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Hanging out with offline friends in an online context:
How the experience of “partial anonymity” impacts on
identity management

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Abstract

Instant Messaging has increased in popularity since 1999 and is now often used by adolescents to communicate with friends already known in their offline social networks. Instant Messaging can be thought of as a hybrid between chat rooms and email. Chat rooms are conducted in “real time” but are an open network in that anyone can have access to interacting with one another. Email is asynchronous and yet it is also a more personal, “closed network” where communicators must generally exchange addresses before they can communicate. When email is used for social reasons communicators generally know each other offline already. Instant Messaging is both synchronous like chat rooms, and can be used as a closed social network, like email. One of the distinguishing characteristics of MSN Instant Messenger (IM) when used between friends is the experience of knowing the other communicator both offline and online. This situation offers the anonymity traditionally experienced online while acknowledging that communicators bring offline knowledge of each other to their online interaction. Thus, the overall relationship is not conducted under conditions of anonymity like that experienced with chat rooms, MUD’s and newsgroups. Online anonymity, in these forums, has been implicated in negative behaviours such as “flaming” and deception which are largely attributed to deindividuation. This research investigates how offline knowledge, which presumably acknowledges the other communicator as an individual, impacts on the experience of hanging out online. Adolescent girls construct identity through friendships and this research is concerned with identity constructions when friendships are maintained between both online and offline contexts.

The research design was based on an ethnographic approach to the study of the Internet. Eight adolescent girls (aged 13-17) were interviewed both online through IM and in a more traditional face-to-face context. Data analysis was informed by positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) to provide a coherent understanding around how identities are continuously constructed and transformed by contextual criterion.

Analysis revealed that IM fulfils adolescent motivations toward social connection and expressing personal autonomy which are both important in the process of identity formation. Instant Messaging is constructed as a space which allows the girls to balance

these motivations in a way which helps them to maintain a positive self-image. The anonymity experienced online is tempered by offline knowledge of each other. This produces an environment of “partial anonymity”. This study examines the experience of partial anonymity and the distinct advantages arising from the lack of online social cues. Control and protection are integral advantages which allow the girls to balance teenage motivations, thus informing their sense of self in largely positive ways. This becomes evident in how they demonstrate commitment to their friendships and negotiate disclosure, trust and risk.

Findings are discussed in relation to contemporary social identity theories which have been applied to computer-mediated communication. Partial anonymity changes how adolescents use technology to construct and preserve a positive self-image. Adolescents understand the flow between contexts and the resulting negotiations around evolving socialisation standards.

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