Our Tidal Selves: Embracing Shifting Identities in Computational Artifacts

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In this position paper, I refer to my own body of work exploring computational identity, primarily in the context of computer vision. I reflect on broad trends on how identity has been—and continues to be—approached in computational artifacts, particularly in machine learning models. In particular, I identify how identity is unreliable, trivialized, and risky, but that it still matters to how we design computational systems. If identity matters to our lived experiences as humans, then we should be designing identity concepts in artifacts to align more closely with those lived experiences. I thus surface three considerations: contextualizing identity through meaningful participation, centering community ownership over identity data, and designing for dynamic and multiplicitous ebbs and flows.

1 Introduction

Human identity is a complex subject, one that has been theorized about since antiquity [34, 37, 39, 64]. Identity is also an incredibly ubiquitous term, one that is so commonplace in daily life that it obscures the underlying complexity and diversity of experiences, thoughts, and theories about it [87]. Many never think deeply about identity, or have a highly narrow vision of what its definition might be [48]. Even in HCI, where the human is central, identity is often taken for granted. Identity categories are collected from participants without a specified reason, and when they are not, they may be requested by peer reviewers, also without a specified reason. Positionality statements are sometimes used to list out identity affinities, rather than for deeper reflection about how those identities may have shaped the work; marginalized researchers bear the brunt of expectation for identity transparency [54].

Yet, in applied computer science, where much of HCI research is focused, the treatment of identity is not merely taken for granted. It is actively incorporated into the design and engineering of computational artifacts without much deeper thought, but nonetheless lays out a stance: identity is obvious, observable, classifiable, static, and ultimately practical. My body of research has focused on interrogating the treatment of identity in computational systems, particularly in machine learning systems designed to classify or predict identity categories and outcomes [6, 35, 47, 69–72, 74–77, 90]. Machine learning disciplines like computer vision have regularly undermined identity, treating complex and historically fraught concepts like gender and race without either deeper contemplation or care. The impacts identity deployments might have on individuals and communities, particularly historically marginalized ones, are barely an afterthought.

In this position paper, I reflect on my own body of HCI work on identity, largely focused on identity in computer vision systems, alongside that of others, and the persistent challenges

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associated with computer scientists seeking to capture identity for computational artifacts. I propose questions about how we might achieve more fluid, shifting, and divergent visions of identity in technology—but also when, or if, we want or need to. I conclude with considerations about how HCI researchers can move beyond shifting the language we use to talk about identity and embrace the inherent instability of identity categories.

2 Surfacing Reflections: A Case of Identity in Computer Vision

2.1 Identity is Unreliable

Social identity concepts like "gender," "race," and "ethnicity" in computer vision are rooted in the perceptions of others. Engineers and computer scientists loosely define the categories that should be present in a dataset for training a model [72], and often outsource the actual labeling of those concepts to data workers based in the Global South [77]. Not only do the data requesters, the engineers, fail to define or demonstrate their vision of these categories, many of the categories are illegible to the data workers doing the labeling [77]. That is, a concept like "Hispanic" may be irrelevant to a data labeler in Kenya, and therefore that concept is indecipherable [77]. Even if a data worker is confident in their interpretation of a category, they may find that it differs entirely from the expectation their client had [77]. Many workers are simply unable to explain why an identity category is correct, just that they feel it is obvious [77]. These identity categories are not only unstable across culture, they are unstable across time, as categories have evolved, largely alongside political interventions for controlling certain populations [74]. These disagreements, inconsistencies, incomprehensibilities, and transformations highlight the unreliability of identity: it is not an observation to be made and catalogued correctly.

When embedded into predictive algorithmic systems like computer vision models, this unreliability, though obscured by the black box, becomes externalized. The same image of the same person may be classified differently by two different facial analysis models; for example, "male" in one and "female" in another [75]. Even if the individual in an image were to label their own identity, it would not be any more reliable for use in a system intrinsically designed to extrapolate patterns and apply them to new, innumerable human faces. That is, just because the person in the image looks a certain way and uses the label "A," it does not mean that a person with a similar appearance also uses the label "A." Self-identification would not solve the inherent flaw embedded into certain computer vision models—the flaw being the belief that human identity concepts can be accurately classified or predicted.

2.2 Identity is Trivialized

Identity is regularly portrayed as "obvious, static, and apolitical" [76]. Theories of identity have had no place in computer vision; psychology and sociology, feminist, queer, decolonial, crip, and critical theory, and philosophy, despite their rich and diverse histories of theorizing human identity, have been absent (despite pursuit by HCI, STS, social computing, and design researchers and activists (e.g., [9, 20, 27, 42, 92])). The world experiences of image subjects, data workers, and engineers, and how they interact to shape these computational systems, are unaccounted for in the actual design process. Categories are presented with no explanation [73, 76]. Technologies like gender classification, first invented in the 1960s, are proposed as evidently necessary. Problems of classification that have not yet been published are pursued as inherent contributions [11, 50, 91], resulting in systems that classify ethnic minority categories [93], sexuality [81], political affiliation [85], and criminality [86]. Despite being an applied field, distance between human subjectivity, the centrality of identity, and the practice of building and deploying the "machine" has been built into machine learning disciplines [11, 73].

2.3 Identity is Risky

Not only is the classification of identity unreliable, attaching identity categories to individuals in publicly available datasets and automating the classification of those categories in public and commercial computer vision models is risky. On one hand, the incidental misclassification of identity can cause harm—certainly, emotional harm, like in cases of misgendering by facial analysis

services [35], but also physical, reputational, and allocative harms, in instances where individuals are mistakenly classified by high-stakes AI systems due to identity biases (e.g., [8, 30, 44]). On the other hand, the correct classification of identity can be explicitly designed for harm (e.g., [57, 67]). The categorization and cataloguing of identity has been a tool deployed explicitly for the oppression of marginalized groups throughout history and across the globe [38, 41, 88]. Identity categories have often been *made* real through political projects, an attempt to naturalize subjugation and minoritization [13]. Even innocuously designed systems can be co-opted in the future in environments of increasingly hostile politics (e.g., [17, 40, 46, 79]). That makes systems that are designed to classify characteristics of marginalized groups dangerous. Yet, largely, identity classifications in computer vision and other machine learning algorithms continue to go unchecked in policy and regulation and the machine learning discipline.

2.4 Identity Matters

Although identity categories are unreliable, trivialized, and risky in computer vision, identity is also *incredibly important to the human experience*. There are many theories about identity development, some of which take a phenomenological lens that argues individual identities are shaped by interactions with other individuals and larger sociocultural institutions [14]. Individuals regularly build affinities with identity concepts, seeking group membership and community, especially in instances where they identify with marginalized identity categories [68]. Further, identity biases and their associated harms have persisted long before the advent of computer vision. Computer vision is simply an extension of prior projects associated with identity classifications [74]. Therefore, while identity categories are continuously utilized as a method of weaponization against marginalized groups, they also remain integral to strategies of resistance and coalition building [18, 23, 58]. Stripping social and computational systems alike of historically meaningful identity concepts will only perpetuate inequity [41]. For example, not taking into account gender representation can perpetuate (trans)misogyny *and* (trans)misogynoir in algorithms [15, 24, 36].

At the root of evaluating *how* identity should be appropriately incorporated into computational technologies are whether the technologies themselves are harmful or valuable to certain communities, and whether, even if a technology is inherently harmful, it should still work well for different groups [29, 70, 78]. For example, facial recognition is generally considered high risk [1]; many marginalized groups resist the use of facial recognition in corporate and surveillance settings [12, 49, 55]. Yet, when facial recognition is used, regardless of whether it is desirable, it can further harm the groups it works poorly on [43, 44, 84]. Whether to mitigate risks and reform technologies or attempt to abolish them entirely is a constant debate [2, 33].

3 Casting Considerations: A More Tidal Approach to Identity

In reality, our identities are not static categories to be captured and classified for computational systems. Our identities shift. Certain aspects integral to ourselves surface during certain moments; some identities might change shape, others might drift slowly into view, and some might wash away entirely; some may appear vibrant or clear, while some might always feel muddy or obscured. In the remainder of this position paper, I propose three considerations for reorienting away from the stagnant, monotonous, and pernicious status quo of identit*y* I have observed in my work to date—towards a more fluid, multiplicitous, and dynamic vision of identit*ies*.

3.1 Identity Contextualized

Identity is highly contextual; one identity concept might be entirely illegible in another context [77]. In ethical and responsible AI spaces, participatory AI, informed by traditions of participatory design, is looked to as an approach for alleviating harms caused by homogenizing algorithmic systems [4, 31]. It's also been proposed for better defining self-identity concepts [25]. While increased participation is necessary to decrease top-down exploitation and inequitable power dynamics common in, particularly, commercial deployments of identity in systems like computer vision, there are also numerous concerns rightfully raised about participatory AI [10, 56, 83]. As Sloane et al. argue in [83], common approaches to participatory AI may backslide into "participation washing,"

embracing participatory methods to push forth existing agendas or beliefs and failing to engage with participation over long periods of time, abandoning the work put in by participants and communities for short-term knowledge extraction. Further, participatory AI raises core questions about *who* is asked to participate and how participation from some community members might overrule or supplant more marginalized voices [19, 61, 63]. In the current time, where racism, transphobia, sexism, and xenophobia are on the rise globally [65, 65, 89], the bounds of participation must be carefully considered. As such, participation and co-creation of systems that use identity concepts should be highly contextual to communities [61] and adaptable to intra-community diversity [28]. What, for example, a predominantly BIPOC LGBTQ+ community located in Atlanta desires for computational identity approaches would undoubtedly differ from those of a predominantly white LGBTQ+ community in the United Kingdom. Disagreements and divergent experiences can fuel more creative approaches to using identity concepts that are actually useful for diverse community members.

3.2 Identity Ownership

Approaches to identity in computation are largely top-down. Even in instances where an individual is given options for self-defining, the ownership of the data is largely in the hands of system developers. Data sovereignty has been an enduring topic long before the advent of machine learning systems like computer vision, spanning beyond the confines of computational systems entirely [7, 52, 82]. As AI has advanced, data has been conceptualized as a "gold mine" for which companies are vying to quarry [21, 45]. Thus, there have been many contributions to increase data sovereignty, particularly in the face of data colonialism aimed at mining data from historically oppressed and disempowered regions [66], often divorcing data from historical context and lived realities [62]. In particular, data licensing and data governance frameworks seek to place ownership and management in the hands of communities. For example, the NOODL license was created to aid data scientists and researchers in African communities in resisting data laundering" [59]; the Māori Data Sovereignty Principles were developed by Te Mana Raraunga to advocate for specific principles that benefit Māori people, language, and culture. [51]. Community databases that maintain control over how data is presented, how it might be used, and when it should be updated or retired could help mitigate harmful uses and ensure identity metamorphosis, rather than stasis. Given the sensitivity of identity data, which might be actively sought after for oppressive uses, it is important to consider how identity data might be controlled by the communities it represents.

3.3 Identity Ebbs and Flows

One of the core flaws with how identity has been implemented in computer vision and other computational artifacts is that identity is not only treated as an observable characteristic, but those observations are grounded in some "gold standard" truth [5, 53, 80]. Not only are observations of identity colored by the lens through which an individual is observing, identity is not a static attribute. Identity is oriented to a specific space and time, shaped by fluctuating cultural norms, and shifting in and out of visibility as people perform different roles. How identity is captured and embedded into systems like computer vision is not as positivist and rationalist as presented. Instead, engineers and computer scientists engage in the construction of a reality they often deem correct and pragmatic for a technical problem they hope to solve [73]. It is the oft-ignored *theories* of identity that could provide the foundation for more community-centered, fluid, and creative approaches to computational identity in systems like computer vision models—approaches that embrace not only constructivism and interpretivism, but multiplicitous realities. After all, there is no single reality to be captured [26]. Rather than attempting to identify and solidify some "ground truth," we might imagine identity conceptions grounded in Butler's performativity [16], Ahmed's queer phenomenology [3], Goffman's self-perception [32], Price's bodymind [60], or Collins black feminist standpoint [22]. We might imagine identity classifications that dynamically shift as communities negotiate and evolve. We might purposefully try to visualize multiple, overlapping, even contradicting concepts. We might imagine uses of identity that individuals and communities embrace, rather than reject or fear.

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