

How does self-presentation on social media affect students' development of identity in higher education? A focus on online and offline structure and agency.

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This study investigated the impact of university students' self-representation on social media on their identity development. Combining ideas from psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, this study understands identity as the combination of fragile and ongoing processes embedded within institutional discourse closely intertwined with students' actions, participation, practices and a subjective sense of invigorating sameness and continuity. Building on this perspective, this research revisits the relationship between self-presentation and identity development, arguing that self-presentation, as a self-technology, is simultaneously constrained by the norm of social media and exhibits limited student agency.

Full paper

Introduction and Rationale

For today's university students, transitions into higher education are a crucial phase in students' life journeys. This critical period facilitates the establishment of connections with the academic institution through diverse online/offline experiences and cultural interactions, significantly contributing to the development of their identities. Self-presentation is an important aspect of students' participation in informal learning cultures as well as the construction of identity (O'Leary and Murphy, 2018). However, the process of constructing identity is constrained by both the legitimate that the student perceives in their context and the personal backgrounds of the students (Henriksen, Dillon and Ryder, 2015). In this context, how students present themselves as well as construct identities is an area of concern. For universities, understanding this issue can help to develop strategies to provide students with relevant experiences and cultural environments to help them integrate into higher education (Taylor and Nichter, 2021). Most of the current research focuses on how college students self-present in social media in the field of higher education, ignoring how self-presentation affects identity construction. Therefore, this paper aims to provide a theoretical framework to explore the relationship between self-presentation and identity construction, providing a foundation for subsequent research.

Identity and self-presentation

At present, identity is extensively employed as a theoretical framework in the field of STEM education research (Rodriguez and Lehman, 2017). Some scholars tend to view the concept of identity from a psychological perspective (Förtsch and Schmid, 2018; Große-Bölting et al., 2023; Leifheit et al., 2019). Erickson's (1968) view is frequently cited from this perspective. According to him, 'identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning' (p.22). Despite the compelling debates of a fundamental core self in post-structuralist theory, it remains imperative to gain insights into individuals' active involvement, acceptance, or resistance towards specific power structures, as opposed to being passively shaped. Drawing on the scholarship in psychoanalysis, the process of generating an active identification could be examined (Atkinson, 2002).

Post-structuralist scholars focus on the social and political processes of identity construction and power relations. Foucault's view holds significant relevance in this context. According to Foucault, identity is shaped by the social and cultural environment and is subject to discursive practices. Dispersed power relations exert influence through interactions via discourse and institutional practices, effectively governing identity and behavior within particular cultural contexts (Foucault, 1982). Although this viewpoint has received criticism from many feminist scholars (Hartsock, 1989; McNay, 1999), Foucault's ethical interpretation of 'technology of the self' or 'the concern with self' explores the possibility of new forms of subjectivity. For Foucault, technologies of the self: . . . permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault, 1988: 18). Base on Foucault, Evans and Saker, (2016) argue that identity can be interpreted as the realization achieved through the construction of a biography that details the 'self' in a meaningful and reflective way to the individual (Evans and Saker, 2016). Importantly, technology of the self hardly function separately with power (Foucault, 1988). This view place identity at the intersection of agency and structure and subject to social power frameworks.

Despite the nuances of self-presentation and biography, Haraway (1991) pointed out that technological advances have long since blurred the lines between humans and machines. She believes that in the process of understanding and shaping the environment by employ a multitude instruments, such as keyboards and screens, humans start to become cyborgs, a cyborg beyond the surface meaning (Haraway, 2013). Thus, writing/presenting themselves online can be understood as a process of identity practice, subject to particular online contextual norms. As argued by Dorrestijn (2012), sharing on social media provides greater possibilities for self-concern, as it involves a reflective process that engages with the political practices that shape one's identity. This process also offers opportunities to change power dynamics that contribute to one's sense of self (ibid), which is not only the embodiment of one's mind (Ramiller, 2016).

Conclusion and future work

Through an overview of identity theory, this paper explains online self-presentation as a way of constructing identity within a normative discourse. This theory lays the groundwork for exploring how students' self-presentation affects their identity construction.

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