

## **Negotiating social roles in semi-public online contexts**

For: *Discourse and identification: diversity and heterogeneity in social media practices*, edited by Sirpa Leppänen, Samu Kytölä, & Elina Westinen

### **Introduction**

- 1) *I've been very careful not to mention anything about looking for a job on facebook recently, even if writing on someone else's wall, for the worry that my boss or a colleague will come across it, and I've also been careful not to post too much information or many photos about what I've been getting up to... In fact, my personal and professional lives have been so complicated recently, that different people know different things about each, so I generally avoid posting anything about either subject.*

Through exploring the processes of identity performance that shape social media interactions, this chapter makes a case for conceptualizing social media as a product of people's social lives, rather than seeing digital technology as an external factor determining social behavior. The quote above comes from Siobhan, a participant in a survey we carried out into the social factors which shape decisions about what and how people post to the social media platform Facebook. This particular comment is typical of a large proportion of responses from the survey. Siobhan consciously negotiates her personal, social and professional lives online based on her perceptions both of the affordances of the social media context and the ways in which identity work is socially achieved in this context. Processes of identity performance on social media, such as the one illustrated here, take place in an environment which is usually described in the literature in terms of 'context collapse' (Marwick & boyd, 2011), whereby various offline audiences (e.g. family members, work colleagues, friends) are brought together in a single online space. This context has been shown to trigger a complex range of audience design strategies on the part of some users (Tagg & Seargeant, 2014), who negotiate the possible communicative hazards that the environment can give rise to by targeting their posts at certain sections of their audience

while excluding others and by making conscious decisions about style and content based on their intuition of the contexts in which their posts may be read and interpreted. In this chapter, we develop the notion of context collapse to better account for users' agency in constructing context through their decisions using our theoretical concept of 'context design' (Tagg, Seargeant & Aisha Brown, forthcoming).

Our chapter extends current understandings of contemporary social relationships by drawing on a questionnaire-based survey of over 100 Facebook users to identify and elaborate two important factors shaping online behavior: firstly, the extent to which people's online identity performances are shaped by the continued recognition of the social roles they inhabit offline (thus challenging notions of an online-offline divide); and, secondly, the extent to which users are aware of the likely trajectories and potential accessibility of their postings, and thus which social roles they deem relevant in the online context. Our argument is that online interactional spaces are not shaped primarily by technical affordances or a company's design decisions, but by users' complex understandings regarding the management of pre-existing social roles and their relationships with other users, and how this awareness shapes the ways in which site affordances are appropriated and negotiated for social purposes. Our focus is on highlighting how people's offline social roles are made relevant in social media contexts in two key ways: firstly, in how they are put forward as an interactional resource for identity work and relationship building; and, secondly, in how users' perceptions of their roles (and the social expectations which typically accompany them) may potentially shape or constrain what they post and how they manage their online communication. Our survey data thus highlights the ways in which processes of identity performance online may be shaped by people's (dis)orientations towards perceived social roles and conventions.

The chapter begins by discussing theoretical approaches to online identity, how this relates to the concept of social roles, and a number of key explanatory principles concerning online communication. We then introduce the method and context for the research itself, before moving to a detailed analysis of the survey data, and the significant insights this gives into the way that people negotiate social roles and relationships in contemporary social media contexts.

## Theoretical precepts

### *Identity and social roles in theory and practice*

While early researchers into the internet suggested that users were ‘free’ to discard and put on identities at will (Danet, Rudenberg-Wright & Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1997; Reid, 1991), changes in both practice and theory have led to a re-evaluation of these ideas and of the perceived distinction between offline and online lives which had acted as an underlying structural context for work around the topic (Turkle, 1995). The main development is that technology is now seen to be fully embedded into our everyday lives, and it is recognized that our online behavior is very much situated in our offline lived experiences, even where it appears to extend what is possible or likely offline (Jones, 2009a; Lee, 2014). Indeed, many social media platforms – defined broadly by Leppänen, Kytölä, Jousmäki, Peuronen and Westinen (2014: 113) as ‘digital environments in which interaction between the participants constitutes an important part of their activities’ – work on the basis of existing relationships. In other words, people tend to connect with those they have some kind of offline relationship with (boyd & Ellison, 2008) and they use social network sites in great part as a means of documenting and organising events and activities in their ‘offline’ lives.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, it is of particular interest to look at the extent to which an individual’s diverse ‘offline’ social roles – as parent, professional, friend etc. – are enacted or extended online, and how an awareness of one’s offline responsibilities and relationships, and the concomitant expectations of those one interacts with, shape online behavior. Although not a focus of this chapter, this process works both ways, so that online social roles may also be enacted and extended offline.

Following Golder and Donath (2004), we define *social role* as constituting a ‘mixture of allowances and constraints, combined with the choices the individual makes given this mixture’. This understanding of social roles – as emerging from people’s responses to perceived expectations and social norms – acknowledges that people’s behavior is ‘not random, nor is it a free-for-all’ (Blackledge, Creese & Takhi, 2014: 486), whilst also recognising that social categories do not rigidly predetermine how individuals will act. We therefore highlight the

importance of people's perceptions of their ascribed roles and of the roles they orient towards – or make relevant – in understanding and managing social situations (Williams, 2005) and in performing social identities. Central to our understanding of social roles is the recognition that, in complex modern societies, people affiliate simultaneously and often fleetingly with diverse social categories (Blommaert & Varis, 2013) which requires them to negotiate multiple social roles. From a Bakhtinian perspective, these social roles are historically- and socially-contingent, emerge from interaction, and are dynamically (re)shaped in processes of (dis)alignment and social positioning (Blackledge et al., 2014). Our research contributes to this literature by showing how people explicate these diverse social roles in explaining and justifying their interactional behavior, and how this contributes to their own understanding of their identity performances.

Online communities have been described as generating their own virtual social roles. Newon (2011), for example, in the context of gaming, documents how the role of 'raid leader' is filled according to the experience, expertise and authority that players accrue through playing the game; while, in their study of Usenet, Golder and Donath (2004) identify emergent roles such as 'celebrity' and 'ranter' alongside more widely-recognized roles as 'lurkers', 'flamers', 'trolls' and 'newbies'. However, their assertion that 'all the roles and, indeed, all the social structures that are present in newsgroup communities [like Usenet] arise solely through the behavior of the participants' (p. 1) relies on a distinction between online and offline worlds that cannot be upheld: Newon (2011), for example, found that women rarely put themselves forward as potential leaders; in other words, that pre-existing gender roles had continued relevance online. Our study extends this body of online research by exploring the ways in which multiple perceived social roles are (re-)enacted online.

In this chapter, we consider perceived social roles both as resources on which people draw and as polycentric normative centers (Blommaert 2010: 39-41) to which they orient in performing identity. In terms of how identity is theoretically conceptualised, internet researchers have increasingly drawn on contemporary constructivist ideas about its nature (e.g. Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou, 2003). Identity is now predominantly understood, in sociolinguistics as in other disciplines, not as a stable, predetermined property of an individual, but rather a set of resources which people draw upon in presenting and expressing themselves via

interaction with others (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), and which includes people's awareness of relevant social roles. People actively and repeatedly co-construct and negotiate their identities (within the constraints afforded by a range of societal and individual factors), and present themselves in different ways depending on the particular contextual circumstances in which they operate. In this chapter, we explore people's awareness of the potential relevance of perceived social roles to their performance of identities through Facebook postings and interactions.

### *Social media affordances and identity*

In recent years researchers into online interaction have tended to move away from a focus on member profiles (e.g. Kytölä 2014; Parks 2011) to look instead at the dialogic construction of identity through updates and comments, seeing this as the most meaningful and locally relevant practice by which users present themselves (Vásquez, 2014). Given the relative disembodiment afforded by sites such as Facebook, where attributes available to speakers in face-to-face contexts – tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, gender, age and accent – are much less salient, if accessible at all, social media participants engage in *writing* themselves into being (boyd 2001: 119) – where writing is seen as a rich semiotic system which goes beyond the purely verbal. That is, they portray themselves not through physical co-presence but through the use of a set of diverse but largely text-based and visual resources, including moving images such as animated GIFs and videos which involve audible content.

As well as the particular set of resources that users are able to draw on, performances of identity on social media are further constrained by the perceived nature of the online audience. In this respect, the notion of 'context collapse' is important. This term refers to the potentially vast audience that is possible online, and way that the different local contexts which give individual utterances or other semiotic acts their meaning run together in communication via the social web (Wesch, 2009). As used by boyd, it describes the phenomenon on social network sites whereby a user's potential audience may be drawn from across the various people that make up their Friends list (we follow boyd and Ellison's (2008) convention of capitalising Facebook Friends), and where the exact composition of an audience for any one post is therefore unknowable (boyd,

2001; boyd & Marwick, 2011). The importance of this concept for communication on social media is due to the ‘intradiverse’ (Tagg et al., forthcoming) nature of the networks that people accrue on such sites. Facebook is ‘semi-public’ in that, although access to a user’s posts is normally restricted to their ‘Friends’ and not open to a general public (depending on the user’s privacy settings), posts are generally not targeted at one individual or group, but to the diverse range of people that can constitute a user’s Friends. Our concept of intradiversity refers to the way in which the audience that people are writing for on Facebook is shaped by complexes of personal networks, individual experiences and mutual friendships, rather than being either unpredictably diverse (or ‘superdiverse’<sup>2</sup>). Nor are Facebook users’ Friends usually organized along the traditionally-defined community lines assumed by concepts such as the speech community (where people are generally from the same geographical locality) or communities of practice (where people share common interests or goals). Instead, the potential audience for any one post is to some extent predictably structured by the poster’s particular life trajectory, including their level of mobility, social connections, and experiences.

The implications that context collapse and intradiversity have for identity performance are that people must negotiate ways of communicating while presenting themselves in the same way to a variety of potential audiences simultaneously (Jones & Hafner, 2012: 152). This is often further complicated by their awareness of the potential *persistence*, *searchability* and *replicability* of their messages (boyd & Marwick, 2011) – that is, the fact that the content of a post can persist indefinitely online (permanence), often in copied or remixed form (replicability), and that it can be searched for and found by other users (searchability). As such, digital content has the potential for great *scalability* in the sense of having great reach and visibility (boyd & Marwick, 2011). People thus develop strategies for distinguishing between different strands of the potential audience, and for presenting themselves in ways which target certain individuals and groups and exclude others (Tagg & Seargeant, 2014). This chapter explores the ways in which people account for choices they make when posting to an intradiverse audience, and the criteria they use for doing so.

### *Context design*

One of the implications of the semi-public nature of Facebook and the invisibility of audiences (boyd & Marwick, 2011) is that Facebook users are not so much targeting or responding to a pre-existing audience as actually ‘constructing’ it.

Theories of audience design – based on the observation that people engaged in interaction construct an *idea* of their audience for the purpose of giving context to their utterances and that this is then reflected in the ways they shape their communication (Bell, 1984; Goffman, 1981) – work on the principle of people drawing on what are perceived to be shared practices, and at the same time enacting and elaborating upon these practices (through processes of code-switching, style-shifting etc). In this sense, communities on Facebook can be seen as a construct emerging from a user’s perception of shared communicative practices, as reflected in their audience design strategies – the decisions many users make and enact about style, language choice, topic of conversation – and the way they draw upon existing (or former) social roles and relationships in performing identity online and affiliating with others.

However, whereas audience is a key factor determining speaker style, sociolinguists have long recognized the range of other contextual variables that also shape language choices (Hymes, 1974) and that shifts in style can in turn shape the kind of space in which participants interact (Gumperz, 1982). Online spaces might offer particular challenges to users because of what Moore (2004) calls ‘the doubling of place’; the fact that people must orient towards more than one physical and/or social context, as well as towards the norms and expectations of the immediate online space (Jones, 2009b) and the possible future contexts into which their posts may be entextualized (embedded and reinterpreted in new contexts) (Leppänen et al., 2014). The survey drawn upon here, as well as other work we have done (Tagg & Seargeant, 2014), suggests that many Facebook users in effect imagine particularly complex contexts to which they respond as they construct their posts, although they may not always be aware of this process. We call the process ‘context design’, building both on audience design theory and sociolinguistics work around the notion of context. Context design examines how participants take on board a range of factors (including but not restricted to audience) in imagining the various ways in which their

online posts may be taken up, interpreted and entextualized, and looks at how this awareness both shapes and constrains what they say.

## **Method and data set**

### *Data*

The data for this chapter is drawn primarily from a questionnaire-based survey, carried out in mid-2014, in which we asked 141 participants what they would and would not post on Facebook, and why, as well as to whom they addressed posts, how they perceived and exploited the site affordances,<sup>3</sup> and how they had responded to any instances of miscommunication on the site. The overarching aim was to elicit responses which give an indication of how Facebook users perceived the context for their interactions; whether and to what extent they were aware of the implications of the affordances of the site and the possibly very wide and intradiverse audience that their posts could reach; and how they felt this influenced their conscious decisions about what and how they posted. We initially carried out this survey because, through our research into interactional behavior on Facebook (e.g. Seargeant, Tagg & Ngampramuan, 2012), we became intrigued as to how users themselves made sense of what they were doing online. Our focus in this chapter is on the survey questions which concerned what users would *not* post on Facebook, and why. The data is used in the first instance to evidence the perceived importance of existing social roles and relationships for interactional behavior and identity performance on Facebook. The survey responses also show evidence of context design, by highlighting users' awareness of the ways in which their interactional behavior and identity performance online is continuously (re-)shaped by consideration of multiple social relationships and perceived social roles.

Prior to the main survey we conducted two pilot projects, which allowed us to refine the research instrument for the main survey. The original research question for these pilots focused on people's perceptions and awareness of the ways their posts might be viewed and interpreted by an audience beyond their Friends on Facebook, but responses indicated a strong trend toward

people being more concerned about how they came across to those with whom they already had an offline relationship. In the later iteration of the survey we therefore adapted the questions to explore this in greater detail.

The questionnaire was structured in two parts with a total of 18 questions: the first asking demographic information and basic details about the participants' Facebook use; and the second aimed at eliciting respondents' ideas about Facebook (as outlined above). For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on answers to the question, 'Are there any topics or information that you would actively not post about on Facebook?' (to which 94.5% of informants responded 'yes') and the follow up question, 'Which information and/or topics would you not post about and why?' For this latter question, we told informants to 'list as many as you like, and explain your reasons as fully as you can'. Responses ranged widely in length, from a couple of words to around 500 words. Although the question did not ask participants explicitly about social roles, in explaining what they would not post and why, many of the respondents gave reasons which were informed by reflections on their social roles, and it is this which constitutes the data analyzed for this chapter.

### *Participants*

The central data set was collected by means of an online questionnaire distributed through Facebook by our research assistant.<sup>4</sup> This network is the product of her biography, allowing us to tap into the kind of 'intradiverse' network that we are interested in exploring. Following graduation from a UK university, our research assistant lived abroad in Japan and China, teaching English and studying at postgraduate level. Her network thus includes colleagues, friends, pupils, and fellow students from these contexts. She returned after this to the UK to study for a PhD, which boosted the number of academic related contacts in her network. Other connections are the result of traveling, of connecting with old school friends, friends of friends, and so on. While we do not feel that we can necessarily generalize from this particular network (whose members, as we shall see below, in the main exhibit similar social features relating to their geographical locations, as well as class and education level), this profile reflects a type of

contemporary mobility common in the era of globalisation (Blommaert, 2010) as well as the type of intradiverse audience which we argue is typical of much Facebook use.

184 responses were collected in total, of which 43 were discarded as incomplete, leaving 141 usable responses. The respondents included residents of 26 different countries. The main three countries of residence were the UK (35%), South Korea (17%), and the USA (14%), which reflect our research assistant's home base (the UK) and the networks of friends she has from working as an English teacher (South Korea) and from her travels (the USA). 63% of the respondents were female and 37% male, which may have some bearing on the particular findings collected (however, gender comparisons are beyond the scope of this chapter). A very large proportion (89%) were aged between 22 and 45, which corresponds to the two age-groups in the survey closest to the research assistant's own age. Of the rest, most were in the 45–60 group (9%). The relative lack of respondents under 22 (2%) and the complete lack of anyone in the over 60 group is most likely a reflection of the age profile of the network. As their varied demographic profiles suggest, our respondents do not easily slot into an existing community with shared social characteristics but are in some cases linked only by their acquaintance with our research assistant. Because of this, however, the composition is not entirely unpredictable but shaped by our research assistant's trajectory through life; it is 'intradiverse'.

We also asked participants about their use of Facebook, and the types of networks they had. Respondents reported going onto the site frequently throughout the day (74%) or once a day (18%), with a few saying they only used it occasionally throughout the week (6%). There was a wider spread in the frequency at which they posted to the site: 18% reported that they posted throughout the day, 27% that they posted a few times per week and 28% that they posted weekly. The reasons they reported for using Facebook included messaging people (11%), posting status updates (4%) or uploading photos (3%), but the vast majority reported to use it for checking their news feeds (74%). In terms of size of individual networks, most people (57%) reported having in excess of 300 Friends. The number of people they actually interacted with, however, was fewer: 70% of people said they interacted with 50 Friends or fewer on a regular basis, and only 9% claimed to interact with more than 100.

## *Data analysis*

With respect to the data analysis, our approach was driven where possible by the data. The importance of social roles in shaping behavior on Facebook initially emerged from the pilot project data. We applied our initial framework of relevant social roles to the main data set, whilst remaining open to what the new dataset revealed in order to allow dominant themes to emerge from the participants' answers to the question outlined above. In this way we firstly identified the types of social roles that people talked about in relation to their online activity and presentation of self, grouped these together as categories, and then focused on the motivations and reasons participants gave for how they thought their perceived social roles had an influence on their online behavior. This was done with reference to the theoretical precepts discussed above, and specifically how participants constructed both their own identities and the contexts in which these participated. Given the nature of the research design, this was not primarily a quantitative study, but we have indicated when appropriate how prevalent particular views were within the set, as this points to their salience as influential beliefs for this network of people.

The data analysed below is predominantly from the main survey, though we have also, on occasion, included quotes from the pilots when these provide particularly interesting or revealing examples of issues that are reflected across all data sets. Unless we indicate otherwise, all examples are representative of wider trends across the data. Participants in the pilot studies have been allocated pseudonyms, following our original design, and in the main survey they are numbered. Those taking part in the questionnaire were asked at the outset to give their consent to the use of their data in the project, and the data were collected and stored securely. All examples from the data are presented verbatim, including any non-standard forms or 'mistakes'.

## **Findings: negotiating social roles on Facebook**

Analysis of the survey responses shows that Facebook offers a space for the complex and selective negotiation of public, personal, social and professional roles as people recreate, extend

and transform their identities online. Behind this negotiation lies an awareness of intradiversity – the different complexes of people who co-exist in the online space of a user’s Facebook feed – and how the perceived expectations and anticipated responses of these people play a key role in shaping the way in which an individual enacts their social roles as, for example, employee, family member, and parent online. The data also suggest that people are consciously concerned about self-presentation in a ‘public’ space – about conforming to expectations based on norms of what constitutes a liked and respected member of society – and that they manage their online behavior accordingly. We also look how being a ‘friend’ – in its general rather than Facebook sense – is a social role which is shaped by local expectations but often conceived around avoiding conflict and thereby creating a generally ‘convivial’ environment (Tagg et al., forthcoming); and finally, at the curation of a (non-)political persona achieved through posting (or not posting) political views and discussing (or avoiding) particular political issues. As we shall see from the analysis, a process of context design underlies the motivations that shape these behaviors, as people’s accounts of others’ perceptions are constructed based on experience, on how others have behaved in the past, on how they themselves have reacted to what others do online, and on their understanding of how online communicative trajectories work.

### *Public and private selves*

In explaining what they would not post on Facebook and why, around two thirds of the respondents drew attention to a distinction between public and private selves (cf Välimäki, 2015). A summary of the position can be seen in the following response:

2. *My general rule is to only post information that I am comfortable with being public, even if the network is not entirely open. Things which I would consider private and therefore would not post are: personal life (feelings, how my day is going), family (photos, comments), work (anything job-related), personal opinions (politics, religion, philosophy),*

*locations (e.g. "I'm in city X right now until tomorrow"), food (photos)*  
*[29]*

Central to this response is the user's recognition that their behavior on Facebook is shaped by a rule which does not necessarily correspond to reality (i.e. the site is not 'entirely open') but which presumably enables the user to deal with the complex semi-public nature of the site. The response is also typical of our survey findings in that the user is seemingly happy to neatly identify and label aspects of their life as private, and to act according to these categories. What people would not post in this public space often involved intimate details (such as 'feelings, how my day is going'), but were also to do with what they categorize as 'negative' (such as 'death and divorce') rather than 'positive' issues. The private sphere is thus mostly related to the personal, the negative and/or the corporeal, as strikingly illustrated in the following:

3. *The results of an STD check. News about my rectal polyp surgery. Anything disgusting, negative, saddening, political? [19]*

Participants' own sense of privacy is often understood in relation to their thoughts about others' privacy. This understanding suggests an awareness of the networked nature of online privacy (boyd, 2012), and users' understanding that when they post online they contribute not only to the performance of their own identity but to that of others. The following comment also illustrates the way in which users' positions on this matter can be dialogically constructed around discussions with other users (asking for 'permission') and how they draw on people's perceptions of other people's ideas about privacy, which in turn shape behavior. The following user would not post:

4. *Anything to do with financial issues, marital issues, anything that affects other people as much or more than me. I believe in respecting others privacy, including my husband's. As my children get older, I also post*

*fewer things about them – especially nothing they would find embarrassing. I also ask their permission before posting. [21]*

The survey responses also point towards an awareness of the affordances of online communication which mark it as different from offline contexts, namely the *persistence* of digital postings, and their *replicability* (see discussion above; boyd & Marwick, 2011). This awareness is explicitly evident in the following examples of what users would not post:

5. *Any personal issues/problems. People don't need to know about that stuff and it doesn't need to be on the internet forever. [53]*
6. *topics that would hurt some of my friends because it is easily spread [spread] to those people [41]*

Comments like ‘People don’t need to know about that stuff’ [example 5. above] also suggest a concern with what is socially acceptable behavior on a public forum. Reasons for what people would not post are similarly expressed throughout the survey in terms of decorum.

In general, as the above comments show, there are two constraints shaping what people will share publicly: their concern to come across in a particular way (related to their identity performance) and their desire not to offend or upset others (related to relationships and community). In most instances the two cannot be teased apart, and a desire not to offend shapes identity performance.

What emerges from these comments is the idea that Facebook is ‘a street or a square’ (as one respondent put it) where neighbors and friends, rather than strangers, are most likely to overhear you (or read your posts). In other words, these Facebook users are concerned with maintaining and negotiating what they see as existing social relationships with acquaintances who are likely to have some knowledge of their social roles, and related expectations around them, in a way that complete strangers would not, and therefore participants are ‘living up to’ or working to authenticate what others perceive to be an existing identity. In relation to authenticity,

these Facebook users appear to accept that they and others will portray – indeed, should portray – different identities in different situations. That is, there is an acceptance that people have a public self which is appropriate for Facebook and a private self that should not be enacted online, that there are certain sets of behaviors that are acceptable/advisable in the public sphere, while others are not – and that through their behavior people contribute to bringing about this distinction. This observation begins to show how diversity – as seen in the performance of multiple identities – arises not only from traditional categories such as gender and class, but also from distinctions which are made relevant by the novelty of the affordances of the semi-public site.

### *Curating a positive persona*

Another common theme, alluded to above, is the idea that the public persona people portray online should be likeable, should not annoy others, and should be considered in a positive light (cf McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011; and Baron's 2008 notion that Facebook users present 'my best day'). As one user pointed out, the basis for this is the idea that you are actively constructing your identity on Facebook:

7. *You are in control of your public imagine on Facebook, you're your own PR officer and most people want that imagine [image] to be positive. [60]*

Viewing this in terms of a social role, there is a desire among people to present themselves as positive and interesting individuals within society, as valued members of the community, and as someone who is 'liked' (a notion which is, of course, a key marker of dialogically constructed identity on Facebook in so far as it is built into the affordances of the site as a way of interacting with others' posts).

Opinions around this are often (expressed as) reactive – users disapprove when others act in a particular way, and thus try to refrain from doing that particular thing themselves. The extent to which the following user is motivated by a desire to distance themselves from the 'annoying'

past behavior of others is particularly evident in the hypothetical claim that he or she would not post ‘Any photos of children if I had them’.

8. *Relationships. My employers Bitchy comments. Vague, attention seeking statuses or comments. Any photos of children if I had them. My reasons are that I find it annoying when others do this so it would be hypocritical of me to do it. [57]*

In instances such as the above, users are claiming to shape their behavior according to ideas they have regarding the interactional context in which they perceive themselves to be operating (based on experience, their own personal feelings, and their knowledge of the site’s affordances) and their thoughts about the likely reaction of the imagined audience in this context, all of which is in turn based on their own responses to earlier behavior on the site. Related to this is the idea that people like to view themselves as *consistent* (Page, 2014). That is, if they do not like others doing something, they feel they should not do it themselves, for fear of being ‘hypocritical’, in user [57]’s words (see example 8. above). The value placed on consistency in responses such as the above highlights the subjective dimension of authenticity – the need to present oneself as a coherent persona – as well as its social dimension – the need to perform authenticity and to have one’s identity performance authenticated by others (Coupland, 2003; Leppänen, Møller, Nørreby, Stæhr & Kytölä, 2015).

If what is considered appropriate or ‘likeable’ behavior on Facebook is co-constructed through users’ behavior – and their response to others’ behavior – then norms will shift between communities on Facebook and over time, as in all social contexts. There is a suggestion from one user for example that although people used to post about everyday ‘mundane’ details, this is less common now, at least among his/her online network, and that norms are evolving as the users’ social roles shift with age:

9. *I try not to post anything that is rather mundane; such 20 pictures of me in a club from last night. I think people tended to do this a lot more about 5*

*years ago? I think people's attitude towards Facebook has evolved, or maybe my social circle has just matured. [82]*

What comes out of this and other comments is the suggestion that ‘being a Facebook user’ requires users to accept certain (shifting) norms, expectations and practices and, in particular, to project and authenticate particular identities (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011). Users’ interpretations of and responses to this social role shape their behavior, which in turn contributes to evolving local norms and practices. Thus users engage in collectively designing the social space which contextualize their postings.

### *The work persona*

In terms of more specific social roles, people’s understanding of themselves as employees acts as a key influence on what they post, with nearly a quarter of respondents mentioning work in their responses. In some cases, work is simply listed as one of the topics avoided on Facebook:

*10. Politics, Religion, Work [26]*

*11. Relationship with wife and family. What happens at work. Controversial political opinions. [104]*

These responses – which appear to assume it is self-evident that work would not be mentioned on Facebook – may be explained by two ideologies evident across the responses. The first is an apparently deep-seated belief that social life (which Facebook is seen to be a part of) and work life are separate spheres, so should be kept separate:

*12. I also do not post any job and work information: this too should be separate from one's social life. [43]*

13. *Work - leave work at 'the office door' - I use fbk for personal connections not employment related moans/rants/discussions etc. [113]*

The following has a slightly alternative take on the same issue, suggesting that the non-work persona (as displayed on Facebook) could give the work persona a bad name in not living up to the same intellectual standards.

14. *I deliberately do not friend people who are professional contacts in order to avoid worrying about whether your posts 'sound clever'. ... My friendship group goes to free parties and festivals and I have to monitor what is said in relation to those just in case my privacy settings aren't as strong as I thought or anyone who knows me professionally has slipped through the net. [45]*

This respondent makes a clear distinction between what her social life involves ('free parties and festivals') and her work life (which involves 'sound[ing] clever'), hinting at how these relate to different aspects of her identity and suggesting an internalized sense of the types of behavior that are deemed consistent with the work persona. She addresses the potential problem of context collapse – she actively shapes the online context in which she posts through a process of context design – by excluding people related to the work context from her Facebook.

The second belief evident in the responses is that work-related information is private or personal and for that reason should not be discussed on Facebook. This relates to our earlier discussion of people's perception of Facebook as a public space:

15. *Things which I would consider private and therefore would not post are: personal life (feelings, how my day is going), family (photos, comments), work (anything job-related), personal opinions [29]*

16. *Private, incl. relationships, friendships, job. Because fb is like a public space [49]*

These varying stated beliefs suggest different ways in which context is divided by participants into social, work, and private spheres: for some, work is categorized as *not social* and therefore avoided on Facebook; for others, work is *private* and for that reason avoided. In this case, the implications for how participants behave on Facebook are the same, but similarities in reported behavior can obscure people's distinct understandings of their social context and how this is reconstructed on Facebook.

Other respondents give more precise and concrete reasons for not posting about work. A key issue is a fear of censure – that if they post things related to work on Facebook they may get into trouble.

17. *Work - too risky to reveal much, unless it is very positive. [3]*

18. *Things I'm angry about, and might come back to haunt me if my employer saw me whinging about it. [14]*

Underpinning these responses is the way one's work persona is understood to be regulated by the discourses that exist within the work context (which determine what is permissible and what is not in terms of behavior), and that these discourses extend to contexts such as Facebook which work colleagues may also frequent. Again, they highlight an awareness of the replicability and persistence of online postings, so that current behavior is self-regulated in case posts 'come back to haunt me' [example 18 above].

There were also a number of comments noting that for particular jobs – such as being a teacher – there are specific concerns. These concerns can relate both to status (e.g. being seen in a bad light by students), and to ethics (e.g. what one feels it is acceptable to say in public about students).

19. *I am a teacher, so I need to be very concerned with the image that I portray to my students, so I don't post pictures or statuses about alcohol or about things that bother me in my job. [31]*

As well as a personal sense of ethical propriety there are also policy guidelines for some which influence behavior:

20. *I do not post specifics about my day at work (name of school, names of children, why I had a bad day) because this would go against the school's ICT policy and also because it could put the children at risk if they are subject to safeguarding concerns. [73]*

As illustrated in the above comments, people's concerns with their work persona are connected to the possibility of 'real-world' implications. Such concerns are rooted in people's offline lives and play a role in shaping how they subsequently behave on Facebook.

#### *Relating to family and friends*

The social role of friend or family member is another key category which influences how people behave online. As with other social relationships, those of friends and family are relevant in two ways: firstly, awareness of the presence of family or certain friends online leads people to regulate what they post; secondly, people consider friendships and family as topics which should not always be openly discussed (often considering them as part of the private sphere). The two issues are closely related.

Around one fifth of respondents mention their awareness of the friends and family who may be reading their posts and the possible implications they feel this may have. In the following example the user claims to regulate quite extensively the opinions s/he has or may be associated with in order not to destabilize relationships. Again, the general context for this is the

intradiverse community s/he has on Facebook, which is the result of relationships from different parts of his/her biography.

21. *I post little if any political topics. I post nothing about religion. I even delete posts from people on my page if they seem confrontational. I have friends and family on Facebook that have very different religious and political beliefs from me. Then I have my friends from undergrad that are more liberal, like me. [7]*

Cases in which people regulate what they say *about* their friends and family reveal their perception of their role and the responsibility they feel they have towards those close to them. The following illustrates expectations about what counts as acceptable behavior towards the rest of your family, with these expectations being both value-based – i.e. deeply ingrained beliefs about the nature of privacy – as well as related to particular cultural traditions.

22. *I do not post any sad news that relevant to family for two reasons. First, its tend to be privacy to me. Secondly, chinese culture tell us, sharing bad news about your family may brings bad luck to others. [67]*

In some cases, the two concerns (family and friends' presence on Facebook, and the extent to which you can talk about them) are brought together, highlighting people's awareness of the way in which the online space can both shape and be shaped by offline relationships:

23. *Problems with/complaints about my husband! (good recipe for marital discord!) [2]*
24. *Fights and disagreements with friends, it just causes issues and is childish [3]*

### *The role of parent*

Within the context of family relations, the role of parent is one that was often cited in our data as having an influence on online behavior. One implication of this role is a concern for the child's own privacy, which relates back to our observation about users' awareness of the implications of 'networked privacy':

25. *I don't post many pics of my son, and nothing frontal so he can't be tagged. [15]*

As well as this feeling of responsibility for the child's privacy (at an age where they are not able to take control of this themselves), there are also examples where the parent feels the need to respect the child's identity as an autonomous individual as they grow up.

26. *I believe in respecting others privacy, including my husband's. As my children get older, I also post fewer things about them – especially nothing they would find embarrassing. I also ask their permission before posting. [21]*

In this example the participant is shaping their behavior according to beliefs they have about the identity of others, and thus are constructing the persona of an element of their possible audience, which then acts as a determiner on how they present themselves online.

Other respondents shape what they post by imagining their children or other family members as the recipients of the posts. Interestingly, this occurred even where the imagined addressees were not on Facebook and likely to access their posts only in the future (in the case of children) or through some more indirect route (for example, where parents might see their posts through other family members' accounts), which involved users constructing imaginary future scenarios which they claimed shaped their present behavior.

27. *I don't post anything that would upset my family (or more precisely my Mother or my children). I don't want my Mother telling me off for swearing as I do to my twelve year-old niece, and I don't want my children being embarrassed. (The kids don't use Facebook yet but they inevitably will.) [John]*

On the one hand, this shows an apparent awareness of the persistence and scalability of Facebook posts (if a disregard for the possibility that the next generation will have moved onto another site). On the other, it can be seen as an example of 'referee design' (Bell, 1999), where the user is designing his utterances for an absent third party, his children, and thus acting online in accordance with what he perceives to be his parental role (we saw a similar response from the user who imagined how she would act if she had children). A similar observation can be made in regard to Paul's use of Facebook (below), whose role as a father – separated from his children's mother – shapes his online behavior despite his use of the privacy settings.

28. *I am circumspect when it comes to romance (because I don't want to confuse / nauseate my children, though I've also taken the precaution of putting them on quite a restricted setting) .... For a while I was FB friends with my soon-to-be ex-wife and even though there was nothing explicit, she objected to FB banter with my girlfriend (because our children might see it). The banter itself was pretty innocuous, but I tightened up my settings. [Paul]*

The fact that this is all reactive and dialogic is clearly illustrated in the following example, which discusses the way that this user manages the presentation of her role as mother, pre-emptively posting certain things because she knows that other people will be posting them themselves and she doesn't want to have to respond to queries about why she herself is remaining silent on this aspect of her identity.

29. *I may start posting about my pregnancy in a couple of weeks when I am past my 20 week scan, but I don't think I will do this regularly, if at all. The only reason for this is that my close friends and family may post on my wall and then other people could ask questions. [73]*

The role of parent highlights the complex nature of context, as imagined by users, including consideration not only of the likely audience and their possible expectations, but also of anticipated future scenarios and outcomes.

### *Presenting a political persona*

Finally, politics is a topic that several people (around a quarter of respondents) claim *not* to want to post about, mostly because they do not want to provoke others (rather, as discussed above, they want to be ‘likeable’), and thus, in online contexts like this, the political aspect of the persona is one they take particular steps to regulate.

30. *Politics- I have many Facebook friends on both sides of major issues and I don't want to start any arguments. [9]*
31. *Overly political things, because hoooo boy people can get their knickers in a twist over that [55]*

The above responses illustrate one frequently-expressed reason for not posting about politics – the understanding that somebody will be offended – which reveals a recognition of the ‘intradiverse’ nature of their audience. Other reasons are given for why they feel the need to be circumspect about expressing this aspect of their persona on Facebook. In some cases, respondents say that they do not talk about politics because the site does not afford the right conditions for reasoned debate. Here, the motivation is less about creating a likeable persona and more about knowing how to manage your social identity and behavior across contexts.

32. *I don't think Facebook facilitates good dialogue, and I feel like political and religious topics deserve more than a single statement [6]*
33. *Political views – if I wanted to discuss politics, I would do it in person as too much ambiguity on fbk & i see fbk as a way for personal interactions / humour not a political forum [113]*

The following response makes an interesting distinction about what the participant feels is acceptable to post in terms of politics in a forum such as Facebook, and what is not. Again a motivating distinction for him/her is the private/public divide, with personal voting habits viewed (by him/her at least) as a private matter (and thus not suitable for Facebook), and activism a public matter (and thus suitable for Facebook).

34. *I do not post about the way in which I will vote. I wouldn't feel comfortable posting about this as it is a matter of personal choice and I find it distasteful to ask people about it or share my views in an intrusive manner. However, I do share links to Amnesty International petitions that I sign as this is less personal and I think it's a good cause that deserve free advertising. [73]*

Again, we see with the avoidance of politics users' consideration of the likely expectations and responses of their imagined audience, as well as their concerns about contextually-appropriate behavior in this public space.

## **Conclusion**

The research presented in this chapter indicates that our informants (Facebook users from 26 different countries aged mainly 22-60) are highly sensitive to the expectations that they perceive

others to have regarding their behavior online; and that the people they worry about most are those with whom they share relationships offline – in other words, they continue to negotiate and manage offline social roles in online spaces. While not wishing to overgeneralize from the particular intradiverse network that we have explored in this research, the findings suggest that these complex processes of identity performance constitute a key way in which context design takes place on a site like Facebook. As the analysis shows, our informants organize their online communication according to their understanding of their own social roles, both as these are broadly conceived (e.g. being a valued and positively-perceived member of society), and more specifically (as employee, friend, family-member, and parent); and they actively navigate the online space created by Facebook through a context design process, shaping their behavior in response to the contextual variables they imagine given the potential relevance of multiple physical contexts, an ‘intradiverse’ audience, the possibilities for infinite entextualizations, and the affordances and emerging social norms of the online forum.

In relation to how people responded online to their offline social roles, the following in particular were found to be motivating factors in shaping behavior, in terms of the salience they were given by informants and their frequency across the data set:

- positive self-presentation and the active maintenance of a ‘convivial’ environment. People wish to portray themselves in a positive light and do not consider Facebook appropriate as a forum for confrontational debate, which they claim leads them to minimize such incidents;
- a wish to protect or respect the privacy of others, both in the immediate networked environment and forward into possible futures;
- fear of censure, especially as this is related to the expectations that come with the work persona or as a family member; issues relating both to ethical decorum and to policy guidelines of institutions of which they are a part.

One point of particular note is the way that respondents appear entirely comfortable with the fact of different, compartmentalized elements of identity being displayed in different contexts,

particularly in relation to the public/private divide, and to different social roles. The research illustrates an awareness of and ability to talk about this on the part of the participants, and in this way has interesting implications for concepts of an authentic self as inherently diverse. Empirical sociolinguistic work has explored how people discursively orient to multiple and shifting norm-producing centers (e.g. Blommaert, 2010; Blommaert & Varis, 2011; Kytölä & Westinen 2015); our research shows how the particular communicative interactions that are facilitated by and have developed around Facebook lead users to explain and rationalize their multifaceted identities – and, based on this, manage their communication – with reference to factors such as contextual appropriateness and ethical decorum. We thus support Coupland’s (2003) claim of increased reflexivity in new and changing contexts of interaction by showing that identity performance on Facebook may involve the quite conscious and deliberate management of complex social roles and relationships.

The importance of our observations regarding the continuing relevance of offline social roles on social media sites like Facebook lies not only in the way our findings detail the relationship between offline and online identities, but more specifically in the implication that interactional spaces on Facebook are socially-constructed, despite being determined in part by the site’s structural architecture and technical affordances, and by design decisions made by Facebook the company. That is, the social media context is shaped by users’ shifting perceptions of the site’s social norms and by users’ awareness of their various social roles and their potential audience (as this audience is opened up by the affordances of the online context), as well as their existing relationships with, and responsibilities towards, the different individuals and groups that make up this imagined audience. To the extent that users actively engage in collectively designing the social space which contextualize their postings, we can argue that Facebook, like any interactional space, is a product of what its users collectively make of it.

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## Footnotes

1 This is of course not the case with interest-based affinity groups or communities of practice, whereby strangers often affiliate around shared topics of interest or common goals (see Gee 2004 for definitions and discussions).

2 The term ‘superdiversity’ was coined by Vertovec (2007) to capture the complex social diversity brought about by increasing mobility, and which has been applied to internet-facilitated affinity spaces in for example the Special Issue on ‘Digital language practices in superdiversity’ in *Discourse, Context & Media*, Androutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014; see also Leppänen et al, 2015).

3 Our survey captures people’s understanding of the affordances available at the time which, for example, included the option of Liking posts but not the expanded set of possible responses introduced in February 2016 prior to the publication of this chapter.

4 For reasons of space, and due to the fact that we are drawing on it only sparingly, we do not describe the pilot data sets in detail.

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