

MON COIN: IDENTITY, PERFORMANCE, AND EXHIBITION ONLINE. THEORIZING ABOUT THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE EXHIBITIONS¹

David Pariser and Juan Carlos Castro, professors
Ehsan Akbari and Bettina Forget, graduate students
Concordia University, Montreal

Here we present a review of sociological examinations of youth online networks and consider their impact on the analysis of the data we have generated from the Mon Coin project.

The Mon Coin Project investigates the practical, curricular, and theoretical implications of teaching and learning using mobile and social media in the visual arts classroom. In the last five years, Concordia Art Education researchers have collaborated with secondary school art educators and over 200 secondary students in four different French and English language after-school and in-school programs. Our objective is to design, test, and develop a visual art curriculum using mobile devices (e.g., smartphones and tablets) and social media (e.g., Instagram) to connect students to their schools, surroundings and each other. Our data analysis has already yielded insights into the potentials and pitfalls of using mobile media and social networks in schools. In terms of civic engagement we found that the youth we worked with were at first just interested in learning how to make “good-looking” images, and once they were technically confident, some used their images to look critically at their civic environments (Pariser et al., 2016). As with previous researchers in this area, we found that youth are invested in constructing their identity online through the visual documentation of personal objects and physical settings (Lalonde et al., 2016). Hogan (2010) sheds light on the creation of such online exhibitions. We have also shown how mobile media can be used to amplify peer-learning

¹ We gratefully acknowledge financial support of this research through a Canadian Social Science and Humanities Council Insight Grant, Mon Coin: Investigating Mobile Learning Networks to Foster Educational Engagement with At-Risk Youth (Juan Carlos Castro, principal investigator; David Pariser, co-investigator) and Fonds de recherche Société et culture, Établissement de Nouveaux professeurs-chercheurs project, L'enseignement des arts visuels et médiatiques en contexte d'apprentissage mobile pour le renforcement de l'engagement social et de la motivation scolaire des adolescents (Juan Carlos Castro, principal investigator).

and educational engagement (Akbari et al., 2017). In a later phase of this project we will investigate the ways that non-art teachers can use mobile and social media to shift students' social relationships, and enhance teaching and learning in academic subjects other than art.

We have generated a rich data set consisting of participants' images and texts posted online in closed social networks and complemented by transcripts of interviews with the participants and their teachers and records of their online activity i.e., posts and comments.

For this discussion today we will be focusing on the work of several key authors: Goffman (1959), Hogan (2010), and Robards & Bennett (2011). However, in the course of our discussion we will also touch on the contributions of researchers and innovators such as boyd (2014), Doidge & Balsillie (2018), and Terkel (2011).

The social-action theorist, Erving Goffman made a landmark contribution to the analysis of face to face interactions, with his description of people's everyday behaviour and the constraints that govern such behaviour. In his now classic work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), he made the well-worn analogy between people's behaviour and the work of actors on stage. In both cases people construct and maintain a chosen identity. Goffman makes a compelling case that everyday life consists of a series of "situations" involving reciprocal work performed by actors and their audiences.

Even though Oram (2009) is quite critical of Goffman, he notes that "Goffman's underlying framework is still valid...and it casts a useful light on some of the dilemmas of going online." And in fact, many contemporary researchers in education, communication and sociology continue to reference Goffman as a way of examining the phenomenon of online communication and the presentation of self online, including boyd (2014), Ganda (2014), and Hogan (2010). Oram concludes his brief commentary on Goffman thus: "Goffman is more chronicler than analyst, I have found, but his categorizations and conclusions can still be helpful when we suddenly find ourselves in new social settings where the Internet never ceases to thrust us."

Hogan (2010) is a scholar who has developed Goffman's concerns with face-to-face interactions to accommodate the universe of digital media. His contribution to Goffman's performance model is to suggest that in addition to the real time business of "performance" in front of an audience, individuals using social networks are no longer constrained to show who they are at a given time or place but can in fact curate an "exhibition" of images, videos and texts that suggest their own unique identities. (Facebook being a prime example.) The audience for such displays of artifacts related to a person can "visit" the site at any time, so the person organizing the collection changes their role from "actor" to "curator."

Three of our Mon Coin participants explain that what motivated them in choosing the images that they used were responses to our didactic prompts (Micro-Missions). These are a part of the Mon Coin curriculum. And as part of our participants' responses to the Micro-Missions, there was the ever-present desire to construct an image of themselves for the benefit of their peers/audience.

Images and Identity. Extracts from interviews with students commenting on their responses to Micro-Missions about the creation of online "exhibitions" that help to construct their digital identities

technosnake1111 (Rosemont)

Q: What do you post through your social media accounts Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, what kinds of things do you post?

A: Instagram I post daily or weekly updates of what's going on, interesting makeups that I've done because I'm interested in hum...in...special effects makeup and also regular makeup. I post a lot of pictures of plants because I love plants...that's mostly Instagram. Facebook I don't post very much I repost pictures stuff like that...

Q: Okay, why do you share these pictures?

A: I share them because...that's a good question...I think I share them because I want to...to share the experience that I've had with the world because **every photo is a**

memory for me. I grew up, you know, my parents took lots and lots and lots of photos so for me taking pictures is just taking a little chunk of time and immortalizing it... yeah

rainy_dayz (Rosemont)

Q: And what kind of images and videos do you make if you do make them?

A: More funny ones, I'll be lip-synching or I'll have a like photo of my friend and we're doing stupid faces, it's more like silly ones. It's not like any like...I don't know, like formal, it's just very silly and like child-like.

Q: And why do you share them?

A: I don't really share them for others. I'm more share them because I like having a theme-ish and **it's more like a memory box for me.**

Inspiremydesire... (Rosemont)

Q: Great, what kept you motivated to participate?

A: I believe that different micro-missions were very interesting, **I loved creating art that relates to myself and I wanna make other people see what I like and my desires and so I feel like that was very interesting, to show a bit of myself and my personality in my pictures.**

Hogan (2010) notes that when participants are online, they are engaged in not one, but two sorts of self-presentation: one is the classic Goffmanesque "performance," which requires a synchronous audience offering feedback to the performer. But Hogan suggests the existence of another kind of self-presentation online, one that he refers to as an "exhibition." This is an asynchronous manifestation, where the person presenting themselves to their audience "curates" a collection of personally revealing images that presents the traits of the person who chooses the images. Social media make it possible for individuals to construct their identities online through the use of "exhibitions" of images related to the person's interests and those of her peers. These exhibitions exist without the immediate participation of an audience. As Hogan states, "A key difference in

exhibitions is the presence of a virtual ‘curator’ that manages and redistributes this digital content” (p.377).

In the work that we are doing with Mon Coin we are, in effect, inviting our high school participants to create a personal and artistic online exhibition by responding to the themes we suggest. In our case, there were, in fact, two “curators”: one was the student him/herself who, under the cover of a pseudonym, decided how they would treat the images that they made and which images they would show their classmates; the other was the class teacher who “lurked” anonymously among the students and who monitored the content of the student images making sure that no one transgressed the rules of in-school online propriety.

Hogan’s notion of an exhibition is a fertile development and one that is especially relevant to the activities of the Mon Coin participants. As with most adolescents and young adults, our students are deeply engaged with identity formation and seeking the approval of their peers. Using the private online network that we provided, our students had a chance to construct their identities in a setting where they were not immediately known to each other. This was because all participants had to assume an online alias, and we have discussed the variable impact of such anonymity elsewhere (Akbari & Pariser, 2017).

As we are dealing in this research with young adults and high school students it must be noted that there is considerable debate about the effects of digital media, social networks and smartphones on the mental well-being of adolescents (Treem et al., 2016). On the one hand, as Castro (2014) has shown, the anonymity which is easily attained in social networks allows adolescents to play with various possible self-configurations and experiment with their still uncrystallized identities. Castro describes an art project in which students were free to adopt identities. He claims that for certain individuals, such experimentation resulted in visual work of high quality and it also provided them with the opportunity to experiment with otherwise risky gender identification.

On the other hand, as the use of mobile technology and social networks are central to the Mon Coin intervention, we must also acknowledge that digital technology has been

criticized for its deliberately addictive design, creating the sort of dependency that one associates with chemical dependencies. A recent article in Toronto's *The Globe and Mail* (2018, February 17) is representative of this ongoing debate. Two key players in the world of high tech mobilities, Balsillie and Doidge, examine the relationship between the corporations that design ever-more addictive devices and the mental health effects of these machines. Balsillie is a corporate co-CEO of the company that manufactured the Blackberry smartphones. Doidge is a psychiatrist who feels that adolescents are particularly vulnerable in the face of a technology that exploits two paramount issues for young adults: developing a sense of identity or a sense of individuation and the attendant need for peer approval. Doidge comments:

Social media is a 24/7 hall of mirrors, with everyone watching themselves and making comparisons all the time...How can anyone not become thin skinned living in a round-the-clock Panopticon of peers all competing with each other for attention in an electronic coliseum?

Other researchers such as Gardner and Davis (2013) have a more nuanced view of the impact of this technology and offer the view that, like all technology, it can be used for good or ill.

As we noted, everyone who participated in our closed social network had to choose a fictive name. Thus, the anonymity granted to the participants could have liberated them from the tyranny of the mob described by Doidge. There is a parallel between the hidden identities of the participants in the social network and the antique fashion of the masked ball. Guests at such events appeared in masks and disguises, which did indeed give the masked participants license to behave in ways that violated normal decorum. As we noted, Castro (2014) illustrated the positive effect of the participants' anonymity. Some of the masked/anonymous participants who engaged in the Mon Coin social network also felt somewhat liberated, choosing names and handles that referenced cultural icons, while others were uncomfortable with enforced anonymity.

The work of Robards and Bennett (2011) (R&B hereafter) helps to characterize the types and functions of social organizations formed by youth in social networks. The

research of the two authors complements that of Hogan and suggests ways of categorizing the rules that govern curated online exhibitions by adolescent and young adults.

R&B conducted a study on the Australian Gold Coast with 32 young people (11 males, 21 females) between the ages of 18 and 27. The participants were given in-depth semi-structured interviews, followed by "...observation and discourse analysis of the participants' social network site profiles" (p. 309). The authors state: "Rather than being used to meet new people, social network sites are instead being used to articulate existing and often offline networks of friends, family, colleagues and more casual acquaintances" (p. 307).

Their most salient result was to show how the virtual spaces offered by social networks "...appear to accentuate existing trends towards reflexively derived, identity projects as defined by post-subcultural theorists..." (p. 304). Thus, their research findings offer support for theorists who propose that youth online behaviour can best be understood within the framework of post-subcultural theorizing. More specifically, youthful online association falls under the rubric of "neo-tribalism," which is a (or one?) form of post-subcultural affiliation. Citing Maffesoli (1996), who originated the term, neo-tribes are "...without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar, (tribe) refers to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favor appearance and form" (p. 98). While R&B state that their findings support "post-subcultural explanations of youth culture, particularly those of neo-tribe theory..." (p. 304), they propose that their findings also suggest novel ways of understanding neo-tribalism among the young.

The sociological term "subculture" is associated with "deviance" among youth, that is, the espousal of oppositional values, mores and tastes that identify youth as "in opposition" to mainstream politics and culture ("Hippies" and Hippiedom being prime examples of a bygone youth subculture). Similarly, the fictionalized punks in *A Clockwork Orange* (Burgess, 1962), or the working class youth in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Sillitoe, 1959) are exemplars of alienated, underprivileged, lower class

(lumpen) violent youth who disdain the oppressive middle-class culture that surrounds them.

The term “post-subcultural” refers to a different version of youth subculture. It is still an oppositional youth culture, but not as overtly political; issues of class are less central. Muggleton (2000) coined this term to indicate a shift in youth culture which can “...no longer be regarded as a direct reflection of class background: rather, ... youth identities today are a product of choice and reflect the heightened reflexivity that is part and parcel of late modern consumer-based societies” (p. 304). It is worth noting that in the work we have done with Mon Coin thus far, we have observed similar indications of these de-politicized attitudes among the youth. (In fact, we have written about this. See Pariser et al., 2016)

R&B conclude their discussion with the following declaration, which helps to clarify the nature of their insight based on the empirical work that they have done with young adults on the Australian Gold Coast: “Indeed, as this article seeks to illustrate, when subject to empirical scrutiny, young people’s use of the Internet exhibits tendencies that align far more readily with post-subcultural/neo-tribal types of association than with subcultural models of explanation” (p. 307).

R&B’s observations raise some interesting questions not only about the function of online social networks as reinforcers rather than diversions from “real world” social networks, but also about the function and maintenance of curated online “exhibits.” As we noted, Hogan devotes a good deal of attention to the way that these exhibits function. It may well be that they serve the same dual function attributed by R&B to social networks, in that they provide a space for fantasy and experimental role playing, while at the same time reinforcing real-world social ties. Then there is also the matter of the type of social cohesion played out within the social networks. As R&B point out, the behaviour observed in social networks aligns more closely with post-subcultural and neo-tribal sorts of affiliation, making a critique of the culture less of a common bond among the participants in the social network. What does create a strong bond among the individuals studied by R&B are a wide range of intersecting interests rather than fealty to a shared ideology or

political critique.

While our data analysis is at an early stage, we have found some indications of the sorts of affiliations that the neo-tribal hypothesis predicts. For example, here is one Mon Coin participant speaking about discovery that she shares an important interest with one of her classmates. Her enthusiasm for dance intersects with her classmate's enthusiasm for the same art form:

magenta.a (Villa Maria)

Q: Did you learn anything about your classmates from doing this project?

A: Hum, yeah because some people were posting pictures of books and like what inspired them like I thought I saw someone post something about dance and I was like: "oh I kind of relate" because I was doing dance since I was two so I was like learning about them and like we actually became friends, I found out who she was...

Q: Because of this project?

A: Yeah, like I found out who she was and I saw her... her dance photos like... ah, I do dance too, and then we like connected for- that....

The student in question discovered, quite by chance, that she and another anonymous classmate share a love of dance. We believe that this sort of intersection is the basis for neo-tribal affiliation. Thus, in examining the image collections of Mon Coin participants, we look forward to finding a similar degree of connective eclecticism in the curated online exhibits. The Mon Coin "exhibits" that we encouraged our participants to make are somewhat bounded by the Micro-Mission prompts, nevertheless, even within those constraints there is latitude enough for a certain degree of eclecticism. When we do a fine-grained analysis of the images created in response to the Mission prompts we may find more examples of the sorts of intersecting eclectic mix that are the indicators of neo-tribal affiliation.

Conclusion

As we continue to process the data, we will be using information gleaned from participant's online collections, their images, their posts, their interview responses and their teachers' commentaries to develop thick descriptions of how participants construct their online exhibitions. We expect to see how the participants experiment with, construct and present their identities and also how they negotiate the acknowledged presence of an audience consisting of their peers/judges.

A practical question arises: What sort of formal and informal online learnings/skills have these participants/students mastered and exhibited in order to create the online exhibitions that epitomize their identities? Answers to such a question will contribute to the long range Mon Coin goal of introducing this ubiquitous digital technology into diverse school curricula. Thus educators will be able to leverage digital media and social networks for educational purposes. It is also our hope to demystify the use of these devices and their aura of incessant distraction, such that teachers will integrate the devices confidently into their curricula.

References

Akbari, E., & Pariser, D. (2017, March). *Identity, mobilities, social media in art class*. Paper presented at the National Art Education Association Convention, New York.

boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated. The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Burgess, A. (1962). *A clockwork orange*. UK: Heinemann.

Castro, J.C. (2014). Constructing, performing and perceiving identity(ies) in the place of online art education. *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, 31, 32-54.

Doidge, N., & Balsillie, J. (2018, February 17). Smartphones: Have we alone made ourselves addicted? *The Globe and Mail*, 1-6.

Ganda, M. (2014). *Social media and self: Influences on the formation of identity and understanding of self through social networking sites*. University Honors Theses, Portland State University, Oregon.

Gardner H., & Davis K. (2013). *The app generation. How today's youth navigate identity, intimacy and imagination in a digital world*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Hogan, B. (2010). The presentation of self in the age of social media: Distinguishing performances and exhibitions online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society*. 30(6) 377-386. (Copyright, Sage Publications).

Lalonde, M., Castro, J.C., & Pariser, D. (2016). Identity tableaux: Multimodal contextual constructions of adolescent identity. *Visual Art Research*. 42(1), 38-55.

Maffesoli, M. (1996). *The time of the tribes. The decline of individualism in mass society*. Translated by D. Smith. London: Sage Publishing.

Muggleton, D. (2000). *Inside subculture: The postmodern meaning of style*. Oxford: Berg.

Oram, A. (2009, October). What sociologist Erving Goffman could tell us about social networking and Internet identity. *RADAR: Insight, analysis and research about emerging technologies*. Retrieved May 30 2018 from <http://radar.oreilly.com/2009/10/what-sociologist-erving-goffma.html>

Pariser, D., Castro, J.C., & Lalonde, M. (2016). Investigating at-risk youth visually examining their communities through mobilities, aesthetics and civic engagement. *International Journal of Education through Art*. 12(2), 211-225

Robards B., & Bennett, A. (2011). My Tribe: Post-subcultural manifestations of belonging on social network sites. *Sociology*, 45(2) 303-317.

Sillitoe, A. (1959). *The loneliness of the long-distance runner*. UK: H. Allen Ltd.

Terkel, S. (2011). *Alone together. Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Philadelphia: Basic Books.

Treem, J.W., Dailey S.L., Pierce C.S., & Biffi, D. (2016). What we are talking about

when we talk about social media: A framework for study. *Sociology Compass* 10(9), 768–784.