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Hiding in Plain Sight: street artists online

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Abstract

Identity and privacy concerns related to social media are the subject of widespread academic enquiry and mass media reporting. Although academic research tends to present identity play and online self-presentation as positive in most circumstances, media reporting in Australia makes much of the risks of identity theft, privacy breaches and online predators. This research explores the phenomenological experience of creating a persona online focusing particularly on street artists. For street artists, the threat of unwanted exposure has to be balanced with the positive implications of sharing their creative work outside its geographical and temporal constraints. I argue that street artists use complex persona creation strategies in order to both protect and promote themselves. The two street artists discussed here experience their engagement with social media and digital networks in ways that offer new insight into the opportunities and problems associated with the presentation of persona online.

Introduction

Identity and privacy concerns online are the subject of both academic enquiry and mass media reporting, particularly in regards to engagement in social media. Although academic research tends to present identity play and online self-presentation as positive in most circumstances (Boyd, 2008; Hogan, 2010; Pearson, 2009; Tufekci, 2008), media reporting in Australia makes much of the risks of the identity theft, privacy breaches and online predators (see, for example, Wroe, *Cyber criminals target mobile users, social media*, 2013, *The Sydney Morning Herald*; *Social media sites erode privacy: study*, 2013, *The Age*; Farrer, *When it comes to online privacy, Facebook is not the only problem*, 2010, *The Sydney Morning Herald Online*). While there is a diversity of opinions and findings in the literature around social media and online persona, my research fills a gap by exploring the subjective experience of creating a persona online.

Although biography, self-promotion and life-writing are not new within the creative and cultural industries (Barthes, 1977; Becker, 1982; Fine, 2003; Kris and Kurtz, 1977), the growing ubiquity of online artistic presence has created new challenges (Arthur, 2009). For an increasing number of street artists the threat of unwanted exposure has to be balanced with the positive reputational implications of sharing their creative work outside of its geographical and temporal constraints. This paper will present the case of two street artists who use digital networks to promote and document their own work, collaborate with others and engage with the growing international street art communities online. Specifically, the experience of creating a persona online is explored using Interpretive Phenomenological

Analysis (IPA)¹ of interviews with the two artists, and analysis of their presentations of self in social media. This analysis is drawn from my doctoral research into the creation of online persona by artists outside of the traditional art world.

I argue that street artists use complex persona creation strategies in order to both protect and promote themselves. The emergent themes discussed here are self-protection: the need to keep images of the artist separate from the images of their work; reputation management: the implication of the widespread sharing of images which quickly leave the control of the artist; and documentation: the creation of a body of work which is ephemeral and geographically fixed. These themes are explored using extracts from interviews I conducted with each artist. At very different points in their artistic careers, coming from different backgrounds and countries, and with very different styles, the commonalities and disparities between strategies of persona creation are of particular interest. The two street artists involved in this research experience their engagement with social media and digital networks in ways that offer new insight into the opportunities and problems associated with the presentation of persona online.

Play, impression management, and online identities

Academic research tends to present identity play and online self-presentation as positive in most circumstances (boyd, 2008; Hogan, 2010; Pearson, 2009; Tufekci, 2008). The mediated, digital nature of social networking sites allows those who engage with them significant control over the information they present to their audience. Through choices of imagery, text, links, friends, and likes, the person

¹ IPA is a “qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith et al., 2009: 1), by examining experience in its own terms as opposed to according to predefined categories. For a thorough explanation of my use of IPA in my PhD research, see Barbour (2013).

building an online profile or presence can bypass distracting elements of their own personal appearance, their geographical location, and, arguably, even their gender identity.

Studies of online identity creation began in the early 1990s. Turkle (1995: 260, 263) discussed the benefits of playing with identity, stating that ‘virtual personae are objects-to-think-with’, that ‘having literally written our online personae into existence, we are in a position to be more aware of what we project into everyday life’. The anonymous nature of many of the early public uses of the internet, including blogs, listservs and games, now sits alongside the anonymous social networking sites, on which the potential for – and acceptance of – identity play is more limited. This has led to a shift away from the tendency to ‘play-act at being someone else or to put on different online personae’ (Zhao et al., 2008: 1818). Rather than becoming someone else entirely, or letting out a risky or socially deviant identity, Zhao et al. (2008: 1819) argue that instead online environments are peopled with ‘socially desirable identities an individual would like to establish’, what Mehdizadeh (2010) terms *hoped-for possible selves*. This construction of identity can be seen as a positive form of impression management, less deceitful than aspirational.

The development of an online profile is not limited to the addition of content to a site, but must involve the development of connections within the network, both to other people’s profiles and to products, interests, and groups. Weber and Mitchell (2002) discuss the way that young girls construct their identity through their connections with friends, family, online groups, links to celebrities and products. They consider this as related to the idea of bricolage, commenting that it ‘involves improvising, experimenting, and blending genres, patching together contrasting or even contradictory elements, creating and modifying meanings to suit the context (Weber and Mitchell, 2002: 43-44). The challenge is to ensure the person creating the profile does not become lost within the network, reduced to a landing page from which to go elsewhere; a balance must be maintained between the presentation of a

public version of the self and that self's place within the network. Livingstone (2008: 400) makes this explicit, stating 'social networking is about "me" in the sense that it reveals the self embedded in the peer group, as known to and represented by others, rather than the private "I" known best by oneself'.

Early research into online identity (such as Turkle's seminal *Life on the Screen*) saw this type of impression management or role play (Goffman 1959/1990) as largely independent from the corporeal self. However, more recent research argues instead that the digital representations of the self are intertwined with the body in complex ways. Weber and Mitchell (2008: 30-31) discuss this in relation to young girls, and state:

The posting of photographs extends their bodies into cyberspace; their sites bear their 'fingerprints', the traces of their activities, the imprint of their inventive spellings and font choices, the visual evidence that they exist, a signpost to who they think they are or who they want you to think they are or who they would like to become.

boyd (2008: 129) takes this further, describing a social networking profile as 'a form of digital body where individuals must write themselves into being', linking the creation and editing of profiles as a form of Goffmanian impression management.

Thinking and research on online identity creation and play has developed significantly within academia over the past two decades. Technological changes, the increase in accessibility and mobility of social networking, and changes in usage patterns all contribute to the complexities involved in presenting the self within digital networks. However, despite the range in focus, methodologies and participant groups, the vast majority of academic research implicitly or explicitly accepts the presentation of a version of the self online as largely positive for those involved.

Risk, fear, and online identities

In contrast to the largely positive descriptions of online identity creation in academic work, the mass media discourse around online identity is much less favourable. Newspaper articles reporting both specific events and editorial opinion focus largely on issues of identity theft, predation of children, and other risks of over-sharing, or posting large amounts of personal information and images through social media websites. For example, an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* states 'Along with wonderful new capabilities, new technology often ushers in opportunities for abuse' (Temple, 2012), detailing several cases of paedophiles contacting minors and engaging in either digital or physical sexual assault. Another article from the same publication states that 'More than half of adults 45 and older who are on social networks like Facebook could be in danger of becoming victims of identity theft or other crimes because they share too much private information' (Evangelista, 2010). The *Sydney Morning Herald* warns 'Mobile phones and social networking sites have become the new frontier for cyber criminals who are stealing passwords and personal information by taking advantage of people's cluelessness' (Olding, 2012), while the *New Zealand Herald* (2012) reports that in that country, 'Two-thirds of online adults have fallen victim to cybercrime'.

This discourse of fear and risk associated with using social media to share personal information is not the only discussion of the technology in the news media, but does tend to be fairly pervasive, and is by no means new. In 2005, when the focus was on MySpace rather than Facebook, danah boyd critiqued this tendency towards what she calls 'perpetuating a culture of fear under the scapegoat of informing the public', stating 'The choice to perpetually report on the possibility or rare occurrence of kidnapping / stalking / violence because of Internet sociability is not a neutral position - it is a position of power that the media chooses to take because it's a story that sells' (boyd, 2005). By highlighting the possible negative consequences of identity play online, and by reporting on the extreme cases of violence and

predation as if they are examples of normalised behaviour, the mass media skews the debate and sets up a discourse of distrust against those who chose not to use their legal identities online. This is in contrast to much of the user-led discussion of pseudonyms, summarised by boyd in response to the growing prevalence of 'real name' policies by social networking sites. Some of the reasons given for using a pseudonym include being stalked previously, avoiding a conflation of work and personal identities (where a connection between the two could lead to the loss of employment), or identifying as gay online while not being out offline, and boyd (2011) believes that '[t]he people who most heavily rely on pseudonyms in online spaces are those who are most marginalized by systems of power'.

Here we come to the inherent contradiction in much of the popular media's reporting of online identity concerns: you need to prove you are who you say you are by using your real name, while also protecting yourself from predators and identity thieves online by not giving away too much personal information. This issue is one that is actively engaged with by the two street artists I discuss below. By exploring how the two artists subjectively experience their online persona creation strategies through the filter of their pseudonymous artistic identity, we gain insight into the process of balancing public and private disclosure through social networking.

Offline and online - artistic lifewriting

Lifewriting, autobiography and biography have long histories in the arts, as has a tradition of artists writing about the work itself for the education of the prospective audience. Belshaw (2011: 124) comments 'whilst artists have routinely written on art since the Renaissance it has been the characteristic burden of the modern artist to explain the work as satisfying his or her own unique intentions'. For those artists whose work is exhibited in galleries, a short biography and a description of the intention behind the work - what are called artists statements - are required in most cases for

publicity materials. Drawing on the theories of both Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, Belshaw (2011: 129) claims “[w]ith neither a beginning nor an end ... artists’ statements are performative and non-narrative acts in which the self is reconstituted at every moment”. However, Belshaw’s discussion is limited to lifewriting and artists statements through contrasting ‘artists’ letters, interviews and articles -- those texts that constitute the staple source of anthologies -- with journals and diaries’ (2011: 125) in their analogue, and does not attempt to deal with the considerable quantity of digital writing of self.

The use of virtual galleries, social networking sites and personal websites by artists is near ubiquitous in the developed world, and now artists find themselves released from the style constraints and word requirements of the printed formats. In addition, the opportunity to create a strong artistic identity is immensely attractive for those artists who operate outside of the representative structures of the traditional art world which functions through gatekeepers such as gallery owners, critics and collectors. Through the use free software, mobile technologies and comparatively low-cost data connections, artists are able to re-present themselves to a geographically, culturally and socially diverse audience, constructing a persona that works to validate their self-identification as ‘artist’. This is particularly important for the two artists whose work I consider below, as their artistic practice necessitates physical distance from the work they produce. I argue that by creating an online persona the two street artists not only tap into a network of fans, followers and fellow artists, but construct a mediating layer between their often illegal art work and their physically present selves.

Street art

As a creative practice, street art has a long history, drawing on a range of historical developments from murals, performance, and public art to the graffiti subculture that stemmed from tagging and subway art in 1970s New York. The street art practice discussed in this paper has closer ties to the spray can

based graffiti movement of the end of the twentieth century than the older art forms, a tie based on the practice of the two individuals involved. Although tentative links can be made within the scene based on aesthetics, mediums, and location, the street art subculture is as diverse as the range of work seen within the more traditional gallery-based art world (Lewisohn, 2008). The broadest definition would include tagging, murals, stencils, paste-ups, posters, stickers, performance and 'pieces' (large format, muralistic tags), along with slogan writers, yarnbombing, scratchiti, and chalk drawing (Young et al., 2010). Work is predominantly figurative or text-based, but there are also artists working in abstract formats, and pieces can appear in both legal and illegal spaces.

Defining an individual as a street artist can be problematic. Lewisohn (2008: 15) commented on issues of categorisation, stating that 'artists, as a rule, don't welcome external categorisation; they prefer to be looked at as individuals. Street artists are by definition rule-breakers, so if you attempt to categorize them, they'll simply go and break the rules that have been set to define them'. In addition, people who see themselves primarily as taggers (graffiti writers) may strongly object to being defined as artists, both because of the implication that they are concerned with aesthetics, and because the essential aims of graffiti writers and street artists are different: graffiti writers speak to each other, whereas street artists speak to the public as an audience. For this reason, self-identification as an artist, in addition to the practice of placing work on the street, was sought from the artists I spoke to.

Much street art is illegal, and all of it has an element of the ephemeral; at any time the work can be destroyed by weather, painted over (buffed) by authorities, or altered, added to or covered up by other artists. This is an essential part of the movement's development. Bowen (1999: 26) comments that '[t]aking risks was sometimes the initial attraction to graffiti for young artists. They made conscious choices about whether they should break the law, knowing the consequences involved'. As a creative practice that as often as not is illegal, making a living from street art adds an extra layer of complexity.

The subway writers of the 1970s and 1980s were briefly accepted into the traditional art world, sponsored by galleries and collectors hoping to find the next big thing. However, these co-options did not survive past a year or so of collaboration before the market lost interest (Lachmann, 1988). The *Pictures on Walls* collective, formed by artist Banksy and his friends, have created an income and what amounts to a self-contained art market selling numbered limited edition prints of their work online (Dickens, 2010). In Melbourne, street artists have begun moving back into gallery spaces creating canvas versions of their stencil works, selling stickers or posters to a growing body of collectors. Although some stay with their street aesthetic, others use gallery exhibitions to explore new mediums and styles, and a smaller group will work only in legal spaces. Worldwide, a number of street artists accept commissions to work on walls, fences and buildings, while others work concurrently in graphic design or other commercial creative roles. Despite this range of practice, Lewisohn (2008: 127) believes that 'the best street art and graffiti are illegal. This is because the illegal works have political and ethical connotations that are lost in sanctioned works. There is a tangible conceptual aura that is stronger in illegal graffiti: the sense of danger the artist felt is transferred to the viewer'.

GHOSTZz and Mike Maka

In this case study, I analyse the online personas and interview responses of two street artists. The first is a Melbourne based artist known as Mike Maka, or by his tag, Makatron. Mike is an established artist in the street art community, and has worked extensively in Australia and Brazil, with additional stints painting in Europe, the United States, and South Africa. Mike's distinctive illustrative freehand style uses recurring motifs of animals, insects, and planets, often blending the inanimate and animate to create characters and images that are simultaneously appealing and monstrous. With formal fine art training, Mike also produces gallery work, utilising the imagery and style of his large scale street work to create domestically scaled paintings and prints.

The second artist is known here as GHOSTZz.² At only 18, GHOSTZz has been working as a stencil artist in Edinburgh and surrounding areas for three years, and is now beginning to have a real impact in the street art scene within Scotland. Specialising in stylised portraits, GHOSTZz creates detailed multi-layer stencils with digital tools, then hand-cuts each layer before spraying the work on the street. More likely than Mike to work in illegal spaces, GHOSTZz must carefully manage the relationship between his digital networks and his physical presence to ensure his ongoing anonymity in the eyes of the street art hostile Scottish police.

Both Mike Maka and GHOSTZz have a presence on a range of digital platforms, including Facebook, Tumblr, and their own blogs and websites. They utilise complex persona creation and impression management strategies in order to both protect and promote themselves. The themes discussed here are self-protection, reputation management, and documentation, which are explored using extracts and interpretation of the interviews I conducted with them, as well as analysis of their online personas.

Self-protection

Consideration of self-protection is a requirement for artists whose work is oftentimes illegal, and this takes the form of distancing the artists' legal identity from their artists' identity. At the most basic level, this distancing occurs through the choice of a name or tag, but with the image-based nature of both the artistic work and most social media platforms, another form of distancing occurs in the choice of images of the artists themselves. Although possible, it is difficult to find pictures of either GHOSTZz or Mike Maka at work, with spray can in hand or linked with their artistic practice, in any of the social media or blogging tools they use. Where these images have been posted by the artists themselves as in the images below, their identities are hidden either by obscuring the face digitally, as with GHOSTZz, or

² GHOSTZz changed his tag shortly after I interviewed him, following a run-in with the police. After discussion, we decided to keep his original tag for the purposes of this research.

because the face is covered by a protective mask, as with Mike Maka. This choice of images reflects offline behaviour of obscuring the face from the public when working. GHOSTZz recalls a time when, pushing his own comfort zone, he went out painting in the early afternoon, saying 'I just put my hood up, [sprayed the stencil] then went flying off'. He also comments that he now prefers to work at night, saying 'I like it to be dark, but not too dark'.



Figure 1: Dundee Graffiti Jam (GHOSTZz, 2012); Figure 2: Mike Makatron (Deniz, 2012)

This contrasts with what can be seen in Mike Maka's image, where although his face is obscured by the protective mask it is still clear that he is working in broad daylight. In this case, the photo shows him working in Brazil, which has a different street culture to GHOSTZz's home town of Edinburgh. Mike was told by other artists that 'they just paint in the day, even if it's freeways or main streets, because ... it's just more dangerous at night. ...Here [in Melbourne] it's the opposite, you wanna paint at night because there's less people around, and less chance of getting caught'. Therefore, the inherent physical danger involved in being a street artist that creates a need for self-protection is contextual to the geographic area in which the artist is painting, but the need to distance one's legal identity from one's artists identity online is more fixed: the international audience of the online persona determines a faceless self-presentation.

Reputation management

The need for self-protection must always be balanced by a reputation management system. As artists, GHOSTZz and Mike Maka produce original imagery, signed with a tag rather than a legal name, and without a clear connection to the legal identity of the artist. Because of this, it is sometimes difficult to claim work exclusively as the artist's own, especially after photographs of the artwork spread across multiple online networks. GHOSTZz recounted an experience of having a 'kid' claim to have produced a wheat-paste stencil piece that GHOSTZz had not signed, and although he found the situation funny, he did produce the original stencil for the kid to see in order to prove that it was he who was the artist. He comments that he always almost signs his work now 'because of people claiming my work as theirs and things like that'. Mike's situation, as a more prolific and established artist, is somewhat different. Mike comments that 'I don't always sign my work, and sometimes it pops up where not necessarily people are taking credit for it, but it would be a good idea if I did sign it, or if other people credited it'. He recounted a story of how an image of a wall-sized piece was shared on Instagram by an aggregation account, without credit either to him as the artist, or to the original photographer. The photographer commented in the stream that the image was his, and that Mike was the artist. However, this comment appeared almost 300 comments down in the stream, and therefore it is unlikely that anyone would see it. Mike explained that 'it's awesome that 17, 18 thousand people like it, ... but no one's going to read all those comments ... so if they did it in the first line, 'work by Mike Maka' ... some people would follow you, check out your website or whatever'. This is a reactive form of persona creation in both physical and digital spaces, where the artist tries to claw back control of the way his work is shared, credited and presented to the audience.

Documentation

Impression and reputation management occurs not only in the claiming of art work, but also in the image selection process each artist undertakes when they upload photographs to their online portfolios.

These portfolios of images provide the viewer with an understanding of the artist's career, style(s), skill and experience. Both Mike Maka and GHOSTZz are involved in ongoing management of the impressions given by their portfolios. When I spoke to Mike, he was going through a period of culling images from his website, which he described as 'getting rid of all the stuff I don't really need people to see'. GHOSTZz is also selective of his choices of images, deciding not to upload pictures of his early work as he saw it as 'really, really bad, and it was rough and horrible'. As someone whose international street art career spans more than a decade, the images Mike has uploaded over that time speak not only to his capacity for work, but also to his international reputation and experience. About images of his older work, he comments 'I look at that stuff and the only thing that I really like about it is that it shows that I've been to a lot of countries, worked in a lot of places. And I guess that's one thing that I have that other people don't'. This documentation of his career through digital photography provides an opportunity to 'put your art in the space' where the audience is, especially through Facebook, whose strength is that 'everyone's looking at it'. This mirrors the street art practice itself, which connects the art work to the audience through the use of public space. As an emerging artist, GHOSTZz not only documents works that he is happy with after they appear on the street, 'almost like a diary', but also ideas, digitally created drafts, and stencil development. Of his development work, he says that he'll 'upload it just to see what reactions, to see if people think it's good or what'. More recently GHOSTZz has trialled live streaming his work process by filming himself cutting stencils and documenting the labour that goes into his final product. The live streaming of the creation of an artwork by GHOSTZz is equivalent to the stop-motion videos produced by Mike Maka and released on YouTube. These short films show the labour and skill involved in the painting of a public wall. This production of moving images of the artist at work supports the claim of the work as one's own, as the audience can see the artist making it. However, in order to maintain self-protective distance from the artist's legal identity, it is still necessary in these pieces to obscure the face of the artist as they work.

Conclusions

The ways that Mike Maka and GHOSTZz create, control and distribute their online personas provides us with new ways of understanding the experience of engaging with digital technologies for the purposes of identity construction. While much academic research concentrates on the ability to play with or trial new identity constructions (Turkle, 1995; Weber and Mitchell, 2008; Livingstone, 2008; boyd, 2008), or to engage in impression management (Goffman, 1959/1990) to present a hoped-for possible self (Mehdizadeh, 2010), this research shows the primary concerns for these artists are self-protection, reputation, and documentation. The personas created through Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, blogs, and forums are deliberate creations which work as tools to demonstrate that the artist is, in fact, an artist, while allowing artists to maintain some form of symbolic distance from their physical/legal selves. Contrary to mass media reports, the use of pseudonyms and the hiding of faces does not occur to deceive the public or to engage in criminal behaviour such as online predation or identity theft. Rather, this behaviour functions to maintain both the artist's personal safety, and because, as Mike Maka comments, 'there's a bit of mystery if you don't know the person's face'.

By expanding the discussion of online identity to focus on experience as well as behaviour, particularly through the use of an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis approach, we can investigate not only what people do when they go online, but also what that is like. Here, I have explored the relationship between traces of behaviours seen in GHOSTZz's and Mike Maka's online personas, and their subjective descriptions of experiences in both physically and digitally networked spaces. This allows us to understand the complexity of the identity of the street artist, which extends beyond a person's physical/legal self and becomes somehow separate to a greater or lesser degree depending on the artist; what GHOSTZz describes as 'a little person in his own little world'. This persona is not false, deceptive or a form of play, but instead a particular role played by each artist in a particular way: a role

that must be protected, maintained and documented to ensure the continued success of the artist who plays it.

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