

“Pathfinding” discourses of self in social network sites

ABSTRACT

It has been argued that social network sites (SNSs) constitute a cultural arena which gives rise to the processes of self-presentation, impression management and friendship performance (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Based on the tenets of discourse-centered online ethnography, this study investigates how identity can be discursively generated, reproduced and co-constructed within the genre of SNSs taking as a case in point Pathfinder, a Greek portal which incorporates social networking features. The tendencies suggested by interviewing a Pathfinder web developer as well as by a pilot survey on social networking are traced in a popular Pathfinder networker's profile. Adopting Zhao et al.'s (2008) sociological model of implicit and explicit identity claims on SNSs and leaning on critical discourse analytical tools (Fairclough, 2003; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), the paper explores how the online self can be cemented and disseminated in narrative, enumerative and visual terms via an armory of linguistic and multimodal strategies. In this fashion, SNSs should not be approached as a sheer technological artefact but as a “space for growth” (Turkle, 1997) that encourages users to have agency shaping collaboratively their own linguistic, social and psychological development.

INTRODUCTION

During summer 2007, when I started crafting my profile in MySpace, it had not even occurred to me that social network sites¹ (SNSs) could ever receive such sustained interdisciplinary attention. Several months later, an unusual experience entered my subconscious only to bring to my notice the omnipotence of Web 2.0² practices in everyday life and their high potential to monopolize the academia henceforth. I dreamt of one of MySpace “friends” with whom we just share similar music interests and occasionally exchange comments. Still, I am totally unaware of her bodily presence; on no account have I met her face-to-face before and, in all probability, I am never going to. According to the dream scenario, we were supposed to attend an algebra course and she was overwhelmed by anxiety and hesitance because she had not prepared her homework. At the end of the lecture, she fetched an enormous king cake as a special treat to everyone present. When I informed my “friend” via MySpace personal message facility about the content of the dream, I received the following startling answer: “You saw aspects of my self; I am generally a shy, reluctant while generous person”.

Yet, identities in SNSs do not exist in a vacuum, let alone in abstract dreams. Conversely, they are fleshed out because one “type[s] oneself into being” (Sundén, 2003, p. 3), that is by virtue of language. Being trained as a linguist, with a background in discourse analysis and stylistics, I decided to explore the online discursive performance of self in SNSs. The choice to work on this topic was fueled—apart from the dream—by two overarching reasons. First and foremost, as Crystal (2001, p. 237) and Thorne (2008, p. 307) have pointed out, the Internet does not simply constitute a technological artefact; it is primarily a social fact which has textual language use at its very heart. Secondly, public discourse, and therefore Internet discourse, is reckoned to be inherently constitutive of identity (Scollon, 1997, p. 39). Web 2.0 modes of interaction in general and SNSs in particular were conceded an ideal context to look at as they mirror, support and change usual practices, especially with reference to how people reveal aspects of themselves and connect with others (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 224).

The launch of SNSs entailed a new organizational framework for online communities, and with it an appreciable, vibrant fresh research agenda (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In concurrence with Beer (2008), “we are at a crucial moment in the development of this field of study” (p. 516), in view of the fact that

its parameters and scope are still nascent and more work needs to be conducted so as to comprehend this online phenomenon in its entirety. Turning now to previous scholarship on social networking platforms, the lion's share almost exclusively belongs to the disciplines of media and cultural studies, information science, sociology and psychology. With respect to eminent documented language-focused studies on SNSs, Herring et al. (2007) and Das (2007, 2008; see also this volume) are more sociolinguistically-oriented in their research exploring the robustness of non-English languages in the topologies of LiveJournal and Orkut respectively. Larsen (2007), on the other hand, examines identity construction in Arto, a Danish SNS, adopting Scollon's (2001) mediated discourse analytical framework, which pays attention to social actions in lieu of sticking to written text or language per se. Informed by corpus linguistics approaches, Thelwall (2008a, 2008b) has published two groundbreaking studies: the first analyzes swearing among British and American users of MySpace while the other compares word frequency statistics of English Live Spaces to the British National Corpus and UK university websites. What is more, he has tackled with the language of MySpace comments addressing spelling variants and "typographic slang" (see Thelwall, 2009).

With these in mind, the purpose of this article is to reflect upon how identity can be discursively generated, reproduced and co-constructed within the genre of SNSs taking as a case in point Pathfinder, one of the most thriving Greek portals, which incorporates a SNS service. My analysis is situated in the realm of work of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) scholars such as Wodak (2001b) and Fairclough (2003) who have made eloquent appeals to the discursive construction of identities.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first provides some essential theoretical backcloth to the discussion drawing upon theories from cultural studies and sociology. The second section moves toward methodological issues describing the data and the processes involved in their collection. Thereafter, the study is dedicated to the presentation and interpretation of the sampled information. I then conclude with a discussion of the caveats that researchers should keep in mind when studying contemporary SNSs cultures as well as implications and suggestions for future investigation.

THE "PROFILE" OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

SNSs belong to that kind of digital media production that is interactive and digitally distributed by dint of the Internet or the World Wide Web, namely new media (Herring, 2004a, p. 47). Through this lens, SNSs are defined as web-based services which enable users to (1) create a public or semi-public profile within a circumscribed system; (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, the so-called "friendship", and (3) view and browse not only their list of connections but also those made by others within the system (boyd & Ellison, 2007, pp. 211). In accordance with this definition, the first recognizable SNS was Sixdegrees.com (sixdegrees.com), launched in 1997 and shut down in 2000.

SNSs have pioneered a new route to networked practices given that it is users themselves who determine and shape the service content and style (Zikos, 2007, p. 124). The profile page functions as their personal web page and comprises information ranging from their date of birth, gender, hometown, religious and political beliefs, and current mood to their favorite films, quotes and activities in their leisure time. Moreover, users are capable of designing the appearance of their page by adding graphics, photos, music and videos (Livingstone, 2008; Ofcom, 2008).

The recent widespread popularity of SNSs has been propelled by an unparalleled combination of factors (Ofcom, 2008). In the first place, increased connection speeds along with broadband availability allow limitless Internet access even for domestic use. The individuals that feel confident in using information and communication technologies are multiplied in geometric progression due to their daily exposure to computer-mediated modes of communication conveyed by the acquisition of Internet literacy. In tandem, SNSs favor unsophisticated, user-friendly programs in designing. What is more, they are chiefly based on managing interpersonal relationships and connections (Dwyer, 2007)

rather than on merely sharing interests (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 219). Finally, a plethora of extra applications, such as email, micro-blogging, instant messaging, quizzes, polls, games, and photo collages have enhanced the versatility of SNSs.

In line with Schau and Gilly (2003, p. 392), the initial impetus for constructing a personal web page, and therefore a profile page on a SNS, can derive from (a) a triggering event, (b) a desire for personal growth, and (c) advocacy. A triggering event refers to either a crucial personal or professional change (graduation, promotion, marriage, parenthood), or an external prompt (administrative mandate, social prodding). On the other hand, a desire for personal growth may involve an educational achievement (mastering of a technology), professional and personal self-promotion (search for clients, find friends/a date) or an exercise in self-discovery. The third reason, advocacy, embraces the cases where users pay homage to a favorite artist, artistic work or social cause.

Consistent with their incentives, behaviors and attitudes, social networkers fall into five broad groups:

- **Alpha socializers:** people who use SNSs in intense short bursts to make new acquaintances, flirt and entertain themselves.
- **Attention seekers:** people who long for attention and comments from others by posting photos and editing their profiles.
- **Followers:** people who join SNSs to keep up with what their peers are doing.
- **Faithful:** people who join SNSs to revive old friendships from school, university or previous jobs.
- **Functional:** single-minded people who use SNSs for a specific purpose.

(Ofcom, 2008)

By utilizing the medium of SNSs for one of the aforementioned reasons and automatically belonging to the respective group, users in essence opt for displaying their status and distinction, their identity in one word, at a particular time and with a particular understanding of the web public (boyd, 2004; Liu, 2007, p. 252).

I shall now carry on to the very concept of identity and its association with mediated networked publics.

NETWORKING THE SELF

Identity³ can be broadly defined as the positioning of self and other (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586). To put it differently, identity refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished from other individuals and collectivities in their social relations (Jenkins, 1996, p. 4). It follows from this that identity bears two basic meanings: the one has to do with absolute sameness, while the other encompasses a notion of distinctiveness which, as Triandafyllidou and Wodak (2003) acknowledge, “presumes consistency and continuity over time” (p. 210). What is more, identity is neither natural nor static but multi-faceted (Lemke, 2007). It is socially constructed and hence should be viewed as “a condition of being or becoming that is constantly renewed, confirmed or transformed, at the individual or collective level” (Triandafyllidou & Wodak, 2003, p. 210).

In the same line of reasoning, people’s identity is a fusion of two analytically distinct aspects: social identity and personality (or personal/individual identity) (Donath, 2006; Fairclough, 2003). Following Archer (2000), Fairclough (2003, pp. 160-161, 223) explicates that social identity is a matter of the social circumstances into which one is born and initially has no choice about (peasantry or gentry, working-class or middle-class, male or female, position within society’s distribution of resources). On the contrary, personal identity is acquired later in life, when one is able to formulate one’s main and ultimate goals as well as to balance and prioritize one’s socialization in proportion to these. The textual dialectic between social and personal identity will be of particular interest here.

Nevertheless, identity cannot be exclusively condensed into a way of being; it also presupposes the inbuilt need to represent ourselves, to record our lives (Boardman, 2005, p. 3). We have “interests, passions, hobbies, idols, fetishes, problems, addictions, and aspirations” that we wish to “communicate, share, argue about, and bond over” (Thorne, 2008, p. 309). The Internet offers unprecedented opportunities in all the aforesaid. SNSs, in particular, should not be seen as a bare technological artefact but as a cultural arena which gives rise to the processes of self-presentation, impression management and friendship performance (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 219). SNSs profiles then function as “digital bodies” which identify a person plus constitute the end product of self-reflexive identity production, as boyd (2008b) forcefully enunciates. In her view, profiles uniquely locate and combine self-descriptions in the context of social connections.

Taking into consideration what has been discussed so far, this paper seeks to:

- Explore the linguistic strategies that Greek users utilize with a view to articulating and positioning themselves in Pathfinder, a Greek SNS service, acknowledging that the bulk of scholarship revolves around major SNSs such as MySpace and Facebook overlooking culture- and language-specific environments.
- Examine the ways in which users help define each other’s identity.
- Discuss the role of other visual channels (photos, graphics etc.) in presenting one’s self since “communication is not only a linguistic process but also a multimodal exchange of meaningful information” (boyd & Heer, 2006).

M ETHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

For the purposes of this paper, which is part of a wider ongoing research on the discursive enactment of Greeks’ identity in the Web 2.0 era, I embarked on a four-month discourse-centered online ethnography. Agreeing with Androutsopoulos (2008), I see online ethnography as having two dimensions: a screen-based and a participant-based one. The former centers on systematic and painstaking observation of online activities while the latter draws upon direct (face-to-face or mediated) engagement with online actors. Discourse-centered online ethnography, especially, coalesces both these dimensions and is complementary to the linguistic analysis of log data (ibid.). Having chosen Pathfinder portal as the field or “culture” (boyd, 2008a) of my research, I logged in every day for 3 hours at least to discern and understand its extension, boundaries, internal distinction and relations among its components as well as to develop a feel for its discourse practices and language styles documenting any observations and conclusions. Hence, instead of being detached and invisible, I customized my own profile in Pathfinder so as to be openly communicated to the users (Georgakopoulou, 1997; Hine, 2000; Larsen, 2007). Leaning on the principle of triangulation, which endorses different, interdisciplinary, methodological and source-specific approaches on the basis of various information (Wodak, 2001b), I gathered both subjective and objective data.

To commence with, I interviewed Zaharenia Atzitzikaki, who works as a web developer at Phaistos Networks, the company that owns Pathfinder. The benefit of discussing with her had been twofold. On the one hand, she provided me the wider socio-cultural context in which the discursive practices under investigation were embedded. On the other hand, she offered insights into the designer’s instrumental role in the formation and actualization of online identity.

Moreover, a pilot questionnaire was distributed by means of email to 24 Pathfinder users (through snowball sampling) so as to pursue direct contact with the participants and obtain an initial idea on how they experience SNSs mechanics. Interestingly, some of them visited my profile either to become “friends” or to leave comments asking about the course of my research. Others emailed me to give supplementary feedback and express their enthusiasm about Pathfinder services.

Then, I had to choose a specific profile—from the thousands existing in Pathfinder—for fine-grained linguistic analysis. Having as a point of departure that Pathfinder blogs is the most popular service of the portal (see what Atzitzikaki says in the next section) and that a prerequisite for setting up a blog is to maintain a personal profile page in Pathfinder, my sampling technique was purposive (Herring, 2004b). In other words, I relied upon participant demographics after having consulted Pathfinder's list of the top 100 Hot Blogs⁴ (January 2009). Abiding by my research questions and wishing to confine the available sample, I developed a set of criteria according to which the user whose profile would be analyzed should:

- be 18-30 years old given that young adults are deemed the heaviest SNSs users (Hargittai, 2007).
- have integrated multimedia applications into his/her profile showing literacy in HTML and CSS coding.
- monitor his/her profile for at least one year, have at least two friends and a minimum of 100 comments on display.

Pathfinder top 5 blogs includes the same users for a very long period of time, in different ranking though, so these were excluded from the whole process as their identities could be easily traced. After daily and methodical observation, I came up with Sophia's profile created in 2003. At that time (January 2009), it had been viewed almost 15,000 times and included 290 comments and a list of 100 friends. Additionally, her blog in Pathfinder had been ranked several times among the 50 most avid blogs⁵ on account of its emotional and intellectual leverage. I took field notes from direct observation of her profile together with dozens of screen dumps to capture her preferences and other users' comments about her.

All field notes, interview transcripts and Internet data were coded in terms of inductive semantic macro-area analysis which allowed me to detect patterns and begin making generalizations. As it was laid out in the introduction, the discourse analytical approach adopted for this study is that of CDA. Seeing discourses as both socially constitutive and socially shaped (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), CDA's tenet is to unveil the "hidden" agenda of discourse; its ideological dimension (Wodak, 2001a). Rhetorical and linguistic techniques vital in cementing identities have been reported by Reisigl and Wodak (2001) and Fairclough (2003), thus for my analysis I drew a lot from their terminology and categories placing weight upon the use of tropes, pronouns and modality. Owing to the multimodal architecture of Pathfinder—and any SNS—there was an urgent need to move beyond text-based phenomena (Garcia et al., 2009; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Naper, 2001) and ponder over the "language of new media design" (Martinec & van Leeuwen, 2009). It has been argued that visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed within the empire of ideology (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Rose, 2001). On such grounds, profile images, photos, typeface and color were also counted in for the manipulation of meanings and the implication of any ideological opinions (van Dijk, 1998) in SNSs.

Last but not least, I would like to comment on the ethical ramifications imposed on my project. Embracing Ortega and Zyzik's (2008) reconceptualization of research deontology in computer-mediated communication (CMC), I first emailed Atzitzikaki seeking consent on whether I could be allowed to use Pathfinder as a virtual space for investigation. Aside from the questionnaire, I sent to Pathfinder networkers a message to assure them that no clues of their personal information would be given away. During profile assessment, I was constantly aware of the fact that SNSs profiles, as any text-based computer-mediated communication environment, leave a persistent record that may easily be searched (Herring, 2004a). Consequently, I preserved pseudonymity throughout my data. Sophia is a fictive name; her exact age and contact details are concealed whereas the comments about her are displayed within the immediate language co-text protecting other users' identities as well. Had she been informed about my research, she might have responded with dismay or—even worse—advanced through the minefield of the observer's paradox by deliberately altering elements in her profile. In such case studies though, taking into account participants' awareness and interpretation of their own practices (Androutsopoulos, 2008) can be proved invaluable in arriving at more general and integrated

conclusions. At any rate, my top priority was not only to allow naturally occurring behavior but also to prevent the published material from causing any harm to the subjects involved (AoIR, 2002).

THE COMMUNICATIVE SETTING OF PATHFINDER

The designer's perspective

ADSL broadband connection was commercially launched in Greece in 2003. It is estimated that the current Internet penetration, both ADSL and PSTN, of the general population reaches a bit more than 30%. The typical Greek Internet user is portrayed as male, approximately 30-35 years old, highly educated, well-off and urban (Observatory for the Greek IS, 2007).

Pathfinder portal (www.pathfinder.gr) released its beta in 1997 and since then it has been established as one of the most integrated Greek gateways to entertainment, information and communication. According to AGB Nielsen ratings, over 1,177,632 unique users visit Pathfinder every month. Its popularity is attributable to a wealth of services which meet Greek users' manifold needs and interests by combining social networking with further social functionality: instant messenger, email, blogs, profiles, forum, chat, fan clubs, personals, experts, shopping, news and sports, to name but a few. It comes as no surprise then that in 2007 Pathfinder won the Tech Excellence Award⁶ as one of the best Internet services in Greece.

Demographically, for the most part, Pathfinder users are between 18-44 years old; 57% of them come from Athens, 10% from Thessaloniki and the remainder is portioned all over the rest of Greece and Cyprus. Atzitzikaki pinpoints that they are chiefly attracted by those services facilitating interaction and self-expression, that is to say Pathfinder blogs and Pathfinder clubs.

In asking her about the modern fuss of crafting profiles, she answered:

Human beings are conceited creatures who always hunt for approval and recognition; therefore it stands to reason that they strive for self-promotion via a global medium such as the Internet. Profiles enable them to find people with similar interests, make new friends or even meet a new partner. The success of profile-based services lies in that they are manageable, fruitful and, of course, are offered for free.

Concerning the topic at hand, Pathfinder profiles, Atzitzikaki says:

The service was launched in 2000, long before the volteface of Internet towards the user and social networking, as it is the case nowadays. The initial idea was to create a "face" for the thousands of Pathfinder users; a place which would capture their interests, their presence in various services along with friends' comments.

At the time of preparing this interview (December 2008), Pathfinder counted 93,377 profiles out of which 70,000 were extrapolated as active. My query was whether Pathfinder web developers browse through users' profiles in conjunction with what monopolizes their discussions. Atzitzikaki elucidates:

We always cast a glance at users' profiles not only to detect problems but also to discover the patterns on the basis of which our users utilize the service. We get very impressed when users deal meticulously with the finest details of the profiles service while we feel disappointed since there is often prejudice against technological advancements and new additions—users do not view them as something positive.

It goes without saying that the way users construe their identities in SNSs is encouraged by the software (Marwick, 2005). Pathfinder developers are well aware of the fact that they do not simply construct a virtual world; they are responsible for crafting the selves that will inhabit it (McDonough, 1999, p. 868):

The most difficult part in our job is to distance ourselves from the developers' idiosyncrasy and dive into users' psychology; to work out which applications will be meaningful to them. Everything is constantly being checked so as to be accessible to users with little Internet experience. This is the biggest challenge for us, I think.

As a final—albeit crucial—point, Atzitzikaki spotlighted the ubiquitous feeling of dutifulness:

We are absolutely conscious of the responsibility we carry as a company towards our users. Nothing is changed with a light heart.

This is exactly the reason why Pathfinder developers, via their official blog and Pathfinder Support service, have opened a channel of communication with their users exchanging comments, suggestions and reports for problems for the sake of the highest possible efficiency in the social networking microcosm.

The users' perspective

To get an impression of how Pathfinder users themselves conceptualize their social networking activities, an explorative questionnaire survey was conducted involving 13 male and 11 female informants. Their age ranged from 13 to 47 years old (mean=34.5) whilst they came from different regions of Greece and Cyprus.

The mean time of maintaining a profile in Pathfinder was found to be 3.1 years. Excepting two users, all the others had at least one extra SNSs profile, with Facebook being the most popular service. The main reason for creating a Pathfinder profile was to express and share interests, views and ideas (69.2%). Other reasons included experimenting with web design and multimedia applications (23%), getting in touch with new people (16%) and being urged by a friend who already owned a Pathfinder profile (15.3%). Nobody mentioned that they chose Pathfinder because communication is accomplished exclusively in Greek and only with Greeks and Cypriots. Vis-à-vis this matter, Atzitzikaki argued that although Pathfinder's language specificity addresses a limited audience, it is definitely advantageous with reference to content specialization and efficiency.

Regarding the frequency of visiting their profile, most respondents answered that they log in every day, with 2-6 times a week as a second option. Profile customization tends to occur once a month. Remarkably, two male users admitted that they have never altered their profiles.

At this point, it would be wise to take a look at Pathfinder profile elements. Figure 1 presents a Pathfinder profile in its simplest form annotated with translations of the respective fields. Users are required to provide demographic information; interest and self-description prose; photograph and avatar (only the avatar appears while interacting); friends listing; comments. All sections are open-ended; the only close-ended questions with preset category-based answers pertain to interests, age, marital status and sex. In my survey, the informants reported that they most often customize "recent news" and "favorite quote" sections.

Multimedia affordances have split users into two groups: those who applaud them and those who are somewhat unenthusiastic. The former see it as a chance for further self-expression showing special preference to wallpapers and music. Consider what two of the informants replied when asked why they incorporated multimedia applications in their profiles.

- To express personal views and my mood in a different way!! (male, 40)
- For aesthetic reasons as well as to present a more complete picture of myself to others. (female, 43)

In contrast, unenthusiastic users either think there is no point in enhancing their profiles or lack the technical knowledge to do so. In any case, all of them have uploaded an avatar to their liking which, as they maintain, constitutes the most identifiable trait of their online performance.

Co-construction and meaning-making in SNSs occurs when users exchange linguistic products. Table 1 displays the ways by means of which Pathfinder networkers pursue sociability and instrumentality.

Priority is given to wishes and informational-practical issues followed by phatic communion comments.

Pathfinder 53 e-shop points
www.e-shop.gr
211 500 0 500

Τερμάτισε στο e-SHOPgr
Το πρώτο και μεγαλύτερο ηλεκτρονικό κατάστημα στην Ελλάδα

Pathfinder » Members »

1 Επικοινωνία
• Email:
• PIM : ONLINE!
• ICQ #:
• Yahoo! ID: Not online

2 Ενδιαφέροντα

3 Τα Clubs μου
Τα clubs που έχω φτιάξει στον Pathfinder:

4 Ο χαρτοφύλακας μου
• Δείτε το χαρτοφύλακά μου

5 Οι αγαπημένες μου διευθύνσεις
• Η ιστοσελίδα μου
• Η ιστοσελίδα μου στον Pathfinder.

6 Το ζώδιό μου:

7 Προσωπικά στοιχεία
Avatar:
Pathfinder ID:
Όνομα
Τοποθεσία
Ηλικία:
Οικ. κατάσταση:
Φύλο:
Απασχόληση:

8 Αγαπημένες ασχολίες

9 Αγαπημένα βιβλία

10 Αγαπημένοι δίσκοι

11 Αγαπημένες ταινίες

12 Τελευταία νέα

13 Αγαπημένη έκφραση

14 Οι φίλοι μου

15 Σχόλια που έχουν γράψει οι άλλοι χρήστες
[More (27) comments] [Leave your own comments]
[Περισσότερα (27) σχόλια] [Αφήστε τα δικά σας σχόλια]

Τελευταία ανανέωση: 14/7/2008 20:33.
Το προφίλ του χρήστη έχει δεχτεί 4422 επισκέψεις
Last editing 14/7/2008 20:33. The user's profile has been visited 4,422 times.

1. Contact
2. Interests
3. My Clubs
-The clubs I have created in Pathfinder:
4. My briefcase
-See my briefcase
5. My favorite websites
-My web page
-My web page in Pathfinder
6. My zodiac sign
7. Personal information
(Avatar, Pathfinder ID, Name, Location, Age, Marital status, Sex, Occupation)
8. Favorite activities
9. Favorite books
10. Favorite albums
11. Favorite films
12. Recent news
13. Favorite quote
14. My friends
15. Comments written by other users

Figure 1. The default Pathfinder profile page.
© 1997-2009 Phaistos Networks S.A. Used with permission.

The informants' very last task was to assess their networking behavior (see Table 2). With regard to the process of impression management, it is striking that all of them denied buttressing a pretentious persona. That the majority recognizes profiles as surrogates of self-persistence, even when logged out, is indicative of SNSs' promise of "digital immortality" (Raptis, 2009).

Communication orientation	Frequency (%)
Say "hello", "good morning"	57.1
Wish (on name day, birthday, Christmas, Easter, wedding or other felicitous occasion)	64.2
Give information	64.2
Give advice	35.7
Ask advice	28.5
Exchange news	50
Gossip	14.2
Forward a poem or a joke	28.5
Send an interesting URL	42.8
Announce your achievements	14.2
Invite your friends to a fan club, blog, website you have created	42.8
Arrange a meeting	28.5
Thank or congratulate	7.1

Table 1. *Reasons for sending comments to a friend's profile.*

	YES (Frequency %)	NO (Frequency %)	SOMETIMES (Frequency %)
Do you announce in your profile any changes in your life (personal, professional etc.)?	50	28.6	21.4
Have you included in your profile any information solely to be likeable to others?	0	100	N/A*
Have you concealed from your profile any information for fear of giving the wrong impression to others?	35.2	64.8	N/A
Do you think that maintaining a profile in Pathfinder or other social network site is a time-consuming process?	28.4	71.6	N/A
Do you think that it isolates you from your offline life?	21.5	64.3	14.2
After logging out of Pathfinder and switching your computer off, do you think that parts of yourself continue existing in the profile you have made?	64.3	35.7	N/A

*Not applicable.

Table 2. *Users' assessment of their networking behavior.*

Pathfinder

[Οργάνωση φωτογραφιών](#)
[Δημιουργία ταινιών](#)
[Σύνθεση μουσικής](#)
[Κατασκευή ιστοσελίδων](#)
[Δημιουργία DVD](#)

Pathfinder » Members »

Επικωνωνία

Email:

PM:

Ενδιαφέροντα

- Κουλτούρα και Κοινωνία
- Τέχνες και Πολιτισμός
- Κυβερνοκουλτούρα
- Εκπαίδευση στην Πληροφορική
- Επεξεργασία Εικόνας/Ήχου
- Γλωσσές Προγραμματισμού
- Κοινότητες Ανταλλαγής Απόψεων
- Διοσέδωση και Ψυχολογία
- Κοινότητες μεταξύ Φίλων
- Κόμικς
- Χούρρα
- Κινηματογραφικές Ταινίες
- Ραδιόφωνο
- Εμπειρία Παιχνίδια
- PC & Video Games
- Παιδιά Φροντίδα
- Κρατική Μουσική
- Ερασιτεχνικά Συγκροτήματα
- Κοινωνικές Επιστήμες
- Σχέσεις
- Αυτοκίνηση - Μηχανοκίνηση
- Φιλοσοφία
- Βιβλία
- Μαστορέματα
- Δημοσίες Υπηρεσίες
- Κράματα και Φαρμακ
- Ενημέρωση και ΜΜΕ
- Online Εφαρμογές
- Ραδιοφωνικοί Σταθμοί
- Ταξίδια

Τα Blogs μου

...

Η Wishlist μου

· Δείτε την Wishlist μου (22)

Τα Clubs μου

Τα clubs που έχω φτιάξει στον Pathfinder:

...

Ο χαρτοφύλακας μου

· Δείτε το χαρτοφύλακά μου

Οι αγαπημένες μου διευθύνσεις

· Η ιστοσελίδα μου στον Pathfinder.

...

Το ζώδιό μου:

· Τοζόφης

Προσωπικά στοιχεία

Avatar:

Pathfinder ID:

Όνομα:

Τοποθεσία: Ταρζανία

Ηλικία:

Οικ. κατάσταση: Χήρος/Χήρα

Φύλο: Γυναίκα

Απασχόληση: Κολώνια μπικρικά και χρωών πομά

Αγαπημένες ασχολίες

Εσύ

Αγαπημένα βιβλία

Στην Χώρα των εσάντων Προαγμάτων - Πολ Οστρο

Τριποκαρβύδος - Του Ρόμπτνς

Supercalif - Adam Βασιη

Ηλίθιος - Φ. Μ. Ντιστογιέφσκι

Η Πλωτή Πίστη - Μάρι Δούκα

Πες στη Μορφίνη ακόμα την ψάχνα - Νικόλ Ρούσου

Πως το λιώνει και νοσταλγείς ταόγλιανη - Γιάννης Αγγελιάκος

Αγαπημένοι δίσκοι

Θα τις έλεγα... "Αγαπημένες Διακοκοσφίες"

PURESSENCE - Archive - Portishead - Placebo - Three Doors Down - Lachuna Coil - The Killers

Way Out West - Papa Roach - Starsailor - Radiohead - The Cure - Tuxedomoon - The Stooges

Over The Rhine - Pixies - Velvet Underground - Warrant - Angie Aparo - Savatage - Muse -

Arcade - Νικόλβιακ - Ρεθαμον - Μοιρακό - Last Bodies - Μικόνος Ιωαννίλης - Κινοίμανα Σχέδια

Μάτκες - Στάθης Δρογιάλης - Δημήτρης Ζαββουδάκης - Γιάννης Ανδρέου - Το Σχίμα - Επειδή -

Gloam - to be continued...

Αγαπημένες ταινίες

High Fidelity

Revolver

K-Pax

My Blueberry Nights

Romeo and Juliet

Dominic Diano

Serenity

Under the Tuscan Sun

City of Angels

Πες στη Μορφίνη ακόμα την ψάχνα

Τελευταία νέα

Τα λίγα λόγια ζάχαρη και τα καθόλου μέλι!

Ποιός είπε ότι είμαι εδώ;

ΠΟΛΙΚΟΣ

Ν' αφήσω να με πάρει ο έρωτας της πετροκαλαμύθρας.

Χαρούμενοι σταυρωτές καρφώσανε στον ουρανό

την μεθυσία της μέρας.

Ξενύνονται γ' αγαμία και τα ασπριτά το μπόι τους

και την μελανή κακοφόροση της γης και της πέτρας

την ώρα που ζυγνά ο Ονείρος

και στην ομιλία των φίλλων

ζναίνονται οι κάρμοι της Σηής.

Οι Ώρες των Αστρον - Δημήτρης Λιανίνης

Όταν δεν θα 'μαι πια εδώ
εσύ τι θα κάνεις;

Αγαπημένη έκφραση

Τι και αν δεν είναι ο κόσμος ό,τι ονειρεύτηκες;

Τι και αν σε ντύνει φώς μου με ελπίδες ψεύτικες;

Η νύχτα σάφως μοιάζει να είναι φίλη σου

Κόκκινο το φεγγάρι βάλτο στα χείλη σου

Είμαι παράξενη γιατί αγαπώ...

Οι φίλοι μου

[Όλοι οι φίλοι μου...](#)

Σχόλια που έχουν γράψει οι άλλοι χρήστες

Από τον/την Σα 09/12/2008 12:26:34

.....!!!! ΧΙΛΙΑ ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΟ!!!! ΝΑ ΞΑΙ ΚΑΛΑ!!

Από τον/την Σα 04/12/2008 07:03:55

Να τα εκαστασσεις(Ευνομηση) και με υγια πάντα!

Φιλιά πομά... με την αγάπη μου :)

[Περισσότερα (290) σχόλια] [Αφήστε τα δικά σας σχόλια]

Τελευταία ανανέωση: 20/1/2009 23:58.
Το προφίλ του χρήστη έχει δεχτεί 14362 επισκέψεις

Figure 3. Sophia's profile page. © 1997-2009 Phaistos Networks S.A. Used with permission.

Cultural self

In this highly elaborated category, it is as if Sophia says “See what I like/do/create/read/listen to” (Zhao et al., 2008, pp. 1825-1826) allowing other networkers to elicit themselves her individual or character traits. The enumerative cultural self-description in Pathfinder includes the following sections: favorite activities, favorite books, favorite albums, favorite films, recent news, favorite quotes, interests, my blogs, my wishlist, my clubs, my favorite websites, and my zodiac sign.

As it is shown, in lieu of listing hobbies and habits, Sophia’s favorite activities are encapsulated in one and only word: *Εσύ* (You). The reference of the second-person singular pronoun here is dubious. Possible meanings are illustrated in the referential matrix below:

- (a) You = my lover (addressee-exclusive)
- (b) You = the potential lover; man in general (partially addressee-inclusive)
- (c) You = every reader of my profile, blogs, posts (generic *you*; totally addressee-inclusive)

Note that the cardinal importance of this *you* as an activity is graphologically amplified by boldening and larger typeface.

The field of “favorite albums” is an instance of transgressing the structural boundaries of the profile. Sophia prefers the broader “favorite discographies” employing epistemic hypothetical modality (*θα τις έλεγα* – *I would call them*) followed by ellipsis (...). In this tentative manner, she commits herself to what is most proper for the texturing of her cultural identity (Fairclough, 2003). At the end of the list, she trails off “to be continued...” conveying the idea that identity is fluid and must be established and constructed at all times (Triandafyllidou & Wodak, 2003, p. 206).

“Recent news” and “favorite quote” highlight certain intertextual connections with the Greek folk, literary and music tradition via which Sophia’s thoughtfulness and romanticism are projected. *Τα λίγα λόγια ζάχαρη και τα καθόλου μέλι* (Few words are sugar, no words at all are honey) is a proverb equivalent to “silence is golden” picked here as a guideline for life and brought to the foreground by the use of the exclamation mark. She also provides a stanza of *Πολικός* (Polar), a rare poem written by Dimitris Liantinis, a distinguished professor of Philosophy in Greece, whose literary work dealt with the themes of love, death and loneliness. The latter are echoed in the two interstitial, complementary to each other, rhetorical questions conceived in all likelihood by Sophia herself (*Ποιος είπε ότι είμαι εδώ; – Who said that I’m here?* and *Όταν δεν θα ’μαι πια εδώ εσύ τι θα κάνεις; – When I won’t be here anymore what are you going to do?*) whereby the pronouns *I* and *you* (my lover) are at emotional interplay. This sentimentality is strengthened by her favorite quotes: the refrains of two Greek songs: *Βαριά ποτά, βαριά τσιγάρα* (Heavy drinks, heavy cigarettes), written by Stergios Papastolou, and *Ο Παράξενος* (Strange), written by Manos Pyrovolakis.

While browsing Pathfinder profiles, I gleaned that most users completed the “recent news” entry with phrases such as: *New beginning, I’m... still alive, I’m hungry, Something’s going on..., Our loving daughter is 1 year, 7 months & 6 days old*, that is issues that touch upon mundane matters. Contrarily, Sophia—once again—violates the norm by setting up dialogicity between different voices (Fairclough, 2003) which, harking back to Atzitzikaki, can be meaningful only to Greeks and that is exactly the benefit of participating in language- and culture-specific SNSs.

Sophia’s rich “interests catalogue” constitutes a token of well-roundedness and sociability. Nevertheless, its validity is challenged by one of her friends: “*You have so many interests... do you have time for all these or do you write them just for the sake of it?*” Regarding this issue and its implications for researchers, Hine (2000, p. 118) remarks that instead of questioning whether people on Internet are actually who they say they are, the empirical focus should shift on how, where and when identities become available on the Internet. In the main, Sophia’s cultural self is not defined by

what the mainstream market offers. Her preferences both in Greek and foreign cultural products reveal a fine, unsophisticated and coherent taste.

Self as social actor

The conversational properties and cultural resonances attached to visuals in SNSs are part and parcel of how users perceive themselves as well as their audience (boyd & Heer, 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). Starting with the wallpaper, Sophia has chosen a grey one embroidered with flowers on the right side as a minimalistic, perfectly neutral canvas upon which parts of her identity are unfolded. Looking at the default photograph, we are dealing with a symbolic attributive process (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 105) whereby the dandelion clock evokes a domain that contains connotations such as freedom, childhood, innocence and daydreaming. The same flower appears in the avatar too, which accompanies Sophia's posts forming a kind of trademark. It is a case of narrative representation (ibid., p. 56) with the actor blowing upon the seeds of the dandelion clock while the sunset in both images instigates mellow feelings. Literally speaking, the green eye placed below Sophia's zodiac sign could synecdochically depict her eyes (if we knew she is green-eyed). Metaphorically, it may suggest omnipresence—likened to that of God or even Orwell's *Big Brother*, for example—or could also stand for a mirror of truth or a “gate” to someone's soul.

Color plays an essential role in the study of the ideological function of signs in social formations and thus the rendering of identities (Koller, 2008). SNSs offer users the unique opportunity to experiment with colors, shades, brightness and saturation according to their mood or aesthetic appreciation. In Sophia's page, the entry titles, *you* on her favorite activities and her questions in “recent news” are in magenta, a dark, saturated, non-textured pink which is associated with an “exaggerated image of feminine sexuality” (Sparke, 1995, p. 198 in Koller, 2008, p. 413). The content (favorite books, albums, films, song lyrics) is written in purple which conveys a sense of spirituality and creativity.⁸ The well-balanced combination of pink with a darker shade of purple in *Είμαι παράξενη γιατί αγαπώ...* (I'm strange because I love...) emits calmness and sensitivity and is verbally enforced by the word *αγαπώ* (love). The proverb is the only string in white, a synonym to the purification of thoughts which functions as a powerful ally to the wisdom crystallized in the saying. Dark blue is chosen for hyperlinks invoking rest for the eye as well as for the poem *Polar* augmenting its inwardness and serious tone. On top of that, the poem and the preceding “recent news” are italicized⁹ for emphasis. Sticking to typeface, although a sans serif font¹⁰ is applied everywhere giving simultaneously a contemporary touch to the text (Boardman, 2005), the song lyrics are relatively larger and in a serif font representative of formality.

Apart from the blending of voices discussed earlier, Sophia also creates an interdiscursive product, a mixture of different genres, which is visually instantiated. The phrases *Ποιος είπε ότι είμαι εδώ;* (Who said that I'm here?) and *Είμαι παράξενη γιατί αγαπώ...* (I'm strange because I love...) are presented in the form of a crawl (unfortunately, the animated effect cannot be reproduced in print), typical of most TV news stations. In this fashion, with the constant move across the screen, it is as if Sophia shouts “HEY! Pay attention! Something's going on!” (Wright, 2008).

Her visual self is consummated with the entry “my briefcase” where the hyperlink conduces to a collection of backgrounds, wallpapers, graphics, personal photos and HTML codes that Sophia stores for future embellishment of her profile.

CO-CONSTRUCTION OF SELF

SNSs have stretched the traditional meaning of “friends” to include anyone with whom a user has an online connection (Ofcom, 2008). All registered users in Pathfinder can send comments to one another

- (6) Χαρικα polu gia ti gnorimia..... Ise gamato koritsi!!! filia!!!
I'm very pleased to contact you..... You're a wicked girl!!! kisses!!!
- (7) Είσαι κουκλάρα. Φιλιά παντού.
You're a doll+AUG. Kisses everywhere.

Good friend

Friendship is expressed through intensification strategies and, in precise, evaluative statements that encode users' emotions, moods and general dispositions (Fairclough, 2003, p. 172; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pp. 82-83). In (8), the evaluative element is the verb phrase *poso xairomai* (I'm so glad), accentuated by the particle *poso* (so), while in (9), the adverb *υπέροχα* (wonderfully). The exclamation marks in both instances function in the same expressive manner.

- (8) pw pw poso xairomai poy meta apo tosa xronia kratame akoma epafh!!
oh I'm so glad that after so many years we still keep in touch!!
- (9) Καλή μέρα αγαπητή μου φίλη ! Σε ευχαριστώ πολύ για τις θερμές σου ευχές ! Μέ κάνεις να αισθάνομαι υπέροχα ,με το να μου δείχνεις την φιλία σου ! Φιλιάκι πολλά
Good morning my dear friend ! Thanks a lot for your hearty wishes ! You make me feel wonderfully by showing me your friendship! Many kiss

Active networker

It can be deduced from the examples below that users compensate for Sophia's networking participation and encouragement by performing the speech act of thanking. In (10), the triple repetition of thanking (*σ ευχαριστω, σ ευχαριστω πολυ, πολλα ευχαριστω* – *thank you, thank you very much, many thanks*) is amplified by the particle *πολύ* (very), apparent also in (11), as well as the adjective *πολλά* (many). The wish *να είσαι καλά* (be well) in (10) and (12) strengthens their gratitude and puts Sophia on a pedestal.

- (10) σ ευχαριστω για το υπεροχο ποιημα που μου αφιερωσες...δεν ξερω τι ναπω ειλικρινα με συγκλονησες...σ ευχαριστω πολυ κοριτσακι μου νασαι παντα καλα..φιλακια πολλα ευχαριστω
thank you for the wonderful poem you dedicated to me...i don't know what to say honestly you thrilled me...thank you very much my girl+DIM be always well.. kisses+DIM many thanks
- (11) Σ' ευχαριστώ πάρα πολύ για τη στήριξη (στο φόρουμ)
Thank you very much for your support (in the forum)
- (12) σ ευχαριστώ για τα καλά σου λόγια. Χαίρομαι που υπάρχουν εσύ και τα άλλα παιδιά να μοιραζομαι τις σκεψεις τις ανησυχίες και τους καθημερινούς προβληματισμούς μου. Να είσαι καλά Φιλια
thank you for your good words. I'm glad that you and the other guys exist so that I can share my thoughts my worries and my everyday problems. Be well Kisses

Within this framework, Sophia is also recognized as an expert networker. The user in (13) pays her a compliment (*Μου αρέσει πολύ ... το προφίλ σου - I like so much ... your profile*) which serves as a request for the object complimented, namely the profile. The question is worded in low modality (*Μήπως θα μπορούσες - Could you perhaps...*) crucial for showing politeness and respect.

- (13) Γεια σου. Μου αρέσει πολύ ο τρόπος που έφτιαξες το προφίλ σου. Μήπως θα μπορούσες να αφήσεις μήνυμα στο προφίλ μου για να μου πεις πως μπορώ να εισάγω εικόνα και να βάλω μουσική;
Hello. I like so much the way you have created your profile. Could you perhaps leave a message to my profile and tell me how can I import a picture and upload music?

Artist

As suggested in (14) and (15), Sophia's artistic temperament is articulated via complimentary and cordial lexis (*πραγματική ζωγραφιά – real painting, υπέροχες – great, όμορφα – nice, perfect – τέλεια*). In (15) specifically, the user verbalizes his flattery through a masterly parallelism of adjective + noun. Notably, both users point to how her creativity appeals to their senses (*ομορφιά – beauty*) and emotions (*διάθεση – mood*).

- (14) Καλή μέρα Σοφία που έχεις κάνει το blog σου πραγματική ζωγραφιά. [...] Νάσαι πάντα καλά και να σκορπίζεις γύρω σου ομορφιά !!!
Good morning Sophia that you have made your blog a real painting. [...] Bealways well and strew beauty around you !!!
- (15) Καλημερα Σοφια))) Υπεροχες οι φωτογραφιες... ομορφα κομματια... τελεια ανεκδοτα... μου αλλαξεε την διαθεση!
Good morning Sophia))) Great photos... nice songs... perfect jokes... you changed my mood!

Compatriot

That Sophia comes from a Greek provincial city is a recurring theme in her comments wall that directly appeals to the activation of a collective identity. (16) and (17) demonstrate that despite SNSs' national and global reach, these virtual worlds are still regionally sensitive (Livingstone, 2008, p. 395; Rogerson, 2004). Through the endearing use of the word *patriot* (*γλυκό και μικρό πατριωτάκι – sweet and little patriot+DIM*) and her metonymical baptism as *patrida – homeland*, Sophia is invited to be identified with the region in question as well as to verify her SNS friendships because of this region.

- (16) Σ' ευχαριστώ για την τιμή της καταχώρισης σαν φίλος, Σοφάκι... Εύχομαι να μην σε απογοητεύσω ποτέ... Την αγάπη μου, γλυκό και μικρό πατριωτάκι:)) Φιλιάααααααααα
Thank you for the honor of adding me to your friends, Sophia+DIM... I wish I will never disappoint you... My love, sweet and little patriot+DIM:)) Kisses
- (17) Hello patrida!
Hello homeland!

Metadiscourse comments

Co-construction also involved reflexive comments on Sophia's profile content as the extracts below indicate.

- (18) “Τα λίγα λόγια ζάχαρη & τα καθόλου μέλι”..... ΑΨΟΓΟ!!!!
“Few words are sugar and no words at all are honey”..... PERFECT!!!!
- (19) μου αρεσει που σου αρεσει ο ζερβουδακης
i like that you like zervoudakis
- (20) σοφακι μου θελεις να γινω εγω η αγαπημενη σου ασχολια?με εκτιμηση και χωρις παρεξηγηση.....
my sophia+DIM do you want me to become your favorite activity?with respect and no misunderstanding.....

(18) and (19) are evaluative statements about desirability (Fairclough, 2003). The adjective *άψογο* (perfect) in (18), which is further enlivened by capitalization and multiple exclamation marks, is a token of high intensity evaluation. On the other hand, (19) constitutes a case of affective evaluation (ibid.) realized by the affective mental process verb *αρέσει* (like). The rhetorical question *θελεις να γινω εγω η αγαπημενη σου ασχολια?* (do you want me to become your favorite activity?) in (20) is

posed by a male networker who seizes on the ambivalent use of *you* in Sophia's activities to send out sexual nuances.

Even though the catalyst for metadiscourse comments was either appraisal or teasing, there was only one case in the corpus where self-referential language was deployed to accompany negative evaluations. Consider:

- (21) i akatadexti eisai, i ypervolika apasxolimeni, i poly mikro gia paixnidia!!! opote afta pou grafeis sto profil sou einai.....
you are either snooty or extremely busy or too young for games!!! so what you write in your profile is.....

The offender in all probability left his comment incomplete for reasons of avoiding swearing. Whatever his incentive was, it is worthwhile that Sophia has not deleted his message welcoming the plural and impartial construction of her identity. Nevertheless, this does not hold for everyone as one of my informants in the survey said that *"It's been a long time since I have deleted all those messages I didn't like"*.

On the whole, identity co-construction amounts to an implicit identity claim ("Know me by my friends") which is by far more effective, spherical and spontaneous than mere self-orchestrated, stylized description.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, producing and networking online content has become instrumental in handling one's identity, lifestyle and social relations attesting simultaneously one's personal importance (Glatzmeier & Steinhardt, 2005, p. 49; Livingstone, 2008, p. 394). Built upon the precepts of discourse-centered online ethnography, the current study sought to delineate how SNSs can provide a novel forum for generating, reinforcing and disseminating aspects of both social and personal identity. Pathfinder's popularity and diverse usage make it an ideal candidate for investigating the value and implications of the phenomenon from a Greek point of view. More precisely, the emphasis was placed upon the armory of discursive—including linguistic and multimodal—strategies that networkers operationalize for reasons of self-presentation in conjunction with the rhetoric of positive-other presentation as implemented by their SNSs friends. With the objective to approach the issue more holistically, my linguistic interpretation was triangulated by interviewing an expert in the SNSs field, Zaharenia Atzitzikaki, as well as conducting a quantitative pilot survey.

Given that one's online identity is inscribed within the software instead of being inherently tied to one's "body" (Marwick, 2005), Atzitzikaki's view on the subtleties that web developers take into account when producing such software was more than enlightening. Pathfinder web developers strive for creating tools according to users' diverse and multifarious needs irrespective of the difficulties this task entails. What is more, they are in constant negotiation and interaction with Pathfinder members to detect any problems and provide fruitful solutions. At the end of our discussion, Atzitzikaki disclosed that a brand new and more technologically advanced version of Pathfinder Profiles service is going to be launched within 2009 aiming at multiplying the means of self-expression—a great potential for future in-depth research.

The questionnaires, on the other hand, analyzed by descriptive statistics, provided corroborative data which unraveled key trends about Pathfinder's networked topology. Being exposed to a series of multiple, dichotomous and open-ended questions, the respondents gave vital clues regarding the reasons for crafting profiles, profile customization, sending comments and self-impression management. Markedly, most of them saw profile maintenance as part of their everyday lives; as a parallel universe where their selves are incessantly in orbit. These findings do not assert to be

statistically representative, yet they are diverse in that they included networkers from different regions of both Greece and Cyprus and with different socio-economic backgrounds.

The online textual dialectic between personal and social identity (with particular reference to gender and sexual identity) in Pathfinder was examined through the spectrum of an alpha socializer networker's profile. Adhering to Zhao et al.'s (2008) sociological model of implicit and explicit identity claims on SNSs, it was shown that the self can be built in narrative, enumerative and pictorial terms. The application of critical discourse analytical tools demonstrated that via allusions, irony, modality, pronouns, intertextuality and interdiscursivity along with a visual panoply of symbolic images and meticulous layout choices in color and typeface, the networker under investigation promotes a well-polished self-image; she appears sensitive, romantic, spiritual, thoughtful, humorous, mysterious, with fine taste and aesthetics, playful in manipulating colloquialisms and discourses, and inventive as regards the strict format of the profile.

Notwithstanding, identities are not solely self-actualized but constituted through interaction with others (Larsen, 2005; Livingstone, 2008). Drawing on predication and intensification strategies, mobilized by endearing connotations, value-laden adjectives and nouns, presuppositions and insinuations, and rich punctuation, friends in Pathfinder foregrounded a commendable image of the networker under investigation which was much more authentic and forceful than what she did assert for herself. So, in the world of networked publics, we are not only what we post (Schau & Gilly, 2003) but also what others post about us. I must highlight here that this is only a case study and therefore in no way do its results claim to be representative of a wider, undifferentiated population. As such, it just attempts to feel the pulse of Web 2.0 trends aspiring to constitute a stepping-stone to future large-scale research.

Let me now turn to a number of caveats that should be allowed for when discourse analysts study social networking environments. Although SNSs evangelize the rise of user-generated content, they are surrounded by controversies as regards their fixed and ex parte structure facing users as mere consumers of entertainment products (Marwick, 2005). What needs to be explored therefore is the modes in which users manipulate this content with a view to transgressing the rigidity of the service and gaining popularity. Suffice to think that in the near future successful SNSs profiles, with heavy web traffic, are estimated to be resold at extravagant prices as it already occurs in Second Life and other virtual worlds (Zikos, 2007). In addition, profiles should not be deemed as a kind of objective reality frozen by the computer since the actual social reality attached to identity is more complicated (Paccagnella, 1997). We should bear in mind that identities are in constant flux; identity on screen especially cannot be identical with identity-across-events or with identity-across-the lifespan (Lemke, 2007; McBride and Wildner-Bassett, 2008). In language-specific SNSs, like Pathfinder, decodings and interpretations of the produced meanings are bound to vary among addresses with different socio-cultural, historical and geographical specificities. In view of that, studies should indispensably be elucidated by longitudinal ethnographical investigation involving direct contact with SNSs actors. It would be interesting to conduct cross-cultural/linguistic studies on profiles to detect similar or different patterns in identity texturing. It could also be possible to work with non-randomly selected networkers who have profiles in more than one SNS and focus on how discourses about identity are recontextualized.

To conclude, in juxtaposition to those who consider SNSs a flash in the pan, Atzitzikaki sounds fairly optimistic:

Social networking is not something transient in the web nor is it going to die out soon; it is just the evolution of a global phenomenon.

On such grounds, SNSs should be approached as a "space for growth" (Turkle, 1997, p. 263) that encourages users to have agency, with the skill of coordinating their behaviors and the responsibility

for shaping their own development—be it linguistic, social, psychological—in both online and offline realms (Clarke, 2009; Zhao et al., 2008, p. 1831).¹³

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NOTES

1. For a debate on whether the term *social network sites* is preferred to *social networking sites*, see boyd and Ellison (2007) and Beer (2008). Here, I deploy the term *social network sites* seeing social networking as the activity of participating in such sites.
2. Web 2.0 has been defined as a combination of economic, social and technological trends that lay the foundation for the next generation of the Internet—a more mature, distinctive medium characterized by user participation, openness, and network effects (Musser et al., 2007).
3. The question of identity has become central to the research agenda of many disciplines including psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, history, philosophy and linguistics. My aim here is to briefly discuss the concept rather than review how it is presented across different disciplines.
4. The choice of Pathfinder 100 Hot Blogs is determined by an algorithm which uses as inputs the following factors: number of unique visitors, number of unique visitors that have left a comment, number of new registrations, number of new comments and total number of screen views.
5. On July 19, 2009, Pathfinder counted 17,415 blogs and 344,269 registrations.
6. For more information, visit <http://www.techawards.gr> (in Greek).
7. The predetermined categories that Pathfinder gives for “marital status” are: single, married, lasting relationship, single but not flirting, single but flirting, married but flirting, divorced, widow/widower.
8. For color meaning and symbolism, I consulted Kate Smith, a color expert and strategist. More information is available on <http://www.sensationalcolor.com/color-messages-meanings/color-meaning-symbolism-psychology.html> (Last access: 28 May 2009).
9. In favorite books, albums and films, italics are the default lettering of Pathfinder.
10. Serif fonts (e.g. Times New Roman) are characterized by tapered flourishes at the ends of letter strokes while sans serif fonts (e.g. Arial) have no flourishes at all (Boardman, 2005, p. 13).
11. All comments are rendered intact including stress omission, spelling and typos mistakes in Greek, multiple punctuation, absence of or extra spacing between words, and incomplete meanings.
12. This is an instance of Greeklish, that is to say the use of Roman-alphabeted Greek online (for more on this issue, consult Tseliga, 2007).
13. Many thanks should go to Pathfinder working team, especially Zaharenia Atzitzikaki, as well as to Pathfinder users for their willingness to participate in my research. I am also indebted to the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their astute comments.

KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Computer-mediated communication: Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is that kind of communication which occurs via the instrumentality of computers. It can either be synchronous (when the message is read immediately) or asynchronous (when the message is read at a later point). The language of CMC constitutes a fusion of writing with spoken conversation. However, it exhibits unique features of its own such as smileys, acronyms, abbreviations and special lexis varying according to the available technologies.

Critical discourse analysis: Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a critical, interdisciplinary approach to discourse according to which language is a form of social practice. It essentially deals with analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships as manifested in language. The three cornerstones of CDA are: the concept of power, the concept of history, and the concept of ideology. Its origin resides in classical rhetoric, text linguistics, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics and pragmatics.

Discourse: Discourse refers to language use in speech and writing. Critical Discourse Analysis considers that there is a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation which frames it: the discursive event is not only shaped by the situation, but it also shapes the situation.

Discourse-centered online ethnography: The term discourse-centered online ethnography refers to the use of ethnographic insights as a backdrop to the choice and interpretation of log data, with a view to illuminating relations between digital texts and their production and reception practices.

Identity: Identity is defined as a process, as a condition of being or becoming, that is constantly renewed, confirmed or transformed at the individual as well as at the collective level. There are two distinct aspects of one's identity, namely social identity and personality (or personal identity). Social identity refers to the social circumstances into which one is born while personal identity is acquired later in life. The relationship between individual and collective identity is mutual. Individual identity is socially constructed through social interaction. Simultaneously, collective identities are negotiated through the individuals who identify with a particular group.

Modality: Modality refers to those features in a text that express the speaker's and writer's attitudes towards themselves, their interlocutors and the topic at hand, that is to say what they commit themselves to in terms of truth or necessity. Modality is distinguished into epistemic modality (modality of probabilities) and deontic modality (modality of necessity and obligation). Both modalities can have high, median or low levels of commitment.

Multimodality: Having social semiotic theory as a point of departure, multimodality considers that—like speech and writing—all modes (i.e. images, gestures, 3-dimensional forms, animation) consist of semiotic resources upon which people draw for the meaningful representation of events and relations. Adopting a multimodal approach at linguistic analysis entails looking at how language is embedded within a broader social semiotic rather than a decision to “side-line” language (Jewitt, 2008).

New media: New media refers to any interactive digital media production which is distributed via the Internet or the World Wide Web. Examples include portals, news sites, newsgroups, weblogs, wikis, email, threaded discussion forums, bulletin boards, chat rooms, instant messaging, MUDs (Multi-User Dimensions / Domains / Dungeons), MOOs (MUD Object Oriented or Multi-User Object Oriented), chatbots, text messaging via mobile phones, social network sites, audiobooks, and desktop videoconferencing.

Social network sites: Social network sites are mediated public topologies which allow users to create online profiles and develop online communities with common interests and activities.

Strategy: Strategy is referred to a more or less accurate and more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive ones) adopted to attain a specific social, political, psychological or linguistic aim. Discursive strategies are systematic ways of using language.

APPENDIX

Sophia's Pathfinder profile translated into English

Personal information

Name –
Location Tarzania
Age: –
Marital Status: Widow/Widower
Sex: Female
Occupation: I weld coffee pots and charge dearly
Status She is out (22 Jan. 08)

Add to my friends

Block user

Favorite activities

You

Favorite books

In the Country of Last Things - Paul Auster
Still Life With Woodpecker - Tom Robbins
SuperJack - Adam Baron
The Idiot - F. M. Dostoyevsky
The Floatable City - Maro Douka
Tell to Morphine I'm Still Looking for Her - Nicole Roussou
How Do You Dare and Feel Nostalgia, You Rascal? - Giannis Aggelakas

Favorite albums

I would call them... "Favorite Discographies"
PURESENCE - Archive - Portishead - Placebo - Three Doors Down - Lachuna Coil - The Killers -
Way Out West - Papa Roach - Starsailor - Radiohead - The Cure - Tuxedomoon - The Stooges - Over
The Rhine - Pixies - Velvet Underground - Warrant - Angie Aparo - Savatage - Muse - Arcade -
Nickelback - Reamon - Moloko - Lost Bodies - Alkinoos Ioannidis - Kinoumena Schedia - Maskes -
Stathis Drogosis - Dimitris Zervoudakis - Giorgos Andreou - To Schima - Epeidi - Gloam - to be
continued...

Favorite films

High Fidelity	Donnie Darko
Revolver	Serendipity
K-Pax	Under the Tuscan sun
My Blueberry Nights	City of Angels
Romeo and Juliet	Tell to Morphine I'm Still Looking for Her

Recent news

Few words are sugar, no words at all are honey!

Who said that I'm here?

POLAR

To let the love of the magnetic stone take me away
Happy crucifiers have nailed the mythology of the day up to the sky
The wild beasts and the reptiles undress themselves of their height
And their livid earthy and stony dowdiness
When the Dream is waking up
And while the leaves are talking
The fields of Silence spread out

The Stars' Time - Dimitris Liantinis (my translation)

When I won't be here anymore
what are you going to do?

Favorite quote

What if the world is not as you have dreamt it?
What if my light dresses you in fake hopes?
The night seems to be your friend
The moon is red, touch it with your lips

I'm strange because I love...

Interests

- Culture and Society
- Arts and Civilization
- Cyberculture
- IT Education
- Editing Image/Sound
- Programming Languages
- Opinion Exchanging Communities
- Fun and Entertainment
- Friend Communities
- Comics
- Humor
- Films
- Radio
- Board Games
- PC & Video Games
- Childcare
- Music Criticism
- Amateur Music Groups
- Social Sciences
- Relationships
- Autokinesis - Motorization
- Philosophy
- Books
- Mendings
- Civil Service
- Foundations and Corporations
- Information and Media
- Online Newspapers
- Online Magazines
- Radio Stations
- Travelling