

Social Media and Personal Histories: Practices, Identities, and Algorithms in the Age of Digital Nostalgia

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Abstract: Many of today's young adults have Facebook histories reaching back to their middle school years. These users are often prompted to engage with their past content through features that capitalize on "digital nostalgia," like Facebook's On This Day (now Memories). The present study investigates how young adults interact with this content, its effects on personal memories and identities, and the perceived role of non-human factors (like algorithms) in mediating these interactions.

Keywords: Social media, identity, literacies

Key areas of discussion

This poster presents the initial findings from a qualitative study examining the way young adults (18-24) engage with and think about their interactions with past social media content, particularly on Facebook. Poster-based conversations will focus on discussion around two questions: (1) What patterns of practices do participants engage in, and how do those relate to processes of remembering/personal memory and constructing identities? (2) How do users theorize about the ways that non-human factors are involved in these processes (if at all), and what are the consequences of these theories?

Issues addressed

Social media has become an important mediator of identity processes as young people are "growing up" with these tools (Lincoln & Robards, 2017; Robards, 2014). For some young adults, these platforms store years of content, sometimes stretching back to their middle school days.

Features of social media tools, including non-human actors like algorithms, play a key role in identity processes. One way that users engage with algorithms is by being re-presented with content they had posted previously. Tools like Facebook's On This Day, now part of an expanded Memories feature, and apps like Timehop use algorithms to sift through past content and re-present users with "memories." To further understand the role of these features in the lives of young adults, we address three research questions:

- How do young adults (18-24) engage with their past social media content?
- How do young adults relate their Facebook content to their life stories, and (how) does past content play a role in shaping the way they think about their past, present, and future identities?
- How do young adults describe and understand the role of algorithms in relation to their social media content, and past content in particular?

Theoretical framework

The current study draws on work in New Literacies (Leu et al., 2017), sociocultural conceptions of social practices, tools, life stories, and identities (e.g., Holland, et al., 1998), and work on the role of algorithms in mediating human behavior. This study approaches social media use as a key "new literacy" (Leu et al., 2017); the internet has changed what it means to be literate, and social media use is a type of new literacy that requires complex critical skills. We approach identity as fluid and intertwined with social media practices, drawing on Holland et al.'s (1998) conceptualization of identity as part of a self in practice, which is ever-changing and socially constructed as people act in figured worlds. We also draw on Jones (2017) to think about how people understand algorithms as agent, authority, adversary, communicative resource, audience, and oracle.

Methods

Two researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 undergraduate and graduate students (4 male, 10 female; 12 White, 2 Indian-American) from U.S. universities, ages 18-24, with several years of Facebook history. The interviews followed a two-part interview protocol, with an audio-recorded portion, where participants described their current and past uses of social media, and a video-recorded portion, where participants showed researchers their Facebook feeds and timelines. The interviews were then transcribed and coded in NVivo in three stages (open, axial, and selective) according to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

Participants sometimes intentionally sought out their past content, and sometimes were presented with it upon opening Facebook. Regardless of how they came to view their past content, participants' active engagement with the content served an important function in the practice of negotiating past, present, and future identities. For example, several participants reckoned with feeling, looking, or acting different than their past (e.g., younger teen) selves as presented in their past content, and they would decide to share, delete, or disregard this content. This practice of *curating or editing Facebook content* served as a potent site of identity mediation, as participants considered deeply the stories they wanted to tell about themselves—to themselves and/or others—via Facebook. Participants also made *critical assessments* of their life stories as seen on Facebook, as well as on other platforms, and indicated that their life story is not captured in one place. Participants frequently made *comparisons* of past and present selves, and their own life to friends' lives. They reflected on changing friendships, personal growth, the felt passage of time, changes in life trajectory, and changed physical appearance.

Participants generated many theories about how Facebook algorithms operated to present them with content, similar to Jones' (2017) "folk beliefs" about algorithms. Some of these theories included: "relevancy" based on others in your network engaging with the content, number of likes, amount of engagement with a friend, or randomly. Participants also expressed concern about (the rise in) accurately *targeted ads and irrelevant content* in some types of "memories" and on their feeds. Participant language suggested connections to Jones' six metaphors for algorithms, particularly as they ascribed them a great deal of authority and agency, and sometimes saw them as magical and/or unknowable (Jones' "oracle").

Conclusions and implications

Telling a life story in the figured world of social networking, similar to Holland et al.'s (1998) exploration of stories in Alcoholics Anonymous, draws upon a system of semiotic resources, other people, memories, and institutional rules.

Introducing the element of the Facebook platform, years of easily accessible historical content, and the algorithms that propel them (in often opaque ways) calls for special consideration of technology in young peoples' identity practices. As users generate, respond to, and curate their own social media life stories, understanding how people relate to this content will be crucial to understanding personal histories, and critical engagement with the technology that mediates these relationships is a new literacy meriting further investigation.

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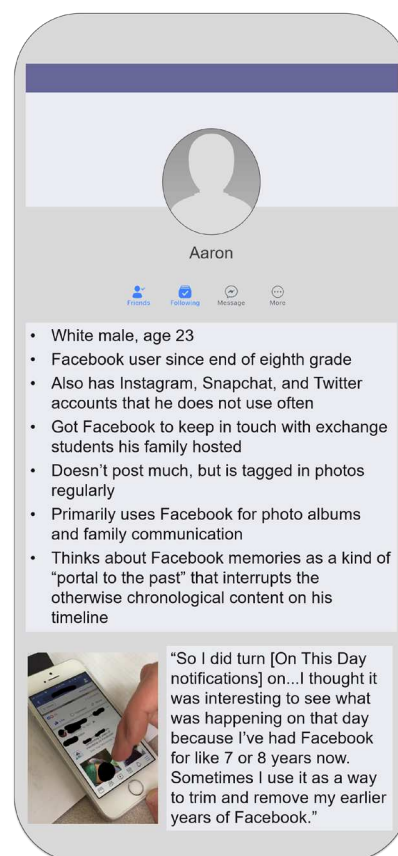


Figure 1. Aaron, one of our case studies, shows a five-year "friendversary" post.