

Digital identity and the quantified-self

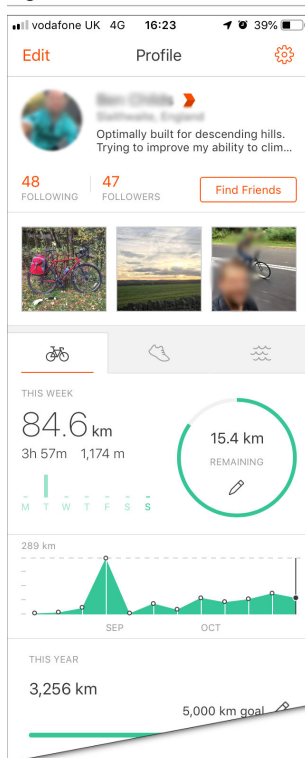
Introduction

The digital platform Strava is a fitness-focussed social network where users can record, analyse and share physical activities – primarily cycling, running and swimming. More than 15 million activities are uploaded every week from a user-base of 35 million Strava ‘athletes’ from 195 countries (Strava 2018c). I use Strava to monitor and analyse my cycling activity – at the time of writing, 3,315km during 2018. As a context for self-reflection of my digital identity I will explore my engagement with Strava over a period of 7 days, during which I uploaded 5 activities representing 192km/9hrs of riding - 4 commutes and 1 structured training ride.

An assessment of my digital identity on Strava

Strava positions itself as a fitness social network where athletes are constructed as ranging from keen amateurs to professionals, interested primarily in the ability to monitor, analyse and improve performance in quantifiable terms but with increasing emphasis on sharing and engaging with the Strava community (Strava 2018b; Stragier et al 2015). Whilst self-monitoring and analysis is not a

Figure 1: Profile



new practice, it has increased hugely due to the ease and accuracy of digital self-monitoring in relation to health, personal improvement and self-reflection. Digital self-monitoring is now commonly seen as part of the ‘quantified-self’ movement, founded by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly from Wired magazine in 2007 (Lupton 2013). Physical activity is the most prominent subject of the quantified-self movement (Lupton 2013). However, Stragier et al (2015, p120) suggest that “people’s motivations for sharing their own physical activity with their peers remains an under-examined topic in scholarly research”.

Strava conforms to academic definitions of a social network due to features such as the ability to “construct a public or semi-public profile” (Kennedy 2016, p21). A Strava athlete’s profile (Figure 1) consists of

name, avatar and short biography, with additional performance-related metadata such as gender, age, weight and maximum heart rate. Whilst scholarship has demonstrated that digital identity can be defined by a network user's profile or their related (meta)data (Kennedy 2016; Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013; Turow 2012), Strava athletes primarily express their identity by uploading a digital representation of their physical exercise as a Strava 'activity'. Both the self-quantified data and subjective framing of each activity conform to Poletti and Rak's (2014, p6) study of digital identities, "the self as an effect of representation", and exemplify that whilst identity

Figure 2: Activity

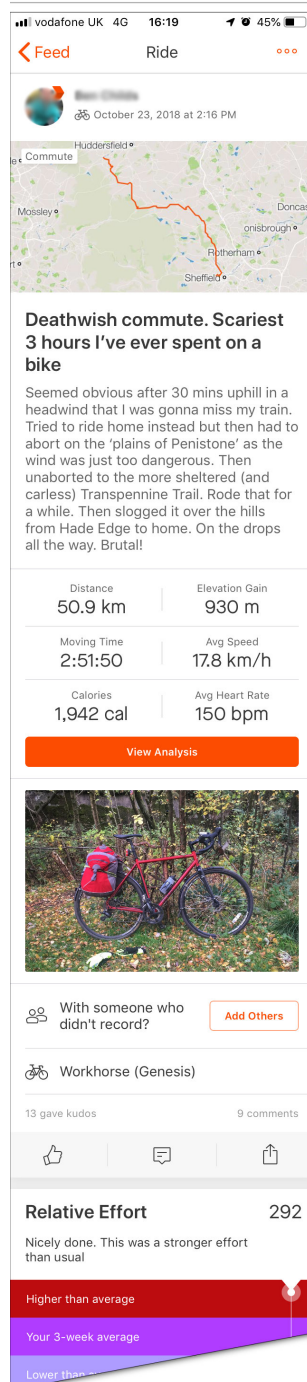


Figure 3: Statistics

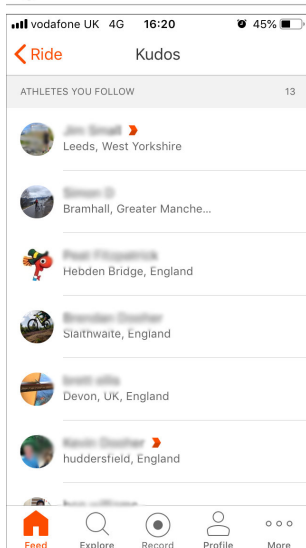


is construed through narrative writing, it can also be defined through other forms of data, media and interaction.

Using the Strava mobile app, an athlete uploads an activity (Figure 2) containing quantified data such as time, distance and altitude gain, often including additional self-quantified data from equipment such as a Heart Rate Monitor or power meter (Figure 3). These explicit statistics represent an athlete's self-quantified performance. How an athlete describes the self-quantified activity contributes considerably to identity construction. For example, during this study, when I chose to blandly title an activity 'Bike/Train/Bike to Uni' and tagged it as a 'Commute', I inferred not only that this is 'merely' a functional ride but also that I am on my (slower) commuter bike, probably hindered by traffic and carrying luggage. I am asking not to be judged on the performance of my shared self-quantified data but that I'm a cyclist who, despite the

autumn weather, is persisting with cycle commuting. Furthermore, whilst 'Uni to Slawit chippy' is also tagged as a commute, at 54.2km it should be recognised as a very long cycle commute and hence I expect my followers to recognise the effort involved. The quantified-self data demonstrates credibility and allows me to create a title that juxtaposes the 'anti-fitness' aspect of terminating at a fast-food takeaway, expressing a humorous side to my identity by subverting Strava's aspirational brand statements such as "Your goal is our mission" (Strava 2018a). Conversely, my training ride titled 'Hi-intensity hour', with a description using training terminology such as '2 x 20 mins at Threshold', signifies this is a structured training activity, conveying that I am also serious about improving my performance.

Figure 4: Kudos

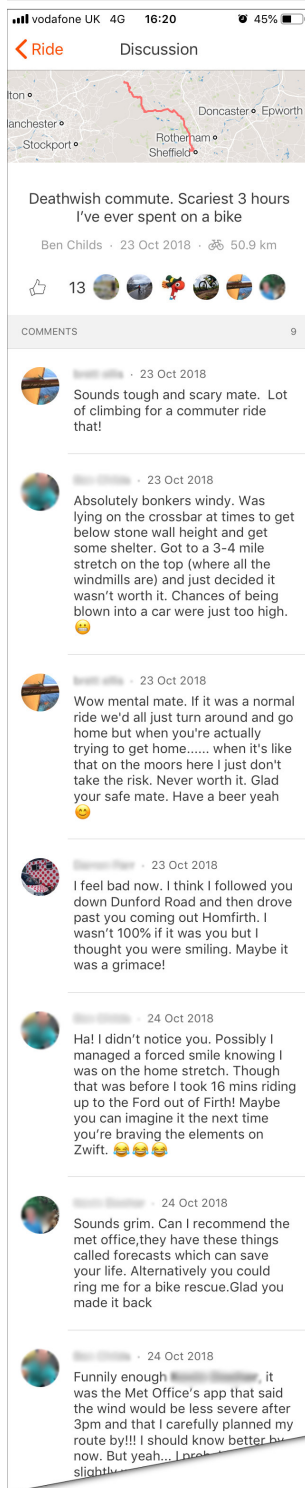


Later in the study I shared an activity during a day of high winds when very few athletes shared cycling activities. The title 'Deathwish commute. Scariest 3 hours I've spent on a bike' declares this is an extreme activity and expects recognition and validation from my network. Strava athletes validate an activity by giving 'kudos' (Figure 4), "which is similar to hitting the 'like' button on Facebook" (Smith and Treem 2017, p139). Strava values promote an ethos of positivity and encouragement, so self-gratifying titles declaring impressive personal performance or recognising extreme effort are acceptable. My expectation of the viewer, to recognise

and reward my extreme effort, is similar to the behaviour of users sharing selfies on social media who "produce and distribute material to court viewer interaction" (Senft and Baym, 2015, p1594). Additionally, my activity title attributes experience and authenticity to my identity by implying that to recognise this as an extreme scenario I must have a wealth of previous experience to compare against.

Giving kudos is the main method for recognising and validating another athlete's activities; more in-depth athlete interaction occurs through commenting on activities (Figure 5). When I create comments on other athlete's activities or reply to comments on my activities I further express identity. My 'Deathwish commute' activity received comments from three athletes, each validating my effort whilst checking I was OK. Each of the commenters are known to me offline, so my replies

Figure 5: Comments



demonstrated a more personal identity contrasting with my 'hardened cyclist' identity conveyed through the quantifiable data.

A Strava activity can further be described by adding photos (Figure 2), as I did on 'Deathwish commute'. The subject and composition of the photo explicitly expresses identity through my bike's brand/type and the situation of the photo – but also implicitly acknowledges that I allowed myself time off the bike to take the photo. By adding a photo to the activity, I reveal that even during the ride I was considering embellishing the activity on Strava, thereby requiring me to imagine my audience whilst also inadvertently "giving off" (Goffman 1956) a digital identity that craves peer feedback (Baym and boyd, 2012).

Conclusion

Digital identity on Strava is constructed through the continual act of athletes uploading representations of their physical activities. The measurable and analysable aspect of an athlete's identity, defined through self-quantified data, is subjectively framed by written titles, descriptions, photos and the interaction between athletes. My self-assessment study witnessed how I fit Strava's construction of an engaged self-reflective athlete whilst demonstrating recognised methods of digital identity construction.

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