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The Notion of the Self and the Issue of Methodology on Social Media Research

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Abstract

The prominence of social media in our lives and our social world is impossible to deny. The uniqueness of social media is its sociality. Thus, the users' selves are constantly being put at the centre of this ever-changing technology. While the concept of the self has a long history in philosophical traditions and remains a subject of discussion in other modern disciplines, it has been rarely investigated by social media research. While a large amount of social media research has focused on the effects and use of social media, few researchers have looked into the nature of the self. Furthermore, much of social media research has been dominated by empirical research. Despite having to deal with such a concept that has heavy philosophical implications, such as the self, the metaphysical experience of the self seems to have fallen out of context. Therefore, this paper attempted to explore and establish a link between the philosophical concept of the self and social media in a bid to systematise and craft the research method in a way that would be interdisciplinary and give equal importance to the conceptual and empirical concerns.

Keywords: self, social media, philosophical concepts, interdisciplinary studies, research method

บทคัดย่อ

สื่อสังคมออนไลน์หรือโซเชียลมีเดียมีอิทธิพลต่อชีวิตและสังคมของเรามากกว่าที่เราจินตนาการได้ โดยจุดเด่นหลักของสื่อสังคมออนไลน์คือความเป็นสังคมและความเชื่อมโยงกัน ความเป็นตัวตนของผู้ใช้แต่ละคนจึงเป็นศูนย์กลางของเทคโนโลยีและแพลตฟอร์มนี้ซึ่งยังเปลี่ยนแปลงตลอดเวลา กรอบคิดความเป็นตัวตนดังกล่าวเป็นกรอบคิดที่มีประวัติศาสตร์ยาวนานในชนวิชาปรัชญาตะวันตก แต่ตัวกรอบคิดในด้านนี้กลับไม่ได้รับความสนใจนักในแวดวงการศึกษาสื่อสังคมออนไลน์ การศึกษาสื่อสังคมออนไลน์โดยมากแล้วสนใจการใช้สื่อและผลกระทบต่อผู้ใช้ เลือกใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงประจักษ์เป็นที่ตั้ง โดยมีจำนวนน้อยที่สนใจธรรมชาติในตัวตนของผู้ใช้หรือสเนใจตัวตนของผู้ใช้ในระดับอภิปรัชญาแม้กรอบคิดตัวตนจะเป็นกรอบคิดทางปรัชญาก็ตาม บทความนี้มุ่งจะเชื่อมโยงงานศึกษาสื่อสังคมออนไลน์ว่ามีวัตถุดิบหลักเป็นวัฒนธรรมทางเทคโนโลยีแต่ก็มีฐานคิดที่เกี่ยวข้องกับกรอบคิดทางปรัชญาโดยพื้นฐาน เพื่อส่งเสริมให้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยที่เกี่ยวข้องกับสื่อสังคมออนไลน์มีลักษณะเป็นสหวิทยาการมากขึ้น กล่าวคือให้ความสำคัญกับกรอบคิดในระดับปรัชญาและหลักฐานเชิงประจักษ์อย่างเท่าเทียมกัน

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1. Introduction

The prominence of social media in our lives and our social world is impossible to deny. Its penetration and heavy usage have changed and diversified the way people communicate both privately and publicly. Moreover, it enables people to congregate and interact, regardless of their geospatial, cultural, or even legal restrictions. Additionally, its influence in many areas ranging from personal concerns, business to politics is widely accepted among the general public and academia alike. However, the uniqueness of social media is its sociality, which has put more demands on users when compared to the early years of the Internet. When an individual joins and makes use of these platforms, he/she is supposed to share information to the audience, and consume others' content in exchange. In this vein, users' selves are constantly being put at the centre of this ever-changing technology. While a large amount of social media research has focused on the effects and use of social media, few researchers have investigated the nature of the self. Furthermore, much of social media research has been dominated by empirical research. Despite having to deal with such a concept that has heavy philosophical

implications, such as the self, the metaphysical experience of the self has seemed to have fallen out of context. Therefore, this paper attempted to explore and establish a link between the philosophical concept of the self and social media in a bid to systematise and craft the research method in a way that would be interdisciplinary and give equal importance to the conceptual and empirical concerns. This paper is divided into two major parts: a further review on the literature on the topic of the self with regard to social media, and some issues concerning research methodology. The first part comprises discussions on the concepts. The aim is to illustrate the complexity of the notion of the self and the subsequent difficulty in the method of research regarding the nature of the self. It is also argued that a solid understanding of the self would be important and bear substantial influence on the research.

2. Various Notions of the Self

The concept of the self has a long history in philosophical traditions and remains a subject of discussion in other modern disciplines. It mainly informs the personhood, individuality, and identity of a human subject. While remaining a great interest in

its home of philosophy of the mind, the treatment of the concept varies greatly across disciplines.

As a modern concept, the self can be crudely put into two camps. The first is a unified, thinking, perceiving, individualist self, which dates back to the seventeenth century mainly by Descartes and Locke. This tradition has been extended to also include the autonomous and rational view of the self espoused by Kant. The other is of the view that the unified, persisting self was either just an illusion like according to Hume and Nietzsche, or socially and culturally defined and constructed, which has been prominent in psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Martin & Barresi, 2013, pp. 33-56). While the traditional view of the self remains the foundation of human rights and human liberty, the non-essentialist view became prominent in the contemporary context where changes were multifaceted, multifactorial, and rapid. For example, the concept of “relational selves” is a recent contender. This stresses that the self is defined by various relationships with which it is inextricably interwoven (Ess, 2015, pp. 53-62). With each definition of the self comes a shift in ways people see

other things, such as self-conception, responsibility, morality, and the nature of the human experience.

‘The relational self’ is also a view that has been recently linked to social media. As opposed to the traditional, bounded, individual being, Gergen (2009) advocated a relationship-centred alternative view of the self. He posited that the individual self was a result of a relational process. Hence, the sense of the self is a reflection of one’s social existence. An individual would be the sum of the relationship, and simultaneously carry with him/her the potential of co-creating new relationships that would further fashion the self. Rational thought, intentions, experience, memory, and creativity, all of which are associated with the mind are ‘born within relationships’ and not ‘in the mind’ (ibid, p. 95). Gergen proposed that not only human beings but "all we take to be real, rational, and good emerges not from individual minds but from relational process." As a consequence, it is out of collaborative action that leads to the conception of the mind. Furthermore, individuals carry their potentiality that would actualise as their self on the condition of past relationships with others. Therefore, the self would be fully relational

(Gergen, 2011). Gergen's concept of the self would be attractive to those who would be interested in media, especially new and social media (Papacharissi, 2012). Understandably, due to his heavy emphasis on relationships or in other words, networks, his concept of the relational self would be integrated well with the online, especially social media environment where being connected and shared would be more important than ever before. Additionally, because Gergen not only put an emphasis on face-to-face interactions, but also included "fictive or mythological characters" as a source of self, his concept of self could be expanded well into the virtual world. With regard to online social networks, Gergen pointed out that the Cartesian dualism, the separation of mind and body no longer existed, but was replaced by "I am linked, therefore I am" (Gergen, 2009, p. 400). To examine the relational being would not only examine the nature of being, but also how to 'be' in the centre of the networked and connected world. To this point, Papacharissi (2012, p. 836) gave an appropriate summary, "perhaps through this approach, we find a place for technology in our lives that does not saturate the self, but enriches relations that support the self instead."

Facing challenges, the field of the philosophy of the mind offered reexamination of the self by incorporating neuroscience, cognitive science, as well as considered the self in a digital context. Two major approaches to the self in the philosophy of the mind mirrors the categories mentioned above; namely, (1) the minimal or the core self, thus referring to a consciousness of oneself as an experiential subject in an immediate moment. This would be a minimum requirement to ‘be’ as oneself. (2) The narrative self, which would be constituted of a sense of time, autobiographical memories, and history. The first would usually be associated with an essentialist perspective of the self, while the latter would be open to seeing a human self as a construct of narratives, thus in the weak sense malleable, or in a strong sense, have no substance of its own (Zahavi, 2007). In addition, there have been attempts to reconcile the two approaches. For example, it has been put forward that it would be insufficient to understand the human self purely as a construct, or even more extreme, as a no-self. In order to truly make sense of the self, the primitive form of the first-person perspective must be taken into account (ibid). For Gallagher (2000), the minimal self

or the core self refers to “a consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time”. This would be immediate in a sense that it would be accepted as a self even if all other related aspects to the self were removed. Unlike the minimal self, the narrative self would have a sense of time, memories, and history. Hence, this could include what the person him/herself or others say about them. Drawing from both approaches to the self, the concept of the self could be thought to be concerned with the experience of the subject as him/herself, which could come from an internal or external source with or without a sense of time.

From the various notions that have been presented of the self, what is most obvious is the primacy and complexity of the notion. The self of a human subject, which is usually presupposed as having some final quality and serves as a starting point in modern research, is still up to debate. Moreover, when each view of the self could be so different in nature, research which would be based on a different model of the self would yield different results. This implication is one to be kept in mind.

3. The Self in Social Media Research

Following the growth in importance of social media, there has emerged a need of research and methodology that has focused specifically on social media. The social media research terrain is incredibly vast. There are debates ranging from the discussion of the definition of social media to the use of social media as a research tool. Early scholarly work on social media tended to look at social media on a single-issue basis; for example, as a single platform, its affordances, user engagement, and social implications. However, there were other issues that were not taken up sufficiently, such as multi-platform use and users' gratification, closing the gap between an online and offline presence, and discipline orientation (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017). In surveying the handbook on social media research, it was found that there was not much discussion on the human self per se. However, this did not mean that there was no interest in the users nor the nature of the users. On the contrary, it was generally accepted that the human self was at the centre of social media.

“Social media are web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organisations to collaborate,

connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible” (ibid, p. 17).

This definition of social media derived from a generalisation of activities inferred that social media were enabled as well as its content. Clearly, the key here would be the users. By participating, users would be contributing bits and pieces of themselves, and in return open themselves up to whatever was floating on the platform. In short, it would be on this self-product that the media would exist.

Although social media as well as the Internet itself is quite new, there has been changes in the understanding and perception of the online world, of users, and the relationship with it. This is significant because its implications could lead to different policy directions and legislation.

In a study on the Net self by Tambyah (1996), not only did this show ongoing scholarly interest on the relationship between Internet technology and the self, but it also presented a change in the direction of Internet research as mentioned above. In its early phase, the Internet used to function as a haven for anonymous users or pseudonymous identities (Vallor,

2016). Therefore, a considerable amount of attention was focused on the Net self and the self IRL (in real life). According to Tambyah (1996), the Internet was entirely different in nature. The online world was an environment that was compressed in the sense of space and time, and susceptible to changes in the norm. Apart from having no sense of time and space, one issue that early scholars found extremely striking was anonymity and the use of a pseudonym online. Tambyah purported that under such an anonymous, virtual condition, an individual could recreate both a new individual self, i.e., Net self, and new communities without any physical or social constraints like in real life. Such stark difference from the offline world was thought to lead to a fundamental change in the self. One could become a recreation as one wished on the Internet providing there was freedom afforded by Net anonymity.

However, this is no longer true. Firstly, social media as currently in use; for example, Facebook, Twitter, or even YouTube, have long begun to encourage connections between the users' online and offline presence (Vallor, 2016). Secondly, the Net self has not broken away from the self in real life or vanished because anonymity is either endangered or

discouraged. On the contrary, as Hogan and Quan-Haase (2010) stressed, the integration between the online self and the offline self has intensified. However, Yang et al. (2017) raised the question about the discrepancies between the virtual and offline self. The virtual self might be different from ‘the true self’, which would serve a purpose of self-presentation and online reputation management. That said, it could also be pointed out that virtual self-presentation at different times or on different platforms could “provide important inferences about stability of the self and its development.” (p. 84).

Another discussion of the self in a more interpretive and conceptual manner comes from consumer research studies. Belk (1988, p. 131) formed the concept of an extended self, which regarded possessions as a “major contributor to and reflection of our identities”. The nature of the self included its relationship with other things, people, or the environment. Both material and immaterial things constitute the self. They assert influence on not only how an individual would act, but also the construction of self. In 2013, Belk reexamined the concept of the extended self in a world permeated by digital technology. It was found that the virtual or digital world enabled the self to

extend and evolve further with less physical confinement. The construction of the self in a digital environment, where social media would be included, would no longer become a semi-private but a shared enterprise. The virtual self would be incorporated and regarded as an extension of the core self (Belk, 2013, pp. 477-500). This study conferred with the views in other disciplines, such as anthropology and philosophy that suggested a collapse or obscurity with a distinction between the online and offline worlds (Hongladarom, 2011; Miller et al., 2016). Therefore, like in the field of the philosophy of the mind, the nature of self in social media research is still very much a dynamic concept.

What is most different regarding the interest between the self in philosophy and social media research is the methodology. The methods used in social media research are mostly of the social sciences, both quantitative and qualitative. Further analysis on the holistic impacts on social media users are considerably rare. Furthermore, existing social theories that are used regarding social media in the field of an information system are usually not introduced in a consistent framework based on philosophical foundations (Qi et al., 2018, p. 94). Thus,

it would be more appropriate that concepts about the new and ever-changing environment, such as social media, could be clearly analysed and understood before both the theoretical and practical application. In addition, social and philosophical theory could be of use because the disciplines would be directly concerned with contemplative issues, such as the self, being, sociality, cognition, communication, and cooperation, all of which would be central to the rise and existence of social media.

4. The Issue of Methodology

4.1 Digital anthropology: A review of ethnographic-led research

The emergence of the Internet and its social functions has posed new metaphysical questions because this has opened a new reality as well as a new mode of being. This has invited a discussion whether the human self stays the same when experiencing, and in the case of social media, creating new reality online if there is a human experience in a digital context. This studies the consequences of the rise of digital technologies on some particular people, and investigates the use of these technologies within anthropological methodology, or the study of specific digital technologies. Digital anthropology

has been able to gather both the intimate experiences of the subjects regarding social media, and large scale of change in social media use using an ethnographic method (Miller et al., 2016). In contrast to earlier works on the Internet and its use, which rather emphasised the gap between online and offline (Vallor, 2016), digital anthropology is obscure as well as appreciates the dichotomy between the offline and online worlds.

The prominent methodology in digital anthropology is ethnography. The human subject is utilised as an "instrument of knowing" (Horst, 2016 in Sanjek & Traner, 2016). The human subject or the effects thereupon are investigated and used to clarify a phenomenon in question. Human experience and how to be human, for digital anthropology, seems to refer to a group of a sociocultural world. In this way, digital anthropology could be subjected to the same criticism posed to traditional anthropology: that a human subject as a person is not the subject of interest for digital anthropology. The main subject of anthropology is culture in a collective sense (Edwardes, 2018). Moreover, anthropology initially did not see the human self as being important or useful in explaining society or culture. In

the same vein, according to cultural anthropology, human individuals, i.e., the human self and their personalities were determined by cultural expectations. In ecological anthropology, human society and cultures were seen as products of adaptations to given environmental or material conditions. Therefore, the human self would be a construction of the essential needs, which would be defined by sociocultural structures.

Such emphasis on culture would deflect the attention away from contemplating the nature of the human self or even the need to do so. Furthermore, anthropological works have rarely clarified in what sense the term ‘self’, or related terms, such as ‘person’, ‘individual’, or ‘identity’ really mean. The lack of conceptual clarity in this regard were pointed out by several anthropologists (Bloch, 2012; Quinn, 2006; Sökefeld, 1999; Spiro, 1993; Zenker, 2017). In addition, like traditional anthropology, in digital anthropology, the self has been seen as almost identical to self-identity and self-representation. Based on the debates in traditional anthropology, it would be doubtful how one could account for ‘how to be human’ while not putting the concept of the self at the centre.

Wang (2016) followed a Chinese rural migrant population and documented their lives and their use of new media. Wang's main method of data collection was 'participant observation', so to gain an insight into what the people did, said, or said they did by being a part of the same community. For the ethnographer, social media profiles of the subjects would be valuable because they would be personal identities that would have been constructed to serve a purpose. Nevertheless, to Wang's surprise, the findings suggested that social media was not merely a social tool; for example, to keep in contact with family in rural China. In contrast, several Chinese migrant profiles turned out to be not merely self-representation serving the sole purpose for other people or 'the social' to see, but also for self-realisation and self-care. In some extreme cases, virtual reality is the only realm where such self is realisable. Therefore, social media profiles as ethnographic data should be treated holistically. With the addition of the concept of the self, it could be possible to arrive at a holistic explanation of an online human experience without the risk of neglecting the self in favour of a social or cultural identity.

4.2 Ethics as a bridge concept between the study of social media and the importance of the metaphysical conception of the self

Although quite rare, the work which connects the philosophical nature of the self to social media research could be found in Internet research ethics. According to Ess (2015), the nature of the self would determine a person as a moral agent, thereby assuming responsibility for his/her actions. Therefore, different views on the human self would lead to different expectations as well as considerations regarding the research methodology and conduct. Ess purported that rapidly changing technologies have a transformative effect on the human sense of selfhood and identity. Consequently, research on Internet technology as well as human subjects would need to be investigated as well.

Like the above discussion on the various concepts of self, there are also two kinds of selfhood according to Ess; namely, the individuated self, and the relational self. In Ess's view, the first began to shift towards the latter. Human self is defined in relation to its various relationships among which the self exists. Thus, a human ethical agency, online-offline alike

would not be purely isolated and autonomous, rather it would be shared and distributed among the networks of such relationships. The understanding of relational self has already been taken up by research bodies, such as the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH). By accepting the duty of protecting the privacy and confidentiality of not only the individual research subject, but also others within the subject's circle, the institution's recognition of relational selfhood is clear. This shows a real-world effect when a particular meaning of a concept is adopted. A conceptual understanding of an issue has directive power; for example, on a policy level.

In addition, ethics are deemed very important for researchers when conducting appropriate and valid studies, both in natural and human science. However, in a fast-changing and relatively new field, such as Internet research and social media research, one could discover that traditional ethical principles are both unclear and unsuitable. With this as a background, emphasis on developing more tenacious philosophical concepts would be obligatory. As the example in social media research ethics show, a more tenacious concept

could serve as a bridge between contemplative and practical science. Nevertheless, more clarity on complex concepts could have actual consequences.

4.3 Case study methodology

To enrich the study of the self within social media, there would be a need for a methodology that would be both acceptable within the social sciences and also embrace the interpretative side of research. Below is a short review whether a case study method would be helpful in studying the self in social media research.

According to Yin (2002, 1), a case study is one of several methods of doing research in social science. It is preferred when researchers are attempting to answer a how or why question, when the researchers are not in control of the event, and when the research focuses on a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context. Additionally, case study research shares some characteristics with philosophical research in the exploratory nature and in that the research model and procedures of the two are occasionally not forthcoming. Despite being a distinctive form of an empirical inquiry, it has been criticised for lacking in rigour, not following systematic procedures, accepting

equivocal evidence, or succumbing to biases. It is questioned whether its conclusions are qualified as a basis for scientific generalisation. These criticisms are quite common to scholars in philosophy. Moreover, what is different, is that there have been attempts to map out a set of methodology in the social sciences, so that researchers could have a common idea regarding the research procedures. For example, four principles underlying good social science research pointed out by Yin (2002) are exhaustively attending to evidence, addressing all major rival interpretations, addressing the most significant aspect of the study, and good use of prior knowledge. Such strategy would fit well with philosophical research going forward. This would be because case studies would be commonly used to present the empirical evidence from a set of cases to test a theoretical “case” using several analytic techniques, such as pattern matching, explanation building, time series analysis, logic models, cross-case synthesis (ibid). Furthermore, a case study is already a widely used method for social media studies. (Ngai et al., 2015). Therefore, the case study method should be helpful in bridging empirical data from empirical literature with more conceptual interpretation.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to illustrate the prominence of social media in academia and the importance of the self as a philosophical concept, and above all, the intricate link between the two. The main concepts of self were selected and explained. A survey on social media research and Internet research was done. The survey was also expanded to include digital ethnography and case study research which is, comparatively, still considered a traditional research method. The first aspect took interest in social media and its users, while the latter could accommodate a less precise factor, such as the philosophical concept of the self. In every case, the emphasis on developing more tenacious philosophical concepts would be crucial. As the example in social media research ethics show, more clarity on complex concepts could have actual consequences, thus serving as a bridge between contemplative and practical science.

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