# Creating the Self in the Digital Age: Young People and Mobile Social Media

Toshie Takahashi
*Waseda University*

While there is a tendency to celebrate children and young people as creative subjects, there is also a tendency to deem them vulnerable targets of media industries. These contradictory characterizations have become even more pronounced with the advent of new digital technologies. "The discourse of the digital native has developed into a complex combination of hope and fear" (Takahashi, 2011, p.70).

Working against the background of such a dichotomous framing, my research question is simple: "Why do children and young people engage with media?" To understand the role of media in the everyday life of young people, I have developed the concept of 'audience engagement' as a heuristic device (Takahashi, 2009). It encompasses the multiplicity of audience activities envisaged within active audience theories in both Western and Japanese media audience studies. The material for the essay is based on my on-going and long-term ethnographic research conducted on Japanese engagement with media and ICT in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, beginning in 2000. In order to test and re-contextualize the concepts and phenomena that I observed among Japanese youth - as well as to consider new developments - I conducted in-depth interviews and observed various participants between 2010 and 2011 in the UK and US. Drawing on fieldwork done on young people and digital media in the US, UK, and Japan, I have investigated multi-dimensional audience engagement with mobile social media in terms of both the opportunities (connectivity, access, critical, tactics, collaboration, share and participation) and the risks (cyber bullying and defamation, infringement of privacy, hacking and stalking, over-dependency and addiction) of such engagement.

In this essay, I will focus on one dimension of audience engagement - self-creation. "Self-actualization demands the careful negotiation between the

opportunities (for identity, intimacy, sociality) and the risks (regarding privacy, misunderstanding, hostility) afforded by Internet-mediated communication" (Livingstone, 2009, p.118). I will demonstrate how the processes of self-creation takes place through a negotiation between the opportunities and the risks given by their engagement with mobile social media.

## Self-Creation

What do I mean by the concept of self-creation? We are familiar with Thompson's (1995), Giddens' (1991), and Hall's (1992, 1996) concepts of self-formation, self-identity, and identification respectively. The idea of self-creation discussed in this piece is derived from their insights, but it also hopes to reflect the creative, original, and individual nature of the process as I have witnessed among the young people that I have interviewed. Giddens' position is that "globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely...processes of self-realization influence global strategies" (Giddens, 1991, p.214). I accept Giddens' portrayal of self-identity as reflexive and responsive to both global and local changes, but in my notion of self-creation I would like to focus on how people create and recreate themselves, even momentarily, through both mediated and non-mediated interaction (Takahashi, 2009). In particular, I consider how this process of self-creation is accomplished through impression management, self-expression, and self-actualization.

## Impression Management

Young people create/recreate their self-identity by means of 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959). Why do young people use social media for impression management even though this use involves various risks? Kate and Tony, American high school students, told me how their friends judged them through Facebook.

> **Kate**: You can see like beer bottles all over the floor...
> **Toshie Takahasi (TT)**: Why do you upload these photos?
> **Kate**; Because people judge you...
> **Tony**: Because are like, the ones who don't drink, you're such a loser...
> **Kate**: You're not good company, you know.
> **Tony**: And it's like, you don't know how to fun, you know. Drugs and beer or... people react like, okay that's cool right...

> Kate and Tony (pseudonyms), focus group interview, November 3, 2010

Young people tend to post "cool" photos and videos online for impression management, even though it is risky to post such content - which might show the subject engaging in irresponsible or illegal behavior - online. The reason they do this is because they want to be recognized by their friends and gain popularity. But why do young people want to be recognized in such a way by their friends so much? I will examine this desire for recognition using Japanese teenagers as an example next.

## "Reajuu (Live Life to the Fullest)" Impression Management

Whenever I ask Japanese young people about the purpose of using social media, they always answer, 'I use Facebook to show "reajuu [I live life to the fullest]," in addition to connecting with friends and family, and seeking information. On Facebook, Japanese young people show reajuu by, for example, uploading large number of photos (sometimes decorating them with stars or hearts using photo editing apps on their mobile phones), and by tagging each other in order to portray themselves as active and popular.

However, these attempts to show reajuu online do not come without risk. Yuha, a 19 year-old female college student, told me that she uploads a lot of photos to show herself "reajuu" and that the number of comments or "likes" she receives shows her popularity among her friends. She told me that social media is "eyes from others" and that it is "shameful" if there are a fewer number of comments (Yuha (pseudonym), personal interview, October 20, 2009).

Yoshitaka Doi (2013) suggests a potential source of this desire for recognition on social media in the age of globalization.

> "Today, without a feel of the social environment (kuuki) or how others may think, it is difficult to be sure if one is going the right direction....So, one is always trying to connect with others on social media such as Facebook and Mixi, and one is always bothered about the number of followers one has on Twitter. "Does anyone recognize me? And do others see me as a valuable person, one who has friends around?" Thus he or she cannot help but care about recognition from others" (Yoshitaka, 2013, p.123).

In the era of globalization, young people have more and more choices. At the same time, as Doi suggests, there is uncertainty. Young people may find it difficult to be sure about the choices they make. This is where the need for recognition, especially from their peers, becomes important. Mobile social media serves as a contemporary platform for individuals trying to win this recognition. Hence, the taking of risks, and of portraying themselves as cool or reajuu, are but strategies of impression management to this end. "Impression

management online and off is not just an individual act; it's a social process" (boyd, 2014, p.49).

## Self-Expression

While the number of comments or "likes" young people receive shows recognition from others, some people view the comments or "likes" that they make on other's social media content as a form of self-expression and proof of self-existence. Anthony, a British college student, told me of his desire for proof of self-existence:

> "I do want to stand out in a way... not by what I post but by who I post it to and how often, it's not necessarily by what I post that I want to stand out ... Comments a day? Maybe five or ten comments a day. Well not even comments, you can also just press like, so that...I guess I use that as a way of reminding people that I exist... making sure that people don't forget about me, like, oh don't forget me [laughs]. Also as a kind of PR, like personal PR machine, like this is the image I want to give people, how can I remind people that I exist" (Anthony (pseudonym), personal interview, June 15, 2010).

Young people, as social actors in the digital age, often express themselves by uploading photos and videos as well as giving their comments or "likes" to others on social media. In the process, their existence is validated through social media when friends and others accept it. Takaaki Nakai describes this twin desire for recognition and self-existence, stating, "'recognition' is that his existence is recognized and accepted by others in the first instance, and then by himself. A desire for recognition always comes with an unconscious desire for 'proof of one's existence'. We want to 'prove' that we exist. We want proof of how great or wonderful we are to others and ourselves" (Nakai, 2007, p.4).

Thus, young people seek recognition from both others and themselves in order to prove their own existence within the complex processes of globalization and rapid social change.

## Self-Actualization in the Global World

Finally, how do young people create and recreate themselves through such engagement with impression management and self-expression on social media? Young people follow and connect with people who can be their role models or give them inspiration on social media. They create a bricolage of those people or celebrities on Twitter or Facebook. Reina, a Japanese college student that I

interviewed, likes to look at her own profile page occasionally where she creates a bricolage of all images of celebrities, companies, and high brands. It reminds her of what kind of person she wants to be in the future. She also told me that the reason why she follows Western celebrities and critics is because popular Japanese celebrities and critics also follow the Western ones, not vice versa. She thinks there is still a hierarchy between Japan and the West. Therefore, she also follows Western celebrities and people who can be her role model, and receives ideas and information directly from them for her self-actualization (Reina (pseudonym), personal interview, April 10, 2015).
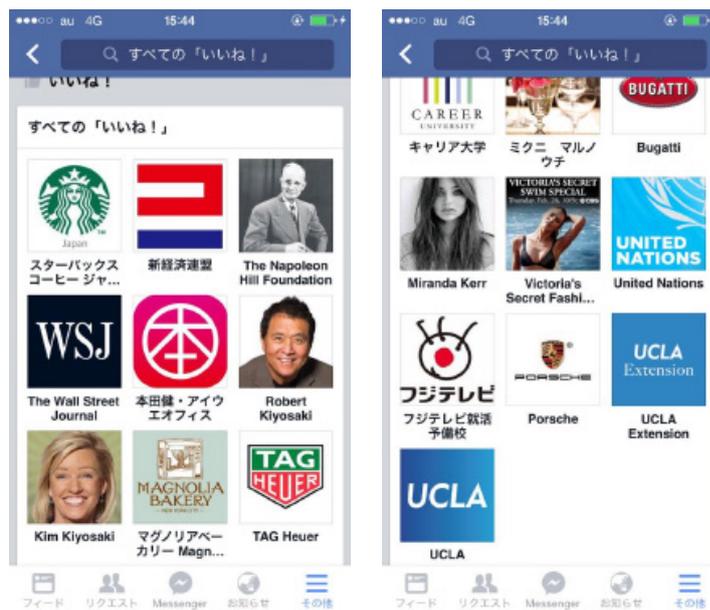


Photos 1 and 2. A Bricolage of Images on Renia's Facebook Profile

While Reina connects with celebrities by following them on Twitter and Facebook, Hideaki, a Japanese student that I interviewed, connects with young people all over the world by organizing a Facebook group for the international conference for students. More than 1000 students from 28 countries applied to the international conference through his Facebook group (Hideaki (pseudonym), personal interview, July 25, 2013). During the international conference, these students have stayed together at the Olympic center in Japan in order to learn about and understand their cultural differences. Hideaki said,

> "It is good to stay together during the international conference because we can get to know each other much more. My final goal is to create friendship across national boundaries. Individually, we can make friends with one other, whether Chinese, Japanese or Korean. But, on the national level, it is often difficult. I wish that dialogue between nations could be like dialogue between friends."
> (Hideaki (pseudonym), personal interview, July 25, 2013)

According to Hideaki, even though people come to the conference from nations in conflict such as Thailand and Cambodia, since both countries have good relations to Japan and could make friends with each other by spending days and nights together in a larger group of students that included Japanese individuals. Facebook makes it possible for these students to constantly connect and reinforce intimacy beyond national boundaries before, during, and after the conference. Through organizing both the Facebook group and the international conference, Hideaki thus creates and recreates himself in the global world.

> **Hideaki**: The reason I organize the international conference is to encourage participants to discover their potentials. After the conference, some Japanese people embarked on initiatives to help other Asian countries. For example, one of the participants set up a company closely collaborating with people in Cambodia. Another person living in Cambodia gave up his car and started bicycling because he wanted to do something to help "stamp out poverty" in Cambodia. To the people he met on the street, he would give out a flyer to explain his cause. Today, more than 1000 people have joined him.
> **TT**: Are they running together?
> **Hideaki**: They do. I heard recently that the Cambodian government has come to know this movement and that six elementary schools have been built in Cambodia. (Hideaki (pseudonym), personal interview, July 25, 2013)

Like Hideaki, young people create new communication spaces and constantly connect with each other trans-nationally on social media, and occasionally interact face-to-face. As such, these young people undergo the process of self-actualization in the global world through constant connectivity and reinforcement of intimacy via the Internet and digital technology.

## Conclusion

In the complex process of globalization and rapid social change, young people use social media for impression management and self-expression that stems from their desire for recognition and proof of self-existence. They create and recreate themselves, through both mediated and non-mediated interactions online, while negotiating the relationship between the opportunities and the risks implicit in their engagement with social media.

With social media, young people seek and receive information, images, and cultural values which may be different from those prevalent in their country or region. The Internet and digital media give them alternative social and cultural

values that make it possible for them to create a new identity in the global world. Through daily engagement with foreign people and celebrities via social media, young people feel connectivity and social intimacy with them, whereas in the past young people felt distance via mass media. Some young people like Reina follow Western celebrities and high fashion brands, and bricolage those images for thier self-actualization. Furthermore, other people like Hideaki connect and collaborate with others trans-nationally. Globalization highlights the inequality between "the West and the Rest" (Hall, 1992). In the digital age, mobile social media provides new choices, possibilities, and ideas for self-actualization through constant connectivity and reinforcement of social intimacy with distant others. Thus, digital media and ICT play one of the most important roles in the of dynamic process of self-creation among young people in the global world.

## References / Links / Resources

boyd, D (2014). It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Doi, Y. (2013). Tsunagari Kajou Shoukougun (2): Jikoshouninyokkyuu no Hidaika [Over-connecting Syndrome(2): an Enlarged desire for self-recognition]. Jidou Shinri, 67 (10), 119-125.

Giddens, A. (1991). Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Hall, S. (1992). The Question of Cultural Identity. In S. Hall, D. Held & A. McGrew (Eds.), Modernity and its Futures. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hall,S. (1996). Introduction: Who Needs Identity? In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), Questions of Cultural Identity. London: Sage.

Livingstone, S. (2009). Children and the Internet: Great expectations, challenging realities. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Nakai, T (2007). Kodomo no Jikoshouninyokkuu to Oya karano Kitai to Shounin no Kanrensei [Relevance between Children's Desire for Self-recognition and Expectation and Recognition from Parents: Child Research from a Standpoint of Post-humanism]. Seikatukagakukenkyuui, 6, 113-137.

Takahashi, T. (2009). Audience Studies: A Japanese Perspective. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Takahashi, T. (2011) Japanese Youth and Mobile Media. In Thomas, M (ed.) Deconstructing Digital Natives. NY and London: Routledge.

Thompson, J.B. (1995). The Media and Modernity. Cambridge: Polity Press, Stanford: Stanford University Press.