

Social Identity in Facebook Community Life

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ABSTRACT

Social identity is a key construct to understand online community life. While existing online identity studies present a relatively static conception of identity, grounded in user profiles and other personal information, in this paper the authors investigate more dynamic aspects of identity, grounded in patterns of social interaction in Facebook community life, drawing on social science research on identity theory and social identity theory. The authors examine the tensions experienced by people between assimilation and differentiation with respect to group identities and role identities. The study provides a framework for understanding how users construct self-presentations in different online social interactions, actively managing identity, rather than merely declaring it in a relatively static profile. The authors speculate on how social computing environments could more effectively support identity presentation.

Keywords: Facebook, Group Identification, Online Community, Online Identity, Role Verification, Social Identity

INTRODUCTION

Online community life has increasingly become a significant part of our social life, and become an arena of research in domains such as sociology, information science and organizational studies. Studies in community informatics recently have been directed to social network websites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, etc.), an Internet phenomenon that grounds on a simple idea that social actors being connected to one another benefits. In this paper, we investigate

social identity, a key construct in traditional community life, in an online community based on a social network website, Facebook.

Nowadays, no term has been so pervasive and abused like “community”. Now any group of people who are physically or virtually related can be named a community. For example, there are university community, corporate community, district community, academic community (e.g., CHI community, ACM community), sports community, customer community, and even user community (e.g., Facebook community). Such a circumstance implies that the “community” is significant to our social life while its definition and boundary are pretty vague.

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Community is important in that it provides a mediating social mechanism that relates the individual to the larger society, helping to satisfy the need of each. As Sanders (1958) pointed out, the institutional concreteness endues community critical significance in our social life. While society is usually understood primarily in terms of abstract concepts, in community, people confront the tangible manifestations of society's major institutional complexes. People are social in the way they engage in activities in schools, companies, golf course, pubs, homes, or even virtual groups that are of communities. On the other hand, the definition of "community" is rather vague, especially in the era of information age. Are those so-called "online community" really communities? Are social network sites such as Facebook a community? Or are the social groups that are constituted in Facebook communities?

Identity theories provide us a perspective to understand these issues. Social identities, as self reflected answers to the question "who I am" or "who we are" drawn from experience of previous social interactions, help people define themselves and give them guidelines for proper social intercourse with others in social life. According identity theories, a community can be viewed as a set of people who share certain distinctive identities (i.e., community identities). By providing relative stable, consistent and enduring answers to the question "who we are", community identities serves as a coherent bonding for all community members, which also helps discriminate themselves from other people outside the community.

In sociology and social psychology, identities have been of interest for decades (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Turner, 1985). Advanced information technologies help create new forms of social life, from technology-mediated communities to even entirely virtual communities whose operations are mainly carried out over the Internet. Recently, researchers in information science began to give attention to identities, and a few studies are emerging (DiMicco & Millen, 2007; Hewitt & Forte, 2006; Zhao, Grasmuch, & Martin, 2008). However,

scrutinizing current studies, we found most of them only touched the surface of the subject matter by grounding identity only in user profiles, and ignored social interactions in which social identities are constructed and enacted. Appealing to us is the issue of how identities are embedded and enacted in social interactions in online community life.

In this paper, we report our qualitative study on Facebook, the most popular social network website, with regard to social identities embedded in Facebook activities. We discuss people's tension between assimilation and differentiation as implied by social identity theory and self-categorization theory (Turner 1985). We argue that people are trying to be different not just in inter-group level as suggested in self-categorization theory. They are also trying to be different inside the group. We also discuss how Facebook can uphold community life by supporting social identities.

IDENTITY: A KEY CONSTRUCT

Identity has been a key construct in studies of various social units ranging from individuals, neighborhood, social groups, organizations, communities, to societies (Stryker, 1968; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), affecting both the satisfaction of the individuals and the effectiveness of the social units. Identity deals with the question "Who am I", which usually refers to further questions of belongings and of locating oneself in social contexts. A relatively stable, consistent and enduring answer to them invoke coherence and continuity of self fundamental to mental health, which also ensures the coherence and distinctiveness of social units.

Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory

There have been two main theories of identity: identity theory (Stryker, 1968) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Identity theory takes a symbolic interactionist view that society affects social behavior through its influence on self (Hogg, Terry, & White,

1995). According to identity theory, the symbol of role, as the relative stable, morphological components of social structure, is constructed and perceived by individuals through social interactions. People come to know who they are and what they should do based on such social roles and positions, for example, as a father, an environmentalist, a Republican. A similar idea was in Goffman's (1959) notion of "face", which asserted that individuals were attempting to influence the social situation by expressing and presenting themselves in a more flexible way to give favorable impression.

Social identity theory, on the other side, is more relevant to individual's perception of their membership, rather than role, in different social units. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and later social categorization theory (Turner, 1985), people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, for example, gender, occupation, city, interests. Each category has prototypical characteristics abstracted from the members. By social categorization and social comparison, individuals gain a definition of who they are in terms of the defining characteristics of the category, as well as self-enhancement as being distinct or better than outside persons.

These two theories are compatible in that both theories address the structure and function of the socially constructed self as a dynamic construct that mediates the relationship between social structure and individual behaviors (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). While identity theory is primarily a sociological theory that sets out to explain individual's role-related behaviors inside certain social group, social identity theory is a social-psychological theory that focuses on membership in a social unit and intergroup relationships.

Social identity is important according to both theories. First, social identities encompassing salient roles or group classifications enable individuals to define and locate themselves in social environments, as well as motivate and regulate their social behaviors. Second, social identities provide individuals with a systematic means of defining others by cognitively seg-

menting and ordering the social environment. Understanding others' roles and classifications helps people understand the world, and sets a basis for further interaction. Third, shared social identities endue social groups' coherence that is critical for the viability and prosperity of the group.

Needs for Similarity and Distinctiveness

In social identity theory and self-categorization theory, the key idea is that a social category (e.g., a sport team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of "who I am" in terms of the defining characteristics of the category. For example, saying "I am a psychologist" indicates the acknowledgement of being in a group of people who study psychology. This categorical information also conveys rich information of what we do and what are proper way of our activities. According to Turner (1985), this categorization is accompanied by inter-group social comparisons with in-group favoring evaluation over out-groups in the service of positive self-esteem. Being a psychologist makes the individual distinguished from other people who are not expert or who are experts in other areas. The social comparison process accentuates both perceived similarity among members inside the categories and perceived differences from people outside the categories.

Therefore, just as Brewer (1991) claimed, social identity can be viewed as a reconciliation of opposing needs for assimilation and differentiation from others. Individuals avoid self-concepts that are either too narrowly personalized or too broadly inclusive, but instead define themselves in terms of distinctive category memberships. Compared with inter-group level differentiation in Turner (1987), we argue that the differentiation can exist in different levels. According to identity theory, people apply identities to themselves as a consequence of the structural role positions they occupy (Stryker, 2000), which implies that people can have distinct roles inside the group (i.e., intra-group comparison).

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN COMMUNITIES

A community to which individuals belong provides individuals certain aspects of identity. Community identity, in turn, helps individuals define who they are and give them guidelines for proper social intercourse in community life. Ever since when “Gemeinschaft”, the precursor of the concept “community”, was discussed, Tönnies (1887) claimed that the bonds of Gemeinschaft derive from personal identification based on the common place where people lived and worked.

In the era of the Internet, the common place where people live and work has been dramatically extended and transformed. It is no longer physically bounded in time and location. This transformation can give rise to new features of identity in terms of how it is formed, developed, and enacted. While the Tönnies’ notion of identity is “embodied” based on soil, in contemporary community identity should be understood in a more symbolic way with regard to things like sacred structure, emotional connection, and identification (Carroll, 2011). The soil itself is less important than the situated events and human interactions that transpire on it. Identity is constituted through the social or symbolic interchange, through shared values and visions, through shared heritage, and the soil becomes essentially a vivid prop for this.

One critical conception for the retention of community identity is “boundary maintenance” (Sanders, 1958). As the term implies, any social system to persist must keep a boundary between itself and other systems, large or small, so that it does not merge with another system to the point that it no longer exists as a separate entity. Compared to Gemeinschaft, contemporary communities are much less confined by physical boundaries but more by social boundaries as defined by things like shared value, shared activity, or common fate, as well as its frame of reference. For example, when it comes to the NBA, the fans of Lakers and the fans of Clippers can be considered as two different communities even if these fans are all in the

same city (i.e., Los Angeles), because they just go to watch different games and share different or even competing enthusiasm. However, they can also be viewed as one community as NBA fans in contrast with fans of other kinds of sports or leagues.

The boundaries of community are shifting and much more dynamic in contemporary communities with the meditation of information and communication technologies. First, people may experience more identities with the facilitation of technologies, considering that people have more opportunity to get access to resources, activities, and people who share interests, and more social groups and events can be constituted and supported. Second, people may experience richer identities in different levels. They can involve in many different social groups and take diverse roles. Finally, the increasing overlaps and interactions between the communities or social groups are making their boundaries even more blurred.

CURRENT STUDIES OF ONLINE IDENTITY

There have been several studies on the issue of “identity” online. Most studies of “online identity” or “virtual identity” in community networks refer to the “digital profile” that “enables individuals to express their interests outside contexts” that can be “established at logon” (Jordan, Hauser, & Foster, 2003; Chewar, McCrickard, & Carroll, 2003), or just “personal information” as purely static data to be managed (Madden, Fox, & Smith, 2007). Some other studies deem identity as “personal private information” to be protected and related to privacy and information security in terms of “identity deception” and “identity theft” (Donath, 1995; Lu & Ali, 2004). We can see identity is considered as static data that are not related to social interactions or community life.

Other studies were studying online “identity” in the sense of being “part of individual’s self concept” (Tajfel, 1981). A famous and influential example is Turkle’s work (Turkle,

1995). These work, however, focused on virtual spaces such as MUDs, where people are anonymous and identities are arbitrary. This is different from social networks (e.g., Facebook), where almost everyone uses their real name, and cannot escape their embodied selves and behavioral norms in their daily life.

When it comes to identity in social network websites, Facebook specifically, online identities are explored corresponding to their self concept in real life. Zhao, Grasmuch, and Martin (2008) conducted content analysis of profiles of 63 Facebook accounts, and divided users into three categories: visual (having wall posts and pictures) enumerative (having interests and hobbies), and narrative (having “about me”), according to a continuum of implicit and explicit identity claims. Similarly, DiMicco and Millen (2007) investigated characteristics in Facebook user profiles including age, number of friends, number of company friends, job title, job description, job start date, number of groups joined, job-related groups joined etc., and divided users into three categories: reliving the college days, dressed to impress, and living in the business world. Hewitt and Forte (2006) investigated students’ perception of their instructor based on whether they have seen the instructor’s profile and whether they are connected to the instructor.

A closer scrutinize of these social network studies reveals that they presented a static conception of identity, grounded only in user profiles and other characteristics. We would like to view identity as a more dynamic conception of constructing self-presentations in social contexts: while identities are consequences of social interactions, they are also underlying motives of social interactions, and thus is presented in social interactions (Simon, 2004). In this paper, we will investigate identities as presented in the context of online social interactions.

Facebook is a good platform for this investigation because it supports user activities ranging from individual (e.g., status updates), dyadic (e.g., comments in wall), to group (e.g., small Facebook Groups) and large community (e.g., large events) level. We would like to

explore 1) whether and how social identities are embedded in online social interaction; 2) how social identities are related to the tension between assimilation and differentiation; 3) how Facebook features can support social identities in community life.

METHOD: SCENARIO-BASED INTERVIEWS

We conducted a scenario-based interview. In the interview, participants were asked to reveal and explain their recent Facebook activities in details (i.e., scenarios) to understand how their identities are enacted, constructed, and embodied in these social interactions. Each participant was interviewed by two interviewers, and each interview lasted for about 40 minutes. Participants also completed questionnaires on identity in each scenario.

We recruited the participants with advertisement post in Facebook Page of the University, asking for participants who use Facebook daily. They participated in this study voluntarily without compensation. Finally we conducted 10 interviews. All of the participants were college students in a large eastern university, 5 undergraduates, 1 master student, and 4 PhD students. Half of the participants were females and half of them were males. Four of them are from United States, five from Asia, and one from Africa. Their ages range from 19 to 29, with the average of 23.4 ($SD=3.13$). All participants used Facebook daily. Five of them used it less than half an hour per day; three of them used Facebook between half an hour to one hour per day; the other two used Facebook between one and two hours per day. The number of their friends ranges from 59 to 684, with the average of 372.3 ($SD=207.9$).

In the interview, we first asked the participants to show their Facebook pages, and briefly explain how they usually use the Facebook daily, who do they usually communicate in Facebook, and the relationships between online (especially Facebook) and offline interactions. Interestingly, although the background of our

participants was pretty diverse, their reports were very similar. They use Facebook primarily to communicate with current friends in the campus; secondly they communicate with friends from previous schools. The activities they showed were mostly status updates (with comments), post in wall (with replies), tagged photos, Facebook Events, Facebook Groups, Facebook Pages, chats, as well as message inbox. A large part of the activities are related to offline activities, for example, talking about where to have lunch, photos of football games. Another large part was sharing interesting information such as videos. It is understandable their Facebook usage was similar: one the one hand, the usage is largely confined by the affordance that Facebook features currently provides; on the other hand, they are all basically college students with similar campus life despite their other different characteristics.

Then participants were asked to select five recent activities as scenarios to discuss with us (e.g., status update, posts in wall, tagged photos, Facebook Events, Facebook Groups). In a story telling way, participants were asked to explain social interactions and social contexts to us. To increase the diversity and diminish the bias of selection of scenarios, participants were encouraged to select scenarios with different Facebook features. However, it totally depended on participants on which scenarios were chosen.

We called the interview “scenario based” because most of discussions were focused on these selected scenarios. In each scenario, the participants were asked to describe the activity contexts, people involved, their motivation or goals, people’s relationships, their roles, activity processes, conversation contents, related artifacts (e.g., updated photos) if there is any. In this way, we not only observed their online activity traces, but we collected more contextual information and their explanations of why and how these activities had happened and what the consequences were.

They were then asked to rate in seven-point Likert scales on questions including how similar they are (group similarity), how distinguished

they are from other people (group distinctiveness), how unique the participant’s role in these people is (role distinctiveness). For each question, the participants were asked to explain “how”. Participants also answered 4-item questionnaire of group identification adapted from Mael and Tetrick (1992), which measures member identification with the selected social category, and an 1-item questionnaire of role verification adapted from Ma and Agarwal (2007), which measures perceived confirmation from other members of the participant’s belief about his or her role identities inside the category, in 7-point Likert scales.

RESULTS

We collected 50 scenarios from the 10 participants. Two of the authors collaborated to clean the data and discuss the main purposes, activities, and identities embodied in each scenario. In the data analysis process, we paid specific attention to how their identities were enacted, constructed, and embodied in these online social interactions.

The Dynamic Construction of Identities

In the study, we confirmed that identity is more like a dynamic conception of constructing self-presentations, which is multifaceted and adjustable in social contexts. Social identities are enacted in social interactions with different levels and salience.

1) *Identities are Modulated by Social Contexts*

While many existing studies tried to understand identities through user’s static profiles, we found participants were experiencing much richer and more concrete identities in social interactions supported by Facebook. We found that different aspects of identity were activated in different social contexts.

For example, when participant 1 showed us a thread of comments in a “wall”, he described

the people involved as a soccer team (with high score of group identification: 5.75 out of 7) talking about a member's farewell match. In a photo of fireworks, he describe himself as one of the Penn Staters (with score of group identification of 4) because it is an important annual event at Independence Day in the university, as well as photographers (with score of group identification of 1.75) when people were discussing photographic techniques in the comments of the photo. He also described himself as a Chinese student and one of a group of travelers (with score of group identification of 2.15) when discussing his profile photo of horse riding in China. Congruent with social identity theory (Turner, 1985), we confirmed the responsiveness of social identity to immediate social contexts, which has been ignored in existing studies on Facebook identity.

It is very interesting how these multiple aspects of social identities could be integrated into individual's self-concepts. There were both hierarchical and intersection representations in this case. Since the soccer team was from Penn State, the identity as a member of the soccer team could be viewed as a subgroup identity of the identity of Penn Stater, which was triggered in the firework event photo. These two identities were hierarchical (Gaertner et al., 1993), and the subgroup identity (i.e., soccer team) not only included all features of superordinate identity (i.e., Penn Stater), but also entailed more specific features. Therefore, the subgroup identity was much more salient than the general superordinate identity.

Furthermore, there were also intersection representations as mentioned by Roccas and Brewer (2002). On the one hand, this participant possessed a set of Penn Stater-related identities (i.e., studying, living, and playing at an American university); on the other hand, he demonstrated his ethnic identity (i.e., Chinese student). The combination of them reduced these multiple and diverse social identities to a single and more exclusive social identity (i.e., Chinese student in an American university), which made the individual more distinct.

2) *Coexistence of Different Levels of Identity*

While most of existing empirical studies either took the perspective of social identity theory or identity theory, few studies investigated group identity and role identity at the same time. In this study, we found the coexistence of both. For example, participant 1 would emphasize his role of the vice captain when talking about his soccer team. Participant 3 described herself as a rookie and catcher in a softball team. Participant 8 described himself as a drummer of a rock band, which included a group identity of the rock band and a role identity of drummer.

We found even different levels of group identity could be activated concurrently. For example, participant 10 discuss a photo of social gathering in her birthday party, she said all the five friends were from the same continent (Africa), and she also specified one friend was from the same country (Cameroon). This finding confirms Gaertner et al.'s (1993) model of hierarchical nature of social identity, and implies that online identity is also a conceptual structure with different levels with different salience.

Hornsey and Hogg (2000) claimed that including inclusive superordinate identity (i.e., Africa) was a good strategy for intergroup harmony, which was applied in this case by enacting the continent level of identity. Emphasizing the similarity of these people helped constructing the identities.

The distinctiveness also helped constructing the identities. The superordinate identity (i.e., Africa) was enacted and reported in the social comparison also because people from this continent are minority group in the United States. The subgroup identity (i.e., Cameroon) was even stressed because it was even more distinct, thought there is only one such person.

Similarity, Distinctiveness, and Group Identity

We categorized participants' ratings on group similarity and group distinctiveness into low (with scores between 1 and 4) and high (with

scores between 5 and 7) groups, and investigated how group identification will be influenced by group similarity and distinctiveness. Accordingly, we got four types of social groups, and we call them cliques, close-by friends, associates, and acquaintances. As demonstrated in Figure 1, social groups with both high similarity and high distinctiveness have the strongest group identity; social groups with both low similarity and low distinctiveness have the weakest group identity.

1) Cliques: High Similarity with High Distinctiveness

The 21 social groups both high on similarity and high on distinctiveness are usually small groups having intensive activities such as bands, sport teams, and close friends who usually hang out in bars together. We call them cliques. Their group identity was the highest (mean=4.90, SD=1.48)

Participant 3 reported that her softball team members are similar (score of 5) because they were all “passionate, energetic, healthy, and love softball”. She also reported this team as distinctive (score of 5) because “only single-minded people are willing to spend so much time to play it every Saturday”, and thus were

different from general people. The score of her group identification of this team was also 5.

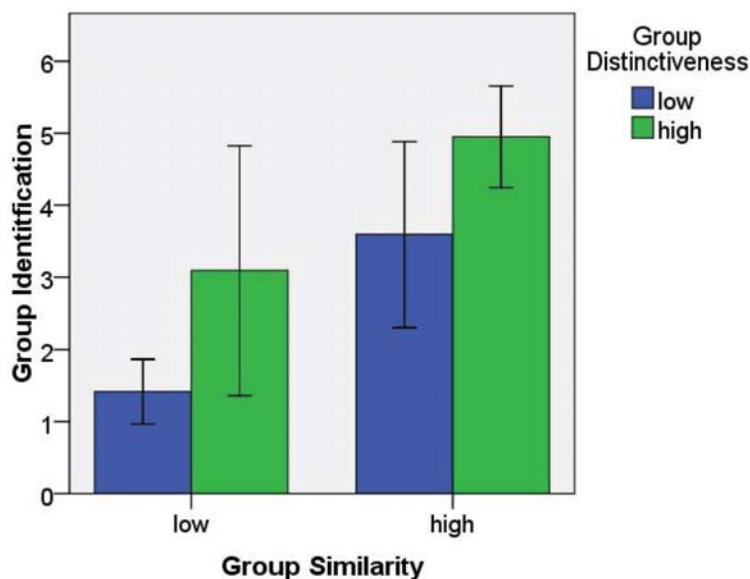
Participant 4 showed us a Facebook Group, which is her high school band. They have been together for seven years. She did not play in the band but every time the band was playing, she went to watch and bring food to them. She rated both the group similarity and distinctiveness as high (score of 7), and the group identification is also high (6.75), just as she said, “birds of the same feathers flock together”.

2) Close-By Friends: High Similarity with Low Distinctiveness

The 8 social groups rated as high on similarity and low on distinctiveness are usually close-by friends who have much intercourse but are not specifically bound by specific activities or groups. Their group identity is not high (mean=3.59, SD=1.54).

For example, Participant 1 reported a friend who talked with him on his wall as similar (score of 5): “we attended the same high school; we both play soccer a lot; we are both admitted to the top universities in China; both of our majors are computer science; both of us came to United States for PhD”. However, he rated their distinctiveness from others just 3, because

Figure 1. Group identification is influenced by group similarity and distinctiveness



“I have a lot of similar friends who play soccer, who are PhD’s in Computer Science”. The group identification was rated 2.25.

Participant 6 commented on a funny picture of him, his sister, and his girl friend together, saying that “we have a lot of similarities, and we play together a lot” (similarity of 6), however, he rated the distinctiveness as low (score of 3) because “we are just at the same level of peers, like other students”. The score of group identification was 4.25.

In these social groups, people seem do not have strong group identity, but they have strong bonds to each other. It seems that, social ties, rather than social identity, may apply better to such circumstances.

3) Associate: Low Similarity with High Distinctiveness

The 8 social groups rated low on similarity and high on distinctiveness are usually people who temporarily involved in low-demand activities with a minimal requirement to participate. They participate in certain events together but don’t have much communication besides that. Their average group identity was not high (mean=3.09, SD=2.07).

For example, in the annual firework, participant 1 rated group similarity as low (score of 2) because “all people attending the event are different” while rated group distinctiveness as 5 because “we are participants in the event”. And the score of group identification was 4.

Participant 9 was tagged in a photo of an event called “LGBT Pride” in New York with other four friends. He rated group similarity as low (score of 2) because “we have different life styles, education levels, and different attitudes toward the life/work balance”. However, he rated the group distinctiveness as high (score of 6) because “we usually go out to explore such kind of activities in New York”. And the group identification score was 4.5.

The size of such social groups is usually larger than other groups, which has more sense of community. These groups are usually based on certain social events. The shared event itself

endued them distinctiveness temporarily in the social context.

4) Acquaintances: Low Similarity with Low Distinctiveness

The 13 social groups rated as low on similarity and low on distinctiveness are usually personal status and activities commented by others. People involved in these activities are just general acquaintances who randomly comment. The average group identity was the lowest (mean=1.85, SD=0.98).

For example, participant 2 added his new roommate as friend on Facebook, with another friend commenting “funny you two know each other”. He rated group similarity and distinctiveness as low (both as 2) because “we just know each other” and “we are just common friends”. The group identification was very low (score of 1).

Four friends commented on participant 7’s status update “caught in the rain shower on my way back on a bike....but I am still alive....” Participant 7 rated both the group similarity and distinctiveness as low as 2 because “we are just general friends with different personality, tastes, major, and occupation”. The group identification score is also low (score of 2.25).

Showing in Table 1, we can see group distinctiveness is discriminated by whether common activities or interests are shared. Group similarity is more discriminated by the history of interactions (length and intensity) in the social assembly. According to different distinctiveness and similarity, four types of social groups, cliques, close-by friends, associates, and acquaintances, are defined.

Role-Based Identities

Intra-group role distinctiveness is highly related to role verification. While some roles were not very unique, some others were. For example, participant 3 reported herself as a “rookie”, and her “sporting skills do not stand out personally” in the softball team; participant 2 said while people in a Facebook event were all local musicians, he was the drummer; participant

Table 1. Examples of social groups with different levels of similarity and distinctiveness

		Distinctiveness	
		low	high
Similarity	low	Acquaintances e.g., connecting to new roommate, general comments on personal status updates	Associates e.g., World Cup comments, a TV show fans, large event gathering, high school get together
	high	Close-by Friends e.g., old friends greeting on walls, close friends sharing funny videos	Cliques e.g., rock band, softball team, soccer team, honor scholar program

6 thought himself pretty unique because he is “boy friend” of one and “elder brother” of the other in a photo of three.

Individuals can have several roles in the same group, probably because role in more related to structural position in the whole group as well as various inside relationship. Just as participant 1 reported that he was the vice captain of the soccer team, “that was because I am the best friend of the captain, and we built the team together”. Here both “vice captain” and “best friend” are role identities. The former refers to the structure position in the whole team, and the latter refers to the structures position in the network of social relationships (i.e., social ties).

There are implications that role distinctiveness will also influence group identification. For example, when participant 1 was talking about his soccer team, he emphasized that he was the vice captain. A more evident example comes from participant 2, who initiated a Facebook Group on active minds with dozens of members. Although he rated the group similarity as low (score of 3) because “we don’t know each other very well”, and the score of group distinctiveness as relatively high (5) because “we are all interested in mental health issue”, the group identification score was 7, because “I am the founder and leader of this group”.

How Facebook Supports Social Identities

While we categorized the activities into status updates (with comments), posting on walls (with

replies), tagged in photos, Facebook Events, and Facebook Groups, according to Facebook features. We did not find significant evidence that the type of technical features is influencing users’ identities.

Instead, we found their identities depended more on the social gatherings or groups where the identities were situated. For example, general friends can comment on your wall while very close friend can also comment. There can be Facebook Groups of small bands with high group identification; meanwhile some Facebook Groups are large communities with thousands of people (e.g., The World Cup 2010) with lower group identification. Facebook serves as a platform to facilitate social interactions from dyadic level to large communities of various kinds of social groups.

Moreover, Facebook as an online platform greatly facilitates student’s community life by providing more convenient ways for these social groups to communicate and collaborate. It also provides more opportunities for students to find interested resources and people with shared interests. Just as participant 6 said, from his friends Facebook activities he was usually surprised to find some of friends share some interest that he had never known, which sometimes starts new conversations or even further social activities. This suggests that online technologies such as Facebook facilitate richer community experience not only by making community identities more concrete in tangible social interactions, but also by extending new opportunities to new identities.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Social identity is a key construct to understand online communities. Existing studies of online identity ignored social interactions and community life where social identities are constructed and embodied. In this paper, we explored the modality of social identities in the ecology of Facebook-mediated community life. We demonstrated that identity is more of a dynamic concept of constructing self-presentations, as moderated by and adjusted in social contexts, in online environment. Through the interview we investigated users' tension between being similar and different at the same time. We found that group similarity and distinctiveness together influence group identifications, which confirms social identity theory. Furthermore, we proposed that intra-group level role distinctiveness can be another source of differentiation, and we found it can influence both role identity and group identity.

This paper first calls attention to social interactions in studying identity in online social network. While most of existing studies on online identity focus on relatively stable characteristics such as user profile, we demonstrate the feasibility of understanding identity embodied in social interactions. We argue that social identities could be and should be understood in tangible social contexts. Social identities are more concretely enacted and function in tangible social contexts than in abstracted statements such as profiles and questionnaires.

Second, social identity is a rather complex social mechanism as it shows in the study. While we investigated inter-group level social comparison as implied by social identity theory, we extended the differentiation level to include intra-group role distinctiveness. Even in the same social group, different levels of social categories can be activated, with different identity salience. Identity salience depends on the factors such as context for social comparison (e.g., people from Africa as minority group), current social activity (e.g., the sport team vs.

the whole university), and individual affiliations (e.g., the country vs. the continent).

How these multiple aspects of social identities can be integrated into self concept is a very interesting topic. In this paper, we demonstrated different combinations such as hierarchical and intersection identities as well as inter-group level combining intra-group level identities. Further investigations should be made on the enactment, appropriation, and integration of these multiple social identities.

Third, we explored the relationship among similarity, distinctiveness, and social identities. Social identities on one hand maintain the coherence of social groups, which usually require conformity of its members; on the other hand, social identities help keep the boundaries of different social groups. Our exploratory categorization of the four types of social groups demonstrates that social identity can be an effective construct to investigate online community life.

Furthermore, we found social tie as an inevitable conception to investigate community life. Some social groups are primarily common-identity based; some others are more common-bond based. Close-by friends in our study are one example. Furthermore, social ties inside social groups influence both role identities and group identity. Therefore, we would argue that social identity and social tie are two complementary constructs to understand community life. Just as Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler (2007) claimed, they are two different mechanisms of people's attachment to the community.

Our study gives design implications from the perspective of social identity. First, the notion that identity is mainly supported by static features such as users' profiles may constrain our community design. Understanding identities as enacted, constructed, and embodied in social interactions calls for more sensemaking features of identities in supporting online interactions. Understanding identities as a complex and dynamic social mechanism calls for collaborative sensemaking of different identities. Our categorization of group identities based on similarities and distinctiveness suggests

that online community design (e.g., Facebook Group) should take different kinds of social groups into account.

As an exploratory study, this paper sets the first step for further studies. Important issues we would like to explore are that 1) for individuals, how different aspects of identities are related and integrated to construct a unified “self”, that upholds their community life; 2) for social groups, whether different members perceive different group identity or hold different identity salience; how this relationship is modulated by their role identity; how people with different role identities can be integrated as an successful online group; 3) for a whole community (e.g., the university campus), how different social groups are overlapping and inter-related; whether social group identities (e.g., a university volleyball team) comprise community identity (e.g., the university), or whether they are just identities in different levels.

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