

## **Understanding Identity and Platform Cultures**

*Harry T Dyer, Lecturer in Education, University of East Anglia ([harry.t.dyer@uea.ac.uk](mailto:harry.t.dyer@uea.ac.uk))*

*Crystal Abidin, Associate Professor & Principal Research Fellow, Internet Studies, Curtin University ([crystal.abidin@curtin.edu.au](mailto:crystal.abidin@curtin.edu.au))*

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### **Introduction**

This chapter explores current key debates and frameworks around the concept of identity on digital platforms. The chapter will begin by drawing on extant key sociological conceptions of identity, asking what we can learn from previous theorisations of identity, and crucially, what is unique about identity negotiation in online spaces. In particular, we will consider how to account for aspects of platform design that constrain our actions and interactions – such as limited character counts or 15-second videos – which form the landscape upon which our identities play out. We will explore existing research looking at how these design choices constrain and shape our identities and social experiences online. At the same time, it is also clear that not all users experience and respond to design choices in the same uniform way. We must crucially also consider the ability of users to engage in unique and novel presentations of identity despite these design choices. In this manner, this chapter will move on to consider how we avoid technological determinism while acknowledging that our actions and interactions are constrained and guided by aspects of platform design. We will consider literature that demonstrates acts of negotiation, novelty, and compromise between design choices and user experiences and desires.

Further, the chapter discusses the growing body of literature highlighting the socio-cultural dynamics of digital platforms, and the evident reality that not all users experience and respond to digital platforms in uniform ways. It is apparent that part of our unique experiences online are guided by the socio-cultural resources we bring with us as users to these platforms. In this manner, this chapter will consider literature exploring how we translate our extant identities onto these new platforms. Finally, it is also evident that these platforms prioritise certain users, voices, behaviours, and bodies and minimise others, recreating, translating, and exacerbating extant socio-cultural dynamics and manifesting them in new ways upon these platforms. Given this, this chapter will consider the growing body of literature exploring the ways in which platforms contain baked-in biases, and what impact these have upon the user. In the conclusion of this chapter, we will bring together these four elements - the impact of the design of digital platforms on our actions and interactions, the agency of individual users in novel identity performances, the impact of the extant socio-cultural resources of the user, and the ways in which platform design act of 'architectures of violence' for different communities – to consider the broader sociological picture of the overlaps between identity, culture, and platform design and platform design and future directions for research in the field.

### **Understanding identity in social media**

Identity is one of the most discussed ideas in sociological research, yet also a concept which is still quite difficult to directly pin down. The discussions of where identity begins and ends, how we account for macro and micro aspects, how we account for non-human and in-human elements, and how we consider agency all become quite complicated, even before we consider introducing technology into this mix. Within sociological conceptions of identity the focus of research and identity theory generally shifts away from considering the relationship between inner 'self' and a concept of an identity, and towards a focus on the relationship between an individual and the social situations and settings in which identity it is (per)formed and enacted. However, there is still much variation within this focus in regard to the conceptualisation of a social identity. Given the variety and breadth of the discussion surrounding the concept of identity, this chapter cannot hope to fully discuss the ways in which identity has been conceptualised in sociology. However, it is worth noting that sociological approaches can straddle more 'macro' concerns (which understand identity as a broad cultural category that is tantamount to the ongoing performed acts, attitudes, and behaviours of a group of people) to more 'micro' approaches (which focus upon identity as an individual response to a given situation), as well as approaches which attempt to disrupt this dichotomy to understand the interplay between broad categories and individual variations. In this chapter we will look at research which explores macro to micro concerns around identity, considering what this means for an understanding of platform cultures and how individuals negotiate their relationship with, through, on, in, and despite social media.

In order to unpack digital identity and platform cultures, we will begin this chapter with a discussion of some of the existing sociological attempts to explore and understand identity, considering what these established theories might offer to our understanding of digital platforms, as well as what is missing from these approaches given the unique modes and manifestations of identity digitally. We will then move on to explore issues around understanding agency in digital identity performances, exploring research and theory around where the boundaries of control over identity lie in online spaces. The chapter will then move on to discuss how the extratextual socio-cultural resources of the user impact their use of digital spaces, before exploring research around inequity in platform cultures. It is hoped that these topics will begin to explore the depth of thinking around digital identities and platform cultures, though there is evidently more work to be done to explore these concepts as new mediums, modes, and manifestations emerge. Any piece written about digital technology is largely grounded in the forms of technology present and prevalent at the time of writing, and this chapter is no exception. With this in mind, we will highlight current concerns at the time of writing and point towards future directions for research interested in exploring identity and platform cultures, highlighting where research at the intersections of identity and technology might head next.

### *Identity in context*

As mentioned earlier, tensions in sociological research exist around where to locate identity, with attempts to understand both broad 'macro' group identities and socio-cultural categorisations and more 'micro' understanding of how individuals relate to their immediate social situations. As we will discuss later in this chapter, socio-cultural categories impact a user's treatment and experiences online in significant ways both rooted in centuries-old inequity and manifested in new forms and modes online (Noble 2018). Yet a broad conceptualisation of identity as dictated by

socio-cultural categories alone nonetheless misses the importance and the theoretical necessity of the separation of the notion of identity as a distinct concept from social categories (Stryker & Burke, 2000), allowing for individual variation and manifestation. As Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 585) point out, “identities encompass macro-level demographic categories, temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles, and local, ethnographically emergent cultural positions”. In other words, while macro categories do shape how we categorise ourselves and others, and do impact how users experience and are treated within social spaces (as we will discuss later in this chapter), these same broad categories are not wholly capable alone of accounting for the complexities in individual behaviours and patterns in-and-of-themselves as they manifest within complex emergent social environments online. Though macro categories do help researchers understand experiences within social spaces, we also know that the manifestation of identity is (in part) also “dependent on the interactional demands of the immediate social context” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 591).

This immediate social context becomes complicated online, as users negotiate a social performance through a variety of “props” and “stages” (Goffman, 1959), often designed out of their control, which emphasise some ways of acting and interacting and minimise others. The dynamics of online spaces pose some challenges for established approaches for understanding identity. For example, Goffman’s hugely influential work around identity and decorum defines identity performances as “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period [...] before a set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (Goffman 1959, 32). The key component here for Goffman’s work was the notion of an audience, who informed and guided a socially-responsive co-creation of identity. For Goffman, identity performance was something that occurred before, in response to, and for an audience who receive and respond to the performance, giving feedback which helps shape the direction of the social interaction. This notion of audience is nonetheless complicated in online spaces, and researchers have increasingly highlighted the ellision and collapse of social contexts online. Perhaps most notably this has been explored through the concept of “context collapse” (Davis and Jurgenson 2014), which looks at how users balance the merging and collapsing of multiple extant and previously separable social contexts and audiences within one platform online. The concept of context collapse allows us to explore how users negotiate possible input from multiple audiences who now exist within one environment, such as friends, family, colleagues, partners, companies, and politicians. The affordances online notably make it “difficult for people to use the same techniques online that they do to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversation” (Marwick and boyd 2011, 114), and in turn to adopt strategies for dealing with these multiplicities. For example, research is beginning to explore the use of ‘finstas’ or fake Instagram accounts to control potential audiences (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin 2020), and even to challenge existing social norms and expectations around issues such as sexuality (Cerezo et al., 2021). A consideration of the negotiation of the complexities of audiences online is a fruitful area for future research, growing on existing research that explores the ways in which contexts might merge and separate online, such as the blending of private and public (Sujon 2018), or friends and work (Brandtzaeg and Chaparro-Domínguez 2020). Or even the flattening of lines between a user’s past and present which may manifest in complex ways (Brandtzaeg and Lüders 2018).

*Identity by design*

The notion of identity as a social performance has proven useful to explore the ways in which users respond to the specificities of digital spaces, including a range of work exploring specific online features as new forms of social identity performance, such as location check-ins (Bertel 2016) or ‘liking’ posts online (Paßmann & Schubert, 2020), to sexual interactions online (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020). As Paßmann & Schubert, (2020, 3) note in their discussion of ‘liking’ on social media as a form of social taste making, these uses of digital affordances complicate our understanding of the relationship between design and social performances as they are:

“neither fully reducible to the technologies social media offer, nor to given social structures that are expressed on social media platforms. On the other hand, taste making on social media is specific, especially due to their respective functionalities providing specific architectures for taste making”.

This is further complicated by the nuances and contexts of design features online varying from one platform to the next, presenting unique interactional situations (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020) which may demand different dynamics from the users, restricting and framing what it means to be social within that space. Traditional frames for identity, such as that of Goffman, have underscored the malleability of how we act and interact in social situations in response to audiences. This can also be mapped onto contemporary online interactions for us to understand the multiple changeable and adaptable identity performances manifesting in digital formats – such as selfies (Warfield, Cambre, & Abidin 2016) and dating app profiles (Ferris and Duguay, 2019) – aimed at increasing the variety of changeable audiences and platforms online, whether on the internet or via apps. Yet, while Goffman’s work allows for a consideration of how identity is responsive and specific to social dynamics in a situation, it crucially does not consider the role of the *design* of that situation in shaping the identity performances. Goffman (1959) does note that we choose appropriate social cues, actions, and interactions for different settings and audiences, but does not overtly consider in any detail, that this choice is not boundless, and instead predicated on the available options within that location.

To extend Goffman’s analogy of identity performances, while the audience certainly does shape how an actor performs, so too do the props and staging available to the actor. A consideration of the overlaps between design and identity online may therefore help us better consider the complex relationship between socio-culturally grounded users within bounded environments. Indeed, Richey, Ravishankar, and Coupland (2016) note that the changeable nature of identity can be potentially problematic in certain situations online when situational cues are misread, leading to inappropriate posts which can damage identity impressions, highlighting that “technology-enabled interactions don’t constitute a perfect situation where performers can access a full range of social cues” (Richey et al. 2016, 604). This presents challenges for researchers exploring identity online, not least of all as it positions a consideration of design as a factor that must be considered, or at the least as part of the social milieu that influences and shapes how identity might emerge and manifest in digital spaces. While theoretical frameworks continue to be developed to help explore the relationship between user and design in identity presentation (see Dyer 2020), so do design features, offering new challenges and possibilities for how identity manifests online. For example, at the time of writing, the early scholarship exploring TikTok

highlights how the affordances of TikTok, as well as the legacy of its predecessor sister-app Douyin, shape new manifestations of the attention economy and visibility labour practices (Abidin 2021b). It is with this discussion of design in mind that this chapter now moves on to a discussion of agency and user control online.

### **Agency and determinism in digital actions and interactions**

Beyond the traditional epistemological splits between often psychology-based conceptions of identity as an internal divining rod individuals project outwards and deviate from, and the more sociologically-driven conception of identity as an external performance measured in efficacy against audience reaction, it is evident that our very sense of a knowable and definable ‘self’ emerges from, and is deeply entangled with, the social world. When considering digital identity, it is worth acknowledging explicitly that identities are socially entangled at all stages as we as individuals make sense of the society we are thrown into. Heidegger termed this feeling as ‘*geworfenheit*’ – a sense of being thrown into a world outside of our designing that we must come to terms with as we position ourselves accordingly. As the works of theorists and researchers such as Judith Butler have explored in depth, we can consider the “social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts” (Butler 1988, 519). This ontological positioning allows an understanding of the ways in which we as a society collectively limit and constrain acceptable identities. As Butler puts it, our socially-bound construction of identities “not only produce the domain of intelligible bodies, but produce as well a domain of unthinkable, abject, unliveable bodies” (Butler, 1993, xi).

#### *Identity and ‘digital’ sensing*

When considering how liveable and “unliveable” (Butler, 1993, xi) bodies impact an understanding of digital identity, we should not lose sight of the fact that technology is not only something that we are thrown into, but also something that is designed in ways that often articulate expected behaviours and bodies, punishing, demeaning, mocking, and threatening bodies that are coded as incorrect and deviant. One need only look at the treatment of Black users online and the coding and presentation of Black bodies (Noble 2018), or the treatment of Trans and Queer people (Vivienne 2016). As drag queen Lil Miss Hot Mess suggests (2015, 145), we can understand “the digital as a space in which new forms of speech acts or gestures contribute to the production and disciplining of our subjectivities”. In this manner we can begin to explore what Verbeek (2010, 39) terms “*entworfenheit* (being ‘designed’ into existence)”, and the ways in which bodies are disciplined through and by design.

Indeed, it is not just our sense of self and our expected behaviour and action, but perhaps even our bodily senses themselves; our ways of experiencing, knowing, feeling, seeing, and making sense of the world around us that are bound in social discourses enacted upon and by us. This relationship between senses and social space has been considered in recent scholarship around the sociology of food (See Canniford, Riach, & Hill, 2018) and diaspora studies (see Kong 2015), and presents a fruitful area of research for an understanding of technology (see Barker, Jewitt, and Price 2020) At first consideration this may seem a radical statement: bodily senses like sight, taste, touch, smell all seem in some way objective and constant, beyond and external to the

messy construction of the social, untarnished by the ongoing project of the social world constructing and constraining itself. Yet, as researchers like Andrew Kettler (2020) show, these distinctions between our senses and the social world are not so clear cut. Senses like smell are sociologically bound, and have been, for example, subject to what Kettler calls 'olfactory racism' – the process by which African bodies came to be defined as scented through a process of embodied cultural knowledge and racial othering that altered the European biological function of smell and attitudes towards Blackness.

Through digitally-infused spaces, this navigation of our senses towards discourses of appropriate bodies becomes a form of normalising certain actions, interactions, and users, as we will discuss later in this chapter. In terms of how we might then consider agency (here understood as the capacity of an individual to act in a self-determined manner) we are left with a number of questions about how much our identity is in our control. If even our senses are sociologically constructed then what does this mean for agency and the ability to resist the literal 'body politic'? And what does this mean in digital spaces where what we might term as our 'digital senses' – our possibilities and ways of knowing ourselves and experiencing these spaces – are so heavily constrained and constricted through design choices? Or, to bastardise Derrida, is there nothing outside of these digital texts?

Such discussions have been taking place in disability studies, with scholarship exploring the ways in which bodies and agency are represented and experienced online by users experiencing disability (Goggin & Ellis 2020), the negations of users not considered visibly disabled (Miller, 2017) of the ways in which platforms further disable users (Trevisan, 2020), and the myriad reasons people with disabilities might go online (Shpigelman & Gill, 2014). Such work is increasingly pushing against optimistic narratives of social media as liberating, and towards intersectional understandings and nuanced discussions of people with disabilities (See Alper 2017, Bitman & John 2019), and a deeper exploration of the ways in which social media acts to frame experiences of disabilities. As Bitman (2020, 3) notes:

The demand for authenticity limits their online persona to what people recognize as their physical attributes; at the same time, what is considered as 'authentic' by general SNSs' able-bodied users is informed by dichotomous representations that fail to reflect the complex lived experience of disability.

Disabilities studies ask researchers interested in identity online to consider the ways in which users with disabilities are caught between, as Gelfgren, Ineland, and Cocq (2021) put it, the hopes and realities of social media, both amplifying possibilities of voice and inclusion, and further stigmatising and marginalising individuals (See Trevisan, 2020).

### *Design and voice*

Recent research on identity and digital equity, largely driven by the early pioneering critical work by scholars of internet studies, and especially by Black, female, and LGBTQ+ researchers, has

made clear that social media platforms (Byron *et al*, 2019; Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020), their designs (Bucher & Helmond 2018; Dyer 2020), their coding, logics, and algorithms (Noble, 2018; Carmi, 2020), and the technologies through which we access them (Benjamin, 2019; Neff & Nafus, 2016) all play a role in shaping how our social identities emerge and manifest on, in, and through social media. There is also growing and ongoing discussion academically as to what extent our actions and interactions are the result of technology and platform design *alone*, and what the role of the users and human agency may be, particularly in the resistance to these design choices. To briefly explore this aspect of identity performance online, we will first begin by exploring the concept of ‘technological determinism’, around which much of this discussion has traditionally revolved in media studies, before moving to explore current work theorising agency in digital spaces.

One of the most cited examples of a deterministic view of technology can be found in the works of Marshall McLuhan and the Toronto School of Communication Theory, most well-known arguably for coining the aphorism “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964). Using this aphorism, McLuhan argued that media studies as a field should focus less upon the messages being communicated through media, and more upon the medium through which they are being sent, positing that the medium had the transformative ability to change the scale and form of human association and action” (McLuhan, 1964, 9), how we are acting and interacting, and how we understand and frame social actions and interactions. Technology, according to McLuhan, could change the human body physically, causing us to rely upon different senses, skills, and knowledges to use it. For example, McLuhan highlights how different aspects of the body were prioritised in oral, spoken, and heard communication than would be prioritised in written and visually perceived communication methods. McLuhan therefore posited that new mediums changed our societies and bodies on a number of levels, using this positioning to argue for depth and nuance when considering the effects of technology upon human action (Logan, 2010). In this manner, McLuhan argued for a focus upon “the physical and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes” (McLuhan, 1964, 24).

While such an approach opens up avenues to understand technologies ability to shape society at a macro level, McLuhan’s focus on the importance of the medium over the message fractures and distances the message that is being conveyed from the medium through which it is being conveyed (Peters, 2017), and has led to sweeping assumptions about how technology works with our identities. For example, the assumptions around ‘digital natives’. Originally conceived by Marc Prensky (2001), digital natives refers to the generation of young people born roughly after 1980 who, because they have been exposed to digital technology from birth, have a different approach, fluency, and use of technology than previous generations whom Prensky labels ‘digital immigrants’. The term digital natives has passed somewhat into its public parlance as an easy explainer for why Millennials (and now Gen Z) interact digitally. This catch-all approach to understanding identity has been widely discredited, not only because of the problematically racist framing of immigrants and natives (Bayne and Ross, 2011), but also because of the sweeping assumptions of young people and their engagements with technology regardless of context and socio-cultural factors beyond age alone (Shah and Abraham, 2009).



Such broad approaches often do not allow for a consideration of novelty, negotiation, compromise, or resistance – of *both* the medium and the messages, which can obscure the complexities of the ways technologies work in our lives, or that humans can have novel and individual experiences with technology beyond suggested and codified uses alone (Peters 2017). These discussions about how users make sense of technology, and indeed the ability to resist or comply with the power of media are rife in media studies writ large where theories have been built and debated over the last century. Digital technology further complicates the nuances of our role in shaping actions and interactions, and elides the role of consumer and producer in multiple ways. In this manner, recent work has begun to consider not just the impact of the technology itself, but the workers, moderators, infrastructures, and logics, around it to produce more complex understandings of which bodies and identities are considered unthinkable and unliveable (see Noble, 2018; Carmi, 2020). This leaves digital researchers in the position to debate to what extent digital spaces allow for the generation of new theories of agency and identity, and to what extent we see continuation from older approaches in media studies.

It is undeniable that there is a uniqueness in the digital translations of identity. We use the word translation here purposefully, drawing on an Italian adage; ‘traduttore traditore’ which somewhat ironically translates as ‘to translate is to betray’. This translation of offline reality takes the already socially constructed world around us and emphasises some aspects while minimising others. If we view social media as an imperfect translation of an already inequitable reality, we can consider agency as a ‘heteroglossic’ affair, in which acts of compromise and resistance are imbued with many voices beyond the user’s alone shaping the final narrative.

### *Agency and Privacy*

Recent research has begun to explore how much users feel in control of their identities and choices online. This work suggest that, in the face of these multiple heteroglossic voices present online corraling possible agency in identity performance, users might simply give up or resign themselves to the fact that decisions in their identity are made for them online, feeling powerless to make many meaningful choices around issues such as privacy (Choi et al., 2018; Draper and Turow, 2019). Though, as Lutz, Hoffmann, & Ranzini. (2020) point out, this need not be a totalising defeat of agency in the face of powerlessness over privacy. Indeed, they introduce the term ‘privacy cynicism’ to help name the feeling of disempowerment around data control while still allowing for users to participate online in meaningful and agential ways. They define privacy cynicism as:

“[...]an attitude of uncertainty, powerlessness, and mistrust toward the handling of personal data by digital platforms, rendering privacy protection subjectively futile[...] (P)rivacy cynicism can be understood as a cognitive coping mechanism because it allows subjectively disempowered users to participate in online platforms without cognitive dissonance since they rationalize privacy protection as useless”. (Lutz, Hoffmann, & Ranzini 2020, 1174)

In this manner we can understand distinctions in our attitudes towards the various voices and elements curtailing our agency. As Sujon’s (2018) insightful research suggests, for example, we

may care more about ‘social privacy’ (privacy from known or identifiable social contacts) than ‘institutional privacy’ (privacy from algorithms, platforms, companies, governments, and other institutions that collect personal information), directing our attentions and efforts towards these in the control of our identity. This can take the form of, for example controlling who sees specific content (Dyer, 2020), cleaning social media content (Raynes-Goldie 2010), creating multiple fake accounts (such as ‘finstas’ – Kang & Lewen 2020), and other acts of compromise and creativity.

Crucially, we can also see novelty in user engagement with social media to present identities in ways that directly resist or seek to disrupt prominent narratives or expected engagements with platforms. For example, activists such as the ‘Art+Feminism’ collective, organised by Siân Evans, Jacqueline Mabey, Michael Mandiberg, and Laurel Ptak, annually run Wikipedia ‘edit-a-thons’ to correct for the fact that, by Wikimedia’s own accounting, 90% of contributors to Wikipedia identify as male (Wikimedia 2018). Others have used gaming platforms such as Twitch to livestream Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 with large impact, attracting millions of viewers and becoming some of the most watched streams on Twitch over the summer of 2020 (Browning 2020).

There are likely to continue to be interesting developments in our consideration of agency online, for example through issues of deep fakes and doctored videos. Prominent cases have shown the overlaps of agency and socio-cultural factors, such as Republican Congressman Steve Scalise editing a video of Ady Barkan, an activist who has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and speaks through the use of a computer, for a political campaign video (McCarthy 2020). Other cases include what we might call ‘zombie’ accounts of prominent public figures which continue to tweet after the user has died. For example, Herman Cain’s account tweeting conspiracy videos about COVID-19 months after he himself died after contracting COVID-19 (Mazza 2020). We continue to see new developments and cases of online identity carrying on, regardless of the original owner’s agency, all of which present challenges to how researchers conceptualise voice and identity online.

From this, it is apparent that agency is complex and multifaceted online, experienced at macro levels and micro personal levels, at all times bound up in social dynamics which can be amplified or minimised online. A users’ ability to act and shape identity is curtailed by multiple factors, design choices, and voices online. Research continues to explore these dynamics in increasingly nuanced way, understanding agency not as a catch-all experience (Sujon 2018, Lutz, Hoffmann, & Ranzini, 2020), but as complex forces and influences with which we compromise and negotiate our actions and interactions. In this manner, future digital research can continue to theorise and explore the socio-technical nature of identity performances, and the emerging and established manners in which our online identities manifest through the ‘intra-action’ (Barad, 2003) and interplay between materially heterogeneous elements that include socio-culturally grounded users, complex multimodal designs, and technologies. With this in mind, we will move now to discuss research and approaches to digital identity that disrupt online-offline dichotomies by exploring and foregrounding socio-cultural resources.

### **Socio-culturally-grounded users**

The early internet appeared to offer a ‘blank slate’ to users to re-write socio-cultural dynamics and to reform their identity anew, fundamentally separate and apart from the entrenched discourses that pervaded offline spaces (See Markham, 1998). Since this early work, digital researchers have worked to show that divides between offline and online spaces are increasingly porous, and that any hope of a clean divide between offline and online, however well meaning, is problematic if not impossible (Jurgenson, 2012; Baym, 2015). As we discussed in the last section of this chapter, many choices are already made for the user when approaching social media, and that a user is not presented with a blank space to produce a social identity, but a curated space. These spaces often ask for markers of identity such as gender, age, name, occupation and so on that are consistent with your offline identity.

### Authenticity online

The modern neoliberal internet is a marketplace awash with data collected about our lives, bodies, movements, desires, habits, and identities. As Carmi (2020, 128) points out, cookies are baked in to the logic of the modern internet, noting:

“[...]cookies were authorized and legitimized by design. This standard enabled hundreds of cookies to be plugged into people’s bodies (through their browsers) and communicate the behaviors they conduct in multiple websites to various media companies that traded them”.

Indeed, Mark Zuckerberg was cited as saying that “having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (Zimmer 2010), offering a clear signal of the increasing ways in which our identities online are bound up in markers of the offline. Crucially, not only are these platforms far from ‘blank slates’ for users to write whatever they want, users themselves are also not blank when approaching these spaces, bringing with them significant ‘baggage’ which informs their engagement with these spaces. Recent research (see Dyer 2020) suggests, users approach these spaces with expectations informed by intertextuality (the knowledge and experience of other similar digital and non-digital texts), and extratextuality (their socio-cultural resources, including from outside the digital text in question). It is this notion of users as already socially embedded agents in a carefully curated and designed socio-technical space that we must keep in mind when understanding identity performances online, especially given that the rhetoric of online and offline as easily separated spaces, which Jurgeson (2012) terms ‘digital dualism’ pervades to this day in policy, press, and public parlance.

### *Sociality and digital space*

Recent work explores some of the nuanced ways in which online and offline spaces elide to produce new forms of sociality. For example, games such as Pokémon Go purposefully provide ‘augmented’ experiences of the world around us as a blended digital and physical spaces. These experiences are shared in real time with other localised players of the game, experiencing the spaces around them in a new manner. As Evens and Saker (2019, 246) suggest, Pokémon Go

presents opportunities for interactions “marked by absorbing, compelling and durable socio-spatial experiences that extend the nexus between location, game, play and digital device”. Elsewhere, researchers such as Miller (2012) and Pires *et al.* (2019) have documented how YouTube becomes an embedded and evolving part of the daily routines of young people, including the co-creation and co-consumption of videos with peers and family for a range of reasons, such as “to exchange their impressions about what they are watching, to enjoy and have the company of other peers” (Pires *et al.*, 2019, 12).

There is also a wealth of research about communities bringing resources with them to their engagements with online spaces, again further blurring online and offline divides. For example, Andre Brock Jr.’s research (2020) demonstrates explicit techno-cultural digital practices that bring together purposefully curated spaces and socio-culturally grounded users to produce meaningful identity presentations. Brock Jr. (2018, 1017) discusses the act of ‘signifyin’ which he defines as:

“[...]a marker of Black cultural identity operating through articulations and performances of shared referents, and[...]a stylistic format of invention and delivery”

Going on to note that:

“Black Twitter could be understood as online signifyin’ practice—a discursive articulation of Black identity mapped onto and mediated by Twitter’s computational, network, and semantic qualities” (Brock Jr. 2018, 1025).

Crucially, researchers have suggested that this is not simply a case of Blackness layered on top of the digital, but is a form of *co-constitution* of space for identity presentation. This presents interesting conceptions of the ways in which identity works as a socio-technical experience temporally, drawing on historic markers of identity and shaping the cultural future. As Sharma (2013, 46) explains:

“beyond conceiving Black Twitter as a group of preconstituted users tweeting racialized hashtags, Blacktags are instrumental in producing networked subjects which have the capacity to multiply the possibilities of being raced online”.

In this manner, we can understand and explore identity performance online as porous practices that stretch across online and offline spaces, manifesting in and through specific affordances online. These performances then ripple onwards into the cultural experience of Blackness. As Nakamura and Chow-White (2011, 5) note:

“Race has itself become a digital medium, a distinctive set of informatic codes, networked mediated narratives, maps, images, and visualizations that index identity”.

While early internet scholarship hopefully declared the internet as a space free from markers of identity, subsequent scholarship explored and opened up avenues for critical discussions of how the social is *already* embedded and embodied in our experiences online. This is done both by and for users, with engagements through technology bleeding across boundaries of the online and offline physically and temporally. In this manner, users draw on past experiences while

reframing both technologies and socio-cultural categories. Digital platform cultures and identities in this manner cannot be divorced from socio-cultural resources which inform the users experiences, expectations, treatment, and engagement with these spaces.

Researchers such as Safiya Noble (2018), for example, have detailed algorithmic manifestations of inequity online, exploring how it is coded into the logics and designs of the internet - for example through search functions categorising Black hair as unprofessional, or Asian females as fetishes for consumption. Noble's work highlights how these categorisations impact the users' ways of knowing and relating to themselves, others, and the world around them, both online and offline. It is with this in mind that we take a turn towards a consideration of institutional response to this inequity and the impact of this upon identity performances and platform cultures.

### **Platform cultures, responsibility, and responses**

Encoded inequity and algorithmic bias (see Noble 2018) is of great importance for anyone studying platform cultures and identities online, and raises ethical and methodological issues for researching online spaces. Questions might arise at all stages of research design: around recruitment and the users already present or excluded in these spaces, around methods of collecting the discourses and voices heard and unheard, around the analysis and choices of the researcher to accept or account for the logics of these platforms. Despite research and advocacy, Noble (2018) highlights that companies like Google seem unwilling to meaningfully address these issues, a point that is further highlighted in the treatment and firing of Timnit Gebru as co-lead of Google's ethical AI team in December 2020. The design of online spaces then is inherently political. As D'Ignazio & Klein (2020, 23) put it, "data and power, far too often, easily and insidiously align". Though online platforms may emphasise their passivity, acting as if they 'simply pass along the speech of their users to those users' networks, without editorial input' (Chander and Krishnamurthy 2018, 401), research is increasingly highlighting the ways in which platforms produce complex dynamics for users, both intended and unintended by the designers (Cottom 2017; Noble 2018; Benjamin 2019).

In this manner, there is a continuing need for research which explores how inequity manifests in new and emerging online spaces, as well as established platforms, and what the impacts of this might mean for users and communities. As D'Ignazio & Klein (2020) point out in their recent work 'Data Feminism', issues arise not only around how ideas are categorised online but also around what is left unrecorded and unacknowledged in the vast repository of data gathered online. D'Ignazio & Klein (2020, 22) highlight that "the things that we do not or cannot collect data about are very often perceived to be things that do not exist at all". Considering these undercounted, uncounted, and silenced communities adds another wrinkle to how we might approach platform cultures and identity online, not only looking at what is present, but also what is left unrecorded and the claims of who digital spaces represent. As Cottom, (2017, 214) highlights in regards to online educational spaces, online platforms are often designed in a manner that:

“understands learners as white and male, measuring learners’ task efficiencies against an unarticulated norm of western male whiteness. It is not an affirmative exclusion of poor students or bilingual learners or black students or older students, but it need not be affirmative to be effective”.

*Polarising groups and violence*

Beyond the mechanisation and impacts of design choices upon users, identities, and platform cultures, we might also think about our relationship to the discourses that are amplified on, by, and through these platforms. The closing days of the Trump presidency bought with them increased discussions of stochastic violence and terrorism, which can be defined as the increased use of rhetoric which inspires and informs statistically likely acts of hatred and violence which manifest in unpredictable manners (Munn 2019). As Saresma, Karkulehto, & Varis (2021, 227) highlight, “violent, hate-inciting online speech naturalises others and the understanding of them as threats, objects of grievance, and targets of hostility, aggression, and violence”. In this manner we can draw ‘rhizomatic’ links (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004 [1980], Lim, 2014) between the discourses and rhetorics amplified through social media and the lived realities of different individuals both online and offline, further eroding any suggestion of a clear online/offline dichotomy.

Online rhetoric can then have the effect of not only violence against certain groups and individuals, but also the silencing of these voices for fear of rhetorical and actual violence, as well as a knock-on effect of users feeling uneasy about speaking on these platforms for fear of repercussions. As Saresma, Karkulehto, & Varis (2021, 227) go on to point out:

“While the severity and consequences of violent online speech are often dismissed due to their virtual nature[...]stochastic violence further highlights the fact that digital practices, such as blogging and tweeting, are nevertheless violent and cause violence”.

It is not just the actual rhetorics of violence that we can track on these platforms through linguistic and big data analysis of hashtags, but also the stochastic potential of violence which might stop users from being able to speak through these platforms, or feeling comfortable being present in online platforms. For example, Arimatsu (2019) details the ways in which female-identifying voices are often silenced online and approached in violent means that silence both the user and other female-identifying individuals in that space. Sanders et al. (2017) documents the abuse of sex workers online, and Are (2020, 741) highlights Instagram’s censorship of women online, noting that:

“Harassment has emotional, psychological and economic costs for victims, making women stop contributing to online spaces and cutting them off from work and/or public life. The same platforms that were going to give them voice are also giving users new opportunities to harass, insult and silence them”.

An understanding of these inequitable experiences and architectures of rhetorical and real violence online then is an important aspect of understanding platform cultures and identity in

digital spaces. It is clear that these platforms are not designed for all, and that by speaking and being visible on these platforms there is a stochastic potential of violence for different communities, unpredictable in how it manifests yet statically probable to occur (Saresma, Karkulehto, & Varis, 2021). This culture can prevent voices from being present in these platforms and spaces (Arimatsu, 2019), in turn solidifying the normality of often white cis-male voices as the centre of digital discourse. In the same ways in which sociological theorists often ask us to turn our attention to discourses as spaces of tension, power, and knowledge, so too can we consider architectures of violence online which normalise certain voices, rhetorics, and ideas, while silencing others. Or, to repeat D'Ignazio & Klein (2020, 23) again, "data and power, far too often, easily and insidiously align".

### Myths of neutrality

With all this in mind, it is evident that platforms are not neutral spaces, free for all to speak, and that these manifestations of inequity, together with extant socio-cultural inequity, present challenges to any consideration of identity online and platform cultures. Research continues to critically challenge the claims to neutrality from these platforms and to highlight the ways in which these spaces impact users and in various ways. For example, Sobande's (2020) work exploring the digital lives of Black women in Britain unpacks the liberating potential of online spaces that exists in tandem and alongside the abuse faced by Black women online. Sobande (2020, 85) notes that "different digital spaces may enable Black women's public documentation of encountering oppression, profiling, and abuse, but can also be a source of such experiences". Sobande (2020, 91) goes on to note that this inequity is infused with market logics which "commodify Blackness, especially the creativity, candour, and ingenuity of Black women", while providing inadequate support for Black creators and users online.

Ontologically, the neutrality often claimed by social media is a turning of the face away from the hard questions of how knowledge is produced and sustained, an effort that often seems to be a wilful attempt to ignore their role in shaping the dynamics on their platforms (Noble 2018). This neutrality is itself agential, a choice to ignore, not a freedom from culpability. A choice to look past rather than to examine. It is the sustenance of the social as 'neutral' and normal that is in-and-of-itself incapacitating. The fiction of the social as non-ideological and "apolitical" originates and is sustained in its contemporary practice and discourse through digital practices which add further credence to these claims of normality. Yet as we have documented here, there is a clear need to further explore the 'body politic' on social media and to unpack these dynamics if we are to critically understand platform culture and identities online. This means, at the least, a need to carefully position research in a way acknowledges the relationships between data and power which manifest online, in turn exploring how these tensions impact and inform online identities and platform cultures. With this in mind, we will move on to suggest possible future directions for research into digital identity and platform cultures.

### **Conclusion: Pathways for future research**

This chapter has mapped four areas of consideration for an understanding of identity and platform cultures online. Specifically, these foci contemplate how the impact of the design of digital

platforms on our actions and interactions; how the agency and ability of individual users can produce novel identity performances; how the extant socio-cultural resources of users impacts their experiences online; and how the design of platforms can become ‘architectures of violence’ for different communities. While by no means exhaustive, this highlights the multiple moving parts that researchers interested in a consideration of identity online might need to consider. With these in mind, we will close by proposing possible directions in which to take these concepts given current trends in social media and society at large.

New manifestations of digital platforms and changes to existing platforms will likely continue to offer fruitful avenues for future research exploring identity and platform cultures online, and the work of mapping how these spaces continue to reframe what it means to be social (see Abidin 2021a,b) will continue to be essential as digital spaces pervade the broader social landscape. There are no shortage of new platforms online competing with existing social media platforms, some of which seek to disrupt corporate models of social media (see Zulli, Liu, & Gehl 2020). In the current marketplace, existing platforms continue to change to offer new features, and to keep up with competitors. For example, in the past year Twitter have introduced a ‘moments’ feature to offer similar functionalities to Instagram and Snapchat story features, and have also recently introduced ‘spaces’ to compete with Clubhouse’s use of social audio features.

Apps such as Bilibili (Chen 2020) and Douyin (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng 2020) offer further disruptions to Silicon Valley and to a narrative of a “bi-polar hegemony of the United States versus Chinese tech world” (Steinberg, 2020: 1), with research highlighting platforms outside of the Global North such as Kuaishou (Lin & de Kloet 2019) and AfreecaTV (2018), and raising possibilities for understandings of creativity, community, branding, and labour. Other design moves, such as shifts towards ‘live’ platforms offer tensions around temporality and community, further shifting understandings of embodied identities online. Researchers have explored livestreaming generally (Thorburn, 2014) and specific spaces such as Twitch (Johnson, 2019), Douyu (Zhang & Hjorth, 2019) as spaces of tension over visibility, disability and gender, reframing considerations of how bodies and communities are framed.

Beyond this visible work, there is also potential to research uses of social media ‘below the radar’ (Boccia Artieri, Brilli, & Zurovac, 2021) such as locationally specific platforms (Miles 2021), quasi-visible media (Neumayer, Rossi, & Struthers, 2021), and encrypted media (Matamoros-Fernández 2020). Such spaces and formats offer ways to reframe early scholarship on social media (See Abidin 2021a), providing new dynamics that disrupt key conditions of early platforms, such as persistence, searchability, replicability, and scalability (boyd 2010).

As platforms continue to evolve an understanding of the ways these features shape user experiences can be a useful means of understanding the boundaries of the social online. These changes also offer a chance for more longitudinal work online, such as Abidin’s (2020) anthropological work tracking the changing nature of ‘old’ social media and the nostalgia of pre-social media formats. A consideration of the legacy of the internet offers a way to move beyond discussions of novelty alone and to explore how we deal with the elision of temporality online, and even the possibility for work considering possible and imagined futures (See Bodden & Ross 2020).



While these brief suggestions are in no way exhaustive, especially as technology continues to evolve, the work of documenting and exploring how technology shapes, reframes, and translates aspects of identity and culture continues to be a fruitful and important area of research, and one of deep importance to our understanding of culture, labour, and identity writ large.

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