Construction of Social Identity in Social Media: An investigation of Iranian Users' Appearance in Facebook

Tayyebeh Heivadi
M.A in Media Management, University of Tehran

Datis Khajeheian
PhD in Media Management, University of Tehran
Faculty of Management, Gisha Bridge, Jalal Ale Ahmad, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

The social networks increasingly become the arena of our lives and involve different aspects of our social presence from day to day and this requires people to play some social roles in these media as such as what they do in real life. The attitudes, perceptions, behaviors and actions people do in these platforms, shape 'Social Identity in Social Media' which in regard with increase in importance of these media, this construct becomes more critical to be studied and to understand. The paper pays academic attention to the subject by focus on regional cultural differences of facebook users as most pervasive social networks. Using a framework consist of three dimension, Iranian users studied in case of variables which construct social identity, consist of Full Name exposure, benefit from Fake Profiles and level of privacy setting. These variables selected in regard with special characteristics extracted from observation of sample size behaviors during a period of two months, and believed that may reflect a new trait in social identity users may present depend on the cultural and domestic concerns. By sending a lot of request to participate in the online survey, a sample of 308 users agree to include in the online survey. The descriptive statistics felt sufficient for the purpose of study. Findings show that nearly half of Iranian users of facebook not provide their Full name, and make some distortions or using abbreviations make it difficult to find for others. Also nearly 40% of them benefit from fake profile(s) in addition to their main account to surf facebook and share the contents they not prefer to be known for them, such as satire or taboo articles. Also many of them restricted the level of access to their profiles to make the social media as a 'private social space'. The authors concluded that social identity joins with the real identity of the users, and thus they care about their social image in the social media space. Many users believe that despite the freedom for joy from the contents in social media, they will damage for some descent in prestige and image against the others which attend to their profiles, likes and shared articles. Thus they use some policies to joy from social media without being hurt or damaged by the activities in it. They try to make themselves hide and merely invite confident friends to join with, make restrictions to access of others to their shared articles and comments, and benefit from anonymous surfing with fake profiles. The findings of this research despite the simple method used is to attract attentions to the interdependency of identity in real life and in social media space and the effect of real life identity on the image, users tend to present in social media.
Keywords: Social Identity, Social Media, Privacy in Social Networks, Iranian social media users, facebook

1. Introduction

The social networks increasingly become the arena of our lives and involve different aspects of our social presence from day to day and this requires people to play some social roles in these media as such as what they do in real life. The attitudes, perceptions, behaviors and actions people do in these platforms, shape 'Social Identity in Social Media' which in regard with increase in importance of these media, this construct becomes more critical to be studied and to understand. The paper pays academic attention to the subject by focus on regional cultural differences of facebook users as most pervasive social networks.
A powerful use of social networks is to support rapid dissemination of public information (e.g., on flu vaccinations, weather alerts, or community safety threats). Many people are more likely to

trust and act on cell phone calls or email messages from friends and family than from pronouncements by public officials on television programs or newspaper reports. Public officials could also disseminate less time-sensitive information on energy conservation strategies, environmental protection initiatives, or health alerts about obesity reduction or smoking cessation. Leaders of many nongovernmental community groups have come to appreciate the growing power of social media and ubiquitous cell phones with their increasingly rich services. Communities can become energized by modern technology-mediated versions of parent-teacher associations, neighborhood watches, and disaster planning teams. Even smaller groups such as book clubs, high-school orchestras, or local birdwatchers benefit from use of communications tools such as Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, or Google groups (Hansen et al, 2011).

2. Literature Review on Social Networks

Despite the relative newness of social networks presence as a important trend in the media space, there are some considerable researches in subject of different aspects of these media by scholars. Sibona and Walczak (2011) offer a typology for research on social network sites and show that these research and in particular in Facebook cover wide areas include identity management, trust, self-presentation, surveillance and privacy concerns, and social capital. Much of the academic research on Facebook has focused on identity presentation and privacy concerns. Boyd and Ellison defined social network sites based on three system capabilities. The systems allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Body and Eliasson, 2007:1).

As Online Social Networks become the tools of choice for connecting people, sociologists expect that their structure will increasingly mirror real-life society and relationships (Catanese et al, 2011). Calvi et al, (2010) uses the website observation method to study the libraries' profiles as social identity of institutes, instead of persons and concluded that Flemish cultural institutions make use of the possibilities offered by social media to communicate with their audiences and to promote themselves. They method limited to the count of Wall posts with comprising the Frequency and cumulative percents. The analysis of Online Social Networks connection is of scientific interest on multiple levels. First of all, large scale studies of models reflecting a real community structure and its behavior were impossible before. Second, data is clearly defined by some structural constraints, usually provided by the OSN structure itself, with respect to real-life relations, often hardly identifiable (Catanese et al, 2011).

Research in social behavior indicates that the Internet is used to maintain existing relationships, form romantic connections, and create new online friendships (Wang et al, 2010). On most social networking sites, users are not looking to meet new people or to network, but rather to sustain contact with their existing group of friends and acquaintances (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). In so doing, presenting a profile and displaying connections with others publicly forms the basis for interaction on social networking sites (Donath and Boyd, 2004)

2-1. Identity in Social Media

The pragmatic concept called sociability emphasizes that our social identity is more likely to be formed through group memberships, rather than individual existence (Bumela, 2012). Identity performance refers to "social identities that are „performed" with a particular audience in mind, or, literally, in view... By identity performance we mean the purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviors relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity" (Klein, Spears and Reicher, 2007: 3).

Identities online can also be expressed in relation to the offline world, in that, "one's identity emerges from whom one knows, one's associations and connections" (Turkle, 1995: 258). The self is disembodied online; and the "consciousness becomes separated from the body..., [but online] it becomes a body itself" (Bukatman (1993) quoted in Lister *et al*, 2003: 368). On Online Social Networks "profiles can be seen as a form of digital body where individuals must write themselves into being... [to] express and represent salient aspects of their identity for others to see and interpret" (Boyd, 2008: 129).Consequently, people's online activities can reflect their offline relations. Facebook users negotiate their relationships and identities through an array of

activities using the features and application the site offers and these activities are engaged with in relation to their offline experiences (Chatora, 2010).

The ways in which identity is constructed and experienced online is not radically different from how identity operates in the offline social world. Ginger argues that the "foundations of identity do not drastically change in the Facebook realm...social identity remains strongly in place, but instead may be mediated in new ways" (2008: 36). While the technology or interface determines what kinds of representations people can construct, whatever the limitations of the interface, the interface is still able to mediate identity and reflect the offline identities. Identities are also constructed and framed with an audience in mind but when online, this audience is invisible (Ginger, 2008: 120). People are conscious of who is viewing their online constructions and thus, they actively construct the ideal self formation in line with how they want to be perceived. Therefore, the online construction of the self is influenced by the individual's offline social identities or subjective positions (Chatora, 2010).

3. Facebook as the platform for research

For study the social identity in social media, the researchers face with some difficulties in cases of method and sample. The first drawback is the numerous social media people use in different regions. For overcome to this problem, we selected facebook as the platform for doing research in, because of its popularity in the period of research as the first ranked social media in the world. The newest trends in first quarter of 2013 show that facebook acquired the 46% of market share in social network market. It followed by Google plus with 34% and other rivals are in the next step with considerable distance in case of users (Figure1). Also the Social login show that the trend in increasing yet and the market share is neither in descending manner nor in danger to be challenged soon by other rivals (Figure2). Thus facebook used as the platform for research and intentionally other social media omitted.
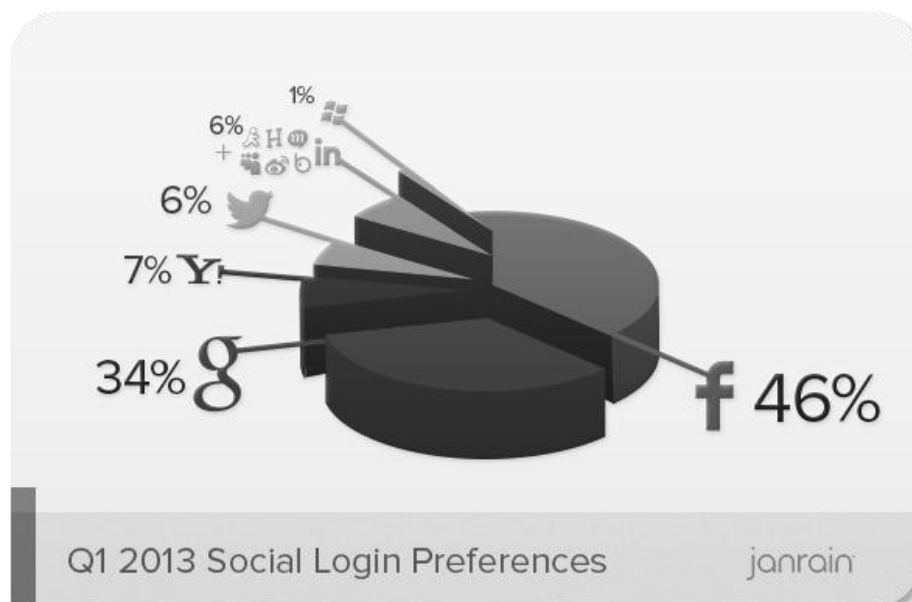

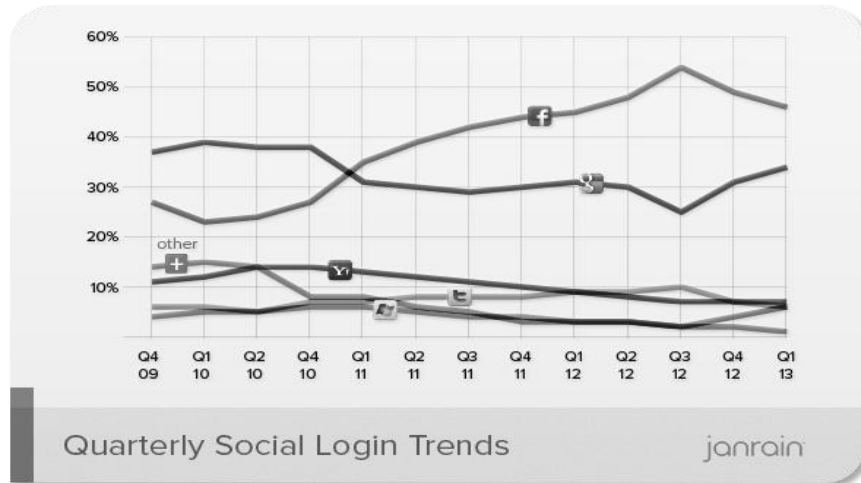Figure 1: The Social Login in 1st Quarter, 2013 (Olson, 2013)

Figure 2: The Login Trend in 1st Quarter of 2013 (Olson, 2013)

3-1. Facebook penetration in Middle East

Figure3 depicted geographical popularity of Facebook in the world. As seen in the map, Middle East is one of the black holes in using the facebook and even other social media in comparison with other continents and in fact the Asia and Africa are the continents with the least penetration of facebook in the globe.
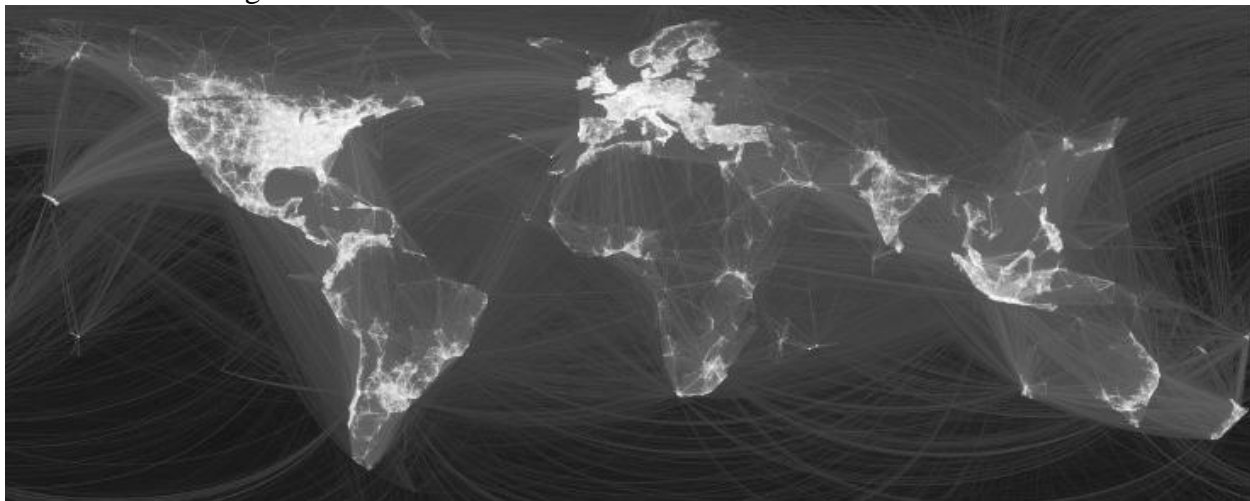

Figure 3: The geographical penetration of facebook by popularity

However there are some differences among the countries in performance, while UAE is the ninth facebook penetrated country of the world after USA and UK and above the Australia by 45% of its population, Iran is in the lowest rank in the region just above the Somalia by the penetrated rank of 0.17% (Arab Social Media Report, 2011).
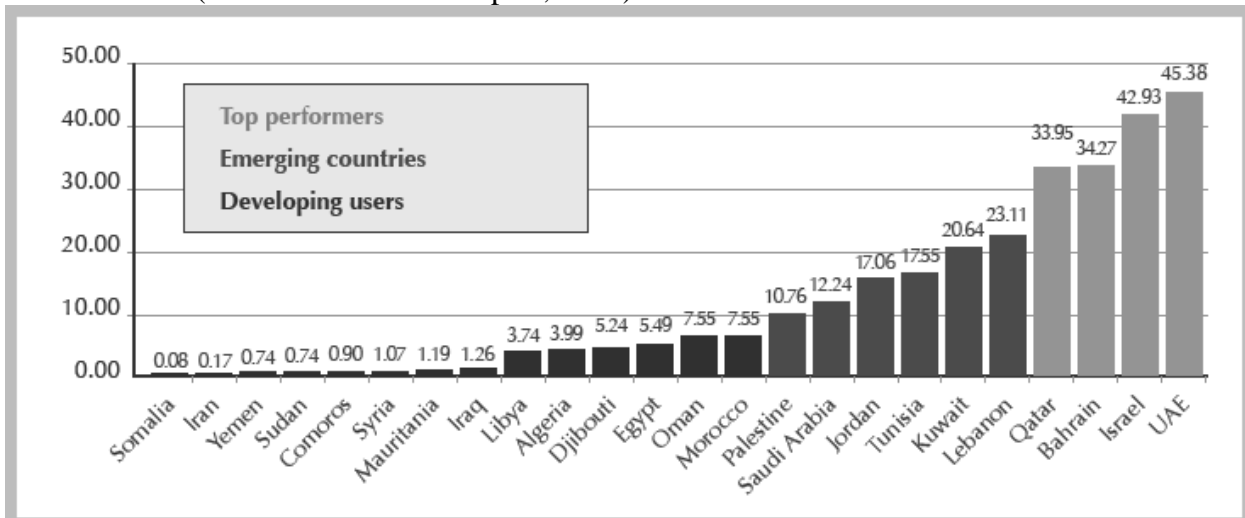

Figure 4: The penetration of Facebook in Middle Eastern population (source: Arab Social Media report,2011)

3-2. Facebook penetration and use in Arabian region

The year 2010 has seen social media being used in a wide variety of ways in the Arab region, whether to rally people around social causes and political campaigns, boost citizen journalism and civic participation, create a forum for debate and interaction between governments and their communities or to enhance innovation and collaboration within government. These tools have also been viewed negatively and subverted, censored and exploited. It is repeatedly argued that this social media "revolution" is also contributing to economic growth globally. Social networking businesses are quickly climbing up the most successful companies list. Additionally, such platforms and their "networks," which connect more than 550 million people globally, provide an infrastructure for thousands of start-ups, social entrepreneurs and to explore their creative potential and build diverse businesses and services for a steadily growing audience (Arab Social Media Report, 2011). According to research conducted by DSG's Governance and Innovation program, the penetration of social networking and Web 2.0 technologies is soaring in the Arab region. Demographically, the Arab region is a youthful one, where youth between the ages of 15 and 29 make up around one-third of the population. With the exponential growth of online social networking—particularly among this demographic, who will in the next few years become active citizens, potential entrepreneurs and part of the government and private sector workforce—it is argued that social networking tools have the potential to enhance citizen engagement in the region, promote social inclusion and create opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship and development (Arab Social Media Report, 2011).

3-3-. Facebook penetration and use in Iranian Society

The penetration of Facebook in Iran is more meaningful when we know that the 0above mentioned .17% number of facebook users are from the 44% users access to the internet in the country. Of course a main reason for such a low penetration may be the restricted access to the facebook as social media because of some cultural and political concerns, but one other main reason may be the untrustworthiness to presence in social media. This is the concern of the paper, which in regard with the suspicious characteristic of many people live in Iran (cited with many different social scientists scholars), identity of facebook users in this country joys with which unique and less-mentioned differences in compare with other users. As the concept of identity in the social media is very broad and challenging, we focus on some clear difference and observable difference in Iranian facebook users; the Appearance. Base on the observation that many Iranian facebook users use names abbreviated, anonymous, unreal or with some difference with their real full name, the researchers felt curios about the social identity of Iranian facebook users and design the research by an observation method to have an elementary picture from what may shape social identity of Iranian users of facebook.

4. Conceptual Framework

The construct of social identity is clearly consist of many different dimensions to study, however as the subject of the research is to get an big picture from the social identity of users in facebook, thus the conceptual framework includes limited variables to study and involves: the real name, to joy from fake profile and the privacy policy.

Each of the dimensions is calculated based on some values they get. The full name has consists of some values: Full Real Name, Real firstname only, Real surname only, The abbreviated use for either firstname or surname, or a completely different and anonymous name.

The Fake Profile is a usual trend for users of social networks without regard to the location or cultural identity. However we mention this to get a sense from how many of social activities are operated with fake profile, to be hidden from others.

The Privacy Policy includes the level of authorization user provide, this consist of full open access, friends, friend of friends and custom access.
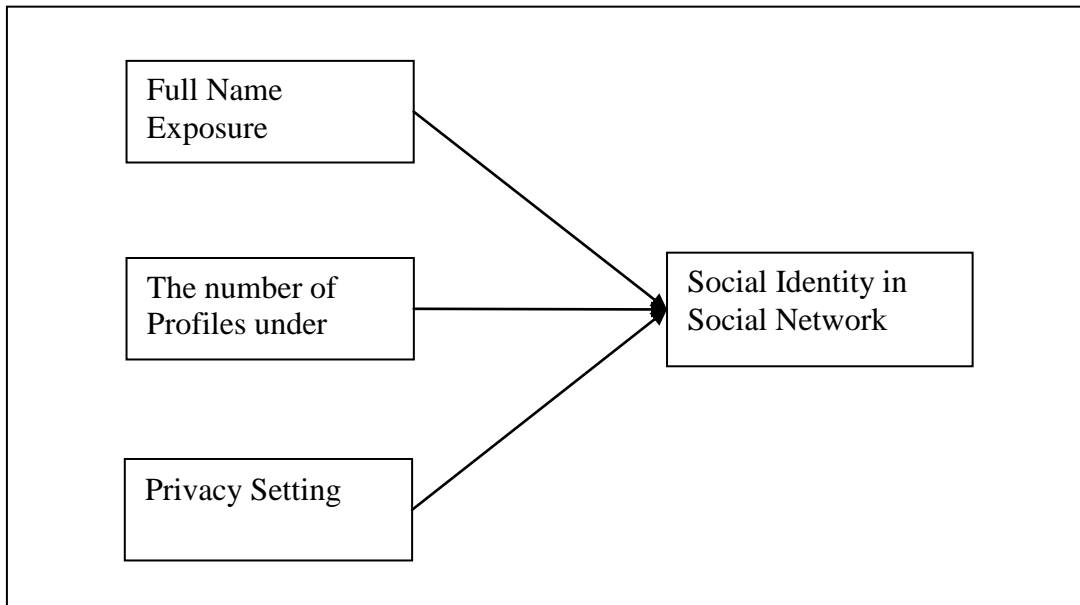
5. Methodology

Identifying drawbacks is important in order to acquire a correct methodology. Because of the complexity of this kind of networks, investigating the scalability of the problem is crucial (Catanese et al, 2011). If we use a network analysis and data mining, there are some limitations. Firstly we have lack of access to users' profiles, because of their privacy settings and their count. Also we do not have computational resources able to mine and work with the whole Facebook network. So as Catanese et al (2011) explain it is common to work with small but representative sample of the graph. In literature, extensive research has been conducted on sampling techniques for large graphs but, only in the last few years, some studies have send light on the partial bias that standard methodologies introduce, one way or another.

The methodology we used for this research is according to the research subject, to get a picture from the social identity of Iranian facebook users, and is the site observation and extracting the dimensions and characteristics in major by descriptive statistics. Although there are a lot of more advanced statistical tools and data gathering softwares, but as there is no study about the construct of social identity of the target users in facebook, it seems that the descriptive stats may appropriate for the first phase of a greater research on identity of the target society. Thus in explicit explanation, in the preliminary phase of research, observation implemented to reach conceptual framework and descriptive statistics used for analyzing the data acquired.

The Survey conducted by online questionnaire and also in some cases by observing and counting some characteristics. The research population is clearly the Iranian users of facebook, either abroad or inbounds the formal borders of the country. However in regard with the natural limitation to access and process the whole population, the researchers conducted a purposive sampling method includes their own social network connections to have access to the authorized data upon the privacy setting of the friends. Thus they include a sample of 308 facebook profiles for doing the research.

6. Findings

6-1. Name Appearance

The Name Appearance analysis shows that 132 persons clearly use facebook with their full real name, while 176 persons have hide whole or some part of their name. the details for these latter class is as table below:

Abbreviated both First and Surname	Exclusively Firstname	Abbreviated Firstname with Real Full Surname	Anonymous Firstname in company with Real Full Surname	Real Firstname in company with anonymous Surname
7	25	17	34	93

The Criteria was set on to know how many people follow the different types of name targeted to be found by others. The results show that 42% of the sample avoid from being know by their full name and make access to themselves limit to others.

6-2. Fake Profile(s)

Fifteen percent from the sample admit to have fake profile, while 24% rather to not answer the question. Reasonably, the authors try to count the latter group beside the whom explicitly declare to have one or even more profiles, which logically is acceptable because of some limitations and also because not having a fake profile, mostly leads to explicitly announce it. Thus this is reasonable to conclude that nearly 40% of the sample definitely or likely benefit from fake profile(s) to surf facebook.

Explicitly YES	Explicitly NO	Not willing to answer
48	186	74

6-3. Privacy Setting

Some questions asked to get the information about the privacy policy persons select for their accounts. The intention behind the question was to know that how much open access has been provided by the users against the unknown people and how much privacy they believe on their social network life. Upon the final findings, 103 of the users set their privacy to 'open to public' while 176 others set it to 'limited to friends'.

7. Conclusion

Findings offer the pure data gathered by conducting simple descriptive statistics. What gives them meaning is the interpretation of the findings. Back to the research statement, the paper designed to get a whole picture from social identity Iranian users of facebook present in their treat with social networks. Thus a conceptual framework has been provided consist of getting the knowledge about how the sample of study expose themselves in the social network. When we consider the unique characteristics of Iranian society from different dimensions, and also mention the restriction to some social networks such as facebook, the framework and its variables become important and worth to investigate.

the research shows that while facebook like any other social network has been designed to make people in access for friends in real world, or for potential ones in virtual space to be found, many Iranian users tend to prevent others to find them by hidden their profile, or by using the name different from their full name, with various forms for distortion of the name. Authors found out that all of their non-Iranian friends use their full name to be found by others, and there was not even exception about the case, the situation is different and Iranian users tend to find their friends themselves, or give them their profile name directly to add or in some cases find them from their common friends' list. This differ the usual trend of friend finding in facebook for Iranians and makes it similar to Email Address, which should be getting from the holder directly or by any mediated channel, and may not be found on search. The Iranians innovate some ways to distort their identity, such as using the abbreviated first name, use anonymous folklore or satire or epic names, etc.

This may be meaningful when we put it beside the other variables of using the fake profiles, with unknown and anonymous names to freely surf the facebook, and also the setting of privacy to the 'friends' level. Upon the findings may reason that some users try to have a safe private space in the facebook –and likely in similar websites- to have self exposure out of public monitor. This is what may called 'private social space' which implies on using social network facilities for private safe activities with friends. This seems a sitting room party which accounts as private place and same time, filled with friends to have discussions out of public intervention. The place which only 'friends' and 'friends of friends' may permit to enter and thus people allow to present different styles of communications. Also they allow to uses a mask to be hidden and no one knows their true identity. This is what fake profiles provide for them to surf, to comment, to like the pages, to chat and to do any possible activity in the social media out of their true identity and

this with some kind of feel safe, and this is what privacy setting offer them to limit the spectators of their deed and what they say.

Authors conclude that social identity of facebook users may influence deeply by the context of real life. This is inevitable to separate impact of what going on in the real life from the activities and characteristics of user in the social network. The interests, exposure, willing to be in touch, social acceptance, prestige and so on are the factors which impact on the real identity of the user and will reproduce in the social network, but in regard with facilities in virtual world, this is a place for user to benefit from second life with secret identity, with restricting the access to his/her acts and says and also by hidden himself/herself from being found.

These results offer some implications for further researches on social identity in emerging networks in web2.0. This is important to mention the differences in the real life of users, base upon their geographical location and situation they live in. while in many studies this idea promotes that social network users tend to converge with consuming the global media content, this should be noticed that national concerns play an influencing rule in the social identity of users who live in different society. The construct of social identity should be more concisely implemented when used in the context of social media, and this includes many various factors, such as what explained in the paper.

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