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Networked selves and networked publics in academia: Exploring academic online identity through sharing on social media platforms

Introduction

The Internet has had a transformative effect upon many aspects of academic life and work, with a myriad of different online tools and their affordances paving the way for digital scholarly practices (Weller, 2011). The ability to foster and use online social net-working for professional purposes has been particularly highlighted in terms of networked participatory scholarship (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012). Online networking is foregrounded in social media, particularly through social networking sites, although recently research suggests that different platforms may be viewed in contrasting terms by academics (Jordan, 2017; Veletsianos & Shaw, 2018). Different conceptions of sites, the ways in which academics choose to portray themselves and their perceptions of audience will all have implications in practice for the professional use of platforms which technically may seem quite similar.

This project has sought to clarify how academic identity is refracted through different major social networking sites, by exploring what types of information academics are willing to share and their perceptions about audiences and high impact interactions online. Veletsianos and Kimmons propose that academics present different 'acceptable identity fragments' (AIFs) through different parts of their online social interactions (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014). However, the concept of AIFs requires further clarification; for example, it is not clear at what scale AIFs operate and how they are presented across multiple platforms. Other studies have suggested that academic identity online may align with a continuum from exclusively personal to exclusively professional identity (Barbour & Marshall, 2012; Jordan, 2017; Josefsson et al., 2015). Findings from a previous interview-based study included a model suggesting that different social networking sites sit at different clusters (which may represent AIFs) within a spectrum from personal to professional identity (Figure 1) (Jordan, 2017).

The first goal of the project was to test the model shown in Figure 1 with a larger sample by asking academics about the types of information that they would consider posting to a range of different social networking sites. This paper focuses upon the research question, 'how are academics' acceptable identity fragments mediated by different platforms'?

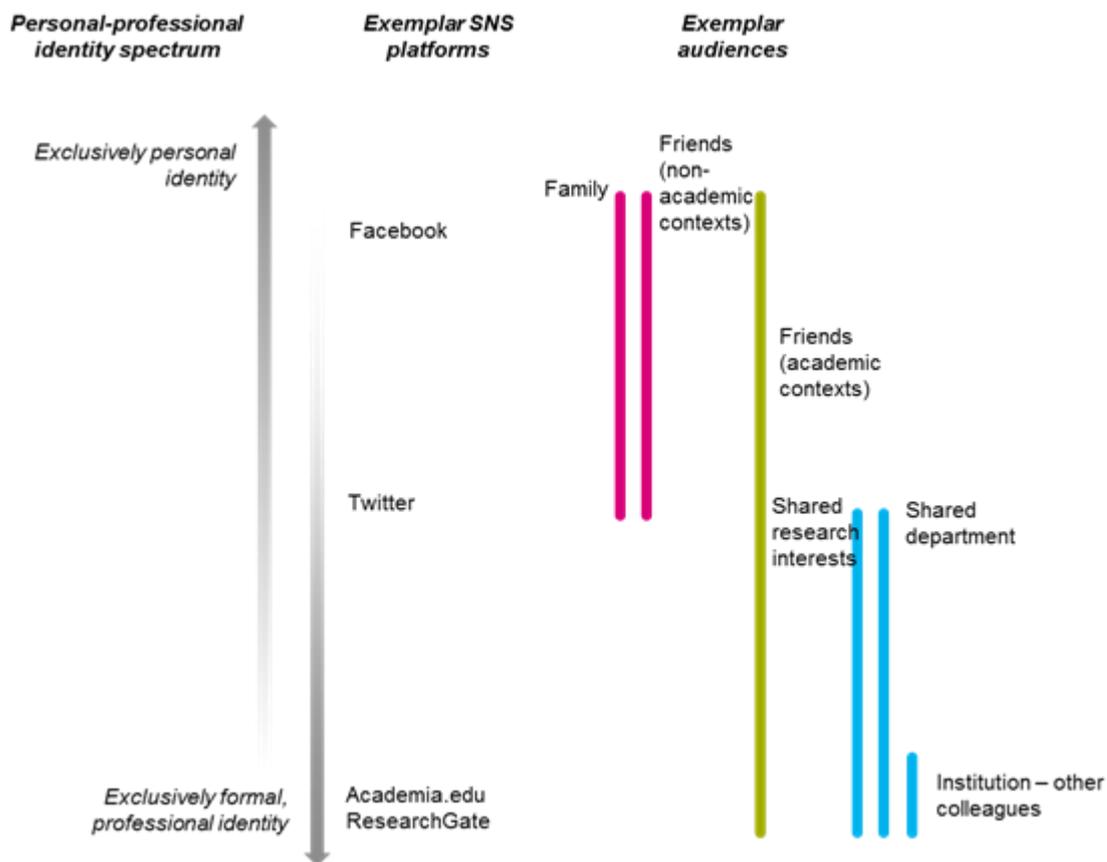


Figure 1. Emergent personal-professional online academic identity spectrum (Jordan, 2017).

Methods and analysis

An online survey was carried out during April and May 2018, and completed by 198 participants. The question of how identity fragments are divided according to different platforms was addressed primarily through the second and third sections of the survey. In the second section, an inventory of 32 statements about examples of the types of information that academics might share through social media (both professional and personal) drawn from other smaller-scale studies which have explored this through interviews (Jordan, 2017; Veletsianos & Shaw, 2018) or larger datasets drawn from single platforms including Academia.edu (Jordan, 2015) and Twitter (Veletsianos, 2011). The data were then converted to a network graph, by conceptualising an item and whether it is shared on a particular site as a connection (an 'edge' between sites and items as 'nodes'). The edges were weighted as a percentage of the total number of participants who used each site, and the network imported into Gephi and laid out using the Force Atlas 2 algorithm (Jacomy et al., 2014).

Results

The network of links between information types and social media platforms is shown in Figure 2. Use of a community detection algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008) identified three clusters within the network. The nodes within the network in Figure 2 are colour-coded according to the three clusters (pink, green and blue).

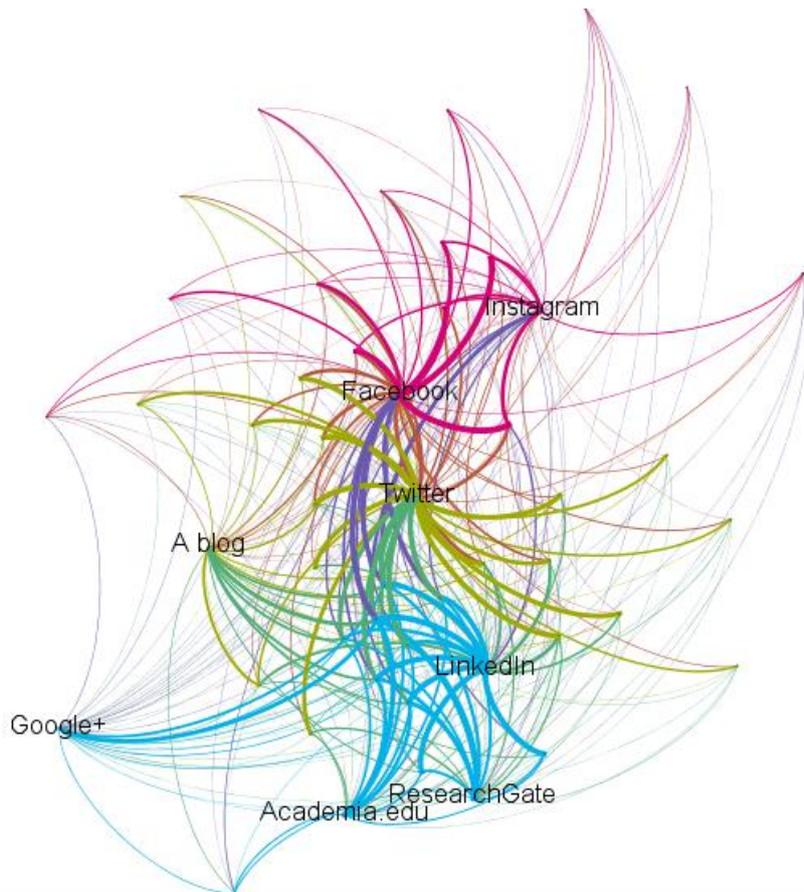


Figure 2: Network of connections between the inventory of information types and audiences and the platforms that academics associate those items with.

The three communities and platforms identified in Figure 2 correspond with the personal-professional identity spectrum model shown in Figure 1. While the inventory items and audiences are not labelled in Figure 2 for clarity, an overview of the items associated with each cluster is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the items (nodes) present in each cluster of the network.

Cluster	Platforms	Audience	Information shared
<i>Personal (pink)</i>	Instagram, Facebook	Friends and family	May use a pseudonym or modified version of name; cartoon or picture (not a portrait) as an avatar; may include geolocation data; may post about hobbies, home life, health, political views; use of language may include using humour, profane language, or filtering language to avoid offending family members
<i>Personal and professional mixed (green)</i>	A blog, Twitter	NGOs, policymakers, non-academic communities which may benefit from their research, current and former students	Information related to teaching responsibilities; posts about career successes and unsuccessful applications; seeking advice in relation to academic careers or publishing; discussing current news; seeking new professional connections; may include links to profiles on other social media platforms.
<i>Professional (blue)</i>	Academia.edu, Google+, LinkedIn, ResearchGate	Current or former colleagues, academics at other institutions	Real name; photo as avatar or none at all; employment history; institutional affiliations; qualifications; professional language.

The results help to clarify the nature of academic identity online and the extent to which academics' identity fragments are defined by particular facets of identity, or different social media platforms. The network suggests that several platforms may be used to express the same identity fragment, and supports the concept of fragments being defined by varying degrees of personal to professional identities. The three communities have contrasting ways in which the self is presented, uses, and audiences. The findings underscore how social media for academics encompasses a wide and nuanced range of platforms and practices, and have practical implications for academics wishing to develop their online profile and engage with social media. The findings also have implications for altmetrics and the types of research impact that can be achieved through social media; for example, the contrasting audiences may mean that a read on ResearchGate is akin to a citation, but a share on Twitter may represent a contrasting type of impact. Qualitative analysis of academics' perceptions of high-impact interactions through different platforms is currently underway.

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