

What is me online?

Insights into how users manage digital identity.

Outline of the UXPA 2013 talk on Identity Management
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Abstract

This talk provides comprehensive and up-to-date insights about how users manage identity-related aspects online. We gathered 100+ user stories from 4 countries as well as 1000+ survey responses in the US and UK. We will illustrate how people present themselves in profiles, manage devices, as well as set up and share accounts. Furthermore, we will show how users curate different audiences using social networking sites, if and how users selectively disclose information to others and how users perceive and deal with identity conflation situations. Finally, I will discuss some implications for the development of identity- and privacy-related features.

Key Words

Research, Identity, Privacy, Account, Profile

Managing identity online is often not a very pleasant experience. For instance, people struggle with usernames and passwords because they use various accounts. Some users present themselves in online profiles, but its often not clear what information is appropriate to make available about themselves and how this refers to overall information findable about the same person. On social networking sites, some users struggle to compartmentalize different audiences such as for work and private purposes. All these issues refer to well studied areas of identity construction in social science (see for instance Goffman 1956).

In this project we wanted to know how users currently maintain identity-related aspects beyond account access and self representation. On a holistic level, we wanted to create a better understanding how people curate and shape appearances of themselves across a wide set of possible online practices. We think that by understanding how users manage these aspects of identity we can better tackle today's industry challenges such as related to personalization. Furthermore, we believe these user insights are a great source for the development of innovative technical solutions.

We explored a comprehensive set of research questions: We wanted to know how users represent themselves in online profiles to gauge how stable online identities are. We wanted to understand how users set up various accounts and devices they may use. To also capture social aspects of identity, we gathered situations in which users share accounts and devices. With focus on social networking, we wanted to know how users curate different audiences, if and how users (selectively) disclose information to others. We wanted to learn when and for what purpose users go to settings of their social networks. Finally, we were interested how users perceive and deal with identity facet conflation.

In order to tackle previously stated research questions we conducted several interlocking studies. We started exploring the topic at the end of 2011 through a set of interviews, then we conducted two in-depth interviews sessions in summer 2012 and finally, we launched some survey questions for basic scaling of our results in autumn 2012. Overall, we gathered data from 49 interviews in 4 countries and several thousand survey respondents.

During the in-depth phase of this project, we conducted personal interviews with 10 social networking users both in a larger US and UK city. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were recorded on video. Participants were compensated appropriately.

For screening, we developed a special set of questions based on previous research (Farnham/Churchill 2011) to select people that not only perceive, but also act on a faceted identity landscape. Through this screening process we wanted to make sure we invite users we can learn most regarding online identity management. We also looked at user's ability to describe identity related strategies with an open ended question and made sure to have some variability in terms of account setups and account oversight (parents looking after their kids accounts). Furthermore, we also considered a variability in terms of age, gender and technological savviness.

Based on the comprehensive list of practices, we extracted five different identity management goals that users pursue when acting on their identity. In the following, we will introduce these five goals and illustrate them with corresponding user stories.

1. Insight: Minimize overhead

Users try to minimize their effort when maintaining identities. This affects social engagement -- the data they choose to share and the audience they share it with. This goal also drives people to share things frequently associated with only one person, such as accounts and phones.

2. Insight: Hide personality aspects

Many users want to actively hide personality aspects or entire personas. Users want to prevent leakage from one or several areas of life to any other. The reason for hiding ranges from slight embarrassment, misjudgement and harassment to stigmatization. People, for instance, hide online by keeping secret their Twitter handles or by refraining from disclosing information such as education.

3. Insight: Separate areas of life

People want to keep apart areas of their life, such as friends, family and work. This is not primarily due to privacy, but also to reduce cognitive load between various tasks. The boundaries between areas are often not binary, rather they are blurred and users “drag” areas of life apart. People, for instance, separate by using different accounts, circles, lists or groups.

4. Insight: Foster a community experience

Many users belong to or want to belong to a certain group online. People often conform to a group's norms in terms of posted topics, language used and intended audience. We have seen very engaged users belonging to certain communities.

5. Insight: Keep up proper public appearances

Most people care for a proper outside presentation of themselves - their online reputation. This goal is often related to work, but might also include other facets of personal life. People, for instance, search for information about themselves and set up accounts with ordinary names.

At this point it is important to note that these goals are not deemed to assign individual users to distinctive buckets. The proceeding insights are a typology of five different strategic goals that users want to achieve. Some users may only follow one goal, but most people will follow several goals and to various degrees. For example, a user might be active under a pseudonym to hide certain online activities (insight 2), but at the same time this user might have a pseudonym as part of the cultural tradition of a certain online community such as online fantasy games. Therefore the user will also foster a sense to belong to a community online (insight 4).

As for implications, we need to basically think about solutions how we can best assist users to achieve the goals mentioned above. For instance, to minimize identity management overhead, there are password managers or connected account features. For instance, to separate areas of life, there are profile managers and on social networking services circles and lists. In this talk we will, with regard to previous stated insights, point to a couple of the latest identity management tools and features.