

# Building identity in online environments: an Information Science perspective

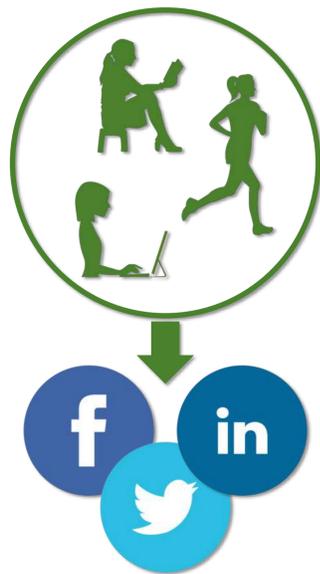
Frances VC Ryan, Peter Cruickshank, Hazel Hall, Alistair Lawson

For more information, contact:  
**Frances VC Ryan** | f.ryan@napier.ac.uk  
www.FrancesRyanPhD.com | @FrancesRyanPhD

## How do individuals use information to build identities for themselves online?

### Creation and use of online “personas” and identities

- ▶ Based on offline identities and “personalities”
- ▶ To showcase aspects of “real world” selves
- ▶ Based on “appropriate” persona for platform
- ▶ Different personas for different audiences
- ▶ Identity creation is not necessarily intentional



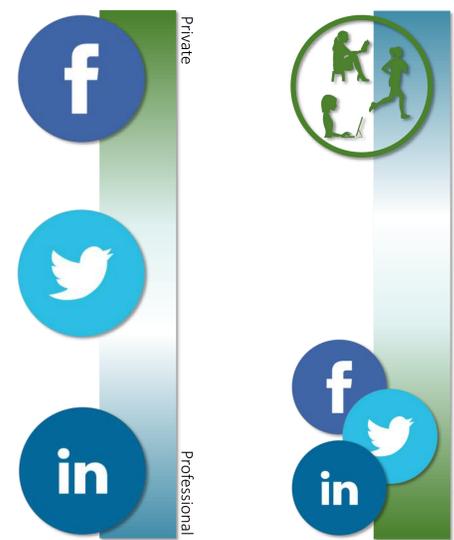
### Deploying anonymous accounts and pseudonyms

- ▶ Complete anonymity is rarely used
- ▶ Pseudonyms associated with “real” identities
- ▶ Pseudonyms as “usernames”, not new identities
- ▶ Consistent pseudonyms or usernames across platforms
- ▶ Some pseudonyms used to “hide in plain sight”



### Managing the blurring of information

- ▶ Blurring between private and professional selves
- ▶ Blurring between offline and online environments
- ▶ Level of blurring varies across platforms
- ▶ Privacy settings and “selective sharing” used
- ▶ Often as a way of managing reputation



“ People [who] see me on LinkedIn and people who know me on Facebook would describe me in very similar shape and fashion, I’m not entirely different people. However, what I share is different. (Yvonne)

“ I [have] different personas. I have a personal [persona] and I have a professional [persona]. I try to keep the two fairly separate. (Nicola)

“ I do believe in always being the same person and not presenting a different version of yourself to different people. (Craig)

“ Choosing my username on Twitter was a big decision ... at first I thought about being anonymous ... then I thought ‘No I want it to be associated with myself’. (Heather)

“ I do have a different professional name to my personal name ... but it’s the same person, I’m putting out my professional persona. (Donna)

“ [There is] nothing anonymous in my life. (Adrian)  
On the other hand ...  
Colleagues must never know that that’s who I am. (Fraser)

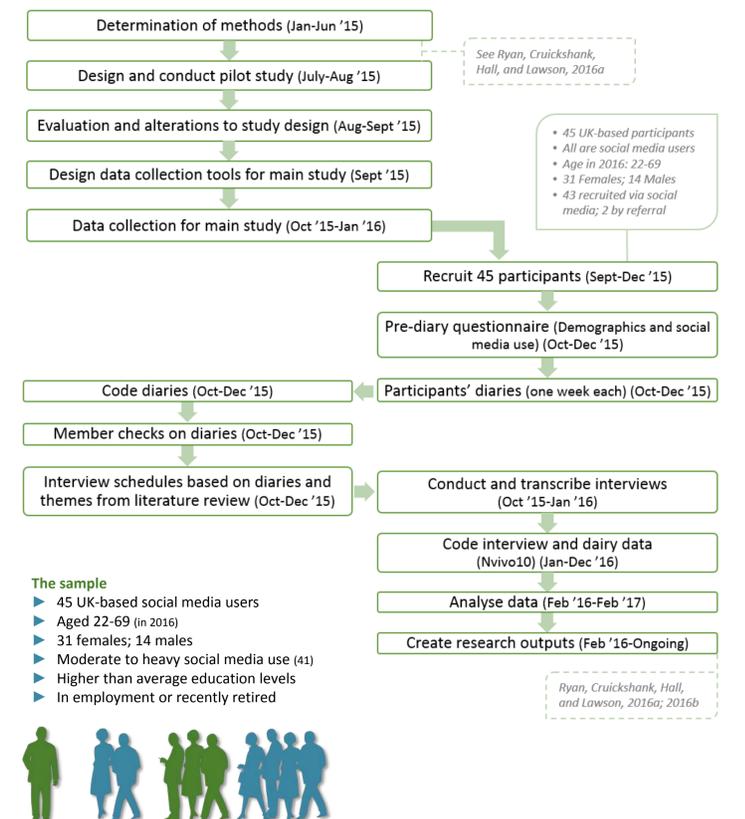
“ I’m lucky that I’m actually really interested in what I do for work. Sometimes it’s hard for me to determine whether I’m sharing something because of a professional or personal reasons. (Gillian)

“ There is so much blurring you can’t think of them as being separate. (Zoe)

“ I separate all my personal [and] professional [information] ... I keep them very separate so that [the opinion others have] of me personally and professional are separate. (Amanda)

### Research background and study design

- ▶ Full doctoral study investigates how **online information** is used in the management and evaluation of personal reputations
- ▶ These findings relate to one of four research questions:  
*How do individuals use information to build identities for themselves online?*
- ▶ **Qualitative** study following the tradition of research into everyday life information seeking (ELIS) (Savolainen, 1995)
- ▶ **Interdisciplinary research themes** with relevant literature found in a number of academic domains (Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall, & Lawson, 2015)
- ▶ Includes a large body of research on the role that information plays in **academic reputations**, such as **citation practices** (Cronin, 1985; White, 2001)
- ▶ Matching aspects of identity building academic reputation using citations with online behaviours and activities that social media users undertake in **everyday life** environments
- ▶ Data collection tools: Participant **diaries** and in-depth **interviews**



**Conclusions:** There are some **strong alignments** between the findings from this research and that of prior research. For example, this research supports the literature related to self-censorship and the regulation of online information sharing practices (Hagger-Johnson, Egan, & Stillwell, 2011), the blurring between private and professional personas based on platform use (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013), and the presentation of personas for different audiences (Goffman, 1959). However, there are also some **weaker alignments** between these findings and the literature, such as the use of anonymity to “experiment” with identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) and the deliberate concealment of personal information in online profiles (Lingel & Boyd, 2013).

The use of information for “building identity” is not an intentional act. Instead, these findings suggest that rather than using information to creating online identity, individuals manage the dissemination of information (that may convey reputational markers) according to different target audiences.

Bullingham, L., & Vasconcelos, A. C. (2013). “The presentation of self in the online world”: Goffman and the study of online identities. *Journal of Information Science*, 39(1), 101–112.

Cronin, B. (1985). *The citation process: The role and significance of citations in scientific communication*. London: Taylor Graham.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Hagger-Johnson, G., Egan, V., & Stillwell, D. (2011). Are social networking profiles reliable indicators of sensational interests? *Journal of Research in Personality*, 45(1), 71–76.

Lingel, J., & Boyd, D. (2013). “Keep it secret, keep it safe”: Information poverty, information norms, and stigma. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 64(5), 981–991.

Ollier-Malaterre, A., Rothbard, N. P., & Berg, J. M. (2013). When worlds collide in cyberspace: How boundary work in online social networks impacts professional relationships. *Academy of Management Review*, 38(4), 645–669.

Ryan, F., Cruickshank, P., Hall, H., & Lawson, A. (2015). Assessing the available and accessible evidence: how personal reputations are determined and managed online. In *Information: Interactions and Impact* (3) 2015, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland.

Ryan, F., Cruickshank, P., Hall, H., & Lawson, A. (2016a). Managing and evaluating personal reputations on the basis of information shared on social media: a Generation X perspective. *Information Research*, 21(4). Retrieved from <http://www.informationr.com/IR21-4/isic/isic1612>

Ryan, F., Cruickshank, P., Hall, H., & Lawson, A. (2016b). Personal online reputation: the development of an approach to investigate how personal reputation is evaluated and managed in online environments. In *2nd International Data Information and Information Management Conference (IDIMC)* (pp. 98–108). Loughborough: LISU.

Savolainen, R. (1995). Everyday life information seeking: Approaching information seeking in the context of “way of life.” *Library & Information Science Research*, 17, 259–294.

White, H. D. (2001). Authors as citers over time. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 52(2), 87–108.