Maja Simonovska, PhD Candidate

University of Banja Luka, Serbia

majasim@gmail.com

Radmila Zivanovic, PhD Candidate

Faculty of Philosophy

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje

radmila.zivanovic@gmail.com

Emilija Stoimenova-Cenevska, PhD

International Balkan University- Skopje

emilijastoimenova@gmail.com

VIRTUAL AND SOCIAL IDENTITY: CONNECTEDNESS, CONDITIONALITY AND DIFFERENCE

Abstract

Social identity is created in a long and complex process, which includes the "meanings which one person assigns to him/herself, while having the perspective of the others,.." (Wendt, 1994). That means that the process entails acquiring knowledge and acceptance of the mutual characteristics, values, beliefs of a social community, which enables an emergence of sense of belonging, distinction but at the same time understanding the differences among one's own group and the other groups. On the other side, the already formed individual, due to the contemporary technology forms its virtual identity in a very short time, and indentifies with groups and their values and symbols in a shorter period

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of time. The feeling that one belongs to these groups is very powerful and strong, and for some it represents a very important aspect of their identity. Looking at the existence of these identities we would like to look at their existence, conditionality, interconnectedness, creation and co-creation. Especially we would like to focus on the way that the existence of the first shapes or modifies the existence of the second. Thereby we are trying to give an answer what is the role of the context in the creation of these identities and whether the virtual world which creates context with different rules, also creates a virtual identity with different, specific characteristics.

Key words: social identity, virtual identity, sense of belonging, new technologies

SOCIAL IDENTITY

The identity of the individual is contextual and multi-faceted including physical, psychological and social attributes. In time it is learned, organized and dynamic. Accordingly, in same time, the individual possesses individual identity presenting the persons unique characteristics and his/hers interpersonal relationships and a social identity which is constructed by the membership of a person in a group.

People are part of different groups. But, although they belong to a large number of groups only few groups are important enough to elicit identification by their members. The way one person defines her/himself when belonging to a group is similar to the way the other members of the same group define themselves. The mutual social identity does not mean that the members of the group will have a mutual interaction. Instead, it means that they believe that they have mutual characteristics. In a certain manner all members of the group have witnessed or survived through the same events which are important to the group (Deaux, 2001).

According the Social Identity Theory one person has a number of selves which correspond to the group membership. Different feelings, thoughts or actions in a person can be triggered by different social contexts. The group membership is sufficient to elicit in-group favouritism. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979) there are three variables which contribute to the favouritism of the in-group: the extent to which the individuals identify with the in-group, the extent to which the context provides ground for comparison between groups and the perceived relevance of the comparison group (Haslam, 2001).

There are three central ideas in the social identity theory:

a. Categorization – Individuals tend to categorize objects and people in order to understand the environment they belong to. By assigning categories they learn how to act with different people, groups, objects, etc. At the same time by belonging into categories themselves they learn about themselves and the norms in their groups.

b. Identification – Individuals identify with the groups they feel they belong to. But it is important to note that depending on the context they can see themselves as unique individuals or as members of a group i.e. their individual or social identity will surface.

c. Positive self-concept – The idea of positive self concept is based on comparison of the person with other people who are members of the in-group or out-groups. Since having a positive self-concept is part of the normal psychological functioning, individuals are prone to compare themselves with others in order to see themselves or their in-groups in a positive light. As a result there are two motivational factors – positive distinctiveness (seeing the in-group as better) and negative distinctiveness (tendency to minimize the differences between the in-

group and out-groups in order to see the in-group more favourably) (Pluempavarn and Panteli, 2007).

While the theory of social identity recognizes that the social identity represents a core factor in the self-concept of an individual, it also points that it is actually the individual's knowledge of belonging to a group together with the emotional significance which create the group membership. It is characteristic for the individuals to strive to achieve positive self-concept, as it is important for them to put effort to maintain the positive social identity. According to Tajfel (1984) the social behaviour ranges from purely interpersonal to purely intergroup, and it depends on the type context the individual faces at the moment. Which type of identity will be salient at the moment, whether personal or social depends on the social context (Pluempavarn and Panteli, 2007).

Taking in consideration the actual discourse on social identity, Jenkins (2004) sees social identity as a social process and not a fixed position, where the individual and the social are connected in a fashion that is almost impossible to unravel. According to him the social world is created through the actions of the individuals, their interactions and negotiations, where as a result the identity is fluid. This is why he focuses on the process stating that it would be more appropriate to talk about identification instead of identity. Giddens (1991) on the other hand, focuses on the changing nature of the identities, and supports this view by putting a light on the energy a person must invest in representing his/hers identity in the social networks. Presenting oneself in the social media has become a "project" where the person has to contemplate and bring decisions who should s/he be and what s/he should do (Buckingham, 2008).

CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

Social identities differ in the manner of their definition – some are defined more generally while others are defined narrower; some are consciously chosen such as an occupation, and some are gained through birth, such as ethnicity and gender; and they can also differ in the status or value given to them.

Social identities develop over time and often change slowly, their expression can differ significantly. Having in mind that people have multiple social identities, which result in expression of different behaviours and attributes, they can be considered as evidence for the ways people respond to the different contexts. At the same time the individuals make choices in accordance with the settings but also they choose the contexts they will engage in or respond to (Deaux, 2001).

There are many forms of social identity due to the different ways in which people

perceive the world and create networks. Deaux (2001) has identified five types of social identification: ethnic and religious identities, political identities, vocations and avocations, personal relationships, and stigmatized groups.

Although social identity can be seen as a label attached to different groups and people, it has more implications and aspects such as cognitive beliefs, emotional associations, and behavioural consequences. The cognitive aspects can be different and can include personality traits, attitudes (social and political) and memories connected to events related to identity. Many of the cognitions are shared among groups and individuals and can also be defined as social representations of salient categories. Although most social representations have a set of traits known by groups, people instead of trying to fit in a social representation adopt only aspects which are relevant to them, and as a result create their own definitions of what it means to be for eg. a specific type of person. It is also important to note that the contents of the social identity are created through socially shared beliefs and other attributes which rely on the personal experience.

The social identity's motivational basis can be seen as means for self-definition or self-esteem, of interacting with others who share one's values and goals and as a way of defining oneself in contrast to others. Other important aspects are the implications to behaviour – how one person acts and interacts with members of the in-groups or out-groups. The stronger the identification is with a group it is more likely that the person will perform activities supportive to that group.

VIRTUAL IDENTITY

In the past the individuals formed their identities regarding their nationality, gender, religion etc. based on information coming from their communities that were mostly territorially defined. Now, identities are also constructed through the media where people are exposed to different ethnicities, nationalities, religions etc. and where a large number of different role-models and lifestyles from all around the world are presented. The technology is developing very fast, and the assumption that it will affect the way the identity is defined becomes more salient.

According Chandler (1998), the internet and the web provide opportunities for identity construction, because they allow thinking about the identity and also enable the people to change in who they want to be. This is why he calls them 'technologies of the self' (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004).

At the beginning there was exaggeration regarding the activity that people have in the cyber space, what they do in reality and what they want to do. Just as Goffman (1959) compares the life of the everyday person with theatrical performance, the

virtual reality can be seen as a "stage" where the identities are presented and people work on their online self-presentation. This is why it is important to see the context of the fluid and multiple nature of the offline identity and the context of the real intentions of the people in the virtual reality.

One of the often arising questions is "which is more 'real', one's offline identity or one's online identity?" Having in mind that individuals shift their identities every day in accordance with the situation they are in, trying to define the online identities as fixed contrasts the notion that they are fluid and dynamic. The identities that people have online and the ones they have offline are part of the ongoing process of identification.

Currently there are two opposing and dominant views addressing the issue of technological influence in construction of the social identity. Technological determinism implies that all our activities such as economic, political and social are altered by the use of technology. On the other hand social constructivism implies that the technology is shaped by the existing social relations and is a form where people choose the way they will utilize it. By this view the technology has no inherent qualities and has no values. There is also a third perspective trying to combine these two approaches saying that technology is shaped but it also shapes the identities and manners of communication (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004).

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

Virtual reality represents a digitally created space which can be entered by a computer. The virtual identity represents a form of the social identity used by the internet users. When individuals enter the virtual space they are entering into a different world where regarding on the environment they can interact with objects, people or other different environments. All movements or actions conducted by an individual in the virtual environment are tracked and the virtual environment where the individual is at the moment adjusts in accordance with his/hers actions.

In order to enter the virtual environment, the individuals must choose their representation (avatar or icon) which can vary and be presented with real or imagined picture of ourselves. Some internet users use their real names on the internet, while others choose to identify with pseudonyms which reveal different information for their owners. The same individual may choose his/hers social identity, can create a number of different identities and take part in different virtual identities of hers/his interest (Koles **and Nagy, 2012;** Turkle, 1995).

Bloggs, social networks, forums, video games etc. are created and shared on the internet. The entire communication among the individuals is conducted on the

internet, and these communities differ from the social networks and communities from the real world. Through the communication conducted in these virtual environments the virtual person gains a reputation, which is shared in the specific virtual community. Based on the virtual reputation the other members of the community can decide whether they will communicate with this person or not.

The reasons for the active participation in different virtual environments differ, but in all of them the individual maintains a degree of anonymity and or invisibility (Koles **and Nagy, 2012;** Turkle, 1995). The degree of anonymity depends of the persons' decision which personal information to reveal, in what ways, and how often to the networked public.

Spears and Lea in the 1990s propose the SIDE model[1] which tries to explain the Computer mediated communication (CMC) combined with the effects of social identity and anonymity. According to this CMC model the anonymity present in the online communication doesn't lead to loss of identity but instead they "motivate people to switch from their personal identity to their social identity". As the social identity is stronger for the participants in the CMC the larger the group cohesion will be (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004).

As individuals participate in the virtual communities, they start feeling attached to them, which as a result cause their identities to be affected by the groups they belong to. These new created social identities can be recognized through their individual narratives on their personalized pages. Their personal pages entail content linked to their virtual groups or share important information about these groups to the networked public. The individuals, who are members of more virtual groups, present themselves in the groups in accordance with the interests shared in that group. Each group has its own characteristics and identities and may have different level of influence on its members.

When the members post photographs, comments, clips etc, most of the users read this content in order to see whether the content they posted is in accordance with the identities of the other persons posting in the same group. As a result one person can create and post content different in style and expression in different groups. The posted content shows the perception that the members of the group have toward their group, the identities of the members of the group and the way they are affected by the presence and membership in the group (Péter, 2010).

It is important to understand the importance that online encounters and interactions have for the individuals. At the least, they have become an ordinary aspect of one's everyday live. As these online environments developed during the years the possibility of creation of the online identities increases, develops and becomes more sophisticated allowing the identities to be formulated "through a

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1 SIDE model- Social identity model of deindividuation effects

complex and dynamic sequence of personal decisions".

The individuals can shape their present identity in a certain online environment, based on the feedback they receive from the other members of the community. They have an option to freely experiment and to present themselves in a conventional or not-conventional ways. It can be noted that some of the characteristics a person represents in the online world are exaggerations of his/hers real-life attributes. It is even suggested that the online environments in fact give the individuals an opportunity to role-play and practice aspects of themselves which are not seen in the real setting but articulated in the virtual environment can result in empowerment and bigger visibility of these individuals.

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN THE REAL AND VIRTUAL WORLD

The virtual identity is consisted on virtual and non-virtual elements. Examples of virtual elements are avatars and environments, while the non-virtual elements include language, reactions to events etc. In everyday interactions, the identity is created based on a set of requirements. One important aspect which helps in creating the perception about the other people is their bodily presence. The physical presence in the real life communication is represented by the person's sex, race, looks, gesticulations etc. Seeing the person as he or she is, prevents the other member in the interaction or communication to create an identity which is inconsistent with the actual body (depersonalization). Furthermore, the knowledge about the person's social background and personal characteristics adds to the difficulty in creating a different personal identity.

The appearance on the internet allows creation of different virtual identities. The virtual world offers a possibility of entering different, new communities, where a person can experience how it is to present him/herself in a different environment and to create and show new identities. It is important to note that the detachment from the physical body allows the individuals to communicate without revealing anything about their physical features. Even when an audiovisual mode is present, a person can maintain his anonymity with withholding information regarding the name and place of residence.

Every registration gives the person the liberty to create a new identity without being burdened by the past or present looks, context, social status etc. It can be opened and closed very fast, and modified quickly by changing the data shared when creating the identity. A person can create as many identities he/she wants, and can give each of these identities different set of characteristics.

In that way the individual can create the so called "now selves" which are

established identities, known by others, and "possible selves" which are new identities unknown to others. We can also speak about "hoped-for possible selves" which are part of the possible selves, "true self", "ideal self", etc. It is important to note, that whatever "self" the person decides to show, or accent in a virtual environment, that self is only a representation of the person he or she already is, or aspires to be (Koles **and Nagy, 2012)**.

The residents, inhabitants, visitors, can freely create their representation in these environments, meaning that they can choose/create their avatars or icons. The main difference among the social networks or the network communities and the virtual worlds is that the main purpose of the networks is sharing content. However, the virtual worlds are used for different purposes such as education, research, gaming, etc.

While the virtual worlds are three dimensional, where a person can "enter" and perform different activities, the social networks are two dimensional and do not allow exploration of a virtual environment (Koles **and Nagy, 2012)**

Nowadays, the most popular usage of the virtual world is through social networking sites (SNS), especially Facebook. Facebook provides an opportunity of authentic representation of its members, which means, they can present themselves as they would in the real life. Statistics show that in 2015 Facebook had around 1,55 billion users monthly and is rated as the most popular SNS globally (2015, Statista). The large number of users, despite the fact that they filter the contents they share, gives an indication that the Virtual World is hosting part of the real social identity features, just in a different package.

If we consider the numbers of the Facebook members which present their identities accurately, 8,7% or 83.09 million Facebook users can be considered as Fake (2015, CNet). At the end of 2012, Facebook presented a rule to its members a real-name policy that encourages presentation under your real name (2012, Facebook). Despite these facts, we witness a situation where individuals share more personal information on the web compared to the information they share in the real contact. This supports the trend we call *publicized privacy,* where we encounter more personal information in the virtual world than in the private encounters.

All aspects mentioned before regarding the social identity construction in the real and virtual environment supports our understanding that the virtual identity is a media-conditioned extension of the social identity formed in a real world where some real identity features are kept and articulated. The self-presentation in the virtual reality enables expression of attitudes, preferences and interests even when proximity is not an issue. This conclusions supports the SIDE model, where the feeling of belonging to a group and by that the social identity can be formed only using minimal comparison and by accepting only few characteristics of the group.

CONCLUSION

Social identity is a process through which the individuals define themselves in accordance with the categories that they share with other people. Being part of different groups is important in people's lives. Through the membership in the groups we socialize, we learn and develop, and we perform all the activities which enable us to fully function in the world.

Belonging to a group does not always imply knowing all or most of its members. On the contrary there are groups such as those connected to the professions where all members don't know each other but the group membership has high importance to them and they highly identify with it. All the groups don't have that impact on the individuals. There are memberships which are important enough and individuals identify with them, and there are memberships which are not so important or strong in order to cause membership.

Entering into the virtual world requires an existence of a virtual identity. Virtual identities differ in the level of specific information they reveal for the person which has created them. Also, they differ in the manner of virtual representation – while ones exist only with icons, others have avatars.

With these virtual identities the individuals enter into the virtual communities where they share and gain experience in the virtual worlds. They decide which information they will share, to what extent they will be shared, what will gain accent and what will be hidden.

But, although these communities exist in virtual worlds, they are strong enough to influence the individual's behaviour and to elicit the identification with them. *This is why the virtual identity is only a form of the social identity.* Social identity is formed by presence in groups and these groups although virtual are perceived by the individual as the ones from the real-life.

The individuals communicate with other individuals from all over the world in real time. They invest in these relationships by spending time, energy and emotions, especially to the groups where their interests match.

So in spite the differences in the contexts, the individuals will search groups in accordance to their real-life interests. In a manner they will "continue" to act as they would in the real life, and they would seek for the same or similar movies, books, songs, pets, friendships, etc.

Even though they can decide which part they will accentuate, and which they will hide, they can only project themselves into the virtual worlds. Some of their features may be hidden in the public, but that doesn't mean that they don't exist. The rules in the contexts remain the same as in the real-life, because the virtual world is a projection of the real people.

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