

Chapter 74

Social Media and Identity: Understanding Identity Communication and Creation Through Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter aims to explore the relationship between social media and identity by reviewing theoretical frameworks as well as empirical studies on the topic. Considering the complexity of the concept of identity, a multidisciplinary theoretical approach is provided, including Psychological Theories, Sociological Theories and Communication Theories. These theories are revisited in the context of online identity formation and communication through social media. Different aspects of identity such as gender identity, professional identity, political identity etc., are discussed and illustrated through empirical studies in the field. Moreover, the role of social media as a factor that might either promote or hinder identity development is also discussed (e.g., phenomena such as cyber-bulling and internet addiction). Finally recommendations and suggestions for future research are provided, including the need for multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks to the investigation of the relationships between social media and identity.

INTRODUCTION

‘Men have become the tools of their tools’; this rather strong affirmation of Thoreau (1854, p.54) dates almost two centuries ago; however paradoxically it is also much relevant in today’s high-tech world. People nowadays live in a world which allows them to do things that their ancestors did not even dare to dream; thanks to technology individuals today are more powerful and controlling than ever. Life is made easier, the world goes faster, and efficiency of performance is ever-growing. These changes could not leave unaffected the personal and social domains; communication, work, friendship/intimate relationship formation, and even the concept of self have all been subject to change. Whether change is radical to the point of making men ‘the tools of their tools’, is however a debatable issue. In this context social media probably represents the best example showing how several basic human face-to-face activities have been transferred into the online world.

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Social media is a concept used to refer to a category of new digital media phenomena including social network sites such as:

- Facebook,
- Twitter,
- LinkedIn,

Photo and video sharing sites such as:

- Instagram,
- MySpace,
- YouTube,
- Flickr,

Location based services such as Foursquare, etc.

Despite the within group diversity, all social media include interactive communication, networking and content sharing (Lüders, 2008). Hence, the primary purpose of social media would be that of facilitating social connections, by overcoming barriers of distance or time. In this perspective, social media might be regarded as an enhancement tool, allowing people to connect and create a much larger network than that in real life. Providing accessibility to individuals living continents apart, social media greatly empowers human agency, aiding the social, cultural or professional development. Indeed, there have been suggestions that actually social media might greatly stimulate creativity (Bruns, 2008; Lüders, 2007; Thumin, 2008). According to Bruns (2008) the user in social media is also an active content producer. Moreover, Livingstone (2008) and Lundby (2008) define the communication process as story-telling or self-expression, while other authors such as Liu (2007) consider it as taste performance (information on interests, likes and dislikes). Beirut (2009) argues that many people see social media as a means of broadcasting problems, voicing debates or supporting causes. Relationships have also been found between social media use and the creation of self-concept or social relationships (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013). Bechmann and Lomborg (2012) focus on developmental aspects and argue on the positive impact of the multiple expressive facets of social media, which allow users not only to express but also to explore themselves through content sharing.

The creative function of social media might be best understood in the context of a comprehensive theoretical framework proposed by Kietzmann et al. (2011). Authors suggested seven main building blocks of social media, including:

- Conversations,
- Sharing,
- Presence,
- Relationships,
- Reputation,
- Groups, and
- Identity.

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