

# Fears of Strangers: Causes of Anonymity Rejection on Virtual World

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**Abstract**—This research is a collaborative narrative research, which is mixed with issues of selected papers and researcher's experience as an anonymous user on social networking sites. The objective of this research is to understand the reasons of the regular users who reject to contact with anonymous users, and to study the communication traditions used in the selected studies. Anonymous users are rejected by regular users, because of the fear of cyber bully, the fear of unpleasant behaviors, and unwillingness of changing communication norm. The suggestion for future research design is to use longitudinal design or quantitative design; and the theory in rhetorical tradition should be able to help develop a strong trust message.

**Keywords**—Anonymous, anonymity, online identity, trust message, reliability.

## I. INTRODUCTION

ONLINE anonymous users have been often rejected by regular users, although they do not intend to harass or make an unpleasant behavior. To study the reason behind this rejection and communication traditions used in related studies would help future research explore the way to invent a strong trust message. This strong trust message would not require a reliability history, or appearance in other media. In the other words, this strong trust message could stand by itself to create an initial trust on online users. This strong trust message could also be adapted to use for online performances which contain some risk.

## II. CREATION OF ONLINE IDENTITY

To create online identity is not a new thing on social networking sites or applications. In a very early research, which was about HTML homepage also studied how adolescent construct social identity on virtual space [1]. A classic study also noted the importance of self-presentation is for adolescents [2], [3], and they develop their identity to fill the gap that they could not do when they were young [4]. In a classroom website, Hawisher [5] found that the students always asked her to take their photograph again, because they wished to have better photos for the teacher to put online. Online self-presentation or identity construction could be anonymous. Sometimes, anonymity is more real than real life. This is because it is what one wants to be, but cannot be in

his/her real life [6].

Facebook and online media give adolescents a new opportunity to create and discover their identities. Music is a necessary part of online identity construction among adolescents. Adolescents copied the materials about their favorite music and put on their HTML homepage in the time that no social networking site existed [1]. In the Myspace era, adolescents also liked to post the images of their favorite musicians and other idols on Myspace profile [7]. On Facebook, adolescents can simply select their musical taste and put on the default page of their profiles. Some users spend a long time and carefully select the musical pages to show on their profiles [8].

A famous quote of Tikhomirov [9], [7] is that, "Tools are not just added to human activity; they transform it." An interesting question in Hawisher [5] is how new technologies reshape the relation between people's identities. In the virtual world, users have flexible options to present themselves, as some present themselves similar to real life, and some present themselves as anonymous [10]. Virtual world does not only give flexible options on self-presentation, it also gives more flexibility to use language and role play [4], which are important parts of identity construction. Huffaker & Calvert [10] also found that male adolescents felt more comfortable to express their transgender orientation, comparing with their limited expression in real life. They could present their orientation on their profiles, and they also discussed it freely. Since online self-presentation contains many kinds of self-presentation, some users have everything public for everyone to access. Lampinen, Tamminen & Oulasvirta [11] argued that these people did not totally present all information for everyone, but they filtered their information before posting on their profiles. Comparing between online media and traditional media, online media allow users to track back to their past wall posts or past blogs, which also help the users to see their ongoing development of identity [10].

## III. ANONYMITY

Anonymity has existed before the era of online media. Anonymity could refer to the behaviors that one does not give most information related to his/her real life. One may represent oneself with an avatar or the name so that the audience cannot know who one really is. In the past of novel history in Thailand, King Rama 6 also used various pseudonyms, so no one knew that the author of the book was him. Herring, Scheidt & Wright [12] reported the quantitative number that 29% of bloggers used pseudonym, and Huffaker

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& Calvert [10] reported that 30% of bloggers did not give their real name in the blogs. These findings found no gender difference among those who gave real names and those who did not. Another study which mainly discusses anonymity is the study of Second Life, a computer-medium-communication social support group. Second Life let the users create their interactive 3D avatars to communicate with each other. Some participants of this research reported that the communication in this virtual space was similar to their real life [13]. While there are many anonymous users, some users do not need to contact them. Some participants of Manago, Graham, Greenfield & Salimkhan's study [7] said that they did not use Myspace to meet complete strangers. The Web 2.0 Suicide Machine also contains an option to remove fake virtual space friends from social networking accounts [14].

In the period of HTML homepage, the users might not control their audiences who viewed their homepages. Many people were known by strangers [1]. Most users tried to put the best things about them onto online profiles. This might be because the roles in online space are not flexible as in real life. The situation that everyone from everywhere views the same profile of a user is different from what one could act in many different roles in real life. Since there are a lot of good things/information about one user, it may cause jealousy among his/her friends which try to compare with him/her [7].

The reasons behind anonymity were various. In a study in Myspace period, Kim, Klautke & Serota [15] found that these anonymous users were unromantic, since they did not show their sexual orientation. This act is different from regular bloggers which discuss girlfriends and boyfriends to develop their sexual identity [10]. Adolescents who were from a small country might not need to show their exact location [1]. Some female users do not need to show their photos or gender. This is because female users are often the victims of cyber bullies [16].

Since many studies were reviewed in this section, most studies examined online identities, but rarely examined anonymity. For example, Myspace users create their second identities by using their actual photos, with the goal of marketing and self-commercial. Similarly, Manago, Graham, Greenfield & Salimkhan [7] found that users use the commercial metaphor of marketing on their online self-presentation. Some studies also concentrated on the relationship between gender and online self-presentation.

Noticeably, to present oneself online is now much easier than in the past. In the past, to create a homepage, a user needed to have knowledge about HTML. To decorate Myspace by one's own artwork, one needed to know how to code CSS. Today, social networking sites and applications are very easy to use. This could cause a higher number of anonymous users. In contrast, the functions of current social networking sites and applications limit identity play [17]. Facebook does not allow users to change their name and their age too often. Sometimes, it requires the reason for changing. LINE requires the actual phone number to register for an account. Another option that may reduce anonymity action on

Facebook is to tag the photo. Because people could tag each other on Facebook, if anonymous users have real-life friends in his/her facebook contacts, they might get tagged on their actual photos [14]. This situation would announce the real-life identities of anonymous users among those who have never known them before.

#### IV. OBJECTIVES

The reason that this topic needs to be explored is that anonymous users should be able to communicate with other users without abandonment. This study would be the first step to understand the point of view of regular online users, and lead to the way to examine this topic in future research. The objectives of this study are (1) to understand the reason that some online users do not want to contact with anonymous users, and (2) to look for the suitable theory traditions which fits with future study of this topic, anonymity.

#### V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1: What should be the reason that anonymity is forbidden for some online users?  
 RQ2: Which communication theory traditions should be used to explore the future research about anonymity?

#### VI. METHODS

This research is a collaborative narrative research which mainly discusses the related studies of online identity and anonymity. Another part of the discussion is a direct experience of this researcher as anonymous user in roles on Myspace, Deviantart and Facebook since 2006. This experience would help describe and connect the issues found in selected papers. Both resources would lead to the reasons that the normal users do not like to connect with anonymous users. If these reasons were explored, they would be a part of the way to help anonymous users to be able to contact with other users easier than before.

##### *A. Inclusion Criteria for Selected Studies*

- 1) Selected studies are about online identity construction and anonymity.
- 2) The selected studies were founded in Google Scholar, and full text must be able to be accessed.
- 3) Keywords which were put in search box are anonymous, online identity, second identity, and the name of seven communication theory traditions (which are semiotic tradition, phenomenological tradition, cybernetic tradition, sociopsychological tradition, sociocultural tradition, critical tradition and rhetorical tradition).
- 4) The selected studies were published during, 2000 - 2013.

#### VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### *A. Reason behind Abandonment of Anonymous Users*

Normally, people feel more certainty when they meet someone they know, comparing with when they meet a new

one. A research conducted in 2000 found that online users in that period used website to stay connected with their friends and families by sharing pictures, video and some text on the internet [5]. Adolescents also acted similarly, that their intended primary audiences of their homepages are their friends in their real life. Arunrangsiewed [18] also found that online users tend to believe social networking sites better than all other kinds of website. This is because users on social networking sites who they met are the actual people they have already known before getting onto social networking. All these resources show that there is not much space left for anonymous users.

One of basic sources of uncertainty on internet is reliability failures [19]. Many websites try to mimic face-to-face communication on their website to increase level of trust or reliability [20]. For example, Fatcow customers might have an experience chatting with Fatcow staff after clicking "Live-Chat" button on Fatcow homepage. When the questions are sent, and the customers get the answers immediately, this is similar to face-to-face communication. Another way that famous commercial websites always use to reduce reliability failure is to make themselves appear on other media. When the users know the websites on television or other traditional media, their memory would heighten the level of trust on the websites, which would help the users feel more comfortable to make an online transaction [20]. While commercial websites have an opportunity to make their users know them on other media, anonymous users do not have this opportunity. They could only make the new friends know them on online media.

Anonymous users do not only have the lack of opportunity to build trust online, this online relationship with new friends also lack facial expression, non-verbal communication and body language-posture [1]. Although emoticon can fill this void on online communication [21], online communication still has less non-verbal language, which is hard for anonymous users to develop an ongoing long-term relationship with other users [22].

Initial trust is the trust at primary level which can be extended to trustworthiness. This initial trust is the most difficult stage to achieve [20]. Different online activities require different levels of trust. To make an online payment might require a higher level of trust than to register for a new account on an unknown website. In some cases, to accept the friend request of an anonymous person on social networking might require a high level of trust. This is because most users with cyber bully behaviors always present themselves as anonymous. They add other users to steal the personal information, and use this information to reach their goal [16]. Some users prevent this situation by filtering everyone before friend acceptance, this method also helps to reduce other online conflict such group co-representation [11]. To post anything online is to share the ownership of information to its audiences [23]. To filter people who could view the information would help to control the information flowing to unintended audiences.

To build trust online, the users or agents need to develop at

least one of these elements, web design or trust-building behaviors. Web design was a possible option for Myspace Profile Version 1.0 and 2.0, which allowed users to decorate profiles with CSS codes [6]. A nice and clean design could increase the number of Myspace friends to reach more than 10,000 friends. The researcher found that the level of trust to contact with an anonymous user on social networking sites was not high enough for an anonymous user to ask for the real address of other users. Regular online users still have public and private boundary for anonymous users to access, even both have accepted each other as friends. Deviantart.com is another good example to study about online trust and anonymous users. Deviantart.com is an online art gallery which users can upload, sell and receive the comments on their artwork. Popular users on Deviantart.com do not need to show their real photo or real location. These users become popular because they could create the artwork matching with what other users like to see. Akdag Salah [24] found that anime was one of the famous styles that could receive a lot of comments on this site.

Although some social networking users are not serious about their online appearance [11], enjoyment and engagement could cause technologies addict among their users [25]. Users who are serious about social networking communication might be sensitive with unpleasant or rude behaviors. Individual users who have the behavior of using multiple online identities could often act inappropriately, because no one could actually know who they are [26]. Regular users cannot know the risk after accepting anonymous users as friends. Since they could not perceive the risk, their level of trust would not be higher [20]. Because friend acceptance of anonymous users could be considered a risk, Suh, Shin & Lee [26] suggested that online community or social networking should not allow users to change their identities easily. For example, Facebook does not allow its users to change their names and their ages too often. Sometimes, Facebook system would ask for the reason of name changing.

### *B. Future Study*

The main limitation of this study is that the selected papers were not selected annually, which could create some gap of information between some years that related paper could not be found. To explore this topic with documentary analysis, the suggestion is to improve a way to select the related papers to strengthen the methodology and get more validity results.

Suggestion found in selected studies is to explore the research about social networking and technology engagement level with longitudinal design [25]. Although this suggestion was not directly about anonymous users, anonymity behavior is also an ongoing behavior and the identity could develop over time. This research would suggest longitudinal design for the future research, too. Similarly, a media related study of existed meta-analysis studies also suggest longitudinal research design to examine the negative effect, which users were influenced from media [27].

Suh, Shin & Lee [26] also suggest that future research needs to increase the number of samples. This is because most data of studies in this area were collected from a small number of samples, and there were only a few quantitative data studies, as anonymous users could not be found easily in the real world. Quantitative data may be collected from regular users to see their attitudes about anonymous users. Their attitude could be used to create an online trust message that anonymous users may display to invite other regular users to join their circles.

### C. Communication Traditions

To explore the way to invent a trust message for anonymous users to use could be consider as a type of persuasion, which fits the rhetorical tradition. If the future study is exactly about this topic, the theories in rhetorical tradition should be used. In the selected studies, there were only few studies that used theories in the rhetorical tradition, but most of them used sociopsychological tradition, sociocultural tradition and cybernetic tradition.

Sociopsychological tradition was often used to describe identity development, points of view and actions of individual users [28], [11], [29]. Sociocultural tradition in the selected studies could describe the social identity, self-development to serve the group's need, social interaction and social construction [30], [7], [1], [31], [32]. In some studies, both traditions could not be separated. They were similar to cybernetic tradition, which one study could examine the relationship of all social, group and individual [7], [11].

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