Understanding Gender Transition on Social Media to Design Technology for Changing Identities

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Abstract

Technology infrastructure often fails to account for users who do not fit within expected categories. Thus, designing technology and social networking sites flexible enough to allow for representation of complex identities that emerge as people embark on major life transitions, such as changing gender, is a particular challenge for HCI. Because little is known about how transgender people navigate gender transition online, we are developing a comprehensive online questionnaire to identify common themes and challenges of gender transition on social media. Results will guide designers in understanding how to construct infrastructures and user-interfaces robust and flexible enough for use by people before, during, and after major life events.

Author Keywords

Social media; online identity; gender; LGBT; transgender

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (*e.g.*, HCI): Miscellaneous. H.5.3. Group and Organization Interfaces: Collaborative computing; Web-based interaction.

Introduction

Many people struggle with navigating their online identities during periods of life transition. Announcing and representing changes on social networking sites (SNS) can cause stress and uncertainty whether those changes are positive (such as marriage, engagement, child birth, or job promotion), negative (such as divorce, loss of a loved one, or job termination), or complex (such as gender transition). The pervasive nature of social media adds additional challenges to life transitions, warranting specific analysis of issues including privacy concerns and the coalescence of online and offline identity.

Taking gender transition as a case study of life transition more broadly, what challenges and common practices emerge as transgender[1] individuals change gender on SNS? Analyzing methods for navigating life transition online and roadblocks encountered will allow us to develop concrete design recommendations for existing and new technological systems and infrastructures. Designing such systems with considerations for life transition support will help transgender people and others during periods of life transition.

Background

Social media is a unique way to express identity online during major life changes; however it can be both a tool and a hindrance in life transitions. Studies show that online social networks and support groups benefit a wide range of transitional communities, such as new parents [2], adults transitioning to old age [6], and students entering college [9]. Yet the public, open nature of social media can also place users at risk of harassment, which can complicate and even impede life transitions online [5]. Additionally, social media opens up a whole new set of "digital possessions", such as photographs and social media profiles, many of which must be sorted through and changed during a life transition [7]. How to best support transition processes online, including ways to preserve privacy and reduce harassment risk, necessitates in-depth study.

Everyone experiences major life changes at some point, and many of these changes involve substantial shifts in identity. Technology applications and SNS often offer people less control than needed to effectively represent such life transitions. Given the broad array of major life changes that are currently ineffectively designed for, HCI research should examine the lived experiences and challenges of people undergoing life transitions in order to capably design for such exception cases.

Unique Challenges and Opportunities

Transgender people often struggle with representing their complex identities on SNS. In the face of infrastructure constraints, such as the need to choose either "male" or "female" as their profile's gender when neither option is sufficient, users may become frustrated and disengaged with their online social network [4].

Information system infrastructure problems, such as those encountered on SNS, can negatively affect the lives of transgender people. Even small disruptions in user experience, when combined with the

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[1] The term "transgender" can broadly be defined as including "those who transition from one gender to another…and those who may not, including genderqueer people, cross-dressers, the androgynous, and those whose gender non-conformity is part of their identity" [3:12].

Figure 1. Limited gender options on Facebook [Screenshot taken January 9, 2014].

marginalization and oppression that transgender people experience, can have a much larger and more negative effect on these users than the normal frustrations that a faulty system causes its end-users [8].

For example, a structural hole or bug causing a transgender person's previous name and/or gender to appear on a SNS creates an embarrassing and potentially dangerous situation for that person within their online network. Exposure of one's transgender identity (which may be unknown to some online social network members) might open one up to discrimination and marginalization. Undesired transgender identity exposure can translate to one's offline network in the form of labor market discrimination, violence or threats of violence, etc. As another example, the infrastructure of SNS like Facebook allows users to "tag" other users in photographs, which can cause unwanted transgender identity exposure and inaccurate gender identity representation when old photos are tagged. Imagine the frustration and discomfort felt by a woman who opens her Facebook account and discovers that a tagged photo of herself as a young man has appeared on the newsfeed of everyone in her online social network. In these ways, seemingly small infrastructure problems can make a SNS a hostile environment for a transgender user.

Bowker and Star define *torque* as the "twisting" that results from a mismatch between a person's identity and a classification system [1]. Transgender people's use of SNS is a classic example of torque. The existence of mismatching is clear, but what remains unclear is how to design technology that addresses this torque and improves user experience for transgender people and others who do not fit neatly into existing infrastructural categories. Better understanding the particular challenges faced by transgender people on SNS will help to address the technology design limitations that torque causes within HCI.

Designing Technology for Major Life Events
Although many major life changes cause people to substantially change their identities, gender transition is one of the only life changes in which a person often becomes literally unrecognizable to their friends, family, and online social network. For example, during transition, a person's SNS profile will often change in three substantial ways: name, gender, and physical appearance in profile photo. If such changes are made without announcement, or if the announcement of gender change is not displayed or noticed by some members of the transgender person's online social network, a person who was once a "friend" now appears as a stranger. Feeling unrecognized among friends may make a transgender person feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar within their online social network, thus causing frustration and disengagement with the SNS.

Such an extreme identity change as gender transition is difficult to represent and implement in most technology applications, and is an area that has thus far not been given much thought in HCI design. Thus, studying the

transgender population and their unique sociotechnical experiences will yield many insights for designers of technology for major life events.

Current and Future Work

We are currently developing a survey to be distributed to a broad sample of the transgender population. Aiming to study the specific practices and challenges of online transition experiences, questions will determine participants' various strategies for managing their social media profiles (*e.g.* profile deletion and re-creation, name and gender change announcement on existing profile, or unannounced name and gender change), including practices surrounding digital items such as photos (*e.g.* photo deletion, no-longer-representative photo de-"tagging," or prior photo archive preservation). The survey will also include questions about stress experienced throughout the online transition process, changes in social networks and relationships, and both negative and positive effects of online transition on offline life.

Major life changes on social media are difficult for a number of reasons, such as stress, infrastructural constraints and mismatches, and potential risks of undesired identity exposure. Studying how these challenges affect a particular marginalized community can help us to understand how to design technology to improve user experience for this group, which informs technological design for any number of life transitions. In this way, in-depth study of gender transition via social media will help to improve design for major life changes more broadly.

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