“The Question Exists, but You Don’t Exist With It”: Strategic Anonymity in the Social Lives of Adolescents

Nicole B. Ellison, Lindsay Blackwell, Cliff Lampe, and Penny Trieu

Abstract
Anonymous interactions may have important implications for adolescents’ social and psychological development. In this article, we use semi-structured interview data collected from US adolescents aged 13–18 years (N = 22) to explore how the specific affordances of an online platform that enables selective anonymity shape adolescents’ practices and perceptions. We contribute to scholarship on the effects of anonymous interaction online by surfacing positive outcomes for young adults who choose to interact in anonymous contexts—specifically, a question-and-answer site popular with teenagers (Ask.fm)—and explicating the ways in which these interactions assist in key developmental tasks during adolescence. We identify five primary themes: (1) perceived authenticity, (2) circumventing social expectations, (3) learning about the self, (4) managing identity and self-presentation, and (5) initiating and developing relationships. Across these themes, we find that users strategically employ anonymity to achieve their social goals. Use of the site was often deeply embedded in offline social structures, such that the platform was used to circumvent rigid norms around socialization (who can talk to whom) and information-seeking (who can ask what), enforced in educational institutions and elsewhere. We conclude that the strategic use of selective anonymity has the potential to scaffold social processes through which adolescents work toward critical developmental goals.

Keywords
social media, anonymity, question-asking, adolescence, adolescent development, anonymous interaction

Adolescents in the United States today can choose from a variety of social media platforms, which afford varying degrees of anonymity, allowing users to engage in anonymous, pseudonymous, or “real name” interactions in order to meet social or informational goals. Although many social media platforms are “profile-centric” and include an emphasis on the profile of a specific user and his or her actions (Ellison & boyd, 2013), others specifically encourage anonymous (e.g., Yik Yak) or pseudonymous (e.g., Reddit) interactions. Despite known benefits associated with varying degrees of identifiability, few platforms enable users to choose between multiple forms of identity expression using a single account. In this article, we use semi-structured interview data collected from US adolescents aged 13–18 years (N = 22) to explore adolescents’ use of selective anonymity on an online platform that allows for both anonymous and pseudonymous interaction. We contribute to scholarship on mediated anonymous interaction by explicating the reasons why young adults might choose to interact in contexts that do not contribute to their overall social media presence (e.g., their “real name” or persistently identifiable accounts) by examining adolescents’ social practices on Ask.fm, a question-and-answer (Q&A) site popular with teenagers, and the outcomes they associate with its use.

Adolescents’ use of anonymous interaction is an important topic of study given the developmental processes associated with this stage of life, the high rates of social media use among this population, and the affordances of social media sites that shape the social and psychological outcomes of their use. Prior literature associates anonymity with both positive and negative outcomes. For instance, anonymous and pseudonymous platforms are often linked with disinhibited behaviors (Suler, 2004), which can include abuse and harassment (Cho & Acquisti, 2013; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). However, because people...
disclose information more openly when interacting with others whom they do not know or do not anticipate meeting again (Kling, Lee, Teich, & Frankel, 1999; Rubin, 1975), anonymity can also contribute to positive social dynamics, such as enabling users to seek help in online support groups, receive feedback on original artwork or writing, or participate in political discussions without fear of social or legal consequences (Kang, Brown, & Kiesler, 2013). The reduction in self-presentational concerns afforded by anonymous interaction is particularly salient for adolescents (Keipi & Oksanen, 2014), for whom healthy social development requires the exploration of different identities, relationships, and worldviews as they transition into emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Defining Anonymous, Pseudonymous, and “Real Name” Contexts

Although often framed as a fixed dichotomous state (anonymous or identified), the concept of anonymity in online environments is best understood as a spectrum, involving multiple dimensions of identity expression. Because traditional identity cues (such as skin color or indicators of age) are often not visible in online environments, users can engage in “selective self-presentation” (Walther, 1996, p. 19), explicitly determining what identity information to disclose, withhold, or distort. Individuals may deliberately link their online personas to an offline identity or instead work to disassociate them. The identity information that can be shared online is constrained by the extent to which the architecture of a particular platform enables or impedes the expression of different identity cues. Online interaction platforms, from the early Usenet to today’s social web, have traditionally enabled three broad categories of identity information structures: anonymity, pseudonymity, and “real name.”

In “real name” systems, such as Facebook, the platform attempts to link each online account to a singular offline identity through verification requirements (e.g., providing an email address) or policies for acceptable site use. In pseudonymous platforms, such as Reddit, users can create a screen name and then interact using this handle across multiple sessions, allowing them to establish a reputation and develop relationships. Pseudonyms may or may not be linked to a legal name, location, or other identity cues (Marx, 1999), and users may have multiple pseudonyms on the same site. Some systems, such as Yik Yak or 4chan, allow posting without identity information that persists across sessions, making interactions fully anonymous. A core feature of Ask.fm is that, unlike most platforms, it enables multiple identity information structures: although individual users can maintain stable profile pages using a pseudonym, they may also selectively send anonymous messages to other users, choosing whether to associate their pseudonyms with the contributions they generate.

Implications of Anonymity and Pseudonymity Online

Prevailing ideologies in both academic and popular discussion maintain that online anonymity is dangerous (Froomkin, 2015). Kling et al. (1999, p. 82) argue that anonymity allows for “communication without retribution, . . . [raising] issues of accountability and reliability” and that it can enable problematic behaviors like spam, hate mail, and deception. Indeed, some believe “[anonymity] facilitates wrong by eliminating accountability, which is ordinarily the very purpose of the anonymity” (McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission, 1995, p. 385). Deindividuation processes, which may lead to unruly behaviors such as hostile messages or harassment (Sproul & Kiesler, 1992), are also associated with anonymous online contexts: increased anonymity has been empirically linked with flaming, trolling, and impulsive remarks (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011).

Similarly, a study of commenting behavior found that users commenting with a “real name” social network site (SNS) account were less likely to use offensive words, such as swear words, compared with their pseudonymous peers (Cho & Acquisti, 2013).

Despite negative associations, the anonymous internet has persisted, from the early days of multi-user dungeons (MUDs) and chat rooms to recent social media platforms such as Yik Yak and Ask.fm. The continued popularity of anonymous and pseudonymous platforms can be explained in part by early work on anonymous interaction online, which argued that anonymity contributes positively to online interactions: for example, anonymity may liberate individuals to say or write things that they otherwise cannot (Kling et al., 1999). Early experimental research found that anonymous online environments allowed users to express their “true selves,” including personal information and experiences they would not be comfortable disclosing in face-to-face interactions (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002)—a theme also surfaced in ethnographic work documenting users’ playful identity explorations in anonymous and pseudonymous discussion spaces (Turkle, 1995).

Work on current online platforms highlights similar advantages. Kang, Dabbish, and Sutton (2016) find that people use anonymous applications like Yik Yak and Whisper to avoid social risk, make short-term connections, and receive social validation. In an examination of Reddit posts about experiences of sexual abuse, Andalibi, Haimson, De Choudhury, and Forte (2016) found that posts that described a need to self-discard, in addition to posts that explicitly included reasons for disclosing or not disclosing, were more likely to be posted from a “throw-away” account, or a temporary account created to dissociate content from a user’s primary Reddit identity. Men—for whom disclosing abuse is more stigmatized—were significantly more likely than women to use throwaway accounts for this purpose (Andalibi et al., 2016).
Anonymity also has advantages when employed within pre-existing social networks. Emerging platforms such as Yik Yak, Whisper, and After School allow for users to engage anonymously with a known audience—for example, posting anonymously to one’s high school community on After School (accessible only by verified students). An experiment by Ma, Hancock, and Naaman (2016) demonstrated that, even when disclosing anonymously, users were more comfortable disclosing to their social ties (mobile phone contacts and Facebook friends) than to people nearby (obtained using geolocation). Their findings suggest that users engaging anonymously among known peers are likely to self-disclose more openly than they would if identifiable by the same audience (Ma et al., 2016), helping to explain the popularity of platforms that afford more flexible forms of identity expression among known peers.

For adolescents in particular, anonymous interactions among audiences of known peers can enable problematic behaviors such as harassment and bullying. Some researchers have characterized cyberbullying as more insidious and damaging to adolescents than traditional (offline) bullying due to its anonymous nature: anonymity enables anyone to engage in problematic behavior and may impede accountability, and the speed and convenience of online channels allow harassers to continually attack their victims (Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; Wu & Lien, 2013). Still, for many adolescents, anonymity affords opportunities for self-exploration, relationship building, and expressive freedom that outweigh potential risks (Keipi & Oksanen, 2014).

**Social Media’s Role in Adolescents’ Identity and Social Development**

Adolescence is marked by extensive biological and cognitive development and can be an important period for identity formation, a key goal of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Collins & Steinberg, 2006). For instance, an early study found that a stronger sense of identity predicts higher psychological well-being and sense of purpose among college students (Waterman, 2007). Similarly, Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke (2010) revealed, in a 10-year longitudinal study, that ego development measured during adolescence strongly and positively predicted intimacy with romantic partners later in life.

There is some evidence that social media platforms can potentially support adolescents’ identity development processes, in that they enable users to engage in textual and visual self-expression and experiment with provisional identities, such as “college student” (Morioka, Ellison, & Brown, 2016). However, the identity structures of current social media platforms present challenges for adolescent users in particular: Schoenebeck, Ellison, Blackwell, Bayer, and Falk (2016) surface tensions between young adults’ self-presentation goals on Facebook in the present day and the persisting archive of personal content they posted to the site as teenagers, particularly as applications intended to resurface prior social media posts (e.g., TimeHop) gain in popularity. The persistence, visibility, and searchability of personal data allow platforms like Facebook to become what Zhao et al. (2013) refer to as “long-term identity ‘exhibitions’” (p. 1), requiring users to practice proactive impression management strategies that may inhibit adolescents from comfortably experimenting with self-expression on these platforms during this critical developmental period.

Instead, adolescents may benefit from more flexible forms of identity expression: anonymity reduces the potential social consequences for self-disclosures made online (Spears, Lea, & Postmes, 2000), a relief of social pressures which Peter, Valkenburg, and Schouten (2005) suggest allows adolescents increased opportunities for identity exploration and relationship formation.

Social media platforms also enable interactions with peers and allow for quantifiable and immediate feedback on adolescents’ identity expressions (e.g., “likes” on Instagram or Facebook). During the transition from childhood to adolescence, peer relationships become increasingly significant, rivaling those of adults (children’s primary influence) in shaping adolescents’ activities, well-being, and future relationships (Brown & Larson, 2009). Meaningful peer relationships provide adolescents with social validation, emotional support, and increased opportunities for self-definition and identity development (Hartup, 1996). Success in cultivating and maintaining friendships often predicts adolescents’ success in meeting other social and psychological goals, such as social adaptation and academic achievement (Brown & Larson, 2009). As their peer relationships become increasingly important, adolescents experience heightened complexity in their social relationships, as elements such as romance, popularity, and social status gain in relevance (Brown & Larson, 2009). These important peer relationships are situated within larger social structures, such as families, work contexts, and—perhaps most dominant—schools.

Navigating these social structures, however, can be challenging. Adolescents’ relationships and social landscapes are often characterized by school “crowd” membership, or larger groups of adolescents who share the same status and popularity within the social hierarchy (Brown & Larson, 2009; Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Factors such as social status and reputation often influence membership in crowds, and adolescents tend to make friends within their crowd, reinforcing a rigid social structure (Horn, 2006). For instance, interviews with adolescents who in middle school lacked self-confidence and were unable to form close friendships revealed the presence of rigid social structures and active exclusion by higher-status peers (Kinney, 1993). Access to a wider range of peers and activities in high school, however, allowed these same adolescents to form more supportive relationships and freely explore their emerging identities (Kinney, 1993).

Social media sites may help adolescents negotiate these rigid social structures and other challenges present in their
offline lives, contributing positively to their social and cognitive development. For example, introverted adolescents can compensate for their weaker social skills by communicating online, which in turn predicts greater online friendship formation (Peter et al., 2005). For extraverted adolescents, “online communication, then, only increases the opportunities to . . . make friends,” similarly benefitting their social development goals (Peter et al., 2005, p. 428). In an online survey of 881 Dutch adolescents, Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006) found that positive feedback on SNSs—which most adolescents surveyed (78%) always or predominantly received—improved social self-esteem and well-being. SNSs also provide adolescents with social identity gratifications, or “opportunities to identify with ingroup members who look and act similarly . . . as well as to compare themselves to outgroup members” (Barker, 2009, p. 209). Similarly, boyd (2014) argues that social media platforms allow adolescents to “see themselves as a part of a broader community” (p. 9).

Given the importance of identity formation and social development during adolescence, teenagers in particular may find anonymous platforms helpful in their daily lives, despite the associated risks. In this study, we explore the social and identity dynamics of adolescents’ engagement with a site that affords selective anonymous interaction: Ask.fm. Specifically, we ask the following question:

RQ. How do anonymous online interactions support adolescents’ social and identity processes?

Method

We conducted interviews with a sample of Ask.fm users (N=22) in April and May of 2015. A random sample of Ask.fm users were emailed by the site and invited to participate in an academic research study; 150 users completed a short screener survey, which included questions about age, gender, country (the United States or not), and frequency of Ask.fm use, and, of these, 74 provided contact information.† Our final sample consisted of 14 female and 8 male participants between the ages of 13 and 18 years (M=16.5, SD = 1.62). Detailed information about participants’ age, sex, and frequency of Ask.fm usage can be found in Table 1. We conducted interviews until saturation was reached.

Research Site: Ask.fm

Founded in 2010, Ask.fm, available in 49 languages, is a Q&A site with approximately 150 million members (About us, 2016). The original version of the platform was associated with cyberbullying in the popular press, but was purchased in 2014 by Ask.com with the goal of making the service “safer and positive” (About us, 2016).

More than 50% of registered Ask.fm users are under the age of 18 years (Van Grove, 2013). Ask.fm differs from other popular Q&A sites (such as Yahoo! Answers or Quora) in several key ways. First, rather than soliciting multiple answers by broadcasting their question to a large audience, questions are directed to individual users via their profile page. Importantly, only questions the user chooses to answer are displayed on her profile. Questions can be answered (in which case they are displayed on the user’s page and in followers’ streams), ignored (in which case they remain in the user’s question queue, but are never displayed on the user’s profile nor in followers’ streams), or deleted (in which case they are not displayed on the user’s profile nor in followers’ streams and do not remain in the user’s question queue).

Personal profiles on Ask.fm are minimal: individual users populate their personal profiles with a location, links to other personal websites or social media profiles, and a biography (with an unlimited character count, although brief biographies seem to be more common). The rest of a user’s profile consists of an “Ask me a question” box—which allows other users to ask the user a question, either anonymously or not—and a list of the user’s previously answered questions (see Figure 1). A user’s answers display chronologically, with the most recently answered question displayed first. Users may receive questions from named or anonymous users, or they may choose to answer the site-generated “Question of the Day,” added automatically to the user’s question queue each day (these are typically general questions that any user could answer, e.g., “What is your usual breakfast?”). Finally, an important social norm

| Participant ID | Gender | Age (years) | Frequency of Ask.fm use |
|----------------|--------|-------------|-------------------------|
| P1             | M      | 16          | Once a month            |
| P2             | F      | 18          | Once a month            |
| P3             | F      | 15          | 2–3 times a week        |
| P4             | F      | 15          | 2–3 times a week        |
| P5             | F      | 13          | Several times a day     |
| P6             | M      | 16          | Less than once a month  |
| P7             | M      | 18          | 2–3 times a month       |
| P8             | M      | 15          | Once a month            |
| P9             | F      | 18          | 2–3 times a month       |
| P10            | M      | 14          | Around once a day       |
| P11            | F      | 14          | Around once a day       |
| P12            | F      | 18          | Around once a day       |
| P13            | F      | 18          | 2–3 times a week        |
| P14            | M      | 18          | 2–3 times a week        |
| P15            | F      | 17          | Less than once a month  |
| P16            | F      | 15          | Once a week             |
| P17            | F      | 18          | Once a month            |
| P18            | M      | 18          | 2–3 times a week        |
| P19            | F      | 18          | 2–3 times a week        |
| P20            | M      | 17          | 2–3 times a week        |
| P21            | F      | 18          | Once a week             |
| P22            | F      | 16          | 2–3 times a month       |
on Ask.fm is that users do not always submit “questions,” instead sometimes using the question-asking feature to send declarative statements that are not in the form of a query.

The most notable feature of Ask.fm—and what makes it appropriate for this study—is that question-askers can choose to either associate their username with questions they ask of other users or do so anonymously. Question-receivers can select whether or not to allow anonymous questions, though the site’s default upon registration is to allow them. Another distinguishing characteristic is that Ask.fm can be deeply embedded in offline social structures: many site users (including our participants) interact primarily with individuals in their existing offline social networks. As a result, questions on Ask.fm are often more social than informational in nature. Though a full name is required at registration, users can elect to remain pseudonymous by choosing a non-identifiable username and inputting false information in lieu of a “full name.” Pseudonyms may then be shared with trusted peers. Even if a user’s specific identity is not known, aspects of her offline identity (e.g., what school he or she attends) may be discerned by signals such as whom he or she interacts with on the site.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in April and May, 2015. The first author (N.B.E.) and a research assistant conducted the interviews, which took place via a university-provided secure videoconferencing system; most participants chose to connect using voice only. We received parental consent via email, as well as participant assent before the interview, and confirmed that participants had a clear understanding of the research process and how their data would be handled. We first asked participants about their general social media use and then their use of Ask.fm (e.g., what they liked and disliked about the site; their positive and negative site experiences). The protocol also included items about asking questions of other Ask.fm users as well as participants’ experiences answering questions, with an emphasis on anonymous interactions. This study was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The interviewers kept notes during each interview to identify emergent themes. Interviews were transcribed using Scribie (https://scribie.com/), checked for accuracy, and then imported into Atlas.TI for analysis. Coding occurred over several stages: first, the research team met to discuss broad themes that emerged from the data and developed a preliminary set of codes, which was used to code a small subset of interviews. Through discussions based on this initial coded sample, the list of codes was revised, such that similar codes were collapsed and new codes introduced to capture important phenomena. A research assistant used the finalized codebook to code the entire dataset; the research team met frequently during the coding and writing process to discuss interpretation of the data. Quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and readability.
Findings

Our research question asked about the implications of anonymous online interactions for social and identity processes in adolescents’ everyday lives. We identified five primary themes: (1) perceived authenticity, (2) circumventing social expectations, (3) managing identity and self-presentation, (4) initiating and developing relationships, and (5) learning.

Participants often described anonymous interactions as disembodied in that they were not associated with an individual, thus shielding their senders from the negative repercussions of sharing their opinions or questions. This kind of protection from consequences was described in both positive and negative terms. Because identity information was not associated with content when asking a question anonymously, participants’ self-presentational concerns were

Perceived Authenticity

Echoing the research literature on honesty of self-disclosure within non-identified contexts (e.g., Rubin, 1975), anonymous comments were perceived to be more authentic than those from identified users by our participants, who described anonymous content as a more honest reflection of the poster’s opinions or feelings (compared to those offered in identified contexts, where a speaker might incur social benefits from the exchange—for example, the social capital earned when paying a compliment). The absence of social outcomes from anonymous interactions meant that often, these interactions were perceived as more honest and more salient than comments from identified peers.

This increased salience of anonymous content was especially true in the case of anonymous compliments, which were perceived as being motivated by something other than normative expectations around friendship maintenance activities. P9 (F, 18) explained,

If your friends compliment you, it’s one thing, ‘cause it’s like, “Okay, well, they are my friends, and they are going to try to be nice to me, obviously,” but if it’s people who you don’t know, or don’t know you that well, it just—it’s something a little bit more special sometimes.

P13 (F, 18) echoed this sentiment, noting that “sometimes friends tell you things to give you something that you want to hear,” as did P22 (F, 16), who said “it’s nice that someone would just compliment me anonymously [because] they’re not getting a reward from doing it.” Anonymous compliments that could not produce social capital benefits had an altruistic dimension: as a result, those who received anonymous compliments saw them as more authentic. While the self-esteem benefits of receiving anonymous compliments were noted by almost everyone who received these kinds of messages, at least one of our participants felt otherwise, explaining that he was “not one to feel so uplifted and fantastic because of a comment online” (P1, M, 16).

Circumventing Social Expectations

For all anonymous content, the unknown nature of the contributor ignited curiosity as to the poster’s true identity, often enhancing the impact of this content. Speaking about anonymous compliments, P18 (M, 18) told us, “it’s more powerful if it was anonymous because it could be anyone. It can be someone you think is cute . . . [It] could be anyone, and so it definitely makes it more intense.” P12 (F, 18) similarly described the feeling of having an unknown person send compliments, adding,

It really makes your day when someone sends you something, telling you—complimenting you on one of your features anonymously. ‘Cause you’re kind of wondering, who could it be, who is this? And you never really know. But it’s great.

Of course, not knowing the poster’s identity amplified the salience of uncivil comments or insults shared on the platform as well. Not knowing who posted an unkink question was disconcerting to many, especially given the distressing possibility that the hurtful comments might have originated from trusted friends. P4 (F, 15) explained,

It can actually be anyone. They can be your close friends . . . And then they can have so much hate towards you, but they don’t want to tell you, they don’t want to hurt you. But they hurt you in [Ask.fm], they tell you these hurtful questions . . . because they don’t have the guts to tell you in person how they feel.

This notion that anonymity enabled the true expression of feelings otherwise inappropriate for face-to-face exchange was a common theme across participants.
lowered, and they felt more comfortable sharing content which might reveal qualities about the self they would rather keep private (such as questions about sex).

For instance, P1 (M, 16) described how the anonymity of Ask.fm allowed users, especially males, to make information requests that would be awkward to articulate in offline settings. P1 (M, 16) said certain questions were harder to ask offline, and that teenage male users “want to know things, but they don’t want people to know that [they] desire to know.” P1 (M, 16) went on to say

> It’s usually very weird, sexual things with girls . . . I think over 70% of the questions that are asked on there because they’re guys and they’re just trying to ask questions about [sex], and they obviously wouldn’t do it in real life, because that may be considered really weird.

P1 (M, 16) described the way in which a question or comment on Ask.fm could exist outside of its association with the asker—thus, protecting the asker from reputation threats or attacks by peers:

> The distinction between Ask and real life is that usually in a conversation when you ask a question . . . it has certain implications for how people view you, and the response also matters for you, because you’re tied to that conversation then. But, on a website like this, you ask a question and then you’re no longer a part of it, because it will never say who you are . . . The question exists, but you don’t exist with it . . . It just changes the dynamic of questions, because they’re no longer tied to any real thing. They’re just free-floating questions, which just changes how they function, because they’re no longer held back by people’s—I don’t know whether or not it’s their actual moral character or just how they want their moral character to be perceived or [aspects of] their own personality that they don’t want to let show in certain public spaces.

In another example, participants described using the site to confirm or disconfirm social information circulating in offline settings like schools. As one participant noted, “whenever there’s a rumor, there’s usually multiple people that ask the same person about it [on Ask.fm]” (P9, F, 18). Within a school or social group, users often knew one another’s usernames, so platform practices could be embedded in offline social networks and interactions, enabling the site to be used for social information-seeking purposes. Participants described several rumor-related Ask.fm practices, such as following people to be “in the know” (P15, F, 17) and asking questions to acquire new information and gossip, as when one participant told us, “I don’t think people really address rumors face-to-face anymore, and it’s more over social media, because you don’t want to feel stupid asking the question face-to-face if it wasn’t real” (P21, F, 18). In another example of using the platform to circumvent social expectations about appropriate behavior, P12 (F, 18) explained that she sometimes would ask herself anonymous questions in order to directly defuse rumors: “I’d ask myself something and I would explain, ‘Oh, this is what happened’, in order to show, ‘Hey, I’m innocent in this. Not my fault’.” This disassociation between users and their content meant that a wider range of topics could be addressed than in face-to-face settings, encompassing subjects that participants felt would be awkward, embarrassing, or inappropriate to express through other channels. For instance, in talking about why she gave compliments anonymously through the platform, P12 (F, 18) explained,

> I would get probably a different reaction if I said this face-to-face to them. I’d probably get an “Oh, thank you, I guess” . . . instead of on Ask.fm, it’s more, “Oh, thank you so much, this is so nice of you!” I guess people would probably just be a little bit more wary if I said that face-to-face to them, or confused.

In this description, both the anonymous and mediated nature of Ask.fm interactions was salient, in that a face-to-face interaction would be awkward (e.g., “thank you, I guess”) and would mean the asker was identified. Our participants capitalized on the disassociation between user and content on Ask.fm to ask for advice on sensitive matters or from unfamiliar acquaintances. For example, P17 (F, 18) describes the anonymity as a “security blanket”:

> If they said they had problems with their boyfriend, I don’t think they would want to reveal who they are because they wouldn’t want people to know that they have that problem . . . If their Mom was sick, if something bad had happened to them and they really don’t want to reveal who they are, they don’t need to . . . Like a security blanket, almost.

Participants also reported feeling more comfortable initiating interactions anonymously with people they didn’t know offline, as explained by P6 (M, 16): “maybe it was somebody that I have never talked to before and they didn’t want to seem weird if they just came out to me in person. So they just felt more comfortable with this online, doing it.” Similarly, P19 (F, 18) observed questions about college admission directed at high school seniors, presumably weak ties whom the asker would be hesitant to approach face-to-face.

This perceived freedom from social norms also contributed to negative social dynamics on the platform, as when participants received socially inappropriate or hurtful questions and statements. The ability to use anonymity to circumvent social consequences manifested in what some participants described as a lack of accountability, contributing to what they described as “mean” comments. As P1 (M, 16) explained,

> The other aspect of it would be trying to make people feel uncomfortable or insulting them, and I guess maybe people don’t do that in public, just because it’s more work to have to actually deal with it. Because the benefit of being anonymous on [Ask.fm] is you can back out whenever you desire, and if you are shown to be the person that’s under fault for some reason, you can easily back out from it. There’s no tying you to what happened.
Similarly, P8 (M, 15) noted,

[On Ask.fm] you could ask anyone any question without any kind of worry of, “Am I going to be judged for asking this or suggesting this?” A lot of times, people would suggest really negative things like—or even straight out say, “You’re stupid,” or, “I think you’re ugly.” . . . And I think that was probably the main problem with the app, was people being able to do that and not have to face any kind of repercussions for it.

Anonymous communication was described by some of our participants as “hiding behind a screen,” as illustrated by this quote from P18 (M, 18):

Yeah, it’s one of those, “Oh, I can say anything I want because I’m behind a screen.” . . . [It] gave people the power to say anything they wanted or any judgment or any idea . . . they had about someone to their face except through a screen.

Managing Identity and Self-Presentation

A third theme emerging from our data involved issues of identity management and self-presentation. Participants strategically used anonymous interaction to achieve social goals while protecting their reputation. For instance, P8 (M, 15; “Sam”) gave a hypothetical example of how he could use anonymity to chastise his friends about having forgotten his birthday by pretending to be a third party:

I would subtly suggest, “You forgot about Sam’s birthday,” . . . to guilt trip them, because I would want that attention, like them to wish me happy birthday . . . That was almost my subtle way of lashing out at them, because I wanted them to do something that they didn’t do.

By asking this question anonymously, the user was able to remind his friends to acknowledge his birthday without experiencing the social cost of doing this directly.

In another example of impression management, users strategically controlled whether certain questions showed up on their page or not by either answering or deleting them. In dealing with uncivil comments, participants appreciated the ability to control the visibility of posts on their page and described two primary strategies for dealing with them. In some cases, participants simply ignored questions: P11 (F, 14) said, “I just deleted those questions . . . I just didn’t want to make a bad impression on social media when nobody knows who’s asking the question.” In other instances, participants would answer the question—which meant it was displayed on their page—but with a nonchalant comment that conveyed a lack of engagement: P14 (M, 18) would reply “Ha ha, whatever”; P18 (M, 18) tried to create funny responses that would result in “likes” from observers; and P9 (F, 18) used “OK” to convey her indifference to mean or negative comments. She elaborated on her strategies for dealing with mean comments:

I would answer them unless they were just really vulgar and I didn’t want people reading that because it’s just gross, but I would answer most of them, and I would just answer them with a sarcastic comment, or just, “Okay,” or something that would probably make the person who asked it angry that it didn’t affect me.

In another case, P12 (F, 18) received compliments about her soccer-playing ability that she found supportive. She purposefully refrained from answering them because she did not want them displayed to her followers, which might give others the impression she was being boastful:

Like, “Hey look! I’ve gotten this saying that I’m good at this and I want to show you, everyone, that people think that I’m good at this!” I didn’t want to brag about it, so I didn’t answer it. I just kept it.

By not answering the submission, she retained the ability to revisit the compliment herself, while avoiding the perception that she wanted to broadcast it.

Initiating and Developing Relationships

Fourth, our data suggest that participants employed anonymity when they wanted to test relational compatibility and connect with individuals outside their usual social circle. In some cases, anonymous interactions on the site developed into closer relationships or led to face-to-face interactions, and many participants described using the site to initiate or develop friendships or romantic relationships. For some, this was a key motivation for using the site. When asked why he used Ask.fm, P7 (M, 18) reported, “To ask questions, to find things out about people that I don’t usually talk to, to make friendships.” The site was also used to validate existing social relationships. For instance, users would be asked anonymously for a list of their close friends or whom they found attractive, their answers serving as a form of social currency and confirmation.

Participants described conducting compatibility tests via anonymous interaction on the site, through questions such as “What do you do in your free time? What kind of music do you like?” Kind of compatibility questions, feelers to see it they’re actually a cool person or not” (P3, F, 15). Similarly, P7 (M, 18) said sharing information on the site made the future interactions easier:

Basically, you’d use Ask or some other social media site to start the conversation, and then, after a few questions, or after you know that they’re interested in talking to you, or that you’re interested in talking to them, you’d ask for a phone number, and then you’d just transfer it to your phone . . . You get the weird questions out of the way . . . so you can have real, true conversations with people on your phone. [It] weeds out the people that you wouldn’t really be interested in talking to.
He went on to describe how relationships developed on the site, moving from anonymous compatibility testing to eventually “hanging out” in person:

Use it to make people see you as interesting or see you as cool, and get their phone number, and talk to them, keep talking to them and then they hang out. And you could ask a girl a question, without them judging you. You could ask them anything you wanted to, without them [thinking], “Oh, this kid’s weird for asking that question.”

Engaging in anonymous uncertainty reduction activities enabled users to avoid uncomfortable feelings if they discovered they were not compatible with someone with whom they were interacting. P13 (F, 18) said she would “maybe first ask them anonymous questions, so they won’t know who you are in case they react negatively to your question. You’d rather just not have that awkward tension between y’all afterwards.”

Relationship development on Ask.fm, where relationships often started online and moved offline, was one domain in which we saw clear evidence of how site use was shaped by and shaped offline social structures. The socially embedded nature of Ask.fm interactions was also evident when participants admitted to trying to guess the identity of their anonymous commenters. Some of our participants mentioned attempt to discern others’ identities, either through direct questioning or by assessing the sparse cues that did exist, such as linguistic idiosyncrasies. For instance, one participant knew who sent her a compliment because it included a specific word (“woo”) used by one of her acquaintances; another thought she could identify someone that sent her a rude comment because the commenter used “4” instead of “for.”

Learning about the Self

Finally, other affordances of the platform enabled some participants to learn about themselves through the process of answering questions in textual form: the anonymous context shaped the answers participants provided and the kinds of questions they received. Our data suggest that the freedom to engage in different kinds of expression supported identity exploration and articulation processes. For instance, P4 (F, 15) enjoyed answering the “question of the day”—a question posed to each user by the site itself—because this gave her an opportunity to write about her feelings and opinions in ways not possible in other environments. She tried to write in detail on Ask.fm because it was “the only time that I can say my opinion, and I can make it long.” She explained that writing on Ask.fm was different than offline conversations:

If a person asks you, you just have to make it short because they wouldn’t want to listen to your whole story of how your day was. And Facebook, no one would want to ask me . . . On Ask, I can actually say so much of how my day was. I can actually say it in detail, without people saying, “You’re annoying me, just stop saying so much.” . . . At school they ask you for your opinion. But it’s the opinion that the teacher asks you to take . . . I love writing so much, and so [on Ask.fm], I find the questions that are really interesting and that I know that I can write a lot about. (P4, F, 15)

Participants described learning about aspects of the self through interactions on the site, whether through comments made by other people, their own reactions to questions they received, or retrospective engagement with their own content. These instances of self-knowledge ranged from mundane information about the self (e.g., P9 [F, 18] was asked why she did not blink when she listened to people, which she then confirmed through observation) to more meaningful insights (e.g., P9 [F, 18] also learned she could be very defensive; P6 [M, 16] was told he was good at giving advice). P11 (F, 14) described the way in which the questions on the site prompted her to think about her relationship with her sister and to try to improve it:

Some of the questions, they actually make me think about things that I did or things that I have done in the past . . . I have a twin sister, and oftentimes people just ask me about that . . . So oftentimes, I have to think about what I do with my sister . . . That actually makes me learn a lot. Like, how can I improve myself, and how can I improve my interactions with my sister, because we fight a lot. (P11, F, 14)

In response to a question about what she learned from questions about her sister, she explained,

[Before] I answer a question, I think back about what my sister and I have done and what we do . . . and I think, “Oh, how have I treated her?” or “What have I done bad to her?” “What have I done good to her?” And I kind of learn from myself, because without that question, I just probably wouldn’t have thought of “What have I done like in the past and stuff?” And from that question . . . I learned how to treat her better and tolerate her. (P11, F, 14)

Others described perusing old Ask.fm content to look for changes in how they answered questions over time. P17 (F, 18) said she “learned a lot about the person I used to be . . . going back and looking at how I answered things.” This act of viewing their historical written traces allowed users to reflect on how their opinions, writing style, and other qualities evolved over time.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that anonymous communication has the potential to scaffold processes through which adolescents work toward critical developmental goals, such as
negotiating complex social interactions, developing relationships with peers, and exploring their identities. Anonymous interactions, as afforded by Ask.fm, allowed adolescents to circumvent socially imposed restrictions on their activities—creating opportunities to get to know new people, to request information or advice, and to learn about themselves.

Adolescents experience an elevated need for social connection and learning about the self (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Our data suggest that selectively engaging in anonymous interaction on Ask.fm enabled our participants to engage in safe exploration of their social relationships and identities, while still allowing them to disavow specific utterances in order to mitigate self-presentational risks. Importantly, many of the interactions described by our participants were embedded within existing offline social networks, such as high school “crowds.” Anonymity that could be selectively and strategically employed allowed users to calibrate the revelation of identity information as they engaged in relationship development, identity formation, and impression management processes within a wider circle of known peers—a principal source of influence during adolescence. Simultaneously, anonymity enabled interactions that would otherwise be threatening to adolescents’ emerging identities; our participants developed strategies for managing these threats, such as nudging friends to engage in desired behavior.

Although many forms of social media revolve around a single mode of identity expression, Ask.fm enables both a stable pseudonymous profile and anonymous interactions with other users. The ability to toggle between asking a question with one’s pseudonym attached and doing so anonymously allows users to selectively and strategically engage in anonymity to meet specific social and identity goals.

Circumventing Social Expectations and the Development of Social Relationships

This work suggests that anonymity is an important mechanism for information gathering about new or little-known acquaintances in known networks, enabling adolescents to reduce uncertainty about their peers. Social relationships develop over time and through a process of uncertainty reduction. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), first introduced by Berger and Calabrese (1975), argues that social actors are motivated to reduce uncertainty about strangers or acquaintances through interpersonal communication processes—for example, the initial sharing of simple biographical or demographic information between strangers. Over time, this allows interlocutors to reduce their uncertainty and better predict others’ beliefs or behaviors, increasing the likelihood that a relationship will form (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

Computer-mediated communication affects these information acquisition processes in novel ways: most notably, individuals can engage in a wider range of passive information-seeking strategies—such as visiting the Facebook profile of a new acquaintance—rather than relying on interactive strategies such as asking directly or questioning mutual friends (Tong, 2013). As Tong (2013) argues, SNSs “obviate the need for direct, interactive strategies by providing inconspicuous routes for information gathering” (p. 789). Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, and Sunnafrank (2002) introduce a four-part typology of information-seeking strategies, which vary in directness: (1) interactive (involving direct interaction with the target), (2) active (acquiring information from other individuals without interacting directly with the target), (3) extractive (non-interactive strategies such as using a search engine), and (4) passive (acquiring information through observations, such as viewing a user profile or reading previously posted messages). Our findings highlight the ways in which social media platforms that enable multiple forms of identity expression complicate and destabilize these traditional information gathering categories: Our participants blended several strategies at once, in order to reduce uncertainty about their peers, while protecting their own social position (e.g., by interacting directly—but anonymously—with a target). Because the technical affordances of Ask.fm allow users to remain anonymous during the early stages of the information gathering process, adolescents may covertly and safely engage in uncertainty reduction strategies that may then increase the likelihood that a future relationship will form (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

Our findings suggest that the ways in which adolescents engage in selectively anonymous interaction with known peers constitutes a shift from themes seen in previous work on adolescence and anonymity online, which has focused on interactions with strangers (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). Adolescents, however, are particularly sensitive to the importance of offline social structures and thus may strategically employ anonymous interaction in different ways than adults. This work suggests some useful extensions of Social Information Processing (SIP) theory (Walther, 1996), in that users attempted to identify anonymous askers based on sparse linguistic cues or other identity detritus. Future work could explore how SIP might apply to situations in which impression formation processes unfold in an environment that is nominally anonymous but which, in practice, often supports interactions between individuals who know something about one another or may know one another offline. Similarly, platforms that enable selective anonymity offer scholars a new context for exploring how users express identity in these spaces—and whether relationships that begin in an anonymous context are bound by the same interpersonal processes identified in other work on modality switching (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015).

Ask.fm enabled our participants to circumvent social expectations in other ways as well. Existing literature on the benefits of anonymous interaction focuses primarily on its implications for more honest self-disclosure. Our data
echo these themes: participants described anonymous content as performing a social task, such as information confirmation, without being linked to an identified user—or in the words of one participant, “The question exists, but you don’t exist with it.” However, our findings extend this work by surfaced other benefits specific to selective anonymous interaction among a network of known peers. Participants reported using anonymous questions to diffuse rumors, for instance, or to ask questions that would reinforce friendship bonds or possibly initiate a dating relationship (e.g., “Who do you think is cute?”). This ability to circumvent expectations for normative social behavior allowed adolescents to execute necessary social functions without risking impression management concerns or social norm violations.

Textual, Anonymous Interaction and Learning about the Self

Ask.fm has several affordances that allowed adolescent users to learn about themselves. The focus on writing itself—especially longer narratives that would be less normative on sites such as Twitter or Facebook—permitted some participants to engage in writing practices that they would not otherwise, or to compare their responses over time in order to chart the evolution of their ideas and emotions. Two participants described the Q&A format on Ask.fm as more conducive to longer and more well-thought-out responses than Facebook or casual face-to-face conversations. Questions from peers may also contribute to identity-forming processes: for instance, questions from peers asking for advice about sports may reinforce an adolescent’s identity as an athlete. Importantly, the platform gave users control over which questions (and therefore answers) would be associated with their pseudonymous profile, thus providing another channel for identity expression as well as a way to deflect “mean” comments. These benefits to identity expression are especially pertinent to this age group, given the developmental advantages of successful identity formation during adolescence (Collins & Steinberg, 2006).

Identity work was also facilitated by the salience of anonymous content (such as insults or compliments), which were perceived to be more authentic than comments from identified peers. Adolescents are highly sensitized to social norms around appropriateness, as indicated by their assertion that friends would feel obligated to say kind things in an identified context. These anonymous comments, however, were shared without expectation of reciprocity or acknowledgement, and thus bolstered self-esteem in ways that compliments from identified peers did not.

Conclusion

As we see the growth of platforms such as After School, Yik Yak, and Ask.fm on high school and college campuses, it is important to consider how online environments that afford anonymity can complement existing offline social structures, to the benefit of adolescent users in particular. Peer relationships during adolescence, especially in high school, are often complicated by boundaries imposed by the perceived constraints of the existing social hierarchy (Horn, 2006; Kinney, 1993). As such, anonymous platforms embedded in offline networks may help adolescents overcome perceived social restrictions and safely reach out to peers outside of their high school cliques.

Our analysis suggests that the ability to engage in selectively anonymous interaction may enable adolescents to engage in important developmental processes such as identity expression and feedback, uncertainty reduction and compatibility testing of new potential social ties, and navigating a complex social landscape. Participants pointed to several benefits of the opportunity to purposefully disassociate some—but not all—interactions from their known identities, particularly in regard to sharing and requesting information. Anonymous interaction also allows adolescents to learn about themselves: how others perceive them, what their own opinions are, and how they evolve over time. These findings suggest that the ability to selectively engage in anonymous interaction—particularly among a network of known peers—has important implications for adolescents’ identity and social development, allowing adolescents to better navigate social contexts that may not be possible to fully explore in environments that afford less flexible identity expression. In the present online landscape, dominated by real-name social media sites such as Facebook, platforms that afford multiple forms of identity expression may offer adolescents a safer space for learning about others, about the world, and about themselves.

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Note

1. In total, 10,000 users were emailed, but many of these emails may not have reached their intended recipients due to invalid email addresses, inactive accounts, and other issues.

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**Author Biographies**

Nicole B. Ellison (Ph.D., University of Southern California) is a Professor in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. Her work explores how interpersonal relationship development, information-sharing, and identity processes unfold in social network sites and other online spaces.

Lindsay Blackwell (B.A., University of Michigan) is a PhD student of Information at the University of Michigan. Her research interests include anonymity, online communities, and online harassment.

Cliff Lampe (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is an Associate Professor of Information at the University of Michigan. His research interests include prosocial interpersonal outcomes and collective outcomes of social interaction via information and communication technology.

Penny Trieu (B.A., Randolph College) is a PhD student of Information at the University of Michigan. Her research concerns how interpersonal and identity processes unfold on social media.