



Managing Missionary Identity in the Digital Age: How Missionaries Utilize Digital Media among Multiple Social Groups

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Abstract

The way that missionaries manage their identities has changed significantly since the days they mailed out several printed newsletters a year to a small audience “back home.” The space for this negotiation of identity has moved from private to public; and the interlocutors who access these blogs, emails, and posts are no longer homogenous. This original research study uses quantitative and qualitative methods to understand how missionaries avow the multiple layers of their identities in the digital age. I conclude that missionary updates are encoded along indexical “cultural scripts” that can be decoded idiosyncratically by various audiences.

Keywords

identity management, social media, missionaries, semiotics, cultural scripts

Browsing through Facebook, I saw a picture of a missionary enjoying a cappuccino at a South American café, with the caption “so great to be back in town.” The next post was a photo of the same friend’s three adorable children at a mixed martial arts class. Further down the “newsfeed” he had uploaded a video clip where he was (impressively) preaching in Spanish. And a fourth post contained a rant he had re-posted about a currently hot topic in US politics. This eclectic mixture of posts from my friend impressed on me how significantly the social media phenomenon has blurred the lines between personal life, missionary work, leisure, and even political discourse.

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I designed a research project to explore how missionaries avow the multiple layers of their identities in the digital age. First, I used chain-sampling to conduct a survey (discussed below) to gather information about how missionaries are currently communicating with their social groups. I discovered that missionaries are no longer restricted to a few unidirectional printed mailings a year; digital communication is frequent, but brief. I then analyzed 500 social media posts¹ by missionaries to understand how these cross-cultural workers present their families, work, and values through photos and text, and concluded that missionary identity management follows “cultural scripts” that are intelligible to the missionaries and one or more of their audiences; yet the various audiences may interpret these scripts differently. Last, I interviewed six Protestant missionaries between the ages of 30 and 50 who are “frequent-posters,” in order to gain their perspective on how they use digital media to engage these “cultural scripts.”

How Missionary Updates are Related to Identity Management

People communicate for a variety of purposes (such as changing behaviors, negotiating prices, teaching a skill); but all communication is, at one level, an act of managing identity (Scollon and Scollon, 2011: 68). As I scanned missionary blogs and tweets, and then interviewed frequent-posters, I tried to uncover how missionaries were managing their identities through various digital platforms. The themes that emerged from the data, such as “validating the work,” “demonstrating the exotic,” “chronicling the family,” and so on, all involve an underlying act of communicating in ways that are expected by the missionaries’ social groups. Expectancy violation theory teaches us that any social interaction, being culturally embedded, is efficacious as long as we meet the expectations of our interlocutors. But the violation of such expectancies hinders the cultivation of relationships (Jackson, 2014: 241).

How Communication Follows “Cultural Scripts”

For communication to be possible within a social network, the communication acts follow predictable “scripts.” Scripts, or schema, are the “generalized collections of the knowledge that we store in memory through experiences in our own culture” (Nishida, 2005: 404). For example, Americans have a script for ordering in a restaurant, or for negotiating the price of a car, or for proposing marriage. Missionaries in this research project seem to be following various scripts that make sense to their multiple audiences. In a broad sense, Americans share a cultural script we could call “updating the grandparents” which contains short communication units about the growth of the young ones. And Christians widely recognize a script for soliciting prayer requests (usually related to sicknesses, for example). But missionaries are also beholden to some specialized scripts for updating financial supporters on the progress of the mission work, or for demonstrating the exotic nature of their work. Missionaries enact the role of “exotic other” by demonstrating the “otherness” of their experiences in a foreign setting. They do this by blogging about exotic foods and unusual pets, enigmatic

religions, and the tremendous needs in their host cultures. Missionaries also enact the role of “effective worker” by telling about relationships they have formed, or by richly describing Christian worship in their host cultures.

Missionaries use cultural scripts in their communication with their audiences because their mission work is only made possible within social networks. Ting-Toomey’s (2005) theory of identity management argues that “the core dynamics of people’s group membership identities and personal identities are formed via symbolic communication with others” (218). Communication is achieved when “a joint function of both communicators successfully meet all these mutual identity needs, expectations, attunements and cravings” (222).

In previous decades, these scripts were all enacted, a few times a year, in the form of printed missionary newsletters. Nowadays, missionaries are managing their various identities multiple times a day, among multiple audiences.

Are Rumors of the Death of the Printed Missionary Letter Exaggerated?

Since a fixed population of “people who read missionary news” is impossible to determine, I used “chain sampling” to have participants identify people who they thought would participate, and who read missionary news.² Five of 217 respondents were excluded since they had not read any missionary news in the three months prior to the survey. An implicit bias in this sample is related to the fact that participants were recruited online, so those who avoid digital media were excluded from participation.

Among the participants, 92% said they had read at least one email update from a missionary in the past three months, only 60% had read a printed letter from a missionary during that same span of time. Nearly half of the people who said they follow missionary updates are not getting their updates in a hard-copy format.

The survey used “adaptive logic” to further ask questions of participants who said they had engaged in missions in the past year.³ Of those, 54% said they hadn’t sent out a single printed letter in the past three months, whereas 82% said they had sent at least one email update in that timeframe. These survey results suggest that the cultural shift from print to digital is impacting the missionary communication world as well.

Missionaries Use the Communication Networks That Strategically Allow Them to “Occasion” Their Identity

Higgins (2011) argues that to have an identity, one must be speaking, be spoken to, or about, and be “cast” into a category associated with characteristics or features (294). Missionary identity, like all identities, must be “occasioned.” That is, the roles must actually be enacted to be meaningful. Managing identity as a missionary requires taking on the expected roles that people “cast” for the part of missionary, and requires interlocutors who recognize and interact with those roles. To do this, first of all, missionaries must be fluent in the same mode of communication as their audience.

Some participants told me that their use of social media was directed by their supporters. One was told, "Post frequently and briefly, instead of sending us long, sporadic email updates." Since millennials are spending as much as nine hours a day on social media (Tsukayama, 2015), they are used to hearing from the members of their social networks repeatedly, not occasionally. Frequent-posters recognize that missionary identity must be frequently avowed in order to compete with this barrage of other messages. One missionary explained,

Pastor Rick Warren said, "The vision is lost every thirty days." So we post at least once a month, even if nothing is happening, so people don't forget the vision. It's like what they say about radio: You don't want silence.

The quantitative and qualitative data in this study both indicate that missionaries diversify their digital communication channels in order to reach as many people as possible. One US-based missionary told me,

We use the layered approach. Marketers say it takes five different "touches" to reach people. We use Instagram, Facebook, Constant Contact [an email program], snail mail, and occasional personal notes.

The frequent-posters in my study know that many of their (especially younger) friends will not engage in the in-depth updates, devotionals on their blog sites, so they post shorter "teasers" on Facebook with a link to their newest blog entries. Just in case some members of their social network are not on Facebook, they also tweet the blog link on Twitter. And just in case nobody is tweeting anymore, they may put the same link on Instagram and SnapChat. Some are also using Skype or other video conferencing to stay connected. They are even posting videos on YouTube and linking these to their other social media platforms, since members of their social groups spend around 23 minutes a day watching internet video (Marshall, 2014).

The majority of people who indicated they are interested in missionary updates are viewing missionary blogs in addition to these briefer posts on social media. In the survey I conducted for this article, 74% of participants had read at least one blog entry by a missionary in the last three months. And 44% who did mission work in the past year said they had composed at least one blog entry in the past three months.

Because social media posts are short (and therefore, tend to be shallow), many people are still using blogs, which allow a significantly longer space for messaging, to further control the way their online identity is branded. Blogging.com's research on 1000 blogs revealed that there were 42 million blogs by 2012. Bloggers upload 500,000 new posts a day with 400,000 new comments every day, and as many as twenty-five billion blog pages are viewed monthly by 329 million readers (Rampton, 2012).

There are so many missionaries using blogs, in fact, that I was easily able to access 500 missionary blog posts which I was able to download and analyze for this study. Missionary blogs abound on the web with names like "Armstrongs Abroad," and "What's cookin' in Tanzania." Others were more poetic with names like "A dry and weary land: The Wallaces in Africa."

The “Fuzziness” of Digital Communication Impacts Identity Management

Participants in my research said they are aware of the blurred boundaries between their personal and professional identities on social media, as well as the blurring of their audiences. Their digital presence is connecting people in their host cultures with their friends (and even friends of friends) back home. For example, one missionary said his Costa Rican friend posted to his “wall” in Spanish, and a member of an ethnolinguistic people group where he serves in Papua New Guinea responded to the photo in the post. To address this somewhat jarring juxtaposition of identities (and social groups), some maintain separate Facebook accounts that are specifically for their work.

But the way in which missionaries blur the multiple aspects of their online identities actually presents a great opportunity. One participant explained,

For some of my [Facebook] friends, the only place they will ever hear about missionary work is on their “wall”—and only because it is scattered along with other postings that my friends find more fascinating, like what I ate for breakfast, or how many watermelons I slashed in the game Candy Crush.

In the digital age, communication spans to an audience that is so unpredictable and large, it increasingly includes strangers who stumble across the blogs or read the “re-tweets.” One participant told me that after a stranger came across her blog, he contacted her and began sending substantial support for her mission work. In my own experience several years ago, an elderly man found my blog and prayed for my family and me daily until we finished our work overseas.

In the digital age, missionary identity management is multi-purpose, since it is enacted among multiple audiences. In addition to updates, online “scripts” include posting interesting cultural information, devotionals, family updates, and information on how to support the work or even how to join the missionary’s organization.

Why Missionaries Turn to Digital Media to Manage Their Identities

Why are missionaries so actively managing their identities in cyberspace? Since posting to the internet is free, missionaries can put out an almost unlimited amount of information as frequently as they wish. The cost of a printed newsletter restricted the ability for missionaries to express their full identities as culture-learners, parents, friends, world-travelers, language-blunderers, food-connoisseurs, owners of exotic pets, as well as missionaries. And they just could not express all this in the traditional, occasional one-page printed newsletters.

Several missionaries in my study initially stated that the purpose of a digital presence is to update people on their work. But as I pushed further, I discovered missionaries were doing much more with their online presence. Their various audiences each have expectations on them to be engaging in various cultural scripts, including

validating the work, chronicling the family, their walk with God, and their prayer requests. I discuss each below.

Validating the Work

Several missionaries told me one of the main purposes for maintaining a digital presence is to provide validation to their supporters that they were, in fact, doing the work they set out to do. One participant explained,

We were sent out by the church. You know: “Out of sight out of mind?” But in reality we’re an extension of the church, so my goal is for people to feel connected to what is really their own ministry... We are their voice or an extension of them over here... It is right for the church to know what’s going on here.

A common trope in this cultural script is the missionary’s interaction with people in the host culture. One photo shows a young blonde woman walking in a field between two young Senegalese women. The caption reads, “Ministry through relationships is our goal.” Another shows an American woman holding a volleyball as she talks with an adorable three-year-old North African girl, and asks for prayer for “the children they are helping.”

When this cultural script is played out for those who support the missionaries with prayer and finances, it reflects their expectations regarding the results of the mission work. As one participant put it, he posts to “let supporters know they’re making a good investment.” My catalog of 500 missionary blog posts included stories of wheelchair distributions, mixing cement for buildings, digging wells, running sports camps, and certainly baptisms, workshops, and worship services. A typical example of a blog entry which follows this cultural script goes like this:

When dropping off the cookies at the local gas station, one of the cashiers asked me, “Why are you so Nice?” (She speaks really good English). It was at that point I got to tell her what it means to be a Christian and how to know Jesus. Yes right there in the gas station. She did not respond at that point but had much more to think about. (Mellinger, n.d.)

These stories validate the missionary’s work as an agent of change, and give supporters a better idea of what missionaries actually do. One blog posted a high-resolution close-up of a woman in hijab, practicing her knitting. The post reads,

We have continued to tweak our curriculum as well although its core still remains the same. We have strong vocational skills focus (sewing, knitting, embroidery and tailoring clothing) and also teach Math, French, health, hygiene, women’s health and childbearing, prenatal and postnatal and moral stories to become respected young women in their own community. (“Chronicles of our Journey,” n.d.)

At times the need to validate work can be fairly sensationalized, such as Willis’s (2015) report that “Over one million people accept[ed] Christ at single event in India.” While some highly suggestible readers in the USA may accept this claim, many

readers in India will be suspicious, or in the case of one journalist (Moksha, n.d.) who happened upon Willis's blog, infuriated.

On the other hand, sometimes validating the work means posting about failures and obstacles, including sicknesses and deaths within the mission team. Some of the participants in this study believed that their followers are a bit wary of exaggerated numbers of "decisions for Christ," and readers would rather see the day-to-day reality. Consider this post from a missionary who is teaching new agricultural methods:

Only three of these fifteen farmers have been successful ... which in percentage terms may sound like failure! But as we know from experience, the first year teaching something new and different is always tough. (Monger and Monger, 2017)

If social groups expect updates on the missionary work, they may also expect these reports to be realistic; and realist accounts include failures.

Chronicling the Family

Another script for missionaries is the chronicling of the family, from the mundane to the milestones. These posts include the highs and lows, the children (and parents) getting older, funny and inspirational experiences. One missionary blog chronicled the couple's pregnancy in photos and captions, including a photo of the healthy, screaming, swaddled newborn as he was still covered in vernix.

In fact, this may (surprisingly) be the dominant cultural script for many overseas Christian workers. One participant from Central America said, "I get 500 'views' for posts about my kids, and 200 'views' for posts about my ministry." Another ~~respondent~~ from the South Pacific said, "I got 300 'likes' when my kids tried basketball for the first time, but only 20 likes when I posted about a translation we made of a family story Bible in the vernacular." It is questionable whether "likes" actually indicate engagement or approval of a post or blog. A study by Youyou, Kosinski, and Stillwell (2015) of more than 86,000 social media users indicated that "liking" posts is a way for users to brand their own religious, ethnic, and gender identities, or to affirm some other aspect of their own public image.

As Ting-Toomey (2005) maintained, identity management is the way to make a connection with people; and the social networks of the missionaries seem to connect best when the communication follows the script of "family updates."

Demonstrating the Exotic

Overseas travelers also follow a script of communicating about exotic people, animals, and places. After all, what makes missionary updates captivating is the degree to which they portray life as different from what it is at home. Many formal missionary updates (on blogs) contained captioned pictures of unusual reptiles and birds, pristine beaches, and high mountain communities, and proof that the traveler has eaten unfamiliar foods. Missionaries leverage this curiosity in their postings for two reasons.

First, it confirms that they are immersed in their setting: They are indeed getting out of their houses to dive in and learn the language and culture. Second, it makes the exotic seem more familiar, so supporters can relate to life in the host culture. Posting scenes of worship or ministry at the corner café seem familiar.

Ministry is about people; and missionary work is a ministry among people who seem “different.” Missionary blogs often reify this difference by portraying the lives of people in a setting which is often very different than home. Consider the following photos that were posted publicly on missionary blogs in 2016:

- A high-resolution photo zoomed in on a teenage girl on a brown dirt road in arid East Africa as she carries two worn 20-gallon water containers;
- A portrait of a middle-aged rickshaw driver as he waits for a fare in a crowded business district in India;
- A close-up of a man with white hair and white beard, wearing sunglasses, with a blurred-out Afghani village behind him;
- A congregation in East Africa wearing suits, led by two priests who are wearing purple and yellow vestments, as they worship under a purple, gold, and red canopy;
- A Tanzanian boy of about six years carries firewood and looks back at the camera; his mother and two younger sisters are blurred in the background, further up the road; and,
- Four monks in saffron robes stand on a bridge over a river in rural Tibet.

These exoticizing photos often have captions that are directly related to the images. But as Peirce (1906: 495) noted, images, including photos, are often indexical. That is, the meanings of images are not immediately deduced by viewers; instead, cultural information is required for exegesis of these meanings.

Higgins (2011) has applied Peircian semiotics to identity management, arguing that the words and images we use to manage our identities are indexical: Our interlocutors know how to decode this type of speech because they share a similar cultural background that helps interpret those images.

Westerners likely decode photos of the exotic as evidence that the missionaries live in an unfamiliar cultural setting, where they must devote themselves to learning the culture—a process that requires flexibility and empathy, not to mention prayer. But other audiences (including the Tanzanian boy with the firewood, or the Tibetan monks) are also finding the photos they post, and will likely ascribe different meanings to these exoticizing photos.

Missionaries also demonstrate the exotic by posting about the amazing wildlife in their foreign contexts. One blog shows a missionary and her daughter in front of two rhinoceroses. The cameras around their necks indicate this is not an everyday experience for the pair; but the photo still validates that they are living in an exotic place. Other blog posts include:

- A man kneeling on the back of a large brown elephant;

- One missionary took a selfie in front of several small Asian elephants as they waded in the river; and,
- A child of a missionary, holding a large lorikeet.

Missionaries also demonstrated the exotic with photos of much smaller wildlife, including the odd insect, gecko, or lizard that doesn't belong on the hallway floor. Since encountering critters caused an emotional reaction for missionaries in the field, their shared context with their viewers back home suggests their friends and family will have a similar response or interpretation of those photos.

And of course, the cultural script of posting on social media seems to dictate, more than anything else, the obligation of "food pictures." Missionary updates, being a subset of the larger "social media script," have posted about exotic foods like heart-shaped tostadas, a cheese ball man, and cappuccinos where the steamed milk was in the shape of a heart. Such posts may show their adventurous attitude toward the host culture.

Yet in some cases, missionaries' desire to demonstrate the "exotic" moves their communication from credible to bizarre. For example, Caitlin Branderhorst's report from her trip to Papua New Guinea reads,

I was going to the most uncivilised country in the world.... Pukari people's diet consists of wood and leaves. That's what they ate every day, and that's what we had to eat every day.... The Pukari speak 800 different tribal languages. (Garcia, 2011)

It can be tricky to balance the effort to communicate our unity as a single human race, on the one hand, with the desire to emphasize difference, on the other. And our biases and prejudices make it even harder to avoid the sort of exoticizing that can be insensitive or offensive to the "other." Though Said (1979) began talking about the dangers of "othering" decades ago, missiologists have been slow to pick up on the ramifications of this behavior.

Chronicling What God is Teaching

A number of missionaries manage their identities through a cultural script I may call "chronicling what God is teaching." They post devotional thoughts, self-authored books, and summaries of books they have read. One post was titled "My top five books in 2016." Such posts covered popular culture, novels, politics, as well as missiology. One blog entry began, "Have faith in God." Another read, "Solomon's search for satisfaction." And a third asked, "Are we complaining too much?"

While some may value the devotions that missionaries post, participants in this study were not clear how audiences are engaging with these devotions. But Peircian semiotics suggests that the value of these devotional thoughts is indexical. The surface meaning may point to a deeper thing. For example, multiple devotional thoughts within the reformed tradition help a missionary blogger to locate his identity within the Reformed tradition of his own social group.

Soliciting Intercession

Many missionaries also enact the script of soliciting prayer requests. One asked for prayer regarding riots in Thailand; another coveted prayers about securing residency permits, vacancy in the work during a furlough, and the securing of a new vehicle. A heart-wrenching prayer request chronicled the trauma of a young boy, Eric, who had been struck by a semi. People use the comment section to type in short prayers. And sometimes the bloggers return to update their supporters on the prayer requests.

Reacting to National News

As whole persons, missionaries respond emotionally to injustices and tragedies in their host cultures. They blog about drug cartels, earthquakes, the effects of war, and so on. One blog post showed a missionary child, aged four or five, standing beside a tethered cow at the river bank, in front of a Khmer boy who was sitting in a hand-carved boat. The caption read “In the village of Kampong Pluch during the floods. Many families were displaced.” Another showed soldiers resting outside a shop in the Middle East.

Chronicling national news can be a way of engaging readers; but it can also be tricky. Cross-cultural workers told me they must be mindful that while it may be cathartic to criticize political parties or public life among their friends at home, readers in their host cultures are also engaging these posts. These readers are likely to interpret political rants in a different light, and at times they have a vested interest in using their political power to silence expatriates who dissent.

As with other cultural scripts, reaction to national/political news may be indexical: It may serve to help missionaries avow their own political identity, which allows them to connect strategically within their own social groups.

How do Missionaries Determine the Success of Their Digital Presence?

Even though all of the interviewees in my study were frequent social media posters and bloggers, some had not thought through the purpose of their digital presence; therefore some were not able to determine whether their communication was successful. Others knew their communication was successful when they received personal messages in return. Others looked to the number of “likes” on Facebook, the number of hits on the blog page, the number of comments on a post or video, the number of long-term partnerships established with supporters, or even the number of people signing up to join the mission. Counting “likes” and “hits” may seem trite or narcissistic, but it may actually be a way of measuring the degree to which members of the social network resound with the message. Identity management theory suggests that communication is successful when the social group finds cohesion.

Table 1. Semiotic analysis of missionary blog photos.

Sign-Index (the written post or photo)	Signified (how the image promotes identity management)
Photo of a young American woman walking beside two African teens	Validates the work
American woman handing a volleyball to a North African toddler	
Photo of woman in hijab knitting	Demonstrates the exotic
East African woman carrying water	
Rickshaw driver in India	
African worship service	
Monks in saffron robes in rural Tibet	
Missionaries standing near Elephants, lorikeets and rhinoceroses	Avows the political tradition of one's supporting social network
Political rant, reaction to national news	
Devotional thoughts	Avows the religious tradition of one's supporting social network

The Multiple Layers of Digital Identity Management

Those with a digital presence are becoming keenly aware that communication is not just one-way, nor even two-way between missionaries and their network in their home country. More and more, people in their host countries are also “friending” them on Facebook, which consequently connects nationals to families and churches at home. Even if members of the host cultures do not speak English fluently, they piece together what missionaries say on social media and in blogs. This causes missionaries to post with caution. A missionary from West Africa told me,

We recently had a photographer come from US for our mission, so we talked through it with the village churches. And many people asked, “Are you selling our pictures?” “Are you doing this to earn money?” Because so many people come here with selfish ambitions, there’s a lot of skepticism. One man in a village church told me, “I Googled and found this picture of myself. Why did they put that there?”

While missionaries use social media to chronicle the exotic nature of their cross-cultural experiences, some are mindful that they must be careful to not post in a way that is interpreted as exploiting the people in their host cultures. Americans are used to seeing pictures of themselves everywhere, but photos can instill a sense of fear in many other cultures. One missionary explained to me,

A mission agency wanted to come share a man’s story, but this man felt like he was being used as a poster child by them to get more support... Like they were using pictures to communicate “they are poor there.” It was almost like they were trying to draw empathy out of the American population.

Conclusion

Because of the rise of social media, missionaries have more opportunities than ever to avow their identities as language learners, travelers, family members, and heralds of the good news. In some parts of the world, such as Asia and the Middle East, people are far less public about avowing their identities as missionaries, so they resort to secure emails or face-to-face communication. In other parts of the world, it is quite strategic to utilize multiple social media platforms not only to communicate with friends, but for the edification of their host culture, as well as of the strangers that come across their photos and blogs.

While missionary communication is multi-purpose (e.g., for updating partners, for soliciting intercessory prayer, or for recruiting more workers) each of these purposes involves managing one's identity as a cross-cultural Christian worker. This identity is avowed with indexical images that are decoded idiosyncratically by audiences from different cultural contexts.

Table 1 summarizes how some of the images (discussed throughout this article) may relate to an aspect of identity management.

This article has raised a number of implications for the production and interpretation of missionary communication, which I summarize below:

1. Missionaries can leverage frequent, brief, and multiple platforms of communication to create identities which are holistic and credible. This holistic image may help multiple audiences more easily connect with them.
2. Missionaries must be aware of multiple social groups' expectations on their communication, and must know what successful communication looks like in each of those groupings. This may involve relating tales of the exotic without "othering" people in their host culture; validating the work; demonstrating spiritual depth; or making the foreign seem familiar.
3. Missionaries who post controversial pictures and text must be aware that the host culture can access these messages.
4. Missionaries should beware of self-hagiography and the temptation to invoke pity for self or the host culture.
5. Missiologists should conduct more research on how supporting churches experience the changing climate of missionary communication in the digital age.

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Notes

1. I used the "Missionary blogs" website www.missionary-blogs.com to track down the blogs.
2. I did not collect additional demographic information on respondents, so their ages and religious affiliation are unknown.

3. Again, since I did not ask for further demographic information, it is unclear what participants meant when they self-identified as “having done missionary work in the past year.” So their religious affiliation, age, and type of work is unknown.

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