
Construction of digital identity on social media

Monia Ben Ayed

Ph.D. in Sociology, University of Sfax, Tunisia
benayedmonia01@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of the use of social networking sites on the formation of virtual identity and to identify the reasons why young people use an identity other than their real identity, in addition to revealing the effects of social networking sites on the personality model of its users and their social ties. It also explores the nature of the relationship between real and virtual identities.

Keywords: Identity, Digital Identity, Social Media, Social Networking Sites, Digital Society.

Introduction

Today's world is undergoing transformations in the field of information flows and communication, where technological developments have led to a veritable revolution in the development of social media, and to the transition from the industrial society to the information society. The emergence of the Internet has opened up new possibilities for individuals and groups to interact, communicate and establish digital social relationships, thanks to the service of social networking sites that have contributed to the construction of virtual social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and TikTok. Place no longer matters, and the technology of remote communication has absorbed all the world's land (real place) and reduced the world to a point of intersection which is real time, hence McLuhan's idea of the 'global village' generated by the disappearance of place and the reduction of time' (Qaidum, 2002, p. 60). These social networks have attracted all segments of society, especially young

people, who are the most frequent users of social networks because of the many services they provide, such as relationship-building, friendship, chatting and information.

Faced with this tremendous growth in the number of users of social networking sites, particularly young people, and the changes that have accompanied this new communication system in the nature of their relationships with others and in the nature of their vision of the world, we have attempted through this study to identify the role of the use of social networking sites by young people in the formation of their digital identity and its role in the adoption of a new identity that may be contrary to or identical to their real identity.

This leads us to ask the following question:

How do social networking sites contribute to the formation of virtual identities among young people?

This main question has the following sub-questions:

- What are the characteristics of the virtual communities to which individuals seek to belong?
- What are the characteristics of digital identity?
- Why are digital identities used?
- What effects do social networks have on the personality model of their users?

1- Terms of Study

1-1 Social media sites:

Social networking sites aim to create and connect groups of people who share common activities and interests or who simply want to know about other people's favourite activities or things, and these services provide them with a set of functions that allow interaction between them (Al-Najjar, 2017, p. 14).

1-2 Digital society:

With the development of technology and technologies, human societies have recognised a new type of society, namely virtual societies, as spaces where users share and interact with each other in order to achieve psychological and social goals. Virtual communities were first formed because of the need for computer technology and digital communications, and then spread with the development of web technology. As for the term virtual community, it appeared as the title of Howard Ringler's book in 1993 and refers to a group of individuals interacting on social networking sites with common interests. 'This society, according to Toffler, began to take shape as early as 1956, when the number of workers in media and communication exceeded the number of workers in other productive sectors in the United States of America, seeing it as the third stage or third wave after the agricultural and industrial waves, the knowledge society and artificial intelligence' (Laquab, 2003, p. 68_69).

Virtual societies are societies resulting from technical development in the field of communication and the technological revolution, 'whose members share over the Internet for a period of time to achieve a goal or a hobby through social-virtual relationships determined by a system of "virtualization"'.(Ayachi, 2020, p. 316).

1-3 Identity:

Identity can be defined as the traits and characteristics that distinguish an individual from others and express his or her individuality and relationship with others. It has been defined as a person's perception of themselves that distinguishes them from other individuals, and this perception is shaped by the impact of human accidents, experiences and relationships, in addition to biological factors, and the human self is divided into two parts: The physical self, i.e. the physical self. The social self, i.e. the roles it plays. The physical self is divided into: the physical self, i.e. the body, and the social self, i.e. the roles it plays. Identity is divided into: Sectarian identity,

collective identity, national identity, Arab identity and Islamic identity (Al-Kharif, 2022).

Mohammed Abu Khalif refers to identity as ‘a combination of social and cultural characteristics shared by individuals on the basis of which one group can be distinguished from another, and it is also defined as the set of affiliations to which an individual belongs and which determine his behaviour or the way in which he perceives himself’ (Abu Khalif, 2021).

1-4 Virtual identity:

It is defined as ‘the attributes and characteristics that a normal individual presents to others via the Internet, so that the communication process takes place between three parties rather than two, namely the normal person, the virtual identity and other people’ (Ba Youssef, 2011, p. 470).

It is also defined as the sum of qualities, symbols and data that individuals use to present themselves to others in virtual communities and interact with them through them, p. 315).

2- The Internet and the Virtual Society

Following the technological revolution and the emergence of the Internet, which reflected technical development in the use of technology, new modes of communication have emerged in the digital space, moving away from the nature of traditional groups such as the family and traditional models of human interaction. A new area of social interaction has been added, namely online communication through communication networks, as a real-time interaction tool that has made it possible to discuss many topics that are not always easy to discuss face-to-face. The internet has become an essential driver for a variety of activities and for all segments of society, enabling people to meet, interact and exchange information. It has a major influence on all age groups, particularly young people, and the internet has become part of their

lives, or rather their way of life. . In particular, Facebook, which is considered one of the most significant results of the development of technology, information and communication and the most popular sites "includes a large number of users and has more than 2.85 billion active users according to 2021 statistics and is the most prominent and famous and used technology, which is attributed to Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 and has transformed from a site limited only to Harvard University students into a global site that includes a large number of users" (Drablia, Bouchareb, 2012, p. 393).

Thus, the scene of young people immersing themselves in their blue world and disconnecting from their environment has become a recurring theme in our daily lives, as it provides them with new representations of the real world through the virtual world and new relationships. This virtual community has formed a world of free expression and the formation of multiple identities, borrowing fake names and photos, and using symbols to express joy or sadness ... , p. 318). Virtualisation 'covers all human activities: virtual money, virtual shopping, virtual relationships, virtual tourism, virtual violence, virtual libraries, virtual marriage' (Ayachi, 2020).

Young people of both sexes interact for many hours at any time, whether they live in the same geographical locations or are separated by thousands of kilometres, using voice, text or video. What's more, they enter and leave the virtual world whenever they want and without tiring, achieving what they can't in real society, sharing their daily lives in the form of everyday relationships and communications, exchanging information, opinions and knowledge on specific issues and subjects, and interacting over the smallest details and interests. Howard Rheingold (1993) points out: 'Individuals in a virtual community perform all the actions that individuals in a physical community perform, but without their bodies' (Fox and Roberts, 1999, p. 646).

Numerous theories have addressed the subject of social media use, including the following:

- Symbolic interactionism: this is considered to be one of the appropriate theoretical frameworks for studying social presence in the virtual community, and this theory focuses on explaining the process of interaction in which individuals engage and the role that social interaction plays in individuals' social lives. The basic idea of symbolic interactionism is that individuals interact through symbols in the context of their social and cultural relationships. Harbert Mead and Jarls Cooley point out that individuals interact on social media sites through texts, images and videos... '... 'These media represent meanings and symbols, and users act in the virtual community according to what things mean to them, and they form electronic selves through interaction with others' (Al-Amoush, 2009, p. 13).
- Technological determinism theory: this theory dates back to Marshall McCulhane and believes that advanced technologies have a major influence on determining relations between individuals and the formation of societies.
- The theory of uses and gratifications: This theory dates back to Katz and Blumer in their 1974 book *The Use of Mass Communication*, and sees the public as active participants who choose what they want to watch according to their psychological and social needs.

A virtual community is characterised by a number of elements:

- Members have a common goal, interest, concern, need or activity as a result of belonging to the community in question.
- Members have access to resources that are shared among them, and there are policies and regulations to limit access to these resources.

- The existence and availability of information, support and services among members is important for community mobilisation.
- There is a common framework of social traditions, language and protocols (Shabounia, 2019).

3- The Role of Social Networking Sites in Virtual Identity Formation

Thanks to technical and technological developments and the rapid transformations and changes brought about by globalisation, a new identity has been formed, namely the virtual identity in the virtual world. It is represented by the apparent personality of users, created by the user outside any temporal or spatial framework. Young people often tend to represent a virtual identity that is often different from the real one, an identity that allows them to free themselves from social restrictions and controls, to express their beliefs and opinions and to prove themselves, which is not possible in real society' Social networking sites have reshaped accepted models of communication and have become an effective role in various societies. Through them, the individual has been transformed into an individual with a virtual identity who interacts within a virtual community, and although these communications are interactive, the participants in these interactions are unknown identities, because the individual in virtual gatherings disguises himself as more than one personality, and the individual can therefore repeat himself in this group with more than one identity' (Al-Barazi, 2014).

The Internet has enabled virtual space to become a field of freedom that transcends the boundaries of the physical sphere, because the individual, according to the theories of the social sciences, be it the coercion of social phenomena with Émile Durkheim, the structuralism of social phenomena with Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu's haptos, Ralph Foucault's socialisation and basal personality. Ralph Linton's socialisation and basal personality, which reveal that the individual has only one freedom, that of submitting to and conforming to these coercive

structures, which have generated a state of social pressure and oppression, contributing to the search for ways to escape this pressurised reality (Ayachi, 2020, p. 326

Young people are increasingly attracted to the virtual world through social networks, particularly with the development of smartphones that contain numerous programmes connected to the Internet, notably Facebook, which is the platform most used by young people to enter the digital space, which has become an integral part of everyday life, adopting a virtual identity that is often a borrowed identity, through which they can express themselves freely away from societal restrictions. Or out of fear of entering the virtual world with a real identity, they use new identities that give different embodiments of their social existence, relying on modern digital technologies by having the ability to form new identities in different social contexts (Bouzefrane, 2015, p13)

This immersion in virtual space, which manifests itself in chat rooms, e-mail and social networks, is motivated by a number of reasons:

- The search for satisfaction of the desire for emancipation and affirmation of excellence, as this identity often expresses the individual's dissatisfaction with their social reality and their attempt to escape from it, so they use a virtual identity that is different from their real identity. 'A woman can be involved in a non-feminine space of political discussion by disguising herself as a man, and the ugly body can be presented in a beautiful and attractive form in cyberspace because computer programs allow individuals to choose the colour of their skin, hair and eyes, as well as change their appearance' (Nayyar, 2017, p. 29). It allows them to communicate with other people without revealing their real identity and to have interactive exchanges to express themselves freely. When an SNS user communicates with a virtual friend, they do not necessarily use their real identity, reflecting users' interest in anonymity. The attributes most likely to

change are name, photo, profile, gender, age and marital status. 'A girl can be a boy, or vice versa, names sometimes change, language can become a code, in short, all the threads that indicate an individual's identity are liable to change and be modified, starting with name and country, through photo to age and marital status' (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 140)

- The services provided by these networks are in tune with all groups, especially young people, who spend most of their time using social networking sites as a means of communicating and obtaining information.
- Access to the virtual world represents a new mode of communication in a world where the boundaries of time and space have been abolished, especially with the ease of joining the virtual community and its flexibility and ease of movement, with registration requiring only a telephone number or email to create an account and access from any location in the light of the availability of so-called wifi, which has facilitated access to social networking sites.
- The youth stage is characterised by the desire to make new friends from different cultures, as this is the stage during which the individual's personality is formed independently of the close family or school environment, in addition to the fact that this technology has created a new reality and a modern model of communication between people that has formed a new social reality and interaction (Al-Obeid, 2014, 164). It is about communicating, meeting friends and talking freely, transcending geographical boundaries, especially as they are at an age where they want to make friends of the opposite sex, have emotional experiences and fill the psychological void through chatting.

4- The Relationship between Real and Virtual Identity

With the intensive use of digital technologies, which have become an integral part of everyday life, infiltrating various aspects of social life and the interaction of individuals in this virtual field and the cultural and social content it conveys, several

questions have been raised about virtual societies, and the specificities of the digital technological phenomenon in its social and cultural manifestations, as well as the perceptions and actions it produces on social reality, which may not be identical to real reality, have been the subject of research. The virtual world has enabled individuals to choose an identity which may be an extension of their real identity or which may be disguised and interact with another identity. Many of those who frequent it have pseudonyms and faces that are not their own, and some of them have more than one account with more than one identity depending on their interests and social status' (Al-Jabri, 1999, p. 13). This has led to the emergence of virtual social links and new patterns of values and behaviour. This has raised many questions around the theme of identity, including the difference between real and virtual identity, the relationship between them, the extent to which the latter corresponds to the former, and the psychological and social consequences of the former.

While identity is synonymous with subjectivity, privacy and individual distinction from others, virtual identity represents the attributes that an individual uses on social media sites and interacts with others. This identity is defined by a pseudonym, a postal address or a symbolic image, which allows the individual to exist and interact in multiple ways.

This virtual identity is based on navigating a virtual digital world, whose rules are multiplicity and difference to achieve a goal through a virtual social relationship, an identity formed of all colours, traditions and customs This makes the virtual identity hostile to unity and stability, because 'gender, nationality and names in virtual worlds have become flexible qualities that can be replaced and changed' (Allen, 2019).

Many researchers have raised questions about the nature of an individual's identity in virtual space and its effects on real life:

- A discourse that believes that the virtual identity does not reflect the individual's real identity or that it does not provide much real information, so it is a

dissociation from personal identity and a distancing from the real world, leading to a kind of alienation and isolation from the social context. ‘Intensive use of the Internet leads to the separation of the Internet user from his professional or real life and pushes him to create a virtual identity that has nothing to do with his real identity and personality, which in turn affects the rituals of social ties and pushes them to disintegrate, so that society appears as dissonant units unconnected with each other (Rabeh, 2014, p. 16).

The result is the emergence of another society with its own values and relationships, and the creation of an isolated generation that cannot communicate directly with others in its real world because of its immersion and energy consumption in a virtual environment. Virtual identity is a form of dissociative tendency that leads to the disintegration of social ties and the existence of a state of rupture between the actual and the virtual, the logical consequence of being present and resident in two completely different and distant worlds, which increases the volume of tension and anxiety. A world in which he lives only according to the principle of necessity where eating, drinking, spending natural needs and sleeping, while the virtual stay is for pleasure, dialogue, communication, entertainment, shopping, religion, education and other daily activities, which are transformed into activities that are lived in virtual spaces (Ayachi, 2019).

En particulier lorsque la vie privée entre les individus et les groupes prend fin et que les frontières culturelles disparaissent pour se fondre en une seule culture, la culture de la mondialisation, qui véhicule souvent les idées d'individus et d'organisations déviants, affectant particulièrement les jeunes dans un monde plein de tensions intellectuelles, de prise d'informations sans connaissance de leur contenu réel, et de circulation de fausses informations sans lois pour les réglementer. L'identité virtuelle à l'ère de la mondialisation "a introduit des changements majeurs dans la vie interne de la famille parce qu'elle a fourni un

espace confortable à l'individu dans son monde bleu, loin de la surveillance et de l'intervention de la famille, de ses valeurs et de ses exigences coercitives. Une situation qui a contribué à la consolidation de l'isolement au sein de l'espace familial et a augmenté le niveau d'isolement social et a contribué à la désintégration de la famille et du tissu familial, car les relations électroniques ont évincé la famille et les relations et conseils familiaux" (Asaidani, Lakkat, 2021, p. 138).

- On the other hand, another team of researchers believes that this virtual communication encourages self-expression, because it allows the user to express it, unlike real society, which restricts personal identity to the normative elements of society and therefore suppresses it. The virtual world is based on intellectual communication and not on appearance, status and rank... As such, this space helps to satisfy the individual's desire for self-assertion and is not a tool for introversion and isolation; on the contrary, it helps to develop relationships and exchange life experiences and skills with other individuals. These virtual communities allow individuals to present themselves as they wish and therefore to put their identity to experimentation and discovery, which is not possible in their real world, so using a pseudonym allows them to express themselves because they feel less responsible He presents himself as he wishes and as he wants, a behaviour that may not be possible in real society, and in this way he discovers his different potentials and abilities' He navigates virtual worlds with their dreams and imagination because of the narrowness he experiences in his physical world. This world is subject to a traditional value system in which coercive authority and normative pressures are intensified. These pressures start from the family and end up in most of the social and economic institutions that make up real society (Masouda, 2011, p. 486).

Conclusion

Technological developments in the field of information and communication have brought about transformations that have penetrated various social structures and systems and affected our ways of thinking and behaving, and have led to a qualitative leap in the way individuals and groups communicate and created a new interactive communication environment called virtual societies that has contributed to the formation of virtual identity.

In this study, we sought to identify the role social networking sites play in shaping young people's virtual identities and the effects this identity has on the reality of its users. We conclude that it is impossible to remain aloof from this virtual world and resist it, as it has become one of the necessities of contemporary life. It is therefore necessary to establish an adequate relationship between social networking sites and societal and institutional structures and to seek to streamline users' relationships with social networking sites through educational and awareness-raising mechanisms, particularly by working to establish a "digital" culture.

This world is subject to a traditional value system in which coercive authority and normative pressures are intensified. These pressures begin in the family and end in most of the social and economic institutions that make up real society (Masouda, 2011, p. 486)

References

1. Amin, Reda (2015). *New Media*. Egypt: Dar Al-Fajr for Publishing and Distribution.
2. Al-Rawi, Bushra Jameel (2012). *The Role of Social Media in Change: A Theoretical Approach*. *Scientific Researcher Magazine*, Issue (18), pp. 94-112.
3. Al-Najjar, Waseem Shafiq (2017). *The Legal System of Social Media (WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter): A Comparative Legal Study on Privacy, Personal Freedom, Responsibility, and Jurisdiction*. Beirut: Arab Center for Legal and Judicial Research.

4. Al-Ayashi, Al-Farfar (2020). Virtual Identity: Its Nature, Characteristics, and Relationship to Real Society. An Exploratory Study on a Sample of Social Media Users. *Journal of Media Studies*, Issue (11). pp. 312-331.
5. Al-Ayashi, Al-Farfar (2019). Virtual Identity and Living Outside the Self. Retrieved from <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.as>.
6. Al-Kharif, Rushud bin Muhammad (2022). The Gap Between Real and Virtual Identity. Retrieved from <https://www.aleqt.com>.
7. Al-Barazi, Ma'an (2014). Searching for an Arab Communication Model, taken from the website: <https://www.academia.edu/>.
8. Al-Amoush, Ahmed Falah (2009), Social Presence in Virtual Society, Conference on Communication Technologies and Social Change, Saudi Arabia: King Saud University.
9. Al-Jabri, Muhammad Abed (1998). Globalization and Cultural Identity. *Fikr wa Naqd Magazine*, Issue (6), pp. 5-18
10. Al-Ubaid, Majida Khalaf Allah (2014). Social Media and Their Impact on Social Relationships. *Al-Hikma Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, Issue (26). pp. 112-139.
11. Asa'idani, Salami, and Laqit, Asma (2021). Formation of Virtual Identity in Light of Diverse Cultural Contexts Across Social Media. *Journal of Social Empowerment*, Vol. (3), No. (1). pp. 136-147
12. Abu Khalif, Muhammad (2021), Definition of Identity, taken from <https://mawdoo3.com>
13. Bayoussef, Masouda (2011). Virtual Identity: Characteristics and Dimensions: An Exploratory Study on a Sample of Participants in Virtual Communities, Volume (3), Issue (5), pp. 465-487.
14. Drablia, Fadwa, Bouchareb, Bouledani Khaled (2022). Uses of social networking sites and their role in shaping virtual identity "Facebook" as a model, a field study on a sample of elderly people in El Tarf State. *Professional Journal of Sports Sciences and Humanities*. Volume (9), Issue (2), pp. 392-409.
15. Radi, Zaher (2003). Use of social networking sites in the Arab world. *Education Journal*. Issue (15).
16. Rabeh, Al-Sadiq (2014). *Digital Spaces: Readings in Concepts, Approaches, and Challenges*. Lebanon: Dar Al-Nahda Al-Arabiya.
17. Shabounieh, Zahia (2019), Youth between Reality and Virtual Society, *Journal of Economic Studies*, Vol. (13), No. (2), pp. 151-161.

-
18. Qaydoum, Hasna (2002). The Internet and its Uses in Algeria, Master's Thesis, Faculty of Political Science and Media, University of Communication and Media, Algiers.
 19. Laqab, Mohamed (2003). Media and Information Society. Algiers: Dar Al-Houma.
 20. Nayar, Pramod K. (2018). Introduction to New Media and Electronic Cultures, translated by Jalal Al-Din Ezz Al-Din Ali. Cairo: Hindawi Foundation CIC.
 21. Fox 'Nick 'Roberts 'Chris (1999), GPs in Cyberspace: The Sociology of a 'Virtual Community', Sociological Review 47(4), pp 643 – 671.
 22. Laurent, Maryline & Bouzefrane, Samia (2015). Digital Identity Management. United States: ISTE Press Ltd and Elsevier Ltd.