

## THE INTERNET AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AN INDIVIDUAL. GETTING TO KNOW ONE'S IDENTITY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

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### ABSTRACT

Due to its great impact on today's communication, the multidimensional phenomena of social media has recently been among the most discussed topics related to manifesting one's identity. In the proposed paper social networking platforms (and Facebook as currently their most significant worldwide representation) are under close scrutiny. They are to be analyzed from the perspective of a researcher who needs to deal with the new internet environment and its constantly changing trends.

In general terms, the paper aims to bring a discussion about the extent social media such as Facebook might be treated as a valid source of knowledge. To do so, the point of departure in the paper is taken and primarily based on the existing literature in the field of online identity and new media.

**Keywords:** social media, Facebook, online identity, online research.

### INTRODUCTION

Modern media undeniably revolutionize our communication putting it in a new and still unpredictable path. These emerging and dynamically changing circumstances create a great possibility for a researcher to explore the nature of a human being from a different perspective. Digital platforms of the Internet and, among them, social media websites offer an individual absolutely exceptional communication tools (Mitra, 2002, p. 57). Internet users, choosing different forms of expression, mark their identity, manifest certain sets of values they feel attached to or in other words, perform a complex self-presentation driven by a number of varied determinants. Lauren Labrecque et al. (2011) argue that "digital spaces allow increased open communication through anonymity and the eradication of real world boundaries, such as appearance (e.g., race, gender), physical ability, and socioeconomic status, which may inhibit identity" (p. 37). Therefore, one could say that online activities such as chatting or gaming as well

as all personal settings within social media profiles allow people free and open ways to communicate parts of the self that are difficult or nearly impossible to explore in face-to-face communication (Labrecque et. al, 2011, p. 37-38).

An increased interest in the way we mirror ourselves to the world, can, thereby, be seen as an expression of the contemporary world, where we seek to make a certain impression. The notion of conveying an image, which expresses one's identity and desires, may be done through social media platforms.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS**

#### **AND THEIR MOST EMBLEMATIC REPRESENTATION - FACEBOOK**

Since social media and within them Facebook constitute an environment for the presented paper, they demand a brief introduction in this part. As Gustafsson (in: Riha, & Maj, 2010) points out social network sites are a prominent type of the diverse forms of user-generated platforms that may be grouped under the term 'Web 2.0' (p. 7). Web 2.0 can be understood as: "[...] a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion [...] the platform for the evolution of social media" (Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

The above definition touches upon the key aspect of the revolutionary character of social media, which allows its users to have real control of the website content and, therefore, get involved in the overall global communication. A more specific definition of the given notion is introduced by Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison (2008), who see social media as: "web-based services that construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211).

Even though portals like Facebook or Twitter are becoming more and more significant, many people fail to see the individual and social perspectives, which are brought by the usage of social media platforms. It might be caused by a lack of elementary understanding of how meaningful and influential social media are for their users (Larsen, 2008). In fact, networking websites affect our reality and have a great impact on what we are as a society. Due to their extension, social media are becoming an important source of information, slowly replacing traditional media like newspapers or radio. However critical towards them one can possibly be, their relevance in terms of global communication cannot be depreciated. Today, human online activities are not limited only to social interactions. What we can observe is a growing portion of shopping, entertainment, and gathering of information, which are now mediated by digital services and devices (Kosinski et. al, 2012).

Furthermore, digital spaces, and social media platforms like Facebook in particular, offer exceptional tools that may be used for expressing one's identity (Larsen, 2008). Hence, what may be done online is sometimes impossible in the case of face-to-face communication. At the same time, it is also one of the biggest

issues related to social media and the Internet in general, which very often presents varied and in many cases incoherent pictures of the same reality. One could say that what we find on somebody's Facebook profile does not necessarily correspond with the real life of the examined individual. On the other hand, we can always argue with this way of looking at social media. In her recent study on online communication, Malene Charlotte Larsen (2008) suggests that social networking sites can be viewed as a continuation of real life of an individual. For this reason, to a large extent the Internet users tend to be as sincere as possible. It means that our online presence has reached an advanced point, when the Internet is not perceived as an unnatural environment for us anymore. People simply start treating social media platforms as a new and convenient tool for being in touch with the rest of the world in the same way they used to feel about writing traditional letters or sending SMS.

Yet, as already pointed out, undeniably the most significant characteristic of social media is the way they have changed mass communication, putting it on an interactive truck. Following Riha and Maj (2010), „[...] cyberculture, being shaped by global and information marketing provided by major IT companies, largely depends on the Web users' willingness and their access to the global information product" (p. 10). The interactive factor seems to be the most revolutionary outcome of the current Internet communication.

One of the social networking sites, which is recognized as especially influential and emblematic in the global world today, is Facebook. Since its introduction in 2004, this social media platform has expanded over the last decade to a global phenomenon with more than a billion monthly active users, which makes it the biggest website of this type on a world wide scale (Facebook Newsroom). The Facebook founders describe their goals in the following way: "Founded in 2004, Facebook's mission is to make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them (Facebook Newsroom)"

The power of Facebook as a communication tool has been recognized also in the field of the research, where it can serve as a valuable source of data. Michal Kosinski, a researcher at Cambridge University's Psychometrics Centre, has recently coordinated a study on 58.000 American Facebook accounts. The research suggests that based only on publicly available Facebook Likes it is possible to create instantaneous and detailed psycho-demographic user profiles containing statistically valid information about an individual's race, personality and IQ scores, age, sexuality, political



Fig.1. Facebook logotype (Facebook Newsroom)

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/>

views and religious beliefs, happiness or even substance use (Kosinski et. al., 2012; Kosinski, 2013).

In the end, one of the reasons Facebook will be considered relevant is that it is deeply incorporated into the daily media consumption of its users. According to Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007), a typical Facebook user spends about 20 minutes a day on the platform, and two-thirds of the users log in at least once a day. Taking this into account, we can assume that a typical Facebook user is widely exposed to a range of messages communicated on the platform by others.

### THE NOTION OF IDENTITY IN VIRTUAL SPACE

“People spend most of their time online at social networking sites. In doing so, we construct a new sense of self and sociability, depending on our ability to redact ourselves and the completely mediated world around us” (Deuze, in: Papacharissi, 2011).

Traditionally in social science the notion of identity was defined as the subjective concept of oneself as a person (Vignoles et al., 2006, p. 7). It means that the sociological approach towards identity is related to one’s self-conception and social presentation or, generally speaking, to the aspects of an individual that make him unique or different from others.

Although the body is absent in virtual space, Thomas (2007) argues that the virtual-self constructed within online communities is strictly connected with one’s offline identity. As she points out, one’s online identity is self-produced, authored through words and images within the social and discursive practices of members of a social networking community (Thomas, 2007, p.7). Throughout the years, scholars have distinguished many types of identity (e.g. cultural identity, gender identity, digital identity, etc.). As in the presented article the focus is principally on the Internet settings, a further elaboration on how online identity should be understood and specification of the core issues related to the given concept are required.

Vignoles et al. (2006) emphasize two aspects of defining identity as especially important:

- first, when identity is defined inclusively, encompassing individual, relational, and group levels of self-representation. In this case studies into self-concept, self-evaluation, personal identity, and social identity can each inform a researcher about the mechanism of identity;
- the second, when identity is put on the level of subjective psychological experience, rather than necessarily referring to an objective “essence”.

Thus, like all subjective meanings, identity is formed through a complex interaction of cognitive, affective, and social interaction processes, occurring within particular cultural and local contexts (Vignoles et al., 2006, p. 308-333). In the presented paper the approach towards the notion of identity is closer to the second aspect, where it is treated as a subjective, ever evolving concept. This standpoint is also represented by Palmer, according to whom identity is constantly affected by varied factors such as our culture, genetics, significant others,

people we love, those who have harmed us, our experiences, choices, etc. All these factors, to a smaller and larger extent, form who we are at a particular moment of our life (Palmer, 1997).

The principal feature of online identity is the fact that Internet users establish and express the concept of themselves in online communities and websites. Hence, what predominantly distinguishes online identity from traditional social identity are entirely different surroundings as well as a new sociological context. Due to its specifics, online identity can also be considered as an actively constructed personal self-presentation. Windley (2005) associates online identity with *digital identity*, defining it as a set of data that is exclusively attached to an entity (what may refer to both people and goods) and contains information about the subject's relationships to other entities (p. 8-9). One could state that what we shall understand by online identity is the social identity that an Internet user creates through digital identities in cyberspace.

Going deeper, Windley points out three notions especially significant in terms of scrutinizing digital identities: "attributes", "preferences" and "traits". The given notions categorize all elements of one's online identity.

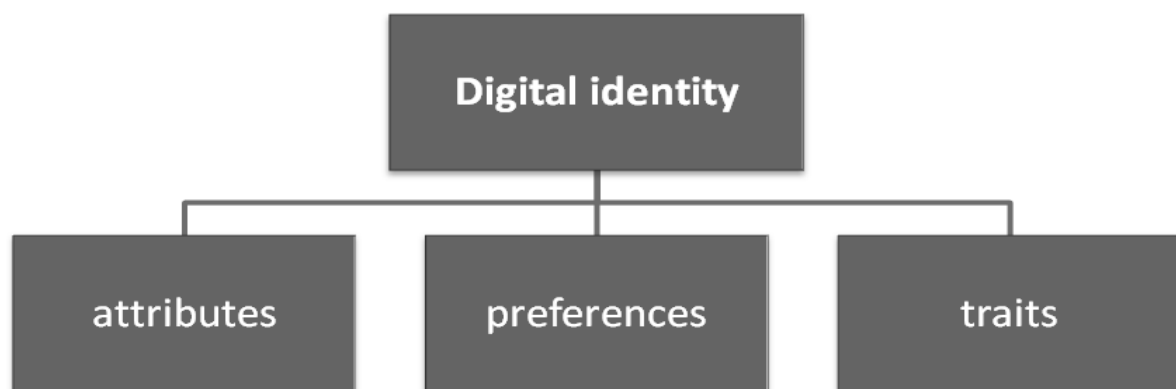


Fig.1. Categorization of elements included in one's online identity.  
Source: developed by author.

Attributes are always acquired and may contain diverse information about an entity, such as purchasing behavior, bank balance, a list music that has been listened to, pictures that have been published, etc. Preferences, on the other hand, represent an entity's choices such as favorite brands or preferred politicians. Finally, traits are inherent features of an entity, such as sex, age, appearance, nationality. It is important to emphasize that attributes tend to be changeable (and in fact can be changed fast and easily), whereas traits change slowly, if at all (Windley, 2005).

As mentioned before, the concept of identity is strictly connected with the notion of self-concept online, defined as "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings with reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). Scrutinizing data through this particular theoretical perspective is expected to bring an additional analytical value to a research that we conduct. However, it is important to bear in mind how complex and multidimensional the given phenom-

ena can be. In the field of the research one should be aware of the fact that the notion of identity as well as self-presentation on the Internet gains an entirely new dimension. Following L. Labrecque, Ereni Markos and George Milne (2011), this is possible due to “an increased open communication through anonymity and the eradication of real world boundaries, such as appearance (e.g. race, gender), physical ability, and socioeconomic status, which may inhibit identity” (p. 37). On Facebook, all personal elements within a profile (such as graphic choices, personal information, photographs, etc.) can be modified by its user. In this way people, through complex self-negotiations and making adjustments in an effort to maintain a coherent identity, are able to project a desired identity, which later may be viewed by a global audience (Labrecque et. al., 2011, p. 38).

### CONCLUSION

Today’s online communication brings several new aspects into social interactions, which researchers from all over the world need to take into consideration. The first one refers to the way we present ourselves to others.

Generally speaking, people tend to have an ongoing interest in how others perceive and evaluate them. They, therefore, spend billions of dollars on diets, cosmetics, and plastic surgery, which is intended to make them attractive to others (Leary, & Kowalski, 1990, p. 34). In other words we are very aware of how we present ourselves to other people. The pressure to look good comes from many aspects of society; political candidates are packaged for the public’s consumption, such as automobiles or breakfast cereals, parents stress upon their children the importance of first impressions and trying to control public misbehaviour, because what may the neighbour think. According to Leary and Kowalski (1990) millions of people become paralysed at the prospect of speaking or performing in public, as they are worried what the audience may think of them (p. 34). This becomes an obstacle in the everyday life of many people, at home, work, school, and elsewhere people monitor other’s reaction to them and seek to convey images of themselves, which promote their attachment to a desired goal.

Equally, the manifestation of one’s identity on social media platforms may be expressed in many different ways. One of the core author’s personal observations is that people attempt to communicate certain elements of their identity not only in direct communication (by the use of their personal attributes), but also through their attitudes, interests, moods, social or economic status, beliefs, etc. Through self-presentation on Facebook, internet users place themselves among others, expose and communicate certain culture-related values and features, and finally present the roles they have in society. Therefore, we are not talking about verbal communication exclusively, but a range of different aspects like stylistic and nonverbal factors like behavior, physical appearance, association with other people or material possessions and food consumption. All these elements in a large extent affect one’s self-concept.

Additionally, it is important to emphasize that virtual space as such has no geographical reference. Therefore, people broadly use social media technologies

to sort of re-create a sense of national community in virtual space, where some cultural patterns, likely to be used by them in everyday life, are transmitted from reality to the Internet. For this reason, the discussion in regard to community can be moved hereby to the more abstract level. This can help us to understand how Facebook users adopt shared language and common cultural codification to create online communities that do not require traditional geographical closeness.

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