

When socializing online with close and far relations each person adopts a role – a social identity – depending on who she thinks is observing. When commenting on the last managerial conference at the workplace, she might choose elaborate wording and a carefully designed photo. When planning an outing with friends, the comments might be casual and the picture may present her in a funny pose. The differences in this self-presentation come from the fact that each person is perfectly capable of being many people: sometimes warm and caring (when talking to a child), sometimes stern and demanding (when discussing with a subordinate), other times careless and comical (when partying with friends). In each situation we try to perform according to the characteristics we attach to our identities and we want others to see us as such: a warm mother or a competent manager. In social interactions – offline and online – we seek confirming feedback. However, in the digital social world some things are different.

First, oftentimes a user can't really know who's watching: in the audience there might be workplace colleagues or close friends, or maybe both those groups. At any given moment, a new observer can join or a current can leave. Moreover, individuals can switch between platforms – and the friend and audience networks within them – quickly and at will. They can even be logged into many services at the same time, on each discussing a different issue with different people, and change the relevant social identities with a swipe of finger on the device screen. These two properties of digital socializing – fluid audiences and quick changes of social networks – may have a big impact on how we define our social identities, on who we are. To add to that, our self-presentations – the digital traces we leave behind – often enter public discussion, shaping wider social processes.

In this project my aim is to investigate the impact of digital socializing on identities and roles social media users take. For this, I will analyze text messages on various social media platforms to see how quick audience changes impact the messages' content. I will also test in experimental studies how individuals respond to feedback about their identity and how that influences what they post. Finally, I will integrate the results into a computer simulation that will show how individual self-presentations combine to shape public debate.