FINDING AN IDENTITY, DESIGNING THE IDENTITY: STUDY OF WEB-BASED COMMUNICATION

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This paper presents an experimental research that uses a corpus of web-based communication portal www.rate.ee. This is the most popular website in Estonia, being used by approximately one third of the Estonian population. Users can present themselves through the special personal webpages, rate each other's pictures and create virtual social networks. Their motivation factors are communication and self-presentation with social feedback. Rate.ee environment supports different social actions, calculates the "fame" (popularity) of users etc.

The author focuses on identity designing and language characteristics in this environment, that is to say: which markers and features can be used for promoting "virtual face" in the context of the web-based communication.

Introduction

The creators and developers of a global computer network dreamed once about the network of knowledge, scientists working together and making the results of research publicly available (1). This dream has become a reality, nowadays the Internet is the greatest source of information (Wikipedia etc). Moreover, media and communication shift more and more to the Internet. New technologies are quite easily accessible and computer users do not need very specific technological knowledge anymore. Internet can substitute earlier ways of communication, the functionality of regular mail is transferred e-mail, phonecalls can be replaced with instant messenger sessions, traditional diaries take new form as weblogs, banking and shopping have web-based equivalents.

In Estonia we have come a long way already. Thanks to different national projects the internet is in every school and library, more than half of the Estonian population uses the internet regularly. Computers can be found in every third home. The most active internet users are schoolchildren. 10 years ago the situation was different, the online community consisted mostly of university students and young professionals working for innovative companies. Nowadays the largest part of online communication is generated by teenagers. Internet plays much more important role in personal as well as business relations. Crucial first impression may stem from online communication, especially within the teenagers-oriented environments. Virtual images are transposed to real life and vice versa. Good reason for people to develop their virtual identity with care.

Communication: environment and participants

The Net is an immensely empowering, individualistic, creative medium, as can be seen from the numerous experimental ways in which people use it. (4). This research is based on the corpus of the youth portal www.rate.ee (Rate). Rate is one of the most popular websites in Estonia having about 1/3 Estonian population as registered users. The majority of the users are children and teenagers. For them Rate is a very important channel of communication. Female/male ratio is about fifty-fifty, but female users communicate more actively. Both public and private communication exist. Users look for new friends, share their pictures, introduce and promote themselves, rate and comment others' pictures. The portal is evolving quickly and continously while incorporating new internet trends, so the Rate corpus represents a synchronic state of youth communication habits.

Registered user gets a personal profile page, where his/her pictures and personal data is displayed. User may mark some data as either public or private (for friends-only). User page is the primary instrument for self-promotion and identity design. Youngsters can „belong" to somewhere (through virtual clubs, friends, similar hobbies, ...) and at the same time to bring out their speciality, individual face.

Designing the identity: tools

In Rate there are several ways to present the identity. Author divides these actions into (inter)active and passive. Interactive presentation involves et least two participants who are communicating in some way, passive presentation is just self-description, available for others to see. (Inter)active presentation is done by communication:
    1) commenting on each other's pictures;
    2) rating each other's pictures;
    3) writing forum postings;
    4) marking other users as friends;

5) writing characterisations;

6) writing weblogs;

7) sending private messages;

8) chatting in chat room;

9) establishing and promoting special communities (for instance "*Club for dance lovers*").

Passive presentation goes through the user information page:

1) personal data (age, birthday, sign of the zodiac, education, occupation, languages spoken);

2) pictures;

3) "fame" (special feature in Rate, fame number is calculated automatically and shows, how many people are connected to this person, in other words – how many people know him/her);

4) interests;

5) slogan;

6) personality (user fills out a test form and results will be displayed on his/her page);

7) design of the page.

Communication: nonverbal tools

Face-to-face verbal communication is emotionally rich as a result of the use of facial expressions, gestures, voice tone and other special features. Compared to speech written text seems to be less emotional, but Internet users have found alternative ways of reflecting feelings: smileys, ASCII art and marked emphasis. Smileys imitate a selection of real-life facial expressions in a rudimentary form (Table 1). Best known smiley is :) - icon of smile. Wide use of instant messengers (program that allows users to send and receive short messages instantly) has determined new „smileys": special symbol combinations that do not iconize real image like smileys do. Instant messengers transform these combinations into small pictures, but chatters use these combinations also in other environments, where transforming does not work.

Smiley	Meaning
:)	smile
:D	laughing, very big smile
;)	wink
:P	grin
(Y)	thumbs up
(A)	angel
(K)	kiss
(L)	love, heart

Table 1. Most popular smileys in Rate

In Rate female users tend to express emotions more readily, using 36% more smileys than male users. It confirms the widespread assertion that women are quite willing to express their feelings and men stay more reserved.

The corpus analysis also revealed that positive emotions (smiles, laughter, etc) are expressed more frequently than negative ones (sadness, anger etc). It would appear that most users want to present a positive and optimistic image. Negative smileys can be found mainly in the texts of certain usertypes: people who like to demonstrate their deep depression and pessimism at every opportunity.

ASCII art is for expressing extra emphasised text or emotion (Figure 1). In Rate almost only young girls (8-15 years of age) use ASCII art, boys do so rarely. Comment containing ASCII art shows extra strong admiration and is more often seen in the kind of context where a person is seeking special attention.

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* * * * * * * * * * ( ¨ ` . . · ´ ¨ ) * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
* * * * * * ( ¨ ` . . · ´ ¨ ) . , . ( ¨ ` . . · ´ ¨ ) * * * * * * * *
* ( ¨ ` . . · ´ ` .  , . · HEY  ` ` . , . . · ´ ` . . · ¨ ) *
* * ` . . , . · ´  *  HOROSCOPE-  * ` . . , . · ´ * *
* * * * * * * ( ¨ ` . . · ´ ¨ )  ( ¨ ` . . · ´ ¨ ) * * * * * * * * *
* * * * * * * * ` . . , ( BOY! ) . . . ´ * * * * * * * * * * *
* * * * * * * * * * * ` . . , . · ´ * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
```

Figure 1. ASCII art

In normal text it is possible to point important words with special way of writing. Some methods found in Rate are:

this is i*m*p*o*r*t*a*n*t   (1)

*this is _IMPORTANT_*   (2)

this is IMPORTANTTTTT   (3)

this is IMPORTANT!!!!!!!!! (4)

Example use of emphasise[2]:

♥ *S* ♥ *E* ♥ *X* ♥ *Y* ♥ *!!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!!*
(KKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK)
Spasiba NASJUSJKAA
LJUBLJU TJA MUSJKA
(LLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL) (5)

Communication: linguistic tools

Linguistically is the language in Rate like written speech: written because of media, but still more similar to spoken language. There are several ways to accentuate speciality: special vocabulary, acronyms and abbreviations, emphasised speech features, mixing different languages (Estonian, Russian, English), morphological changes, clitics.

Also there are many mistakes, so-called „typos" (short for typing error). Sometimes it is hard to say if there is real mistake or deliberate change (i.e text without spaces: „*imissestoniaiwantback*").

Fragment from the weblog of teenage girl:

Ulä...Ulä...Ulä
-ZaVtlö KlövO otolVöMsJäÄäÄä...........
...XeEeEe doBilasä 4egö Hotelä :D löVe ü...(L)
...piskä obWipala Moi Brovo4Ki...bolNö bõlo:(Nu Vsö RavnÖ Ja tja LäVo4Ki(L)   (6)

The special vocabulary in Rate consists of the slang words, acronyms and abbreviations. Acronyms are very common in the online communication, due to the optimality principle. Frequently used words and sentences are shortened to widely known letter combinations. Globally familiar acronyms origin from English: *LOL* (laughing out loudly), *BTW* (by the way), *AFK* (away from keyboard) and others. Estonian youngsters use these English-based acronyms and also abbreviate native words.

    sps, psib (spasibki)   *(8)*

    mja (menja)   *(9)*

    ljuff (ljublju)   *(10)*

    pozdr (pozdravljaju)   *(11)*

Speech features are used for originality. These support identity designing in quite a visible way. Intentionally infantile text stands out ('r' is replaced with 'l', words are modified in baby-talk style). Very correct ortography is peculiar to users who want to be seen as intelligent and authoritative. People with stronger need to belong somewhere imitate the writing style of the trend setters. Major writing „standard" in Rate seems to be just written speech: youngsters write as they speak. So there is no regular syntactic structure, morphology varies a lot and even pause fillers are used. Sometimes languages are mixed: Estonian-English, Estonian-Russian, Russian-English or even all three languages together.

Estonian-Russian mixed:

superskaja fotka!!! tnx[3] *za puhendus*[4]*!!!(KL)   (12)*

Russian-English mixed:

prikolnaja foto4ka / krasavec / tok 4e grustim?? / tebe grust ne k licu / sjupppppa / nice pic   (13)

ol4ik senks[5] *:P (14)*

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[2]Communication in Rate is mostly in Estonian, but for this conference have been selected Russian examples when available.

   [3] tnx <- tänks <- thanks: Estonian slang abbreviation of English word

   [4] 'pühendus' – dedication

[5]senks <- thanks: Russian slang abbreviation of English word

Designing the identity: process

First step is choosing a nickname, registering and adding information to the userpage. In chatrooms and some other interactive online communities nickname is one of the most important identifiers, because this is almost the only information about the user. In Rate this is not quite as important, because additional information can be found on the user's page. So in Rate the classical netspeak question A/S/L (Age/Sex/Location?) is out of date.

More important part is user's personal page designing. Birth year is often unmarked, because both underages and grown-ups prefer to keep their age in secret. So they do not want to identify themselves through the age, but rather by something else like interests. Interests allow the user to define a speciality and a sense of "belonging" at the same time. Statistics show that the most popular interests are music, friends, summer, swimming, sun, dancing, love, msn (instant messenger), parties, cars.

Some typical interests by identity types:

wild, free – *ferrari, superbike, speed, streetrace, snowboard*   (15)

party animal – *hardstyle, dnb, alcohol, chill, sex, music, rap, drugs*   (16)

goths[6] – *anton szandor lavey, black metal, blood, pain, snakes, anger*   (17)

After composing the introductory may the communication start. Main part of it is rating and commenting pictures, also answering others who comment user's pictures. People who want to get better reputation put always the best marks and hope to get good comments from others as a reward. "Rebellions" put the worst marks and wait for the aggressive feedback. People worrying about their popularity write personal messages also and ask others friendship for getting more virtual friends and higher fame.

Finding the identity

Virtual self may be quite other than real-life self, also the identity may change quite quickly, in which connection real life may modify reality and vice versa. Big popularity in Rate helps to get popular in everyday life and famous people will be popular in Rate. People want their "face" accepted and respected, but especially in younger age this face is changing. This identity search can be easily followed, analysing web corpus diachronically. What influences young people? It is almost impossible to say what is happening in their everyday life, but modifications in virtual life can be tracked. In Rate it is possible to point out some factors that affect virtual identities:

1) identities of most popular users: their interests, communication style are imitated;

2) important affairs in society when everyone takes a position: in such cases Rate is like mirror, users split into groups and present their opinion in profile, weblog or comments;

3) sympathy: style and identity of certain person is imitated, hoping to get his/her attention;

4) internet trends: popular virtual clubs (belonging), weblogs (promoting the personality) and so on.

Sometimes it cames out that users do not feel this as reality and act as if it would be an anonymous place. For example some schoolgirls wrote in Rate publicly bad things about their teachers, even promised to hang them (3). These teachers were also using Rate, found the comments and recognized the girls. When these violent threatens were discussed with children and their parents, girls were not able to comment it, for them it was more like game than reality. They did not feel strong connection between virtual and real communication.

Conclusions

The article gives a short overview of web-based communication and identity in it. Online communication is very rich of several expression possibilities and can be easily collected and analysed. Thanks to interactive nature of the web it is possible to involve more information than just text: researcher can see the communicators in action, can see their self-description changing in the time, can see the relations developing and even social measure mirroring through the young people, hundreds of thousands virtual citizens forming big mosaic of living language.

Acknowledgements

References and materials

1) Licklider, J. C. R, Man-Computer Symbiosis. http://memex.org/licklider.pdf, 1960

2) Rate, http://www.rate.ee

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[6]Goth is a modern subculture that first became popular during the early 1980s within the gothic rock scene, an offshoot of post-punk. It is associated with characteristically "gothic" tastes in music and clothing. Styles of dress range from death rock, punk, Victorian, androgyny, some Renaissance style clothes, a combination of the above, and/or lots of black attire, and makeup. (7)

3) Internetis õpetajaid mõnitanud noored lahkusid koolist. PM Online, http://www.postimees.ee/110206/online_uudised/191558.php, 10.02.2006

4) Crystal, D. Language and the Internet. Cambridge University Press, 2001. P. 239

5) Corpus collected from rate.ee, owned by the author

6) Personal conversations held with portal users

7) Wikipedia, http://www.wikipedia.org, 14.03.2006