
Social Networks, Cyberspace and Formation of Virtual Identity of the Users

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Received: 19 March 2015, Revised: 18 April 2015, Accepted: 25 April 2015

ABSTRACT

Today's world is a world that has been affected by the plurality of values, a fragmented world, a world with various ways of living, a world in which, as "Sartre" puts it, values do not take precedence over us, but rather they are succeeding us. Therefore an era, in which we live, is called networked society, values are redefined every day, and these values have a decisive role in shaping our identity. In fact, today, the media have transcended geographical, cultural and political boundaries and by its growing and increasing expansion, it has gone beyond the socio-political sphere and has also affected the identity of contemporary human; in a way that, the identity of modern human can be called media identity. Therefore, more than any other time, there is a need for revealing identities and verification and acknowledgment of it by others within the network which can be employed as a fundamental force for understanding the world and introducing self to others. In the meantime, social networks from 2005 onwards have allocated most of the Internet users to themselves and by creating a virtual community and the like-minded groups they have played a great role in creating identity of the individuals. The present study, through the theoretical-analytical method, evaluates the role of these networks in creating and shaping people's identities.

Keywords: Virtual Social Networks, Identity, Virtual Identity, Cyberspace, Globalization, Networked Community, Digital Identity.

Introduction

We are living in a revolutionized world that encounters dramatic and permanent changes (Giddens, 1994: 555) and the thing that provided the basis for such a rapid transformations and changes was the new and recent technological achievements of the human. From the

perspective of Castells, communication plays a decisive role in shaping culture and the culture, as a result of new technological developments, experiences other fundamental transformations. He states that: "One of the important consequences of the development of new

information and communication technologies is the transformation of cultures. Hence, as a result of development and expansion of informational highways, a new culture is emerging (Castells, 384, 2006). Under the impact of information and communication technology revolution, individuals become acquainted with new ways of life and face with countless identity resources that have led to the transformation of the identity of individuals within the dimensions of traditional identity, emergence of multiple identities, transformation of value systems, changes in consumption methods and lifestyle (Adibi and others, 2008: 100). Identity, as one of the key components of the humanities and social sciences, has attracted the attention of scholars and scientists in the recent decades. In this period that the Internet and electronic communications are dominated in the community, information and data and more preciously, it is these virtual communities, such as virtual networks, that make up the identity of individuals. Digital identity, which is a product of the information society and virtual communities, makes the audiences as the users of communicational devices and tries to change their identity towards a transnational identity and this may lead to a decrease in social cohesion. In fact, it can be said that today, the media have transcended geographical, cultural and political boundaries and by its growing and increasing expansion, it has gone beyond the socio-political sphere and has also affected the identity of contemporary human; in a way that, the identity of modern human can be called media identity.

Now, the important question is that in the age of information and communication technology, what is the role of social networks in the formation of identity? And

what is the necessity of considering identity in social networks? And this is due to the fact that many people are in interaction with together on the social networks and these networks, as a virtual community, have a significant role in shaping identity. To answer these questions, theoretical and analytical method was used and by library study and analysis of views related to the identity, the information society and the role of social networks in establishing a communication between them, a conceptual framework of analysis and inferences of the views was presented.

Virtual social networks

The term of "social networks" have been used in communication sociology, psychology... researches and studies and the central core of it, is formed by the existence of relations between the members of these networks. From 2005 until now, the issue of virtual social networks has been the main concern of Internet users in the world. Virtual social networks are now considered as the world's most powerful online media. The distinguishing feature of this network is the power of establishing a network system among friends and like-minded users in a regular and organized form (Ziaee Parvar, 2009: 24). Today, social interaction of people has been extended into virtual social networks and virtual communications is a major part of the reason of using these spaces by the users. The scope of these virtual communications has gone beyond the email, chat and blogging and the networks have been created for the application of all of the mentioned forms, in order to have a more complete and comprehensive social interaction among the people; these new forms are called virtual social media. Blogs, social networks, wikis and podcasts

are of this kind. Venturelli in the book of "International Law and International Relations" defined social networks as follows: "social networks are spaces in the virtual world that are created for the communication between different people, with different levels of access, like real space and the development of mass and interpersonal communication, formation of virtual communities, informing, exchange of information and opinions are among the best known functions of this space." The term of "social networks" is a subset of social media. Some features of social networks include: sharing, organizing and mobilizing, friendship, trust, circles of audiences, citing and generalization, being multimedia, chat, cruel criticism, following and being followed, prestige, open publication, the collective wisdom, universality, social mobility and ingenuity (Ziaee Parvar, 25,2009). The presence of people in social networks increases the possibility of participation and social interaction among people. So, whatever the bonds between the people and members in the network are greater and denser, the association, interaction, closeness of ideas, common and consistent movement will be more likely. In a social network, people pursue both political goals and personal goals, and interact with other individuals and organizations (ibid, 87). In fact social network are formed on the basis of an identity in a society and identities are derived from models, myths, ideologies, beliefs, ideals, values, and so on. By categorizing the principles of the formation of identity, groups and various social networks are inseparable. Damage to the principles of the formation of the identity, such as patterns, myths and... causes damage to social networks and as a result, relevant network becomes in the floating position and can harm not only to

its group but also to other networks of the group. Therefore the question that is raised in the social networks is that what effects, the networks with features such as interactivity, interactive communication, being transnational, anonymity, flexibility, etc., can have on people's identity? And have what implications for the formed identity of these people?

Types of social networks

Social networks can be divided into two virtual network and non- virtual network. In fact, non-virtual networks are the networks that act in the social environment by a series of interconnected individuals and groups. Virtual social networks or online social networks are website or set of websites which let users to share their favorites, thoughts and activities; in other words, social networks are the sites that by using a search engine and adding features like chat, messaging, email, voice and image transmission and ... provide more communication facilities for users in the form of a network of personal and group relationships, blogs (1), Facebook (2), Twitter (3), YouTube (4), podcasts (5) are among the virtual social networks (www.migna.ir).

Identity and virtual identity

According to Castells, the identity means meaning-creation processes on the basis of cultural characteristics or interconnected set of cultural characteristics that are superior to other sources of meaning (Castells, 2006: 23). Identity is an internal emotion that the man is trying to fulfill it through symbols and signs. Everyone tends to consciously search his identity, within a specific group. People's tendency for searching collective identities sometimes leads to taking several different identities, in a way that the simultaneous

belonging to the family, religion, ethnicity, nationality and civilization can also be in compromise with each other within the identity of every individual (Golmohammadi, 2002: 91). According to "Giddens", identity is created and its creation has no end; the reason is that people constantly use their knowledge and information in the definition and reregulation of their activities and identity. The representation of this identity is reflective and as a result not static (Penna, 1999: 32). Erickson believes that the effort to achieve identity is a permanent process and even in adulthood, our minds it occupies our mind (Ahadi and Mohseni, 2001: 138-140). Identity is not a concept that can be defined once and for all, this concept is fluid and its doors are always open to negotiations, but it's always faced with many limitations and constraints. Social networks have a major role in defining this fluid identity. Social networks enable their users to create new concepts and redefine old concepts. Therefore, identity is formed in a dialectical space, an identity which is both personal and social. In fact users create, destroy and recreate this identity in this space and the global environment. Users can derive their identity from the virtual environment and are alien with the real environment. In this way, their identity, rather than being real, is subjective and imaginary and sometimes far from the reality and in this virtual relationship, virtual identity is formed. So in a society that we live, under the title of media, identity has become very important and as it was mentioned, in these networks, identity is always being created and it is a fluid process that is constantly changing and being redefined.

Theoretical Framework

Castells theory

Castells believes that our current life, in its most important aspects, is formed with two conflicting processes of globalization and identity and in the final decades of the twentieth century, along with the technological revolution, transformation of capitalism and the collapse of Soviet Union, these powerful waves have become the collective identity that have shaken our world (Castells, 2001: 432). According to Castells, the identity means meaning-creation processes on the basis of cultural characteristics or interconnected set of cultural characteristics that are superior to other sources of meaning. He believes that identities are created and proposes the hypothesis that, generally the matter of who does create the identity and for what purposes, to a large extent determines the symbolic content of the intended identity and its meaning is for those who consider themselves integrated with it or imagine themselves outside of it. Since socialization of identity always takes place within the context of power relations, he distinguishes between three forms and origins of identity building, described as legitimizing, resistance and project identities. *Legitimizing identity:* Legitimizing identities are those introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination over social actors and are built upon a formal centralized pattern and are the measures that the official media try excessively to promote them.

Resistance identity: Resistance identity is usually formed against legitimizing identity. Resistance identities are those identities that are formed in marginalized groups and for most of the times, this identity has an informal language. Underground music, hidden language and... are instances of this kind of identity. In fact it is built by the actors in the circumstances or conditions that are

considered worthless by the logic of domination.

Project identity: Project identity is a significant identity that tries to have necessary and required functions and is more complex than others identities, it decreases the gap between the legitimizing and resistance identity and tries to repair their gaps. The context of society is more in search of project identity. In fact, the project identity is when social actors, by using any available material and cultural compromise build a new identity that redefine their position in society and thus following the transformation of the entire social structure, this kind of identity is realized (Castells, 125,2006).

Each of these identity building processes led to a different result in a society. Legitimizing identity creates the civil society. Resistance identity results in the creation of community and project identity leads to the creation of subject. Castells says that the question that how the varieties of identities are made and by whom and what are the consequences, is a matter that is related to the "context" and "social background"; as Zaretsky puts it, the politics related to the identity should be studied in its own historical place.

Giddens theory

Regarding the issue of identity, Giddens has discussed matters such as personal identity and modernity and globalization. He believes that the transformation of personal identity and the phenomenon of globalization in recent times have formed the local and global dialectic poles, so that even changes in very private aspects of personal life are associated with extensive social contacts. In fact, the level and dimensions of the Time-Space Distantiation/Distanciation, in the current modernization, has spread to such an extent that for the first time in human

history, it interacts with the community in a global environment. In other words, several factors affect the relations between personal identity and social institutions. This reflexivity of modernization has also extended deep into the depths of human. In traditional cultures, all the social affairs remain the same and unchanged from one generation to another, change in social identity actually are beaten like the apparent badge on the personality of individuals. On the contrary in modern societies, the transformed "self" should be understood through personal exploration and it should be considered and built as a part of the process of mutual contact between personal and social changes. Personal identity as a general phenomenon requires reflective awareness. Identity, in fact, is what the individual is aware of it. In other words, a person's identity is not something that has been delegated to him as a result of the continuation of social practices, but rather it is something that the person must continuously and routinely create it and support it in his reflective activities. According to Giddens, one of the verbal features of personal identity is the grammatical differentiation of "I - Me - You". Therefore, it can be said that personal identity is open-sighted understanding of individual from his own life (Giddens, 2008: 15-81). In short, Giddens believes that "self" of the human is in interaction with others and it creates his identity and constantly changes it throughout the life. Self is not a passive concept that can be formed only under the influence of external factors, but rather it is caused by the interaction between inside and outside. In addition, the identity cannot be delegated, but must be created by the individual.

The impact of virtual social networks on identity

In an era in which we live, more than any time, there is a need for the demonstration of identity and confirmation of it by others within the network that it can be utilized as a fundamental power for understanding the world and introducing oneself to others. Therefore, the study of identity and the impact of these networks on the identity are of great importance, because it might cause some crisis for identity and face the users of these networks with identity crisis. Goffman believes that identity "is the person's efforts to demonstrate his distinguishing features from others, while he shapes his behavior." Tajfel states that "social identity is a person's awareness about belonging to a particular social group and emotional value and importance of this membership for the person." Castells says that identity "is the source of meaning and experience for the people" and "the identity is meaning-creation process on the basis of cultural characteristics or interconnected set of cultural characteristics that are superior to other sources of meaning and for each class or for each group, there may be several identities. "

Durkheim says that "ways of imagining time and place are originated from social life of human and substantial impact on the identity beliefs." In the definitions that have been presented in the last two decades specific geography has had a pivotal role and identity transformations have been influenced by geographical changes over time. Specific social group is also other element of the formation of identity, in the sense that identity is an understanding of a person from belonging to a group. A fundamental factor in the formation of social identity is human interactions. When a person interacts with another person, he discovers his identity

as a member of the society. In fact, identity is defined within the context of social interactions (Noormohammadi, 89, 2009). Today, people through information and communication technologies, have become a concurrent society but with different geographical locations that the development of communication and the accumulation of data have made them conjoint and connected with together. This collectivity has created the "virtual identity" for them that along with other aspects of identity of individuals shapes their own identity. Features of electronic communication in cyberspace provide circumstances for the users that are different from face to face relationships. Speed, remaining anonymous and...provide same and identical environment regardless of requirements, such as gender, class, ethnicity, race and location that create different experiences for the users. Interactions that occur in this space create a new mentality and attitude for the users that can change their behavior and interactions in the real world. Internet connections can provide more incentives for the users in playing with identity, experimental behaviors and non-real image that there is a less risk of shame in them (Noormohammadi, 101, 2009). Modern communication and information technologies lead to the formation of new communities and identities. Mark Poster believes that in the new era that the Internet and electronic communications are dominated in the society, data and information or to be more precise, virtual communities build the identity of individuals. Modern information and communication tools create changes in individual perceptions and place identity in the new situation that is very different from the past and sometimes even contradictory. Identity in virtual communities moves in the direction

of being transnational. Information society represents the unstable, changeable and flexible movement of new human. In this community, the proximity of people in terms of location is not indicative of their intimacy and people in different countries can communicate and have the feeling of intimacy and having the identical identity. In virtual communities, usually people have at least one thing in common and that is the interests and benefits that gather them together. These benefits i.e. access to information forms their identity. An identity that is constantly changing and unstable. The identity of individuals in the virtual communities is "digital identity" and territories, native and local language, country, national culture and race do not determine the identities of individuals in virtual communities, but rather sectional and limited interests in the field of various subjects, gather people together and build their identity (Noormohammadi, 128, 2009). New communications technologies provide the possibility of having new private space for the individuals by creating private and personal space in cyberspace. In this space, people communicate with each other and by taking advantage of the Internet facilities such as social networks and conversation rooms, extensive network of relationships are formed among individuals that are uncontrollable. This gradually leads to the disintegration of traditional networks of relationships like neighborhood and creates identities for the individuals that are distinct from the real world (ibid, 141). One of the most important features of social networks is the increase of individual importance and private domain versus public domain. People in social networks, can be present in different groups and sometimes the groups that are conflicting with their real identity and at the same time, they can feel themselves

alone and distinct from others. As the result of lack of hierarchy of power in these networks individuality of people is not resolved in the community. In the real world, the choice of people always has been limited under the influence of factors such as place, time, culture, government, and.... But in the virtual world limiting boundaries are removed and person, in a global scale, faces with many options to choose. In other words, the formation of communities in cyberspace on the basis of social status causes the communities to become gradually pale and insignificant in the real world. This means that the source of identity becomes pluralistic and diverse and people can experience different identities. And if these people fail to establish a balance between real space and cyberspace and they would create a dual identity for themselves and they will face identity crisis. With the advent of virtual social networks, a new form of life was formed in the cyberspace and relationships between people became different from their traditional form and created undeniable impacts on social relations. Social networks are one of the most popular media that have numerous audiences, especially among young people. Interactive features and providing the basis for social relationships are among the reasons of popularity of social networks. A person is in connection with a wide range of people and shares his interests with them in different fields. People on social networks can have their desired identity, and on the basis of the desired identity they can expand their virtual relationship with others. (Barani, 56, 2011). These networks, with lots of information and modes of communication that they provide for us, enable us to have the identity that is more flexible than before. Thus, the new range of meaning is created in our lives (Dreyfus, 2004: 4). In

this regard, Richard Rorty (1982) believes that in the era of postmodernism, a broad concept of group solidarity would be proposed. Group solidarity, here is not just simply the sudden unity and integration of members of society, but such solidarity is gathered with pluralism. In other words, the different groups, by accepting the differences and diversity of their positions, start to discuss with each other and a kind of human relationship and social- group solidarity is created. In fact, it can be said that in social networks, which result in the formation of the virtual identity, virtual identity is released from the restrictions and strengthens its different aspects, that previously it was not able to represent them. In fact, it can be said that participation in social networks, on the one hand, decreases the pressures of adapting oneself to the expectations of the group in the real world and gives more freedom to the individual to achieve "his ideal" or "ideal identity" and to interact with others, and on the other hand, it reduces environmental and geographical pressures on the users.

Discussion and Conclusion

Today, the media have transcended geographical, cultural and political boundaries and by its growing and increasing expansion, it has gone beyond the socio-political sphere and has also affected the identity of contemporary human; in a way that, the identity of modern human can be called media identity. This discussion is particularly crucial for the Iranian society, because the Iranian society is experiencing a transitional period, and in the meantime, the media play an important role and one cannot ignore their role in the incidence of identity challenges. The relationship between identity and media can be also justified from other perspective. Identity is not an essence-dependent concept, but rather it is an essence that is made by man and his society and

changes within the context of social transformation and takes a different form. Identity is not something instinctive and innate, but it is acquisitive, voluntary and on the basis of human upbringing. From this perspective, media become as one of the effective factors on the formation and evolution of identity, especially in the contemporary world that is known as the age of communication. As mentioned, the virtual social networks are virtual communities in the cyberspace. The formation of networks through news websites, news and analytical weblogs, online communities, virtual conversation spaces (chat rooms) and family circles, such as Orkut and Yahoo, Six Degrees, and... each create a virtual space in which the exchange of news and information takes place. Weblog, Facebook, Twitter, Friend Feed and Balatarin, are among the sites that have provided the possibility of wide networking on the Internet. In fact, today, due to the new information and communication technologies and through removing the gap between us and the others, a new understanding of events has occurred. These technologies are man-made, but their distinction from other man-made objects maybe in the fact that by eliminating the barrier of time and space and the proximity of people next to each other, they have been somehow became close to their real nature, so that at this time, the search for the identity happens through the flow of information circulation on the networks. Social networks make people to go after their identity, which has been suppressed throughout the history and in particular, in communities that the process of nation-building and state-building have been carried out insufficiently, this movement is faster. So users, by membership in social networks, are in an attempt to represent and reconstruct their culture and identity. And if in the real world the suppression of identity does not take place, then the individuals will not join these

networks for representation and reconstruction of their suppressed identity, but rather they will join these networks for strengthening their identity and participating in a transnational world and a new global identity. In an era in which we live, more than any time, there is a need for the demonstration of identity and confirmation of it by others within the network that it can be utilized as a fundamental power for understanding the world and introducing oneself to others; but since the nature of the world that is taking shape is of a cultural kind, founders and bearers of culture play a significant role in these developments. According to experts such as Castells in the age of networks, life of legitimizing identities raised by authorities is over and with the advent of the information society and increase of social awareness and conversion of one-way communication to two-way, other forms of identity is emerging. So, according to Castells theory and his formatting of the identity and function of the media (vertical and horizontal) in each of these three areas, it can be vertically or horizontally, this conceptual model can be presented as follows:

Vertical media are the media that publish information and demands of a power center vertically in various forms of news, reports and... to the society, it means from bottom to top or top to bottom. But media such as mobile or social networks have the responsibility of the restoration of messages horizontally, i.e. instead of publishing news between top and bottom they do this among all sectors. The role of blogs and social networks is enormous.

Legitimizing identity: Legitimizing identities are those introduced by the dominant institutions of society and are built upon a formal centralized pattern and are the measures that the official media try excessively to promote them and the communication in these media is one-sided.

These identities are in fact made by vertical media and governments greatly emphasis and rely on the legitimizing identity.

Resistance identity: Resistance identity is usually formed against legitimizing identity. The performance of this identity is of horizontal media, which is a kind of reaction against vertical media. The big problem that our world is facing it is the prominence of resistance identities. All the shaped radical and generational movements or informal arts and all of these, are understandable in the context of resistance identities.

Project identity: Project identity decreases the gap between the legitimizing and resistance identity. The context of society is more in search of project identity. Usually, social media, blogs, social networks, local television channels and the like, mostly help the project identity. This type of identity is created due to the emergence of social actors that are known as social subjects. In fact they are planning for building new identities.

So the consequences of each of these identities, according to the Castells, depend on the social context. In fact, it can be said that social networks by creating interactive and two-way communication for their users, can help to establish the project identity and prevent the crisis of identity in the community by filling the gap between authorities and individuals, and help to create a new identity. The origin of identity in the age of modernity (industrial) was civil society and the government of domination, while in the age of post-modern and networked community, the identity is greatly influenced by cultural resistance against dominated ruling in the networked community that resists against fading of its identity (Castells, 2006: 26-24). And it is the social networks that have turned into resisting position of these subjects and create a new identity for individuals.

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How to cite this article: Naser Peikari, Rasoul Lotfi, Hadi Makhdomi, Social Networks, Cyberspace and Formation of Virtual Identity of the Users. *International Journal of Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Science*, 2015, 4(2), 92-101. http://www.ijashssjournal.com/article_83681.html