Networked Publics and Identity Construction: Towards an Era of Virtual Socialization

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In the era of digital age where the rate of information exchange and sharing have gone extremely high, the line of demarcation between the sender and the receiver in a communication act came to be less existent. With the rise of new media technologies, social networking sites (SNS) such as Google+, Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, LinkedIn, etc. have increasingly become a common platform for networking among people. The term 'networked publics' became a more appropriate term for the broad category of users in these virtual networking platforms. One of the most important characteristic features of social networking is the issue of self constructed identity and representation. This emerging trend has become the key towards virtual socialization amongst the networked publics. Based on strong theoretical backgrounds of self and identity construction, this paper tries to explore the various aspects of socialization in the virtual space through a wide array of literature surveys. Notwithstanding their privacy concerns, the willingness to self expose themselves among the public and to what extent people reveal their "self" in the process of identity construction will be highlighted thoroughly in the paper.

Keywords: Digital age, networking, networked publics, social networking sites, self constructed identity, virtual socialization.

Communication is a term imbibed in human nature. It is a strong necessity for maintaining life processes. The need for communication among human beings is as strong and as basic as the need to eat, sleep and love (Kumar, 2000). It is both an individual and a social need for existence in the society. The historical development of mankind and civilization supports the evidence and development of human communication since time immemorial. In all the stages of human evolution, mankind has been experiencing diversified ways and forms of communication for social existence. Due to a high speed growth in the overall population, culture and society and as societies strive for growth and modernization in all spheres,

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communication in the public and mass scenario is gaining grounds at a high rate. The ways of communication have become manifold and complex as the stages and levels of communication increases.

The rise of the Gutenberg era marks the era of the mass printing and gradually mass communication came to be popularized. The mass media through its various forms like the newspapers, magazines, radio, television, films and the new media is wholly responsible for disseminating messages to a large number of people whose magnitude and diversity is unimaginably wide. Media's role came to be highlighted prominently when the society became extensively huge and multifaceted. Walter Lippmann (1922) in his famous book *Public Opinion* gave the idea that media is responsible for forming pictures in people's head. The media became one of the most important tools for public opinion formation among people in the society. As the media became more powerful, mediated communication came to be a topic of debate and research in the society.

Along with the technological developments in media communication, the nature and structure of audience came to be highly diversified and complex. The importance of the audience in the communication process is felt heavily in order to determine the reach and success of the communication act. In the contemporary era of digital age, where the rate of information exchange and sharing have gone extremely high, the sender-receiver rapport is extremely magnificent. In the new form of interactive communication, the line of demarcation between the sender(s) and receiver(s) of communication came to be less existent. Rather, 'networking' would be the appropriate term for this new form of participatory and interactive communication where all the people involved in the communication process are senders and receivers of communication messages simultaneously.

The most recent development in the digital age is the era of social media where the social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, LinkedIn, etc. have increasingly become a platform for networking among people. Here, the term 'networked publics' became an alternative and more appropriate to the term 'users' or 'consumers' of these online participatory platforms. These highly diversified and socially active publics are reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange through the process of networking (Varnelis, 2008). 'Networked publics' is the 'new generation participant' of communication process in the digital era. Communication is in the form of massive intertwined network among individuals where each individual becomes senders, receivers and distributors of messages in the massive network.

As people enter into 'networked publics' zone, identity construction in the social platform through self-exploration, self-assessment and self presentation occurs. This projects one way of maintaining connectivity and socialization amongst the networked publics. Based on strong theoretical backgrounds of self and identity construction, this paper tries to explore the various aspects of socialization in the virtual space through a wide array of literature surveys. Notwithstanding their privacy concerns, the willingness to self expose themselves among the public and to what extent people reveal their "self" in the process of identity construction will be highlighted thoroughly in the paper.

Self and Identity Construction—A Theoretical Perspective

Constructing an identity is a way to find a unique place for us in the social environment. The term 'identity', which was introduced by Freud to explain personal psychological mechanisms, is a fundamental concept in the explanation of many social phenomena (Galkina, 2000). The concept of 'self' and 'identity' are fundamental features of being in the world. "A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future" (Weinreich, 1986). So, identity comprises the distinctive characteristic features that contribute to a unique individual personality as well as the collection of group memberships that define the individual. Self presentation among people is one of the common ways through which identity is constructed in the social environment (Cerulo, 1997; Barnes, 2006; Strano, 2008; Estoisia, et. al., 2009).

Personal identity is a term which is very much glued with the society. C. H. Cooley (1902) in his famous work *Human Nature and Social Order* gave the concept of 'looking-glass self'. Cooley defined the concept as: "I am not what I think I am and I am not what you think I am; I am what I think that you think I am." This means that 'identity' or 'self' is the result of other peoples' perception of ourselves. Often, we try to look and evaluate ourselves on the basis of how other people perceive us in the society. This is what exactly networked publics do in the social media platform. The way we project our social behavior and the way other people react on our personal information and behavior is the basis of our assumptions of our 'self' through the social networking sites. This is how people rate themselves through self presentation. Thus, our self image can be seen derived from our social context itself.

George Herbert Mead's well-known theory of the social self is based on the central argument that the mind and the self is a social emergent. Mead (1934) in his *Mind, Self and Society* entails that individual selves are the products of social interaction that arises through the process of social experience and activity. Mead's concept of the "generalized other" is also an essential element to define a person's identity, which he defines as 'an organized and generalized attitude of a social group' (Mead, 1934). The individual defines his or her own behavior with reference to the generalized attitude of the social group(s) they occupy and this is how a personal identity in the full sense of the term is attained. According to Mead, the generalized other is the major instrument of social control for it is the mechanism by which the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members (Mead, 1962). With rising levels of socialization and individuation, more and more people, and more and more aspects of the self come into play in the dialectic of self and generalized other (Voelz, 2010, p. 131).

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development sought to demonstrate that psychosocial development is the result of the interplay between the individual psyche, the social/historical/cultural context, and the developing biological organism (Seligman & Shanok, 1998). Erikson (1950) conceptualized that individual identity development process include interaction with the social and cultural environment. He describes his concept of identity as "the accrued confidence in the inner sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others, the inner experience of oneself" (Erikson, 1950, p. 235). His theory, then, is relational in its orientation and encompasses individual meaning-making, as it is constructed from the self-

in-relation with others (Josselson, 1987). Individual identity is the conscious sense of "self" that we develop through social interaction and exhibited thoroughly through our behaviors and actions.

Erving Goffman (1959) in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* pointed out that when an individual comes in contact with other people in the social environment, that individual will attempt to form, control or guide his or her impression before others by changing or fixing his or her setting, appearance and manner in carefully planned ways. Through self descriptions, attitude statements, dress, body posture, etc., an individual stakes claim to particular personal and social attributes and thereby delineates a particular public image, or "face" (Goffman, 1967). The type of public image presented on the social networking platform defines how a person wishes or expects to be treated in social relationships. The person expects to receive favorable social evaluations from other people in his social environment on the basis of the quality and quantity of the personal information displayed before the public.

The gateway to socialization, majority of the public felt is through self presentation. For the sake of making friends and socializing, giving a good impression of themselves by presenting some of their personal information or exhibiting personal behaviors in the social media platform is common among the users in social networking. Self presentational tactics form an integral part of the social interaction process (Schlenker, 1975). According to Schlenker (1980), there are two motives that govern self-presentation. One is instrumental, where we want to influence others and gain rewards and the second motive is expressive where we construct an image of ourselves to claim personal identity, and present ourselves in a manner that is consistent with that image. So, it is the people themselves who manage how they should be identified before the public.

According to Katz, Gurevitch and Hass (1973) in their 'uses and gratification' perspective, the audience obtains personal integrative needs as one form of gratification needs from media (Baran & Dennis, 1999). Social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc. are regularly used by people in order to interact with family, friends, colleagues, relatives etc. Such form of networking helps in self exploration and reinforcement of personal values and beliefs through diverse forms of message content disseminated through the social media. Certain media messages provide insights into individual behavior and attitudes which help in gaining knowledge about ourselves. Individuals come to recognize and discover their talents, status and capabilities by analyzing and interpreting media messages. Personal identities are also strengthened through reinforcement of personal values and beliefs with the help of social media. So, the social media acts as a great tool for satisfying personal needs and restoration of self identity.

Literature Survey
Networked Publics and Identity Construction

The internet has become an evitable part of the lives of people today and social networking sites as a way of enhancing their social lives. These sites have become a comparatively easy way for people to reach out to individuals all across the globe. New

digital media are indeed an unparallel means of free expression and speech. Through the social networking sites, the basic ideology of communication is sharing information for acquiring information. Issues on identity construction, security, privacy and self presentation are some of the specific areas of study on social networking sites.

New communication technologies have changed the backdrop against which identity is constructed; they have reframed the "generalized other" and the "generalized elsewheres" (Meyrowitz, 1989) from which the self takes its cues (Cerulo, 1997). Ever since the emergence of popular social networking sites such as MySpace (2003), hi5 (2003), LinkedIn (2003), Facebook (2004), Orkut (2004), Twitter (2006) and Google+ (2011), researches on the social networking sites have become a favorite for researchers, scholars, individuals, institutions, organizations, communities and firms.

Sherry Turkle (1995), for example, explores online communities and their impact on personal identity construction. The internet, linking millions of people together across the globe, has significantly changed the way we think about identity (Turkle, 1999). Unlike face-to-face interaction, online interaction provides an opportunity for one to be anonymous, invisible, and multiple (Turkle, 1995). Users have the opportunity to portray, experience, and express unexplored aspects of the self (Turkle, 1999). Turkle describes that in MUDs (Multi-User Domains) or online role-playing games, users often find that "they can play many selves and none of these characters are any less real than what they think is their true self – all are there to be played out and explored". Turkle's keen insights provide a unique picture detailing the building and experiencing of online persona in the virtual world.

In the contemporary era of new communication technologies, exchange of culture and identity on the internet, and especially on social networking sites has become one way of social interaction. Younger individuals seem to socialize more frequently and intimately on the internet (Birnie & Horvath, 2002), and as there is much identity formation going on in adolescence (Hogg & Vaughan, 2006) we could claim that young people's self-concept is shaped on the net, at least in cases where individuals create an ideal self instead of a realistic self.

Chalfen (2002) talks about the apparent shift from analogue to digital photography moving us to focus from the concept of "taking pictures" to "making pictures" since digital photography offers increased power over the editing process. Now, with digital photography, anyone with a computer and a photo-editing program can change the structure of a photograph in a desired form. Van Dijck (2008) asserts that digital photography may offer the possibility of a stronger emphasis on the role photography plays in identity formation with its enhanced technicalities. In addition, the identities constructed in digital environments may be more dynamic than the print-based display contexts of analogue photography, since the technology eases the process of substituting one photograph for another (Slater, 1995).

An analysis of weblogs revealed that the types of personal information revealed online includes name, address, birth date, location, and numerous contacts, including email addresses, instant messaging user names, and links to personal web pages (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). Nevertheless, the privacy implications of an open profile showcasing the identity details do exist. "Due to the variety and richness of personal information disclosed in Facebook profiles, users may put themselves at risk for a variety of attacks on their physical and online persona," (Gross & Acquisti 2005, p.8).

People who are self-conscious may want to put a great looking picture of themselves in their virtual community profile, in order to get a positive comment, or post it to make their self esteem higher: "individuals with low self esteem orient toward self-enhancement while those with high self esteem try to protect themselves" (Danowski & Zywica 2008). Having high self esteem seems to be a social compensation for an individual in the virtual world. The user that is going to update their default picture does not want anything negative about them posted: "these symbols that appear with some kind of frequency can designate that someone may be labeled with a stigmatized identity because that symbol or object vouches for the individual's status" (Boostorn, 2008).

Facebook profile images can be seen as a form of "implicit" identity construction (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) in which users display personal characteristics through images. Zhao et. al. (2008) conducted a content analysis of 63 college student Facebook accounts and found that users rely heavily on implicit modes of self-presentation, with the average number of photographs per account at 88.4 photos. In addition, while 33.3% of their sample blocked non-friends from viewing photos on other parts of their site, over 90% of the accounts displayed their profile images publically.

According to researchers, "people will use whatever information is available within an online environment in order to form impressions of others (social information processing theory) including cues that are volitional, consciously chosen by the user (such as profile pictures and textual self-description), and information that is not necessarily provided by the individual with intent (such as the number of friends)" (Tong, et al, 2008). Furthermore, others suggest that through all the content provided by the user in the profile, the individual creates a 'performance' indicating things that differentiate them from others, and moreover that group identification in social networking sites may be used to express prestige that comes from 'inside knowledge' of the group (Liu, 2007).

In a study conducted by Estoisia, et. al. (2009), Facebook users' pages are automatically seen as a representation of the physical person who created it. The user's profile will always serve as a manifestation of the physical person. Users tend to structure and format their profiles as accurate as possible to reflect their physical selves while consciously omitting some flaws of which they believe others will disapprove. The researchers found that for many people, the different parts of the profile carry varying degrees of importance. For example, some users think that pictures are accurate representations of the real person because it shows them in action and sometimes, a picture can be more descriptive of an individual than anything written. For others however, the written profile gives straight to the point specifics on a person's likes and dislikes that can lay a general overview of their personality.

Ginger (2009) found that people spend most of their time on Facebook investigating and viewing the profiles of other friends or potential friends. With all of this social predation, one would assume that people would customize their profiles in order to provide the most efficient and positive advertisement of themselves. This correlates Mead's concept of "significant other" where people identify and define themselves by linking themselves with reference to the generalized attitude of the social group(s) they occupy.

Wang, Norcie and Cranor (2011) conducted an online survey that investigates American, Chinese and Indian social networking site (SNS) users' privacy attitudes and practices. They found that generally American respondents were the most privacy concerned, followed by the Chinese and the Indians. The American respondents exhibited highest level of concern for their identity by restricting certain personal information such as phone numbers, email, hometown location, status updates, religion, etc. while on the other hand, Indians reveal most of these personal information making them more vulnerable to identity leakage.

Several studies have identified gender differences regarding identity presentation in the social networking sites. Strano (2008) demonstrates that women tend to change their profile image more often than men because women are trying to represent a multitude of social relationships and activities, instead of a more static individual identity. This study also found that women are more likely to describe themselves as smiling in their profile image to say that their image makes them look happy and fun-loving. Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) also noted that women were found to change the appearance of their website more often than men. Although this finding applied to the website as a whole, and not the profile image specifically, it does prompt us to question whether women might create more dynamic identities through their profile images than men.

Siibak's (2007) finding that women are more focused on displaying an idealized image of female beauty on dating sites also suggests that women may change their profile image more often in an effort to better approximate a beauty ideal. Siibak found that female users were more likely to display a profile photo of themselves smiling than men (65% versus 24%) and more likely to choose a photograph at a close personal range, showing only the head and shoulders (28% versus 15%). In addition, Siibak reports that women tend to display themselves in more seductive poses and wear clothing that emphasizes their sexuality.

With regard to gender differences in information disclosure, Tufekci (2008) found that men provide their telephone numbers and addresses on their SNS (Social Networking Site) profiles more often than women. However, women post their preferences about movies, books, and religion more often than men. In addition, another finding shows that college women disclose personal information on Facebook at a greater level than do men across several areas.

In general, women perceive more risk online and report more privacy concerns than men (Fogel & Nehmad 2009; Sheehan 1999). Although both genders equally use social media to stay in contact with friends and family (79%), college women update their profiles (82%) and post pictures (46%) more frequently than do their male counterparts (65% and 35%, respectively). (*emarketer.com*, 2008). Overall, it seems that female users of social networking sites focus on constructing identities that emphasize light-heartedness and beauty than their male counterparts.

Regarding age differences in online self presentation, Livingstone (2008) found that the younger users' constructed their identities through visually elaborate and individualized profiles, while older adolescents preferred an aesthetically plain profile appearance that highlighted social connections through "links to others' profiles and by posting photos of the peer group socializing offline" (p. 402). Strano (2008) provides comparative data demonstrating that older users are less likely to change their profile images frequently and

more likely to display images of themselves alone. Women of younger age are more prone to reveal themselves on the social platform than do older women (Barnes, 2006).

Online social networking, in fact has become an important part of daily digital interactions for people around the world. The various personal information sharing practices that online social network services provide have led people to disclose self information and present themselves before the public platforms. Personal information revealing physical self such as gender, age, appearance, hometown, phone numbers and abstract information such as likes, dislikes, favorites, preferences, beliefs, attitudes and behavior are some of the self disclosures made by the networked publics consciously or unconsciously in one way or the other to form a self image and construct their own identity in the virtual social environment.

Virtual Socialization—Today's Trend

Social communication is the art and science for survival on this planet. The urge to socialize is an important attribute of human society from time immemorial (Pillai, et. al., 2011). Primary group, social group, community, society, institutions, etc. are all creations of human communication. Social interaction and socialization is the key to the formation of the entire social system. Robert Merton (1957) defined socialization as the process by which people selectively acquire the values and attitudes, the interests, skills and knowledge – in short, the culture – current in groups, to which they are, or seek to become, a member. It is through socialization that an individual learns the norms, values and behavior to define his/her social position and acquire a personal identity in the social environment.

In the contemporary digital era, the internet embedded platforms have configured socialization into virtual entities, rather than traditional real entities (Pillai, et. al., 2011). The online social networking sites (SNS) have become virtual communities (VCs) for socializing among people. Virtual communities, sometimes called online communities, describe the mediated social spaces in the digital environment that allow groups to form and be sustained primarily through ongoing virtual communication processes (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2002). The virtual communities are viewed as consumer groups of varying sizes that meet and interact online for the sake of achieving personal as well as shared goals of their members (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004). Through these online participatory media platforms, people are constantly engaging themselves in virtual socialization. Ahuja and Galvin (2003) observe that geographically dispersed, but virtually connected social groups will continue to be an important mode of socialization in future as well.

Individuals create a presence in virtual worlds for a variety of reasons: socialization, cooperation with others, content creation, entrepreneurship, learning, entertainment, etc. (Pernar, 2012). Nonetheless, virtual environments are ideal places for self-exploration, discovery and development (Joinson, 2003). There are multiple ways for socializing through these digital networking systems. Networked publics started creating their own virtual spaces to interact within their own groups (or, even keep themselves open for other out group members) and project themselves in their own desired ways for socializing. Information exchange among the virtual groups has become the foundation of the socialization process (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). Expression of individual opinion and ideas, sharing of information, participating in discussions and public opinion formation are various ways for social interaction through social networking systems.

Individuality expression and facilitation of social interaction are actually advocated as value propositions for most VCs (Dholakia, et. al., 2004), suggesting the ability to individuate members, in itself, a marker of shared identity or common in-group membership (Marx, 1993). Self disclosure of personal information and creating individual identities in the virtual environment constitutes an initial approach among the networked publics for opening themselves to others to start the social interaction process. Features enabling virtual co-presence such as self presentation and deep profiling features cater to the needs for social interaction and it ultimately fulfills the needs for self disclosure among the virtual members (Pernar, 2012).

The popularity of social networking sites on the internet introduces the use of mediated communication into the relationship development process (Barnes, 2006). People now use organized social websites to meet others and explore identity formation through mediated messages. According to James Beniger, "The rise of the Information Society itself, more than even the parallel development of formal information theory, has exposed the centrality of information processing, communication, and control to all aspects of human society and social behavior" (Beniger, 1986, p. 436). "As societies achieve higher degrees of organization, mechanisms of social control will inevitably expand" (Hamelink, 2000, p. 131). Online participatory communication accelerated the pace of information processing and unimaginably widespread dissemination.

Self presentation in virtual world includes features used to convey personal identities such as visual presentations, unique IDs, personal profiles, avatars, signature files and weblogs (Pernar, 2012). With various self-presentation features for individuation expression, VCs provide an attractive venue to balance the 'need to belong' in the social group with the 'need to be different' from the other group members. Individuals empowered to express their personal identities will be more likely to develop strong identification (Haslam, et. al. 2003). One of the reasons why self presentation on social networking sites may be different from face-to-face is that in online situations one may "inspect, edit and revise" (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001, p.110) one's self presentation before it is made available to others. So, a high degree of manipulation is always present in such presentation forms.

Beniger (1987) describes how mass media has gradually replaced interpersonal communication as a socializing force. According to him, new communication technologies have freed interaction from the requirements of physical co presence; these technologies have expanded the array of generalized others contributing to the construction of the self. Several research foci emerge from this development: the substance of Mead's "I," "me," and the "generalized other" in a milieu void of place, the establishment of "communities of the mind," and the negotiation of co present and cyberspace identities (Cerulo, 1997). Social networking sites have become popular sites for youth culture to explore themselves and their relationships, and share cultural artifacts (Jenkins and Boyd, 2006).

"Commercial social networking sites thrive on a sense of immediacy and community. The spirit is independent, even rebellious" (Howe, 2005, p. 218). Teenagers nowadays are learning how to use social networks by interacting with their friends, rather than learning these behaviors from their parents or teachers. "(Public conventions) generate our manners and morals – our shared assumptions – and allow communications" (Karnow, 1997, p. 255). Often parents have no clue about the information teens are publicly revealing (Sullivan,

2005). With the emerging online virtual communities, a new type of social communication behavior is emerging amongst networked publics as they explore their identities, experiment with behavioral norms, date, and build friendships. Social networking sites are "already creating new forms of social behavior that blur the distinctions between online and real-world interactions" (Hempel & Lehman, 2005).

Disclosing personal information in the process of identity construction on the social networking sites poses certain societal threats. According to certain reports, there are a number of social concerns associated with social networking sites including the following: teenagers revealing too much information about themselves online (Bahrampour & Aratani, 2006; Downes, 2006; Komblum, 2005; Sullivan, 2005; Viser, 2005); children being exposed to pedophiles (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Lenhart, 2005); teenagers being raped by people they meet on social networking sites (Antone, 2006); companies using the sites to collect marketing information (Hempel & Lehman, 2005; Verini, 2006); and, children under the age of 14 using social networks (Antone, 2006). Today, content creation in social networking is not only sharing music and videos, but it involves the publication of personal diaries too (Barnes, 2006).

Conclusion

Identities are anchored around a set of moral propositions that regulate values and behavior, so that identity construction necessarily involves ideas of "right" and "wrong", desirable/undesirable, unpolluted/polluted, etc. (Schöpflin, 2011). One of the most potent forms of presenting individual and collective identity is the virtual networking platforms where people or rather the 'networked publics' try to present and maintain their identity by regulating certain personal information in the public platform. The virtual community has a luring effect on the users to form a favorable identity before the public. In all the stages of human development, every individual faces the task of defining themselves before the society (Erikson, 1968). So, online self expression and exploration have become a common platform for people to deliberately project their identity in the public space.

One of the most common features we observe in social networking sites is the issue of self disclosure and self presentation. Self presentation is the technique by which people try to manage their impressions on other people. According to Leary (1996), it is "the process by which people convey to others that they are a certain kind of person or possess certain characteristics" (Leary, 1996, p.17). In the process of social networking, people often show self presentational tactics consciously or unconsciously. Disclosure of personal information, creation of profile image, uploading of personal photos, expression of emotions, opinions, likes, dislikes and personal preferences are certain techniques through which users of social networking sites perform to present themselves before the public. Through this, they try to create their own identity in the digital public forum.

Social networking sites have become a platform of virtual socialization where people maintain identities in order to interact and socialize with each other. As technology gets more and more advanced, and with increasing work and less time for interpersonal interactions, people become drawn more to the virtual environment. The "self" is no longer a personal entity but it has gradually become an open dairy where people self disclose themselves for the common purpose of social interaction and maintaining the membership in the society.

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