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Identity, Bilingualism, and the Presence on Virtual Social Networks: Case Study, Students of Kurdistan University, Iran

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Abstract:

The present study, entitled "Identity, Bilingualism, and Presence on Virtual Social Networks", was conducted among students of the University of Kurdistan, who were studying at the university in the academic year (2019–2020). This study seeks to investigate the identity of virtual social network users and the impact of presence rate on social networks and the diversity of use of different topics in the four dimensions of social identity (personal, communication, social and public identity) as well as the role of bilingualism on their social identity. The research method in this study is survey and data collection technique are standard questionnaire of identity (Cheek, J. M. & Briggs, S. R. (2013). Questionnaires were distributed among 400 students who were selected by stratified random sampling. The theoretical framework for the research is inspired by the theories of Giddens, Berger and Castells. The results of this study showed that there is a positive relationship between social, personal, communicational, collective and public identity with the amount of use of virtual social networks and the variety of use of different topics in different virtual social networks. Bilingualism also has a negative impact on social identity.

Keywords: Identity, bilingualism, virtual social networks, personal, communicational, collective and public identity

1. Introduction

Identity is the source of meaning and experience for people. Identifying and self-defining, which is always a form of making, is never completely separable from how others are known. The process of meaning-making and identity-finding is based on a cultural feature or a coherent set of cultural traits. From the sociologists' point of view, identity is a process that is constantly subject to reconstruction, and the causes of this reconstruction vary socially, historically, and culturally. (Rafat Jah, 2004: 3). Thus, identity as Hall (1987) puts it, is an acquired phenomenon that forms the core of the first few years of life and is constantly changing through the acquisition of new information throughout life.

In the past, people's identities were shaped in person-to-person interactions, but today with the advent of new technology and media, interactions have become virtualized, where face-to-face communications no longer determine the identity of individuals but they are created through the channel of virtual spaces, One has the opportunity to interact with people beyond the place and the time they are there.

Mark Pasteur (1995) in the "second age of media" emphasizes that in the new era which internet and electronic communications dominate the society, it is virtual communities that make people's identities. Identities are in a completely new situation. Social structures influenced by information technology and communication reveal a new understanding of the mentality that views human beings as a multilayered, changeable and passive phenomenon, and it fights with any kind of identity consolidation. "The issue of media influence is one of the most important and debatable for the researchers. The importance of this issue doubled when Marshall McLuhan (1964) stated; 'media is the message'. 'technologies of the self' allow us not only to think about our identity and to transform the way we think of ourselves, but also to change ourselves to who we want to be' (Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic, 2004).

Therefore, technologies enable us on virtual social networks to redefine our desirable identity online, which is distinct from our real or offline identity. This distinction puts us in a reciprocal space, constantly in conflict with or interacting with our true and virtual identity. One of the features of online and offline identity in virtual social networks is anonymity or forgery, which means concealing identity, affecting the multiplicity of social identities, and causing fluidity of the identity of users of these networks. This effect of identity and virtual social networks has been studied by various researchers, which suggests that identity in cyber space is undergoing transformation (Renn et al. 2007, Papakarisi 2009, Wellman et al 2001, Shalchi 2005, Shariati 2005). Achieving online community also leads to greater socialization and higher levels of sociability. Regarding the influence of media on identity formation, Claire's (2009) study also showed that media influences are reflected in behavior and ideology, which in turn affects individuals' social identity. (Lee, J & Lee, H, 2010). Furthermore, in this study, identity is considered as a dynamic process that takes a special form influenced by the media (Claire, 2009). Some studies also underestimate the impact of cyberspace on identity, Khalili (2005), in his study of

the impact of the blog's virtual environment on identity, concluded that there was no multiplicity of personality in blogs. Also, the results of Behzad Doran's research (2002) showed no significant relationship between cybernetic space experience and none of the three levels of social identity (family, peer and national) of the respondents. Some research has also looked at factors outside of these networks that somehow examine the effects of prior variables on the impact of these virtual social networks on their users. The results of Michelle G. Hart (2011) are in line with the findings that: Different levels of education have an impact on students' use or enjoyment of social networking sites and the way they spend higher levels of behavior. Different educational levels have an impact on students' use or enjoyment of social networking sites and the as they go through higher levels, their behavior and attitudes toward using these online social networks becomes more applicable (Hart, 2011). Lim and Cho (2010) state that university and college students are among the most frequent users of social media. In this regard, the discussion of identity among these students as the focal point of the identity issue is of great importance, and because of the vast network of student relationships and their relatively large relationship with the mass media and people with different identities, they are more likely to be involved with the problems and stresses of traditional and modern identity and the challenges posed by the information society. Students are therefore at the center of the process of identity differentiation and similarity. On the other hand, following Jay Hart's research into factors outside these networks, bilingualism is one of the most important variables that have been overlooked by researchers in the discussion of cyberspace and identity. Also, given the fact that the university is a place where different cultures and languages interact, and according to Lim and Cho regarding students' use of cyberspace, the importance of the issue doubles. Therefore, considering the position of language as one of the important symbols of identity of each ethnicity, group, and nation, as well as the evolution of identity in cyberspace, this study aims to answer the question of how does the amount and variety of use in virtual social networks affect the social identity of virtual social network users? Also, what impact does bilingualism have on social identity in cyberspace?

2. Social Identity

The word identity is literally derived from the word "Identitat" and is used in two seemingly contradictory meanings: (a) Absolute homogeneity and uniformity (b) A distinction that involves consistency or continuity over time. Although these two meanings seem contradictory and opposite, they essentially focus on two main and complementary aspects of identity (Gul Mohammadi, 2001: 14). If we are to define identity in both the individual and social categories, we must look at both psychological and sociological theories. Accordingly, most psychologists and personality theorists regard identity primarily as a personal matter, and believe that the main meaning and aspect of identity focuses on the personality and emotional characteristics of the individual. Most of these theorists, of course, do not deny social identity and, as a consequence, view these two types of identities as separate and independent from each other (Ibid.). Thus, from the perspective of psychology, identity is "the feeling of personal differentiation, the sense of personal continuity, and the sense of personal independence" (Jacobson, 1996: 9). Sociologists emphasizing on the dialectic between the individual and society believe, that identity is expressed in the attitudes and emotions of individuals, but that the basis of its formation is collective life. The social identity manifested in the personality, apart from the social world of other people, has no meaning. Individuals are unique and changeable, but their personality is completely socially constructed through different stages of socialization and social interaction (Jenkins, 2002: 20).

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

In relation to the identity debate, it can be said that most psychologists and personality theorists regard identity in the first place as a personal matter. From this perspective, however, identity is "a sense of personal differentiation, a sense of personal continuity, and a sense of personal independence" (Jacobson, quoted in Qizqhan, 2001: 16). But social psychologists and sociologists emphasize the fact that a sense of individual identity is formed through the dialectic between the individual and society. They more or less accept that identity is usually expressed in the attitudes and emotions of individuals, but the basis of its formation is collective life, therefore the social identity expressed in the personality, apart from the social world of other people, has no meaning.

Therefore, to study a subject such as identity, sociological theories are more efficient than other scientific fields, so in this study we focus on the theories of sociology. However, such a choice is not simply due to the abundance of sociological studies in the subject of identity, for example, many psychological studies can be found in this field. We have begun our discussion of individual and collective identity accordingly, but our argument for choosing such an approach is that identity is first of all a social matter and that it is not correct to reduce it to the individual level, while appealing to very general and universal criteria such as human nature, as a source of identity is pointless, because by such a criterion, essentially speaking of identity distinction is also meaningless. Accordingly, by modeling sociological theories, we examine social identity in the four dimensions of personal identity, communication identity, collective identity, and general(public) identity based on the categories of Cheek, J. M. & Briggs, S. R. (2013). In this regard, we discuss some of the sociological theories that explain the relationship between language, identity and cyberspace.

2.2. Peter Burger

The two main domains of the sociology of knowledge are 'social life-world' and 'social construction of reality'. Social life-world speaks about the consciousness of the actors, that is the way humans construct social reality. This everyday consciousness is a thread of shared meanings between the individual and the others and creates a "social life-world". From the sociological point of view, any kind of knowledge is justified and meaningful only in a particular situation. Thus, the dialectic between consciousness and reality (mind and object) makes social reality constructed and

attention to the dimension of consciousness (mind and within the institutional processes) enables understanding of social reality. In this context, Berger and his colleagues, by examining and analyzing the relationship between modernity and the changes of cognitive frameworks and consequently social realities, come to the conclusion that there is a huge difference between tradition (traditional life-world) and the modern world (they do not refer to modern and postmodern separation). They believe that human being, in the sense of being human, must live in a world, a reality that gives meaning to life, and that life-world seeks to express this fundamental characteristic of human existence. Understanding the life-world is also crucial for the sociological analysis of concrete situations (Berger & Lockman, 1996).

According to the theoretical framework of Berger and his colleagues, the centrality of one's life planning is in the sense that it is attributed to one's own biography (as well as universal meaning of society), all of which have important identity implications for the individual in modern society. They promote. What they mean by identity is not what is described in scientific psychology, but rather the actual experience of the individual about himself or herself in a particular social situation. In other words, they mean 'the way in which people define themselves. Identity, in this sense, is part of a given structure of consciousness, and therefore is a phenomenological descriptive function (free from any epistemological or psychological judgment)' (Berger et al., 84: 1381).

2.3. Anthony Giddens

Giddens's theory is a sociological theory that focuses on the emergence of new mechanisms of personal identity that are both born and shaped by modern institutions. Therefore, "self" is not a passive concept that is formed solely under external influences. (Giddens, 1999: 16). He on the basis of his integrated approach (structure and agent), believes that for the first time in human history, "self" and "society" interact with one another in a global environment.

Giddens emphasizes the issue of identity identification and awareness, believing that "personal identity, as a regular phenomenon, requires a definite narrative: the" self "narrative must be explicit and clear. One of the most important recommendations for establishing and maintaining a comprehensive concept of 'self' is to arrange daily diaries and formulate a personal biography '(Ibid: 113). In modern social life, biography is the core of personal identity. Such biographies, like other narrative texts, are something to work on, and they require ingenuity and creativity in arranging and editing them. In the context of the role of social structures, Giddens argues that lifestyle choices and life planning are not precisely "within" the context of everyday life as social agents or constituent elements, but are related to institutional situations that help individuals. To shape their actions (Ibid). It can also be said that Giddens considers identity to be uncertain and changing. Thus the "content" of personal identity or, in other words, the characteristics that make up one's life, as in other existential realms, are socially and culturally variable (Ibid: 85).

2.4. Manuel Castells

Castells regards identity as a process of meaning-making based on a cultural feature or an interconnected set of cultural features that are prioritized over other semantic resources. According to Castells, "in network society, for most social actors, meaning is organized around a fundamental identity. This essential identity is inherent over time and place. Although this approach is similar to Ericsson's formulation of identity, my focus here is primarily on collective identity rather than individual identity. However, individualism (which differs from individual identity) can also be a form of collective identity." (Castells 2006: 3-22).

In Castells' view, all identities are constructed. But the key question is how, from what, by whom, and for what purpose. Materials such as history, geography, biology, production and reproduction institutions, collective memory, personal dreams, device and power supply, oracle, and religious inspiration are used to construct identities. But individuals, social groups, and communities re-cultivate all these raw materials and rearrange their meaning in accordance with social requirements and cultural projects rooted in their social structure and temporal-spatial framework. According to Castells, who and for whom to build collective identity largely determines the symbolic content of that identity and its meaning for those who assume themselves same with it or imagine themselves outside it. (Ibid: 24).

2.5. Triple Approaches

To describe and explain bilingualism, identity, and cyberspace in order to answer research questions and achieve the goals pursued in this study, three different approaches to the problem are presented. We will try to use these three approaches to explain the results of the research, so we divide the existing theories into three general categories - optimistic theories, pessimistic theories, and realistic theories.

In the optimistic approach, it is looked positively at the impact of social networks on individuals' social identity. Sherry Turkle is one of the theorists who looks at identity in the virtual social network with this approach, Turkle attributes cyberspace as a liberating space, due to its unique features, such as the possibility of anonymity and the removal of physical cues that allow the user to easily customize multiple roles at different times and settings. Because it allows the user himself to be at the same time the creator, actor, director, producer, all-rounder of his or her favorite show. Another theorist is Howard Ringold. In his view, participation in virtual communities, on the one hand, reduces the pressures of adapting to group and collective expectations in the real world and giving the individual greater freedom to realize his or her best and ideal, and to interact with others of his or her own desires, and interacting with his or her own favorite ones, on the other hand it greatly reduces environmental and geographical pressures on the user (Turkel quoted by Zakai and Khatibi, 2006: 126). Overall, postmodernists like Terkel and Stone's view of the identity effects of cyberspace has centered around the idea that cyberspace is a liberating space that allows the user to free himself from the body and many other constraints and flourish various aspects that was previously unable to express and present.

In a pessimistic approach, the issue of identity in cyberspace is viewed negatively. These theories have been largely dispersed and shaped by criticism of the relatively optimistic theories and approaches of some postmodernists. According to this view, the virtual world as a whole may be more incalculable than the everyday world, but it is generally formed on the basis of the same real-world rules and social conventions, and this space is also controlled and governed by sources of real economic and political power. Therefore, everything is planned and predetermined by some programmers and controlled by them and they believe that the forms formed in cyberspace are more of the form of programs than identities. According to this perspective in cyberspace, each user is able to easily access different information about the other user, so it can be said that today's lives in digital technology are inevitably visible to others. This is a problem that threatens the personal lives of individuals (Wayne and Katz, quoted in Zakah and Khatibi 2006: 128).

In a realistic approach, two completely different approaches to identity and cyberspace are dealt with: The first is an approach to how we form and present ourselves in cyberspace within the framework of Goffman's Theory, and the second approach, is a new approach to self in the current modern world in the light of the emergence and expansion of new media and the enhancement of media interaction.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this study, we sought to assess and study social identity in virtual social networks and the role of bilingualism among university students, which in this regard, we have examined four dimensions of social identity namely personal, communication, collective and public identity.

One of the main hypotheses in this study is the impact of the diversity of social network use on each of the social identity dimensions. That is, the greater the variety of use of these networks, the different the identity of each dimension of the user, due to the location of users in different positions in this space. This hypothesis is based on the views of Giddens and Burger.

Identity, in the sociological sense, fills the gap between 'inside' and 'outside' - between the public and the private sphere, the fact that we integrate 'ourselves' into cultural identities and at the same time internalize their meanings and values and make them 'part of ourselves' helps us to integrate our mental emotions with the objective places we occupy in the cultural and social world. Therefore, identity connects the subject to the structure. So, it can be said that the variety of use of different virtual social networks puts users in a position that sets the stage for change in their identity.

Another hypothesis raised in this study is the impact of the use of virtual social networks on the social identity of their users. That is, as the use of these networks increases, each dimension of social identity changes. According to Castells in network society, for most social actors, meaning is organized around a fundamental identity. This essential identity is inherent over time and place. Castells believes that all identities are made up. But the main question is how? From what? By whom? Our assumption that fits in with Castells' theory is about the amount of presence on cyberspace. Here we consider time as the factor that creates users' social identity. Lastly, we consider cyberspace and social networking as a life-world that the extent of presence in this life-world affects all aspects of social identity. Finally, the next hypothesis examines the impact of bilingualism on the social identity of virtual social network users. According to Berger, it can be argued that language as a cultural origin, prescribes a kind of consciousness that this awareness in the cyberspace, can take a more different form from the real space, because of its unique features. So, based on Berger's theory, we explain this effect.

3.1. Research Hypotheses

- There is a relationship between the type of topics used on virtual social networks and social identity and its four dimensions.
- There is a relationship between the use of virtual social networks and social identity and its four dimensions.
- Social identity in virtual social networks differs between monolingual and bilingual users.

3.2. Research Methodology

The study is done by social survey method and the unit of analysis as well as observation level is individual. Problem variables and indices are determined based on the theoretical framework, and the information required is completed by the Cheek, J. M. & Briggs, S. R. (2013) Standard Identity Questionnaire. Each independent variable was tested using closed-ended questions, and the dependent variable was measured by the Likert scale, which based on the levels of measurement of each of these variables, the relevant statistical tests were used. The statistical population of this study includes all students of Kurdistan University of Iran, who were studying in this university in (2019-2020). In order to determine sample size, 369 people were selected according to Cochran formula which finally, the questionnaires were distributed among 400 students who were selected using inappropriate stratified sampling (according to different virtual social networks) to prevent possible downfall.

$$n = \frac{N t^2 p(1-p)}{N d^2 + t^2 p(1-p)} = \frac{9441 * 1.96^2 * 0.5(1-0.5)}{9441 * 0.5^2 + 1.96^2 * 0.5(1-0.5)} \approx 369$$

(Sarai, 1372: 140)

N=9441	The whole statistical population of the university
D=0.5	Possible optimal accuracy
t=1.96	Confidence factor of 0.95
p=0.5	The variance of the main research variable
n=?	Determine the research sample size?

Finally, we used SPSS statistical software to analyze the collected data.

3.3. Descriptive Appearance of Respondents

Out of 400 respondents (31.8%) were male and 68.2% were female. Regarding the age composition (8.2%) of respondents belong to the age group of 25 and under, (30.8%) were among the age range of 26 to 30 years, (37.4%) were among the age range of 31 to 35 years, (23.6%) are over the age of 35 years. Regarding the marital status (56.2%), were single and 43.8% of the respondents were married. Also (37.8%) of the respondents were monolingual and (62.2%) were bilingual. Regarding the variety of topics used in virtual social networks (59.0%), respondents were more active in open discussion groups, (57.8%) in scientific groups, (74.8%) in dating groups, (55.8%) in news groups (74.8%) in entertainment groups, (88.8%) in work groups, (13.5%) in arts, (9.0%) in sports and (5.5%) in family groups. In terms of the amount of use of virtual social networks, the average person uses virtual social networks about 4 hours a day.

3.4. The Relationship between Independent and Dependent Variables' Test

We use Pearson correlation test, considering the distance between independent and dependent variables.

Independent Variables	Variety of Used Topics		Rate of Usage	
	Pearson	Sig	Pearson	Sig
Personal Identity	0.345	0.000	0.067	0.183
Communicational Identity	0.345	0.000	0.136	0.006
Collective Identity	0.317	0.000	0.105	0.036
Public Identity	0.365	0.000	0.152	0.002
Social Identity	0.429	0.000	0.147	0.003

Table 1: The Relationship between Independent and Dependent Variables' Test

The results of the Pearson test in Table (1) indicate that the amount of use of virtual social networks and the variety of use of different topics in these networks have a direct impact on social identity and each of its four dimensions, and there is no correlation between the use of virtual social networks and personal identity alone, as the significance level of the Pearson test was greater than 0.05 (Sig = 0.183).

3.5. The Mean of Social Identity Scores Between the Two Bilingual and Monolingual Groups

In order to compare social identity between the two bilingual and monolingual groups, we need to compare the mean values of social identity scores between the bilingual and monolingual groups. To determine whether or not the mean values of this variable are different in the two groups, mean comparison test of two independent groups is used (independent t-test) considering the normality of the distribution.

Groups	N	Mean	Independent Samples Test			
			T	df	Sig	Mean Difference
Monolingual	151	85.43	6.405	398	0.000	11.41
bilingual	249	74.02				

Table 2: Statistical Analysis Results Comparing Social Identity Mean Scores between Bilingual and Monolingual Groups

According to the independent t-test presented in Table (2) which is equal to ($t = 6.405$) and also the significance level which is less than (0.05) ($sig = 0.000$), it can be said that we cannot accept H_0 that indicates there is no relationship between the two groups, and we say that there is a significant difference between the mean values of social identity variables between the bilingual and monolingual groups. To examine this difference more precisely, we compare the mean of this variable between the two language groups. The mean of social identity in the bilingual group was (74.02) and mean in the monolingual group was (85.43). Accordingly, social identity in cyberspace is (11.41) points stronger in monolinguals than bilinguals.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In line with the research hypotheses, Variety of use of different topics in virtual social networks are considered as influential variables on social identity formation and its four dimensions, which the research data show that social identity and each of its four dimensions is reinforced by the diversity of use by users of different topics on virtual social networks. These results bring us closer to Giddens' theory in that it states that the institutional situations in which individuals are placed provide the basis for individuals to shape their actions, as well as in line with Peter Berger's theories of "social life-world" and "social construction of reality", in the present study, virtual social networks are considered as a life-world that shapes people's consciousness, thus it can be said that the awareness that practitioners gain from being present in these networks and using the various topics presented in these networks as a life-world shapes their social identity, and this is

the conclusion that the findings of this study are in line with. But another issue that we tried to study in this research is the impact of the use rate of virtual social networks on social identity and its four dimensions. In this study, it was assumed that the presence of individuals in these networks is intertwined with time, meaning that the extent of the influence of these networks on social identity is related to the extent to which they are used, which is one of the main hypotheses we examined in this research. Research data indicate that social identity and three dimensions (communication, collective and public identity) from among its four dimensions are related to the extent to which users use virtual social networks, which means that increased use of virtual social networks reinforces these three dimensions of the four dimensions of social identity. From Castells viewpoint, too, in network society, identity is inherent over time and place. Castells sees time as one of the components that transforms one's identity. Therefore, the result is consistent and in line with Castells' theory. But there was no relationship between personal identity and the amount of use of virtual social networks. Social identities in virtual social networks also differ between monolingual and bilingual people, so that people who speak two languages are weaker in virtual social networks than monolinguals.

In general, the impact of virtual social networks on social identity can be addressed by three different approaches. Turkle and Stone argue that, in an optimistic approach to cyberspace, one achieves multiple selves in cyberspace, Turkle believes that cyberspace is leading us to a postmodern culture based on differentiation and dispersion, because presence in cyberspace due to its unique features such as the possibility of anonymity and the removal of physical cues, the cyberspace allows the user to easily perform multiple and different roles at different times with different custom settings. So, one can also justify the discussion of the relationship between personal identity and the amount of cyber space usage. That is, altering and manipulating personal identities that occur in cyberspace can undermine individuals' personal identities. In the pessimistic approach, experts such as Vienna and Katz fall into this category. According to this approach, virtual social networking is a space whose rules are set by professionals and experts of the field and implemented by other users. In fact, cyberspace is also managed and controlled by sources of real economic and political power. According to this approach, virtual social networks are regarded as a backdrop designed by the leaders of economic, cultural, and political power who seek to shape and actually uniformize the social identity of their users. The results also show that using different themes of virtual social networks can influence all aspects of identity. But the extent of the use of virtual social networks did not correlate with personal identity, which seems that designing different themes in these networks, according to this view, causes the attraction of personal identity in the collective and public identity. Another approach to cyberspace and social identity is the realistic one. Miller is an expert on this approach, starting with discussing how to present an acceptable and favorable self in cyberspace. In his view, people in the cyberspace have the resources, techniques, and facilities that make it much easier to present their favorable selves in this space than in the real world. But on the other hand, interacting on cyberspace is actually interacting with the unknown, which can make it difficult for people to communicate. Generally, in this approach, and according to Goffman, it can be argued that people in cyberspace to some extent have the opportunity to present their ideal and desirable selves. The selves that behind the scenes can be in the real world with a combination of the behind the scenes and the front of the scene. In this sense, cyberspace can be both in front of them and others' as well as their behind scenes. Of course, playing sometimes different roles and the constant movement between the backstage and the front of the stage can create a bit of an unstable identity for the user. But in general, cyberspace offers us good opportunities to present ourselves better and better understand ourselves and others through virtual interactions. Also, being bilingual allows for more interaction with people in virtual networks, which can further modify people's identity.

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