The Search for Identity in Online Chat

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Abstract

Internet communication is one of the most important applications of the 21st century. College students are among those who make use of this activity for both academic and personal interest. Students usually vary in their use, appreciation and response to this widely used activity. Accordingly, the present research paper aims at answering the following questions: to what extent college students use the instant-messaging system in initiating and developing personal and social communication? and to what extent the revealed identities are real or fake? If real, how many aspects of identity are real or fake? What is the purpose behind using fake identities? Are there any similarities and differences between gender-based identities? To what extent messages reflect the user's identity and gender? And what are the different ways of identity manifestations? To achieve the above aims, a questionnaire has been conducted on the students of Baghdad University to closely examine the relationship between online interaction and gender identities. The results showed that the highest percentage of students, 94%, agrees that chat is of great help in establishing and maintaining distant and local relationships. While the lowest percentage, 1.1%, goes with the proposition that chat is the most important application of the internet.

Keywords*:* Identity, hidden identity, gendered-based identities, self-disclosure, disguised chat

Introduction

Internet communication is a socially-based activity that involves no personal presence of participants who are logged on simultaneously, but separated geographically (Doring, 2006). Such a means of communication is found to have many merits, among which are to assert their own identities and to explore new means of self-representation. The stepping stone of using such a means embeds questions about the user's identity, such as name, gender, age, location, interest and may also indicate motives for the communication.

In this vein, the psychologist and internet researcher Turkle (2005) notes that many users employ chat to "try on" identity positions that might not feel permissible in their offline lives. Just as chat allows banter and creative communications conventions (LOL for "Laughing Out Loud") to flourish, it also seems to promote antisocial behavior, such as flaming and trolling.

Gender vs. Identity

Gender is the foundation of personality. It indicates how a person chooses to express himself, i.e., which identity does he actually represent? Moreover, Lott (cited in Stewart, 2003: 4) defines gender as "an attribute used by individuals for self-identification within their culture". Identity, on the other hand, is often characterized in terms of one's interpersonal characteristics, such as self-definition or personality traits, the roles and relationships one takes on in various interactions, and one's personal values or moral beliefs (Calvert as cited in Huffaker& Sandra, 2005). In other words, everyone in this world has a different identity because they all make their own over the course of their life. Identity also involves a sense of continuity of self-images over time (Grotevant, 1998; cited in Huffaker& Sandra, 2005), a continuity that may be disrupted when puberty creates radical alterations in one's physical appearance.

Identity, as a term has been viewed differently by different socialists. Traditionally an individual's identity was looked upon as singular and stable—perhaps permanent—and over which one had little control. If a person is a carpenter by occupation, that is how everyone views him, and how he views himself. However, over time, this view progressively changes. The current view of identity, on the other hand, holds that individuals have multiple identities, which are constantly changing and being negotiated depending on the time and context of the situation. That is to say, an individual has numerous facets of the self (e.g., man/woman, spouse, parents, and boss), all of which together form the individual's multiple identities. These multiple facets or ways of looking at oneself in relation to the world are socially constructed (Cohen, 2008).That is, the more changes in the social roles, the greater changes in the communicative behavior (Stewart, 2003: 5).

According to Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), identity can be of three different categories: imposed identities, assumed identities, and negotiable identities. Imposed identities can be described as "those that cannot be negotiated in a particular time and place". Assumed identities, on the other hand, refer to those who are comfortable with and willing to try a character that is valued and legitimatized by the dominant group within a given society. The third

category of identity is negotiable identities. Negotiable identities "pertain to all identity options that can be, and are, contested or resisted by particular individuals and groups"(Cohen, 2008). In this respect, Stewart (2003: 7) maintains that identity is a collection of socially-based features that can be revealed through social interactions; that is communication plays a key role in the development of our gender identity and of our perception of other' identities.

Gender has been around throughout history; however, within recent years, gender has separated itself from the traditional view of sex, i.e., male or female, and has become centered on one's masculinity or femininity, gender has become a way for one to describe, he or she, in a way in which they are different from everyone else. Gender has turned into a sense of identity, a way for one to feel different and fulfilled among all of those around them. On the whole, gender identity is closely interlinked with social science as it is based on an identity of an individual in the society. Sexuality is the "the condition of being characterized and distinguished by sex" (Free dictionary, 2009).

Identity and other Related Terminologies

Speaking about identity may lead to come across other related and confusing words. In this vein, Ivanic (cited in Joseph, 2004: 9-10) makes a survey of the different terms that may be used when dealing with identity-related topics and from different angles or connotations. Such a list embeds the following:

1. **Self** emotionally and effectively refers to "who I feel myself to be";
2. **Person** refers to the identity "I project to others in my socially defined roles";
3. **Ethos** is a general term for a person's identity as conceived and constructed in the context of world view and social practices. It indicates the personal characteristics which a reader might attribute to a writer on the basis of evidence in the text. That is, self inner qualities;
4**. Persona** means a mask. It is an objective self that one creates in order to position himself within the context of those around us;
5. **Subject**, **subject position**, **positioning** : in accordance with these terms, self is a product of the discourse and social field in which it is located
6. **Subjectivity**, **subjectivities**, **positioning**, **possibilities for self-hood**: these terms carry the connotation that identity is socially constructed, that people are not free to take on any identity they choose, and that add a sense of multiplicity, hybridity and fluidity; and
7. **Identity**, **identification**: these terms refer to a process rather than a fixed condition.

Creating a profile

Some young people create profiles as their friends have; they desire to join in their peer group and to share a common experience with their friends. Joining like-minded peers appeals to their collective self-esteem, which eventually, gives them the unexpected pleasure in expressing themselves on SNS profiles. Often, young people provide specific information (e.g., name, birthday, relationship status) on SNS, although such disclosure is often considered as personalized. Profile generation is an explicit act of writing oneself into being a digital

environment and participants must determined how they want to present themselves to those who may view their self-representation or those they wish might.

Questioning the Authentication of Profile Information

The first place of wondering about the authentication of profile information launches from the process of choosing an ID for your e-mail, instant messenger contact details, and personal websites, blogs, and face books. In this respect and as far as chat rooms are concerned, Döring (2006) maintains that before entering a chat room, one has to select a chat name or nickname, and an avatar if needed. The advantage of choosing a name or nickname is to communicate such information as gender, age, weight, size, location, interest and to some extent the motives for communication. But, to what extent the revealed information is true and real. Online chatters usually change their proposed sex, physical appearance, and age for different reasons. One of these reasons is psychologically oriented in that young chatters want to appear old; another is socially oriented in that chatters do not like to be focused on; instead they merely wish to develop long-term and more serious contacts. The second question that lays itself in this vein is how many aspects of personality are intended to be hidden? The third is how much time is allocated for online chatting? The more time allocated for chatting, the sooner fake personalities are discovered, especially if developed into voice chat. Consequently, and despite the fact that chatting plays a role in enhancing and extending the social network of a person, there is still a percentage of risk that the revealed identities are assumed and the closeness is an illusionary one.

As far as the previous studies are concerned, Turkle (1995:184) adds that by divorcing ourselves from our bodies, from time and from space, the computer opens a realm in which the multiplicity of identity that is taken to realize a contemporary life… we can be multiple identities simultaneously, with no one of these selves necessarily more valid than any other. These valid identities can have varied degrees of relation to the embodied 'self'.

Bargh and McKenna (2004) propose that "constructing a new identity which is successful within a new peer group can allow for role changes that create real changes in self-concept".

Self-disclosure

The opposite process of disguise identity is self-disclosure. Pearce and Sharp (cited in Stewart et al, 1996, 104) state that self-disclosure occurs when:"people voluntarily communicate information about themselves that other people are unlikely to know or discover from other sources". Brunell (2007) adds that disclosure is considered a key aspect of developing closeness and intimacy with others, including friends, romantic partners, and family members. It embeds revealing personal, intimate information about oneself to others; it helps two individuals to get to know one another. Self-disclosure varies by the level of intimacy. For example, information can range from being relatively superficial, such as disclosing where you are from and what your favorite flavor of ice cream is, to being more private, such as revealing that your parents are going through a divorce or that you once cheated on your boyfriend or girlfriend. Self-disclosure

also varies in the number of ways in which topics are disclosed. When individuals disclose private information, their disclosure is high in depth. When individuals disclose a wide range of topics about themselves, their disclosure is high in breadth.

Gender and Disclosure Differences

Disclosure, as far as gender is concerned, indicates that women are seen to be more expressive than men. When a woman is not expressive, others perceive her as maladjusted. Likewise, men are expected to be inexpressive, and when a man is expressive, he is perceived as unstable. And, in fact, women tend to disclose more than men do in general. However, although women disclose more to their female friends and to their romantic partners than men do, they do not disclose more to their male friends any more than men do. Furthermore, women tend to elicit self-disclosure from others, even from those who do not usually disclose very much about themselves. One reason for this is that women tend to be responsive listeners, which in return promotes further disclosure by the speaker (Brunell, 2007).

In the light of the above, Tannen (cited in Stewart et al, 1996: 104) adds that females emphasize throughout the process of disclosure expressive aspects, such as sharing feelings and emotions, for they regard them as important aspect as far as friendship is concerned. Males, on the other hand, emphasize instrumental aspects, such as working together. Howell (cited in Stewart, 1996: 104-105) maintains that "several communicative behaviors demonstrate that that women tend to be facilitators of disclosure and that men are the controllers of disclosure". Coates (1986) further states that talk among female friends is generally characterized by noncritical listening and mutual support. Women are likely to sense when their women friends are in trouble and so be able to provide a sympathetic listening ear that conveys understanding and concern. But, when a man senses that a close male friend is depressed, his first impulse is to ignore the depression and change the subject of their conversation, or they may respond to another person's self-disclosure as if it were a request for advice, instead of responding to their own self-disclosure.

Haas and Sherman (cited in Perry et al. 1992) mention that disclosure among female friends typically focuses on topics that involve personal and family matters. Such topics are closely related to self and tend to be characterized as more emotion-based in nature than men's talk. Moreover, women often are more willing to share intimate details of their personal lives with other women than men share with other men. Women are more likely to confide worries to a friend than men are; they often discuss self-enhancement that results from self-disclosure while men do not; or they might talk more about people while men talk more about things. Women are more likely to respect each other's speaking turn and attempt to equalize participation in the same sex-groups. Conversely, individual men may dominate an all-male group while the others just listen.

Some people are better able to self-disclose than others are. This is because self-disclosure can be threatening. Self-disclosure can leave one vulnerable to rejection, manipulation, and betrayal. Some individuals are so concerned about these dangers of self-

disclosure that they have trouble opening up and revealing intimate details about themselves, even in the appropriate contexts. They worry about the impression they are making on others and readily perceive rejection in others' intentions. Consequently, these individuals frequently feel lonely and isolated from others and tend to have fewer closures, satisfying relationships with others (Brunell, 2007).

Merits of Disguised Chatting

Chatting with respect to disguised identity is not void of advantages. In light of this statement, Persad (2010) mentions the following merits of internet:
1. Helping adolescent establish their sense of identity;
2. Chatters find a chance to try different identities (or pseudo-profiles) to see which one suits or lets them feel more comfortable;
3. Anonymity, and its lessening associated risks, may allow people to be more honest and take greater risks, in their self-disclosures than they would offline (See McKenna and Bargh, 2000).

Data Analysis

A thirty item questionnaire has been conducted and applied on 36 college students from Baghdad University. The items of the questionnaire are to be answered with yes or no except in certain situations where answers are to be further justified or elaborated to show the impact of the items on the students, or even to entail the reason behind the given answer. The percentage has been calculated for each item to trace the students' reaction to it, i.e., to see how many students side with or against each item.

Percentages have been calculated and the highest percentage of the students' reactions, which constitutes about 94% (34 students), goes to both items that agree that online chat is considered a means for developing long-distance and local friendships. This means that place or location is of little value in comparison with gender and identity, except in cases when individuals have already met face-to-face when geographically close. So seeking friendships is what most students point at.

The second highest percentage, about 83% (30 students), goes with the propositions that anonymity and multiplicity of identities are dangerous and anonymity may allow people to be more honest and to take great risk in their self-disclosure when they would offline.

The lowest percentage, which constitutes about 1.1% (two students), goes with the proposition that the chat is the most important application of the internet. The second low percentage, 2.7% (five students), emphasizes the obsession of the idea of multiplicity of identities.

Generally speaking, most students agree with the following:
1. Reduction of physical appearance creates a kind of invisibility or anonymity.
2. Anonymity opens potential for the multiplicity of identities.

3.   Anonymity creates a high degree of privacy and a lower sense of social risk.

4.   Anonymity may allow people to be more honest and take great risks in their self-disclosure.

5.   People online are brought together by shared interest and by a joint focus on one another's conversational style without attending to one another's appearance.

6.   Online chat serves as a means for people with existing ties to support and maintain meaningful relationships.

7.   Users use the chat to 'try on' identity positions that might not feel permissible in real life.

8.   Instant messages are used to reinforce relationships with those who are geographically close to them and whom they have met face to face.

9.   The socio-emotional communication is said to be more likely personal than antisocial.

10.   These identities might have varied degrees of relation to the embodied self.

11.   Anonymity (or hidden identity) is dangerous.

12.   The rational ideals in online relationships are the same as those emphasized in offline relationships including trust, honesty and commitment.

13.   Girls are slightly more than boys in using instant messages.

14.   Multiplicity or anonymity leads people to treat life online as an isolated social entity.

15.   As far gender/identity relation is concerned, most students agree that identity does not necessarily reflect gender, and sometimes gender can be reached at during self- disclosure, if there is any need, when chat occurs with total strangers.

Conclusions

    Internet communication is one of the most important applications in which people are interested. College students are among those who make use of it for both academic and personal interest. Yet, students usually vary in their use, appreciation and response to this widely used activity. Throughout answering some question, the researchers of the present paper have arrived into a number of conclusions, the most important of which are the following: Identities are of two types real and fake; fake in the sense of being hidden wholly or partially. Fake identity is initiated due to social and psychological factors. Illusive or fake identity can be widespread or more common in online interaction. Fake identity is followed by a process of self-disclosure. Gender-based identities show that women are more likely than men in being expressive and responsive to online chat. Gendered-based identities seem riskier when it comes to self-disclosure.

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