affect the original emotional response that prompted it; for example, the lonely may form friendships online, or their loneliness might be further exacerbated by exclusionary online communities. The bored may find new interests or might find the Internet even more boring, people worried about their health might be calmed or further alarmed, and such outcomes may have consequences for identity. Hence the trigger for identity change can be serendipitous and unanticipated. The potential of each individual to be exposed to such events is affected by their perceptions of Internet communication, which affect the ways in which they use the Internet. If the Internet is perceived as trivial or too difficult to learn they are of course unlikely to use it. Likewise, if they hold the belief that communication on the Internet is shallow, that the Internet inhibits communication, or if they have a distrust of strangers on the Internet, they are unlikely to seek meaningful social contact online. On the other hand, if people believe they are capable of using the Internet successfully and that it is worth using they will be motivated to do so. Similarly, if they believe that the Internet can sustain meaningful social contact they are more likely to seek friendship online and social isolation or boredom may be lessened as a consequence.

In other cases, where older people feel no such barriers to online communication, they are more likely to seek meaningful social interaction online. If such cases are motivated by unhappiness or dissatisfaction with old age and still feeling "young on the inside" or "young at heart", the anonymity afforded by the Internet may be exploited to create an ageless personal front (Figure 4, relationship 2). This in turn can contribute to feeling younger, and possibly lessening the original source of dissatisfaction.
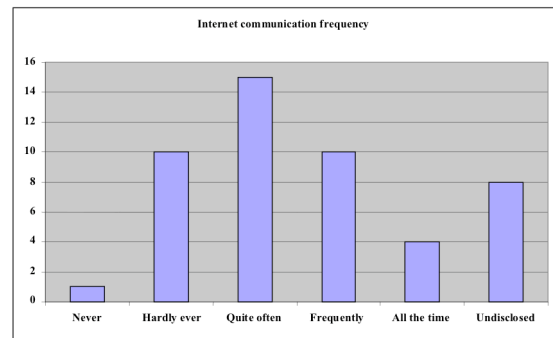

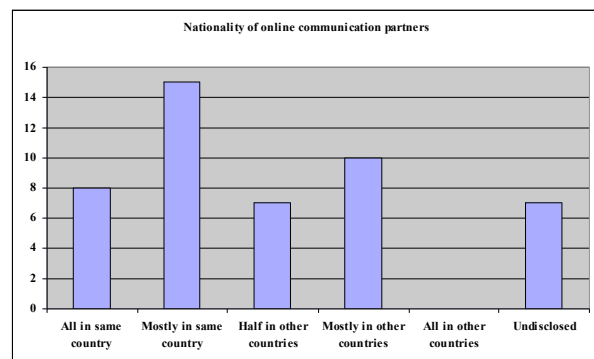Figure 1. Internet communication frequency of respondents

Figure 2. Nationality of online communication partners

Anonymity also helps facilitate the creation of situations in which in-depth discussion of age-identity issues is fostered (relationship 3). Such discussions are motivated by dissatisfaction with ageing or being old, and many online support groups exist in which members exchange social support relating to age-related concerns. Both relationships 2 and 3 illustrate identity change as a result of dissatisfaction with one's current age-identity. Thus, identity change can be driven by internal pressures as well as by serendipitous external events as described above.

4. CONCLUSION

The model proposed here thus encapsulates three aspects of Internet communication that are relevant to ageing and identity. First, people may turn to the Internet to mitigate some of the practical consequences of ageing, which may in turn influence some of the causes of these practical consequences. Second, the Internet can allow management of personal front in ways that would be difficult or in other methods of interacting socially, leading to experiencing agelessness. Third, the Internet can facilitate discussion of age-related issues, which may lead to novel insights or feelings about one's own

age. This model owes much of its creation to the dramaturgical framework of Goffman. The study revealed that identity is influenced by users' offline contexts, emotional states, and the range of social situations in which they interact. Identity effects are deeply personal and cannot be considered only at a group level. The impact of dramaturgy is that it draws the researcher's attention to the fact that this is not necessarily sinister or unusual as it has been previous portrayed. In fact, impression management is a normal characteristic of all interaction and plays a major role in identity formation. Thus, relationship 2 is bi-directional, something that would likely have gone unnoticed has the thesis been guided by other theoretical frameworks. Similarly, Goffman's distinction between front and backstage interaction focuses the researcher's attention on the different affects social interaction can have on identity, even if such interactions are with the same people. This would have been difficult to conceptualise within other theoretical frameworks that ignore the user's wider context.
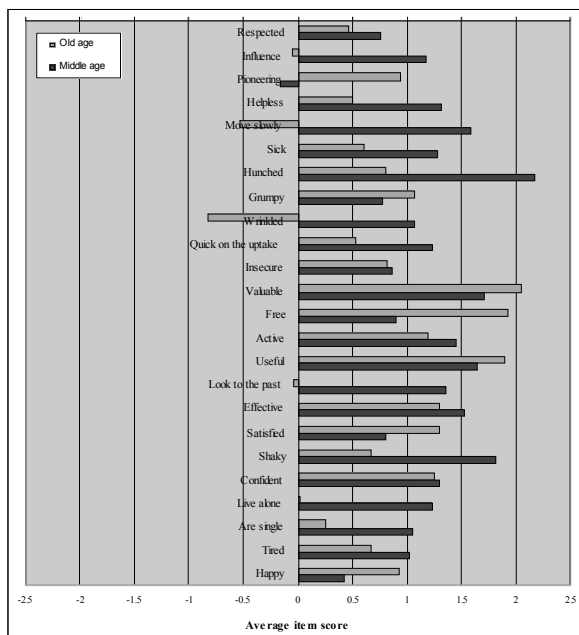
static in dramaturgy, and although useful for analysing identity in general, it did not greatly help to understand temporal aspects such as identity change. However although Goffmanian dramaturgy aided the study of identity in many ways, it also became clear that dramaturgy did not capture the concept of identity *change* particularly well.
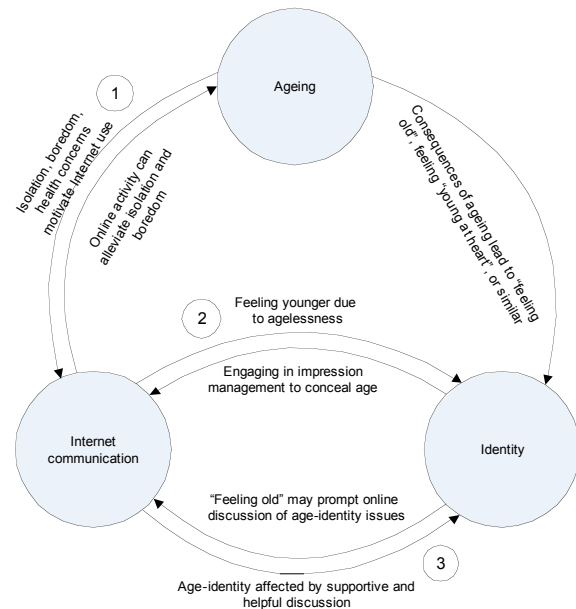

Figure 4. Model of theoretical concepts

Figure 3. Comparison of perceptions of old-age and middle-age

Roles, a fundamental concept in dramaturgy, were also useful in understanding participants' identities. Thinking about identity in terms of a role focused the researcher's attention on the effect a person's age might have on others' expectations of them and of their thoughts about themselves. Nevertheless, the concept of role is

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