Narrative as a Tool for Privacy: How Stories Guide Curation, Sense-Making, and Impression Management among Emerging Adults

Abstract
Emerging adulthood is a period of significant change in the life-course when many youth transition to college and explore different identities and group affiliations. Developing self-continuity is important during this developmental period, yet young adults are also likely to encounter past behaviors preserved on social media such as Facebook and Instagram that do not match with their current self-concept. How do young adults make sense of and curate this past content on social media? I present early findings from semi-structured interviews with 23 young adults in college, the stories they tell about their past photos as they reflect on them and how these stories inform retrospective impression management.

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**Introduction**

Autobiographical memory consists of memories from an individual's life, such as personal experiences, people, events, and objects from a particular time and place [3]. Moreover, autobiographical memories are given meaning through the stories we tell – both to ourselves and to others – and the narratives we create about our lives promote both relationship and self-concept development across the life-course and inform our behaviors [7].

Many computer-mediated technologies also support reminiscence of autobiographic memories by acting as an archive [10,11] and steward of personal content, which introduces new challenges around privacy as content is resurfaced by algorithms (Thomas et al., 2018), by others (Schoenebeck et al., 2016), or by oneself. It also introduces new challenges around how to design for reminiscence [4,5], how to help people meet goals around self-presentation, story-telling [1], and reminiscence, and what the implications are of archiving and resurfacing digital traces of selfhood across the life-course [6].

Through narrative, autobiographical memories take shape and meaning [2] beyond their organization in time and space. Such narration and story-telling serve as a means for organizing and understanding past behaviors or events through evaluating them and forming themes and relations among events [7]. I argue that these stories are not only important for understanding past behavior and how people curate their past content, but they are also central to how people direct their current and future sharing practices.

In order to understand how participants make sense of and manage their past behaviors and photos, I had participants browse through the photos they had shared and been tagged in on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. Several categories emerged related to how participants make sense of and manage differences between their past and present selves, how they curate this content across social media, and how narratives were used to inform current sharing practices.

Participants evaluated representations of them in the past, and then used narratives to project how they relate to their current identities and future ideal selves. Participants often told stories that made sense of their physical, psychological, and social changes over time in photos. Further, participants described how their throwback photos told stories of growth, maturation, and rites of passage into adulthood and used them to distance themselves from their adolescent identities.

**Methods**

I conducted 23 Interviews; 10 male, 13 female with ages ranging from 18 to 25 (only two were older than 24 years old). Participants came from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, diverse majors, and from a broad range of use-frequencies across social media. Each participant used at least two out of three social media: Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. My goal was to gather rich accounts of participants' experiences managing, sharing, and reflecting on photos across social media, the heterogeneity within the sample was helpful because it allowed me to make some illustrative contrasts.
Findings
I found that young adults engage with their past content in order to evaluate or project aspects of their selves and social relationships, and to assimilate or distance themselves from both past identities and relationships as they transition to college. Participants engaged with their past differently on Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook – how and why they curated and made sense of their past content differed in unique ways.

Many participants used humor to identify and then distance themselves from their past cringe-worthy photos, especially when they discussed pictures that show them going through puberty. After using humor to first identify and distance themselves, participants often formed redemptive narratives to tie events to their unfolding life-story, and to turn what was once a negative experience into a positive memory. For example, P13 scrolled back to the oldest photos of her on Facebook and started laughing:

“I did not look good! (laughs) Puberty hit me like a train (laughs). Most of the people in these I don’t really talk to any more and I don’t regret that- not that they anything happened but just that they you know- drift apart. So it’s fine. This is, this was a play that I did which I , I guess when I’m looking back at it now, was pretty unique. I’m thankful now that I was a part of it, but at the time it was very stressful.” (P13, W, 19)

Deleting was practically the norm on Instagram, with many participants deleting content because their aesthetic tastes had changed over time, or the way they express themselves when they were younger was embarrassing. Others, however, made decisions about whether or not to delete content based on the stories the photos told, and the meaning they held to them – often deciding to override their original decision to delete a photo due to poor aesthetics, because of what it meant to them:

P12: Um, I remember that there was one picture that I thought was pretty meaningful, it was a goofy picture - it was a picture of me and two of my buddies in his garage and uh, it wasn't the best Instagram picture, but I wanted to delete it, but as I deleted it I thought, you know, that was a good time, I remember that time, and you know, those are good people that I’ll probably always remember, so yeah, there's time that, you know.

Other young women I spoke with also reported deleting photos prior to high school – the tween years seem to be the cut-off in terms of what others can view without their permission interesting:

“So like Facebook I’ve had since I was like, 6th grade or 7th grade in middle school, and like obviously those pictures that I like posted then, I don’t keep because I just, you know like, that was when I was like a little kid” (P10, W, 18)

Although other recent research suggested that emerging adults playfully engage with their past content rather than delete it – I found that people did both [8], and that they used humor, stories, and meaning to guide their privacy decisions. These stories intersected with identities, audiences, and norms around social media platforms as well – so different practices emerged across Facebook and Instagram.
Conclusion
I propose that walking through people's past content and understanding the narratives they use to make sense of their practices and past content can highlight important values that guide privacy practices, and that doing so can help us understand the diverse ways people engage in retrospective impression management. Young adults attempted to project ideal selves by sharing throwback photos that contrasted past and present selves, developing narratives around growth and shedding adolescent identities. They also used humor and playfully engaged with past content to distance themselves from their previous behaviors. Finally, they used stories to make decisions about curating and deleting past content – sometimes narrating bad break-ups and using them as justifications for deleting content, and other times telling redemption narratives or happy stories that kept them from deleting what were once negative memories.

References


