

• *Articles* •

## **Identity in 10,000 Pixels: LiveJournal Userpics and Fractured Selves in Web 2.0**

B. GRANTHAM ALDRED  
*Kendall College*

---

**Abstract:** *In the virtual world of Web 2.0, what is the “self”? How do people create a tangible image of self that is linked to user generated-content when limited to a static series of avatars, and how does this inform our understanding of critical questions about identity and representation online? Using semiotics, psychoanalysis, and folklore, this article examines userpics in the world of LiveJournal, and analyzes how a group of users negotiate their identity with repertoires of 100 x 100 userpics. Drawing on research among LiveJournal users, the article presents a new view on the fractured nature of identity, exploring the epistemic nature of the avatar/self.*

“Who are the folk in cyberspace... [and] what makes them different from the traditional folk? What are the constraints and exigencies that dictate how they carry themselves in an Internet context?”

~ Trevor J. Blank (2009, 11)

The conceptualization of identity has been at the forefront of critical thinking about the Internet for at least as long as the *New Yorker* has been publishing pictures of computer using dogs. Researchers have repeatedly addressed these complexities as a problem for the scholar, focusing on the issues that must be addressed in ethnographic work (see Dorst 1990; Ellis 2003; Frank 2004; Howard 2008; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996, 1998). Given that the concept of identity on the Internet is still nascent, involving instabilities and strategies not present in more established cultures, a folkloric approach grounded in the study of performance

sheds light on the relationship between such communication and identity. By looking at the communication of identity as the deployment of a repertoire of creative identifiers (“userpics” on the website LiveJournal), it is possible to examine how individuals negotiate and balance multiple identities through performance.

Identity on LiveJournal cannot be represented traditionally. Monica Foote suggests that “people represent themselves [online] with scraps of art cobbled together into images that distinguish themselves from their fellow users” (2007, 27). Foote analyzes the ways in which memetic themes develop within online artistic fora devoted to icon creation, exploring the development of genres and patterns in icon creation but stops short of discussion about their use; this leaves the impression that the creation of the icon is the most folkloric aspect. A more important issue to consider is how this art is used. How is a folklorically-created repertoire of icons deployed to form those connections between self and group that are the essence of culture? Is there a core form of cultural expression of identity readable in this deployment? As Lynne McNeill observes, “the digital world is a culture, one that a person can be native or non-native to” (2009, 81). This culture, like all cultures, includes a form by which members identify themselves in context similar to the decoration of the body, one of the key sites of identity in folkloric study. With this in mind, the goal of this article is to examine a specific set of communicative acts, specifically the use of “userpics” to represent the self online in the online community of LiveJournal. These pictures form a locus of identity negotiation embedded in online interaction. By understanding the use of these

pictures as acts of power connected to subject positioning, I hope to shed light on the ways in which the symbolic evinces agency.

In folklore, identity is rarely treated as adhering to an individual. Folklorists have traditionally located identity in cultures and texts, exploring the ways in which groups emerge from shared creative works. One exception to this comes in the exploration of embodied folklore in the scholarship of dress and bodily movement. Many folkloric scholars have examined the folkloric implications of the embodied performance of the self (Noyes 1993; Skukla 2008; Young 1993), and they have generally concluded that the artistic construction of the embodied self has deep folkloric implications—a system of signs that is deeply important to culture, perhaps its deepest expression. But what about groups whose interactions are inherently disembodied? Can there be an art of the self when its most powerful symbol, the body, is unavailable? When Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asks, “What do terms like group or community mean when strangers at computer terminals at the far ends of the world type messages to each other?” (1998, page 284), she seems to be contemplating ‘how do we have community without embodied identity?’ A cynical answer is that ‘we can’t,’ but, as I hope to show, identity remains on the Internet, creatively deployed and still unified.

### **Web 2.0**

The medium in which I propose to examine these manifestations is one of the cornerstones of Web 2.0: the blogging website LiveJournal (also known as LJ). One

of the key parts of the Web 2.0 milieu, blogging has dominated much of the user dominated content dimension of the web. The activity of blogging, short for weblogging, is a form of open journaling, in which users create a shared space in which to display their writings. Originally the province of the programming enthusiast, blogs became a major phenomenon in the early 2000s, with high profile political blogs, extensive media review blogs, and a number of celebrities such as Author Neil Gaiman, Actor Wil Wheaton and Television Weatherman Al Roker keeping public blogs. In addition to tech specialists and those who employ them, the general public gained access to blogging through user-friendly interface services such as LiveJournal, Blogger, and Blogspot.

LiveJournal, founded in 1999 by Brad Fitzpatrick, describes itself as “an online journal service with an emphasis on user interaction.”<sup>1</sup> As of September 2010, LiveJournal had 30.3 million journals. Using either web-based interfaces or downloadable clients, users maintain “LiveJournals” as part of an expanding network of “virtual communities” and personal connections. Through the use of this service, they are able to present their thoughts to the world, or at least a select part of it. It is a new medium of communication through which people can engage in virtual conversation unmediated by space and time. Interestingly, while other blogging sites have waned in popularity with the rise of social networking services such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, LiveJournal has maintained significant popularity among online interest groups, maintaining popularity due to the capacity for additional content.



On LiveJournal, as in all computer-mediated communication, some issues arise in terms of how identity is represented. While there are specific communicative tools used to distinguish users, there are questions as to how well these actually represent identity given the lack of the body. Many potentially useful theories about identity come in psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's conception of 'fractured identities,' that an individual does not have a single coherent identity that can be examined, but instead is the site of a number of identities, sometimes conflicting, sometimes overlapping, but not understandable as a single united identity. Where Lacan's reading is internal, cultural studies scholar Satya Mohanty expands this multiplicity to understand social identity, stating that "Identities are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways" (2003, 398). Mohanty's expansion gives a specific orientation for the study of identity that can be useful in understanding the ways in which identity and communication interact. These theories, based in both psychoanalytic concepts of the self and the semiotics of representation, help to explore the concept of the self without the body.

While this article cannot deal with every intersection of identity and communication, or even every aspect of identity and communication on LiveJournal, I will look at a specific manifestation of identity in the LiveJournal: the userpic or avatar. While many have used the term "avatar" to represent an online visual identity, the emic usage of userpic or icon will be used in this context.<sup>2</sup> One of the

key means of communication available to LiveJournal users is a self-created repertoire of pictorial representations that can be attached to anything written on LiveJournal. The selection/creation of repertoire, the deployment of userpics as facets of identity and the dynamics of group and personal identity all provide ripe ground to view the usage of userpics as a manifestation of creative expression in small groups, understanding this as a form of folkloric performance linked to identity.

### **Identity**

As folkloristics primarily focuses on the embodied, it is necessary to establish a theoretical framework of identity. Jacques Lacan first introduced to the world the notion of “fractured identities” in his *Écrits* (2002 [1966]). This idea, in brief, indicates that identity does not exist within individuals as a contiguous object, but as a conglomeration of multiple partially overlapping identities. Lacan’s concept, while useful for psychoanalytic considerations of the self, falls apart when conceptualizing the practice of identity. Lacan’s conceptualization theorizes a linguistic split to identity, reading individual identities as temporally cohesive and symbolic. While it is possible to call out multiple manifestations of identity in an individual leading to the appearance of fractures, the fractures emerge in the calling out rather than within the identity of the individual.

In order to cogently present my interpretation of fractured identities, there are several theoretical concepts that I will explicitly define, namely my

interpretation of the relationship between Lacan's concept of the Real and the Symbolic, the concept of the "subject," and what I call "instanced identity," which is a way of conceptualizing identity as temporally manifest and conceptually limited. One useful definition of "the Real" comes from Lacan's analysis of Plato in which he notes, "Everything that exists only exists in relation to the idea which is the real"(1986, 141). In essence, the Real is that which cannot be signified by anything other than the signified itself. The "Real" is directly linked to Lacan's concept of the Symbolic, which is the aforementioned capacity to "represent an experience of 'things'." The Symbolic is any attempt to use something other than the referent to express the referent.

To use the example of a tree: I can describe the tree: I can take pictures of the tree, and I can measure all available statistical data about the tree. Each of these cases uses symbolic codes in an attempt to represent the tree. While each of these descriptions may present persuasive or interesting data about the tree, none of them are able to fully invoke the fundamental reality of the tree. It is this fundamental reality—this unrepresentable, fundamental reality—that is the domain of the "Real." Thus, things that are "Real" *exist*, but cannot ever be fully symbolized, as the domain of the symbolic is fundamentally reductive, using codes rather than whole ideas".

The concept of the Real threatens that of the subject. While the concept of the "subject" has been criticized for its reliance on a privileged sense of autonomy

(see Butler 1997; Kristeva 1982), there has remained a sense of subject that could be called 'self-as-agent', linked directly to selfhood. I use the term "subject" somewhat differently; exploring it as a symbolic, epistemic phenomenon. For instance, when an individual refers to his or her self symbolically by using the pronoun "I," he or she is referring to the locus of consciousness that is the self. The subject is the symbolic self, constituted through linguistic acts. To borrow linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's terminology, the subject is the signifier to the self's signified; a symbolic representation disconnected from an actual object. This distinction is important in relation to Lacan's conception of the Real and the Symbolic. While the self is real, it cannot be fully described using the language of the symbolic. No symbolic representation of the self can actually succeed in tapping into the full sense of consciousness; it cannot describe what it is to be the individual. Thus, as the self resists the symbolic order, it fits into the category of "Real". As such, when I discuss the self, I am referring to that "Real" aspect of identity, the inner consciousness that relates to that sense of "I." The complex aspect is the relationship to identity; since the self is "Real," it cannot be properly described or categorized. What I am arguing is that the term "subject" can be used to refer to the symbolic representation of the locus of perspective that is the self. The subject could be metaphorically described as one frame in a film of an object, capturing an object from a single position fit for description but never allowing that object to transcend the limitation of space, time and perspective in description.



The opportunities presented by the limitations of space, time, and perspective emerge in the term “instanced identity.” Part of the ‘multiple identities’ concept comes from an attempt to read identity as removed from the temporal order. In short, any attempt to examine an individual in one situation and then in another will lead to two different results. This does not mean that there are multiple selves—the difference is in temporal description based on a specific subjective perspective captured in the symbolic. In order to faithfully express these temporal links, I use the term ‘instanced identity in reference to subjective positioning at the time of expression; an incomplete identity defined through symbolic communication.

Everyone has a way of expressing subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> An individual generally has some internal sense of what constitutes the self.<sup>4</sup> Because the totality of identity cannot be expressed or understood through the symbolic, it is instead presented in fragments that represent aspects of ‘instanced identity’ based in time and space, and linked to a sense of Subjectivity. For instance, right now, I would describe myself as hard at work in a café, having consumed several cups of coffee and a bit warmer than normal. I would also describe myself as an academic, a male, a geek, and rather introspective. All of these things are attempts to reflect certain aspects of my current identity; they are specifically linked to my position in time and space, both in terms of my personal history, and my understanding of the outside world.

However, these are all fragmentary expressions of my “self,” and they are unable to capture my total inner identity.

Because fragmentary expression of self are the only way in which identity can be presented, identity is categorized as fragmented. In the theory of fragmented identity, there is no central identity, but instead many different identities. However, it is my assertion that this is not a correct reading of the self. By bringing in an understanding of Subjectivity and the temporal order, identity can be read as a single unit about which things are expressed. I would suggest that the way in which identity is made manifest in the world is through a series of necessarily incomplete symbolic manifestations, which leads to a false sense of fragmented identity. In other words, fragmented identity is a communicative cleavage that restricts the understanding of totality rather than eliminating the totality.

A view of fragmented identity is similar to some readings of Lacan. As Steven Friedlander puts it, “this subject will only be discovered through psychoanalysis, and even then, ‘discovered’ only in the sense that it is synthesized through iterative acts of identification, interpretation and construction” (2000, 364). Accordingly, the Subject is only able to manifest through these ‘iterative acts’ of communication. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1993) describes gender identity as only existing through performative acts of gender mimesis. Thus, discovering the Subject can only occur through secondary interpretation of symbolic acts and this only presents an imperfect synthesis.

So, if we understand identity as an internal unity that cannot be fully expressed through language, how do we study it? One critique of this somewhat deconstructive approach is that it essentially leaves no object of study. However, the intention of this deconstruction is not to make identity inaccessible, but rather to move the focus from reading the internal, which is inaccessible, to reading the communicative act, which *is* accessible.

Instead of reading identities as concrete cultural artifacts, they should be read as temporally and spatially located communicative acts that allow direct access to identity as an object of study. By examining how individuals use the symbolic to represent aspects of their identity, it is possible to understand how people attempt to define their identities. Identity then becomes a communicative act of power, utilizing the authority granted by communication to attempt to express the self to others. This movement from the subjective object of study to the expressive object of study, we access manifestations of “instanced identity.”

In the end, what is available to study in terms of identity is not what a person’s identity is, but the ways in which that person attempts to communicate their subjective position. Communicative acts do not resist the symbolic order and are thus available to be examined using the symbolic order. Until we have ways of communicating that eliminate inaccessible subjectivity, we should attempt to make conclusions that we can make without referring to the inaccessible.

## **LiveJournal**

So what is LiveJournal? What differentiates this area of study from other blog services? The LiveJournal website describes itself as

an online journal service with features that allow interaction between users. Registering for an account is free and will give you access to most site features...With a LiveJournal account, you can write entries in your personal journal. You have several options for security levels, ranging from Public entries which any site visitor can read to Private entries which are only visible to you...

There are several options available for interacting with other users. You can use your Friends page to view recent entries by multiple users at once, which makes it easier to keep up with your favorite journals. Many users allow comments to be made on their entries, which is a great way to start conversations and find new friends. Another way to meet people is by participating in communities, which are group journals in which multiple users can post entries.<sup>5</sup>

In short, LiveJournal is a blogging service that attempts to provide several general services. First, LiveJournal provides users with a personal journal, and in doing so enables access to a password-managed Web location through which a user can post information without extensive HTML coding<sup>6</sup> or personal server maintenance. Second, there is the potential for communities, since any LiveJournal member can start a 'community,' or a pseudo-group journal that can be used by any member of the community to post information.<sup>7</sup> While communities were a minor feature in the early period of LiveJournal, they are at the core of current usage, with LJ providing an online home especially for fan and creative virtual communities.

Additionally, there are a number of services that LiveJournal provides to its users. One of the most important of these is the ability to list “friends.” Friend-listing allows centralization and the restriction of content, bringing together the content of others for consumption and creating the potential for limited release of personally generated content, restricting some content to select groups of people. This limitation can create a sense of intimacy between users as private information is shared within a select group, preventing access not only by the specifically forbidden but also by outsiders. Interestingly, this is one of the areas where identity starts to become important in a LiveJournal context. Through allowing users to restrict access to identified users, LiveJournal privileges those who maintain a stable identity (in the form of the username) within the community over those who merely observe but do not identify themselves (in the form of anonymous users).

Another service offered by LiveJournal is the ability to add comments. Users have the option of allowing other users to respond posts on their journals by enabling comments. Comments are generally accessible to everyone who can view the original post, though they appear on a secondary page accessible from the original post. The comments feature gives LiveJournal a sense of discussion, similar to a message board. One aspect of the comments feature that shows the importance of identity in LiveJournal is the way that the service is able to be limited. When choosing how to allow comments, users have the option of disallowing comments by anonymous posters, or if screening those comments (enabling the user to examine



the comment before it is displayed on the site), or permitting the original poster to detect the IP address<sup>8</sup> of the anonymous poster. This once again privileges those who maintain an identity (this time in two ways) first by giving certain rights to those who maintain a localized presence, and secondly by identifying anonymous commenters via their registered IP address). With the calculated denial of access to those who do not present an identity, LiveJournal again shows the way in which identity is valued as part of the service.

LiveJournal takes a typical Web 2.0 approach to identity by providing a portal for user-created content that can be accessed by other users who maintain a stable presence within the site. Users are allowed to add content or restrict access; privilege is given to those who maintain an active presence on the site. However, LiveJournal presents an interesting model for studying the cultivation of their identity on the site. On LiveJournal, users are represented by a repertoire of user-generated avatars that can be deployed strategically in a way that defines a variable but unified identity.

Users on LiveJournal are permitted to maintain a dynamic toolkit for self-identification. While a user info page exists for all users, in most utilitarian settings users are identified by username and 'userpics.' Users are allowed to maintain a dynamic repertoire of pictures that can be selectively deployed in conjunction with user-generated content. LiveJournal describes them as userpics, which are "icons or avatars used to represent yourself, your moods or feelings, your interests, etc. They are displayed in many locations on LiveJournal, including your Profile page, your

journal, your entries in communities, the Friends pages of people who list you as a friend, comments, support requests, and the comments pages of your entries”.<sup>9</sup>

Within the world of LiveJournal, the userpic is a semiotic representation of identity.

There are limits on the construction of userpics. Userpics can only be 100 pixels by 100 pixels and must be smaller than 40 kilobytes. Within a maximum of 10,000 pixels (which on an average-sized monitor is about the size of a large postage stamp), LiveJournal expects the individual to be able to “represent themselves.” Additionally, there are limits to the number of userpics that one can have. LiveJournal users have the option of paying for the service. Paid accounts give certain benefits to users, one of which is an increased allotment of userpics. A free user is allowed three userpics, a paid user fifteen. It is even possible to pay additional money in order to have up to 100 userpics. By presenting additional content as a commodity to be obtained, LiveJournal again privileges the representation of identity, this time by presenting more ways to express identity through a process of commodification, implying that access to additional identity representation is valuable.

When making a post or comment, userpics are selectable from a drop down menu, allowing site patrons to select userpics based on user-defined keywords during upload. Users have the option of selecting an individual userpic for a post or selecting a default image. Once userpics are uploaded, all instances of user-generated content are accompanied by a userpic, with the first pic posted becoming

a *de facto* default image. Once multiple userpics are uploaded, a user may choose one to be the default or may select a userpic each time.

In order to better explore the representation of identity, I examined a group of linked individuals on LiveJournal. The individuals studied were recruited through LiveJournal itself as a networking tool. Their responses were gathered using a public poll on LiveJournal that encouraged readers to reply to the poll and/or to recruit people to answer the poll. While this was not a statistically random grouping, it does represent an experience closer to that of a LiveJournal user. The group ranges from 19 to 39 years of age and consists of primarily students or retail professionals with shared interests in role-playing games, arts and crafts, science fiction media, and mysticism. As a group they provide some interesting perspectives into the use of the userpic as a manifestation of identity. In an effort to provide my informants with some degree of anonymity, their usernames have been replaced with pseudonyms.

### **Manifestations of Identity in LiveJournal**

In analyzing communicative forms, one of the easiest places to start is through an examination of what the sender is trying to communicate. In other words, to paraphrase Dan Ben-Amos' (1971) definition of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups," how do people try to creatively communicate via their userpic repertoire within small groups on LiveJournal?

When constructing a post or a comment, the user is able to select a specific userpic from among their available repertoire. In this way, the user can provide extra-textual information related to a given piece of text. Thus, the userpic serves to establish a meta-communicative frame, guiding the interpretation of the content through extra-textual cues. According to the survey group, an individual userpic is seen as either reinforcing the positioning of the poster or communicating information that the text of the post does not or cannot communicate. One of the techniques by which this is done is thematic iconography. Many users of LiveJournal classify the things they post within generic categories they provide, taking on a variety of performative voices based on their relation to the performed text.

For instance, a post by the user "Scarecrow" (who is an avid player of video games), may invoke the voice of amateur reviewer or that of an avid fan when discussing a new game for the PC. In these instances, he uses different userpics: one displays an image of a person using a computer (which is a parody of the Maxell cassette tape advertisement in which the listener is being blown away by his stereo); the other image is of a character named "fanboy" from the online comic *Sinfest*.<sup>10</sup> "Scarecrow" explains that he often uses the icon that most thematically fits the post he creates. This use of differentiated icons helps to define his performative voice. As an example, the post "[*Game X*] is awesome!" communicates a different message with the reviewer userpic than with the fan userpic, in the one case representing a more measured opinion and in the other a less reasoned reaction.

These categories are purely user created. The group member “Canislatrans” categorizes his posts differently: “I have one for questions and stories, one for thoughts and moods, and one for social things.” His perspective references a metacommunicative aspect to the userpic, linking it to genre classification. The way in which one interprets a joke is different from the way that one interprets a parable, and metacommunicative information helps aid that interpretation. Interpreting userpics this way turns the metacommunicative frame into an aspect of the self, making the voice an aspect of instanced identity, the creation of the self including the frame.

Another link between instanced identity and the userpic is the expression of mood. Many users indicated a link between one’s mood at the time of posting and the chosen userpic. As the user “Smeagol” says of choosing userpics for specific posts: “With personal posts, it often depends how I feel.” Group member “Driedroses” responds to the same question with, “by mood. I have one icon for silly/ happy/ joyful, one content/ mischievous/ happy, and one for sad/ serious/ thoughtful.” This inclusion of mood as a method of selection is tied into the concept of Subjectivity. While mood is not viewed as a long-term identifier, it is a Subjective characteristic that links to the current state of the Subject. Mood is directly tied to the temporal aspect of instanced identity, attempting to convey part of the perspective of the communicating Subject within a temporally limited framework.

The userpic is seen as a direct link to the Subject itself. It is seen as being a representation of the subject, where the text of the post is the voice. The user



"Oracle78" says of one of her userpics: "it reflects a lot about who I am." Going further, "Mr\_grumpy" describes his default userpic as "The simple representation of 'me'," a statement of representational identity. His characterization is very telling as it speaks to both the idea of the Subject and the inability to fully represent the "I" to which the Subject refers. The userpic is not the self; it is a symbolic representation of the self (and a simple one at that) which serves as a Subjective manifestation of instanced identity.

The belief that the userpic is an incomplete representation of the subject is shared by a number of users. Many users spoke of the inability of a given userpic, or even a group of userpics, to fully encompass the self. Instead, they spoke of aspects, representations or reflections in understanding the relation of the userpic to the self. Group member "Flyriver" says of userpics, "they represent different aspects of my personality." Oracle78 states that her userpics "all are about aspects just of me." These user responses indicate an understanding of the relationship between the iterative act of userpic selection and the self; it shows that to some degree that the users understand the communication is not the person. However, there is a sense that they do communicate more about the user. "Smeagol" asserts, "they don't define me, but they help to convey more of my identity than words could." This linkage between personal identity and userpics gives a strong sense of why the images are used. By going outside the bounds of written language, the user 'conveys more of their identity.'

An interesting aspect of this link to identity is the connection between personal identity and group identity. One of the ways in which many people attempt to communicate personal identity is through connection to a group. A person may wear the sweatshirt of their alma mater, may identify themselves as a member of a political party, or perform a 'secret handshake' with someone else that attempts to convey to the other individual that both are part of the same organizational structure. The same is true of LiveJournal. Many people use userpics to convey a connection to other people.

In some cases establishing this connection is simple. For instance, a user may choose a userpic when making a comment that attempts to link their subjective position to that of the original user to whom they are commenting. As user "empress605" notes, "the 'two cents' icon gets used more often in replies than in posts." Fellow group member "Singingfriend" offers a similar perspective on this, stating, "I consider it rude to comment on sad things in friends' journals with my 'happy' icon, which is the default." In this case, the user is trying to contextually define their identity in relation to other users. Meanwhile, Singingfriend attempts to identify with other users by conveying the way in which the original user feels. In many cases, a post can link the individual to more extensive groups. One of the uses for LiveJournal is virtual community participation, connected to both purely virtual and non-virtual communities. My informant "Thefoxwife" describes LiveJournal as "Another way of reinforcing the communities I'm involved with." Her perspective appears frequently in the use of the userpic. A number of users have userpics that

identify them as part of a specific social group. For instance group member “mneidz” has a userpic that connects her directly to a friend. As she says “[this userpic] relates me to my best friend.” The userpic to which she refers is part of a pair of linked paintings.<sup>11</sup> She uses this painting as her default userpic and her ‘best friend’ who is also on LiveJournal uses the other painting as her default userpic. This links them together, attempting to communicate that connection.

One clear example comes from the involvement by multiple members in an Alternate Reality Game called Changeling in which participants take on different character roles. Smeagol explains, “my [character] icon definitely is related to the changeling game.” This is echoed by “Empress605,” who contemplates, “I can’t imagine using the [character name] or [character name] icons outside of a Changeling context.” By deploying the names of the fictional roles they play within the network of people, these users are reinforcing an identity linked to the specific segment of people who play the game. This is an example of the way in which small group identity is manifested, through indicators of the role of the subject within the group.

Larger group identity is done somewhat differently. Many of the participants have userpics that are linked to broader groups that they see themselves as belonging to, for instance political interest constituencies, religious affiliations, or fandoms. Examples of each exist within my group of informants. “Smeagol” admits, “I’d argue my political (read: anti-bush) icons definitely place me in a group.” The

argument in Smeagol's case is that these userpics express a group sentiment that others can interpret, placing Smeagol within a certain political group. User "Astridia" does things somewhat differently "My [web comic-based] icon is something of an in-joke for fans of the comic." The use of the in-joke links her to a group of fans who are linked through their consumption of the comic. Finally, "Gatoarmado" uses a third strategy of communication. Speaking of one of his userpics, he claims that "Only people who get involved in totems understand the relevance." In this case, the idea seems to be that there are a shared group of symbols deployed in a given userpic that individuals with an interest in totemic religion can understand. However, each of these approaches is indicative of a larger pattern among users in terms of linking to large group identity. By deploying these communicative tools, a user tries to show the link of the subjective position to various disparate groups.

In terms of communicative tools that are connected to identity, people have pre-existing systems to fall back on, such as language. However, one of the characteristics of language is that competence necessitates an incredibly extensive, generalized repertoire of shared symbols. The communicative system of the LiveJournal userpic is somewhat different from these, closer in some ways to communicating through clothing, assembling a specific, limited, repertoire that can be deployed in conjunction with other communicative tools to define one's self.

So what motivates someone to add to their repertoire? While there is a limit to the number of pictures that a user may have on the LiveJournal server at any



point, these pictures may be removed and replaced at any time, thus allowing an adaptable repertoire. But what motivates one to do so? There appear to be two main cases where userpics are added, both related to identity communication:

The first category of userpic construction happens when a new aspect of instanced identity arises. User “Sassywatson” explains this as “whenever I have a personality change.” Often users will feel that in a specific instance, there is an aspect of themselves that they wish to communicate and try to find a way to express that via userpic. My informant “Empress605” simply gets new userpics, “As I need them. If I’m replying to something and go, ‘Wow, I wish I had an icon that conveyed \*this\*’, then I know I need it. That’s how 80% of them came into being.” This is one of the more common reasons for altering one’s repertoire. “Singingfriend” says, “if I create an image that expresses a negative feeling that I feel often when I’m [using LiveJournal] I’ll add it as an icon.” This connects interestingly to identity, as people try to find a way to express aspects of their subjective identity when it is necessary.

The second reason that people change their repertoire of userpics is due to a feeling of disconnection with the communicative language of a given userpic. They may feel that a userpic no longer conveys what they wanted it to, or may feel that they have moved past the instanced identity that the userpic represented.

“Driedroses” describes this as “when I feel one that I’ve been using isn’t sufficient or doesn’t express what I want anymore.” Smeagol adds, “when I decide that one of my current icons is no longer [as] appropriate/useful as a new icon.” In both cases, the



sense is that there is a more efficient or effective way of communicating aspects of instanced identity and that this requires an alteration of repertoire. This in general points to a desire to properly express one's self.

Given the desire to alter their repertoire, users tend to draw on a certain group of resources in order to construct this repertoire. Many users construct their userpics themselves from things they find on the web. User "Holliel" constructs hers "by finding pictures that I like and that are representative of me, then editing them to fit." "LeoMoon" describes her userpics as "pictures of animals and other things that I find online." This selection is similar to purchasing clothes and then altering them to fit the wearer, drawing on a selection of recognizable images and personalizing them so that they are 'representative of' the user. There are even sites devoted to userpics, providing pictures that are in the prescribed size and format for LiveJournal.

Other users take images that they have constructed from scratch using digital cameras or taking existing images and altering them to create new images. For instance, "Thefoxwife" says of her sole userpic, "[I] made it myself, but it's not really fancy." "Scarecrow" shares, "I find pictures I enjoy and add captions to them." The method of construction gives the user a unique repertoire to draw on, by creating userpics that are not duplicates of other userpics or of other pictures. These tend to be the most personal in some ways, including self-portraits. "Countrypunk" says her userpics are all "pictures from my digital camera." Users often actively determine their own repertoire by drawing on personally specific resources. This repertoire

personalization is part of the process of creating a unique subject, a self-positioning act that allows distinctive performative acts by an individual.

Interestingly, some users draw on the resources of those around them in order to assemble this communicative repertoire. In some cases, construction from elsewhere involves physical artwork as in the case of “Lizither.” As she says, “my friends draw me, I ask if I can use the drawings as icons and so far I have two.” While this is a distinct case of another person literally creating the pictures, there are cases that are closer to personal construction. “Empress605” describes her process as “[another LJ user] has made most of them for me, some at my request...I’ll say, “Hey, graphic-grrl! This is what I want!” and then she takes my idea and makes it kick ass.” In these cases, the userpic added to the repertoire is not one made by the user; things that another person made is designed to represent an aspect of the user’s identity.

However, regardless of who actually made the userpic, there is a sense of agency in the inclusion of the userpic into the repertoire and in its use. This is important in terms of the link to identity, because it demonstrates the way in which agency is used to determine the use of the userpic. By expressing ownership over the userpic and its usage, the user declares the distinct choice that is the icon and what it means in the system of communication. This ownership translates well in the idea of ownership of userpics. For instance, as Smeagol declares, “I’ll steal [userpics] from other people (bad iconetiquette, I know)”.<sup>12</sup>

In the end, we can see that the userpic is part of a system of meaning constructed via agency on the part of the communicator as an attempt to convey aspects of personal identity. By deploying certain symbolic elements pulled from other areas, users attempt to convey aspects of the self with the userpic, conveying personal perspective in visual form.

### **Conclusion**

Identity has always been a construction. Pravina Shukla speaks of the nature of expression in physical culture, stating that “Individuals exist simultaneously in a state of self-expression and social connection, communicating personal artistry in ways that are constrained, encouraged and appreciated by the people they live among” (2008, 383). Sherri Turkle asserts that “At each point in our lives, we seek to project ourselves into the world...the computer offers us new opportunities as a medium that embodies our ideas and expresses our diversity” (1995, 31). What, then, can we see by looking at this new communicative medium? What can we say in general about the communicative act of instanced identity? How do we reconstruct our identities in artistic ways constrained, encouraged and appreciated by the people around us?

The userpic is just one aspect of a given post that is part of an attempt to convey Subject positioning. Within the context of a post, there is space to define mood, there is space to convey thoughts through text, and there is even a space to indicate what music an individual is listening to during a post. However, certain

aspects of the userpic give it some primacy in terms of identity communication. As part of a limited repertoire, there is a sense of repetition that links a userpic to a specific user who deploys it as an iterative act. People come to identify this act with the individual performing the act and through that, understand the act as a way of understanding the individual.

As the complex example of LiveJournal userpics shows, studying the way in which certain specific communicative acts are used to symbolize aspects of identity can lead to an understanding of the intersections of instanced identity; the way in which these expressions link to the “Real” identity is otherwise inaccessible. I believe that there is an appropriate metaphor from religious philosophy in the form of the sacrament. A sacrament is referred to as ‘an outward sign of an inner grace.’ In other words, the sacrament is not the inner feeling but merely a representation of it. I believe that the same can be said for identity, that communicative acts of identity are outward signs of an inner being. While we cannot access that inner self, we can examine how people try to convey it, and through that understand better what they may be trying to say about themselves.

Looking at the process of instanced identity through the lens of folklore, we may see how the strategic deployment of a set of creative products can itself be a form of creative representation of identity constitutive of a virtual self situated within a complex web of connections, representing a virtual folk group. Driven by communal creativity, this web of connections, not only creates a method of looking



at identity, but a way of understanding the role of creativity in constituting small groups vital to the study of folklore online.

*Benjamin Grantham Aldred received his PhD in Folklore and American Studies from Indiana University Bloomington in 2009. His dissertation work focused on the performance of history in Salem, Massachusetts and the relation between a multi-vocal historical consensus and worldview. He currently teaches Humanities and Social Sciences at Kendall College in Chicago and does research on new media and community, emergent forms of digital folklore and American worldview in the mass media. In his spare time he enjoys baking bread and taking in Chicago's theater scene.*

### Works Cited

- Ben-Amos, Dan. 1971. "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context." *Journal of American Folklore* 84: 3-15.
- Blank, Trevor J. 2009. "Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Folklore and the Internet." In *Folklore and the Internet*, ed., Trevor J. Blank, pp: 1-20. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge. New York, NY.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge. New York, NY.
- Dorst, John. 1990. "Tags and Burners, Cycles and Networks: Folklore in the Telegraphic Age." *Journal of Folklore Research* 27: 179-90.
- Ellis, Bill. 2003. "Making a Big Apple Crumble: The Role of Humor in Constructing a Global Response to Disaster." In *Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture*, ed. Peter Narváez, pp: 35-79. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Foote, Monica. 2007. "Userpicks: Cyber Folk Art in the Early 21st Century." *Folklore Forum* 37: 27-38.



- Frank, Russell. 2004. "When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Go Photoshopping: September 11 and the Newslore of Vengeance and Victimization." *New Media and Society* 6: 633-58.
- Friedlander, Stephen and Malone, Kareen Ror eds. 2000. *The Subject of Lacan: A Lacanian Reader for Psychologists*. SUNY Press: Albany, NY.
- Howard, Robert Glenn. 2008. "Electronic Hybridity: The Persistent Processes of the Vernacular Web." *Journal of American Folklore*. 121: 192-218.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1996. "The Electronic Vernacular" In *Connected: Engagements with Media*, ed. George E. Marcus, 21-66. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. "Folklore's Crisis." *Journal of American Folklore* 111.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror*, Trans. by Leon Roudiez, Columbia University Press: New York, NY.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1992. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*. Trans. by Dennis Porter. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, NY.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002 [1966]. *Écrits*. Trans. by Bruce Fink. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, NY.
- McNeill, Lynne. 2009. "The End of the Internet: a Folk Response to the Provision of Infinite Choice." In *Folklore and the Internet*, ed., Trevor J. Blank, pp: 80-97. Logan: Utah University Press.
- Mohanty, Satya. 2003. "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity." In *Identities: Race, Class, Gender and Nationality*, ed., Alcoff, Linda Martin and Mendieta, Eduardo, pp. 175-200. Malden, MA: Blackwell
- Noyes, Dorothy. 1993. "Contesting the Body Politic: The Patum of Berga." In *Bodylore*, ed., Katharine Young, pp. 134-161. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.
- Shukla, Pravina. 2008. *The Grace of Four Moons: Dress, Adornment and the Art of the Body in Modern India*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Turkle, Sherri. 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Young, Katharine. "Introduction." In *Bodylore*, ed., Katharine Young, pp. xvii-xxiv. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993.

---

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.livejournal.com/support/faqbrowse.bml?faqid=56> accessed 1/8/2008

<sup>2</sup> See Foote 2007, for another in-depth examination of avatars and userpics from a folkloristic perspective.

<sup>3</sup> When I say Subjective or Subjectivity in this paper, I am referring to the act of being a Subject.

<sup>4</sup> This is the realm of Lacan's imaginary, which I do not intend to explore in depth in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.livejournal.com/support/faqbrowse.bml?faqid=56> accessed 11/21/2004.

<sup>6</sup> HTML (or hypertext markup language) is the code that is used throughout most of the World Wide Web.

<sup>7</sup> The term "community" is used internally. I refer to abstract online communities as virtual communities, while I use "communities" to refer to the LiveJournal categories.

<sup>8</sup> The IP address is a series of numbers that allow a computer professional to identify the 'location' of a computer on the Internet. It is one way to identify the posting computer.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.livejournal.com/support/faqbrowse.bml?faqid=1> accessed 5/27/2010

<sup>10</sup> Many different icons are obtained under a broad interpretation of fair use, editing existing materials into smaller versions with customized text. This usage has proven controversial among comic creators.

<sup>11</sup> The paintings involved are a pair of paintings depicting the same subject matter in different, but related contexts.

<sup>12</sup> It is considered plagiarism to use someone's userpic without properly crediting them for the construction.