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Young people and social media

A comparison of profile icons of teenagers from different countries

Teenagers can express their evolving self-identities on personal websites, in blogs and chat rooms, and via personalised game avatars. At the same time they can draw on cultural resources from across the globe to fashion their self-image. This study analysed one type of online self-imaging, the ubiquitous profile icon, to see how 12- to 15-year-olds represent themselves visually and what cultural markers[1] they employ.

The study

Although access to self-imaging web tools is increasingly ubiquitous for young people in developed economies, it is not so simple for researchers to use that ubiquity for their purposes. The ethical issues that arise when researching young people are significant. First, how does one make contact with young people through the web without encouraging them to "trust" strangers? What is the nature and value of interactions online when the researcher has self-identified as an adult? We hoped to begin by running local face-to-face focus groups in each site (China, Germany, Korea, Australia, France etc.), and then to move these discussions online once trust and effective safety procedures had been established. Informal dis-

cussions were held with young people already known to the authors, and a workshop at the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People elicited important contextual insights for a reference group (aged 11 to 17).

The pilot project therefore focussed on collating a database of image types and regional specificities.

The coding group comprised 2,000 images sampled and organised by surname and likely ethnicity. This allowed us to access broadly nation-specific samples (South Korea or Germany for example), but we also acknowledged that in strongly multi-cultural environments (such as Australia) ethnicity was a less stable mark of difference.[2]

The test zones were MySpace and Facebook. These are the most popular international social networking sites, or they were at the period of the scoping work – we note that social networking is a highly mobile business phenomenon and that what is popular one day is old-fashioned the next. This is already somewhat the case

with Facebook, where young people have noted with horror that older people (including their parents) are occupying the same network. MySpace has also begun to decline in popularity also as its design capabilities are outstripped in other venues online. We also note that many Korean and Chinese users have non-English sites such as CyWorld. Nonetheless, the Facebook and MySpace samples are the best placed to provide an international snapshot of self-imaging practices.[3]

First results

The interim results have demonstrated remarkable uniformity in the creation of code categories.

- Gestures tended to be "on the way out" whilst head shots and quite formal poses were popular.
- Korea in particular used the ID shot mode most frequently.
- There was a slight tendency for quite imaginative statements of personality – through animation,
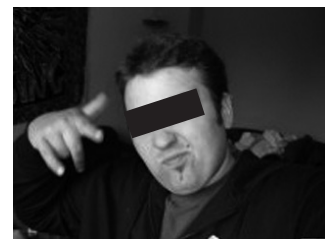
Profile icons with formal poses (Ill. 1) **and head shots** (Ill. 2) **have become more popular than icons with gestures** (Ill. 3)

Ill. 4-8: **Females often display themselves as "sexually desirable" through their profile icons, males try to produce attractiveness through material belongings or macho behaviour**

abstract images, composites, and reference points of location (Sydney Harbour Bridge, a jetty, a statue and so on).

- The degree of informality – very hard to code but one is able to discern – is strongest in the European samples, but there is a heightened sense of play and extravagance and indeed intimacy in Australian and Asian shots.

The terms of a visual grammar that we were attempting to define through this project were most problematic in respect to interpretations of intent, especially as the forms of image capture affect what kind of image is possible. So, whilst the close up of a worried, or soulful teenager might look at first like it is a statement of vulnerability, it might also be a false impression created by the webcam. The latter does encourage the user to peer intently and to thereby distort their own image.

- Given the important focus on gender differences in media use and content, it is crucial to note that there does not seem to be significant self-differentiation between males and females across the younger sample.
- Although females in all sites were somewhat more prone to display themselves as sexually desirable, that was most often achieved through an ironic performance rather than as a more problematic display of the body as "available".

In our conversations with young women in Australia (aged 13 to16), this interpretation was forcefully supported. Young men also display themselves as desirable but they do so through a display of belongings (bikes, guitars, headphones) or through bravado (achieved through gestures).

Conclusion

This is the beginning of what needs to be a larger and internationally resourced longitudinal project. Our conclusions are therefore tentative. We can claim, however, that there is strong evidence of an internationally understood visual grammar of online sociality, shared by young people and only somewhat differentiated by nationality, proximity, or ethnic difference.

Young people use their online sites to ironise mainstream definitions of sexuality, as well as to attract attention from one another. They are very unlikely to project political or social messages on social networking sites (and as such use the systems quite differently from young and middle-aged adults).

They use available image capture technologies in a sophisticated manner – showing an ease with fractured and fetishistic techniques of displaying the body which is occasionally belied by more timid close ups of the face. It is very evident that self-imaging is both a mode of play and a serious game in regards to defining the self to the friendship network.

Other media platform content might be enhanced by examining these forms of self-identification to see whether there is a different range of identity available to producers and casting agents. In particular, the ease with which young people deploy childlike playfulness in the same realm as formality and ironic sexuality, indicate the complexity of how they feel in the world. Multi-dimensional character development in television would respect that complexity. ■

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