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Revista de Antropología, Ciencias de la Comunicación y de la Información, Filosofía,  
Lingüística y Semiótica, Problemas del Desarrollo, la Ciencia y la Tecnología

Año 36, 2020, Especial N°

# 26

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

ISSN 1012-1537/ ISSNe: 2477-9385

Depósito Legal pp 198402ZU45



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Maracaibo - Venezuela

# **Social Media and self-identity: Virtual panopticon VS virtual schizophrenia**

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## **Abstract**

The researcher raised the question about the mechanics of the self-identity building and reshaping through social networking sites. The exploratory study relied on the technique of electronic interviews concluded that Social Media may somehow create a hypothetical virtual prison (Foucault's panopticon) that affects the psyche of users and lead them to look for the virtual crowd admiration through a deliberate selection of the publications presented in accordance with the requirements of the virtual communities to which they belong. The self-awareness of the virtual crowd is supposed to push social media users to "create" a positive self-identity which is not necessarily identical to their real one.

**Keywords:** Self-Identity - Facebook – Panopticon - social media – virtual identity

## **Redes sociales e identidad propia: Panóptico virtual VS esquizofrenia virtual**

### **Resumen**

El investigador planteó la cuestión sobre la mecánica de la construcción de la identidad propia y la remodelación a través de los sitios de redes sociales. El estudio exploratorio basado en la técnica de

entrevistas electrónicas concluyó que las redes sociales pueden de alguna manera crear una hipotética prisión virtual (panóptico de Foucault) que afecta la psique de los usuarios y los lleva a buscar la admiración virtual de la multitud a través de una selección deliberada de las publicaciones presentadas en de acuerdo con los requisitos de las comunidades virtuales a las que pertenecen. Se supone que la autoconciencia de la multitud virtual empuja a los usuarios de las redes sociales a "crear" una identidad propia positiva que no es necesariamente idéntica a la real.

**Palabras clave:** Autoidentidad - Facebook - Panopticon - redes sociales - identidad virtual

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social networks have provided a fertile ground for the development of a new type of identity called “virtual identity”, escaped from social dictations and “judgments” within what the French philosopher Michel Foucault calls “expanded and reciprocal panopticon”. This panopticon pushes the virtual self to disguise and spawn according to the requirements of each virtual community that users join voluntarily.

At this level, the researcher asks about the manifestations of virtual identity / identities through the social networks, and about the potential role that social networks play in the self-reconstruction and formation.

Since modern communication and networking technologies have produced virtual societies, the individual is now able to compensate for the true identity and reproduce multiple identities as the concept of

society is no longer linked to a temporal or spatial context, but to the principle of common interests. The pivotal question will be directed specifically to the identity in the virtual context and formulated on three sub questions:

- How is the world of identity through Facebook?
- How does Facebook contribute to rebuilding a new identity that is consistent with the requirements of expanded and anonymous censorship within the virtual domain?
- To what extent can digital social spaces be able to blur the boundaries between the virtual world and the real world?
- Recognizing the impact of communication technologies on the self-building,
  - Disclose the most important identities being promoted in virtual world and in the social media in particular,
  - Identify the groups that are interested in identity issues,
  - Revealing the strengths and weaknesses of the social media role in shaping identity.

### *1.1. RESEARCH IMPORTANCE*

The study contributes to the deepening of the research on the self-identity within the virtual system. It focuses on the points of convergence and disharmony between the features of the individual in reality and the picture he draws for himself through social networks. Perhaps, the qualitative addition to this research is that it is looking at ways to build the true self-identity and confirm it through social

media, or even develop it through the image or images individuals paint for themselves in the virtual space, to obey its bonds. This makes it a parallel society that is not very different from the real one.

## *1.2. LITTERATURE REVIEW*

Many studies were conducted raising questions related to the dual: Social Media VS Identity:

A study conducted by Fathia Nour El Houda (2018), entitled "The problem of cultural identity in the light of the new media" raised the following problem: How do the new media contribute to the formation of the cultural identity of youth?

The researcher adopted a purely theoretical approach, and stressed the impact of the new media on the formation of identity. She concluded that the youth is an important stage influenced by the trends of the era and the prevailing culture, especially new media, which has become an integral part of their life, stressing that this has been proven by many studies and evidences from social reality.

Another study by Ahmadine (2017), was published in a book entitled "Virtual Identities in Arab Societies: What Role for Social Media in Shaping Identity?" In the first and second chapters, the book started from a conceptual approach about the identity and social networking sites. The third chapter included an applied study on the social media role in shaping the identity of Arab and Islamic societies.

The most prominent results obtained by the researcher are summarized in the following:

- The talk about identity has escalated with the emergence and spread of globalization in all areas of life and it is linked to the need for internal reform and the search for how to emerge from underdevelopment,

- There is a conflict between scientists and thinkers in determining the elements of the term identity and its definition,

- Social networking sites produced a number of issues and problems affecting identity.

At the end of his book, the author made a number of recommendations, such as:

- Preparing various studies on Identity,

- Conducting a comprehensive study on how to deal with social media;

- Attention to all elements of identity,

- shifting from a culture of consumption to a culture of production,

- Interest in supplying the Internet content with materials and information in the Arabic language (civilizational, historical and cultural memory of the Arab and Muslim individual).

Marijiana Macofsky published a study about the “Real Concept vs. Digital Identity on Facebook” (2014). The research was based on the question about the features of virtual character and its relationship to the real identity of users of social networking sites. A questionnaire was distributed to a sample of secondary school students and reached 104 pupils aged between 13 and 15 years. The results showed that there is not a single student with a very negative self-concept via

Facebook, 97.6 % have a positive self-concept and that the digital identity of the sample students is a completely real personality: Their own. The researcher concluded that her findings contradict the general assumption that social networks have been used as a tool to build our ideal identity that may contradict our true one. The results show that the digital identity is actually the same with the concept of self-identity in real life.

A study conducted by Luigia Simona Sica, Tiziana Di Palma, Laura Aleni Sestito, and Luizia Simona Sica (2011) was entitled: "Virtual Identity: Danger or Resource?", It raised the effects of social network usage and the virtual multi-user environment (MUVE) on identity building processes for emerging adults. The results showed the presence of four lexical groups (with a stabilization index of 78%) related to self-construction processes (Group 1: Curiosity and Exploration; Group 2: Need for Belonging and Mask Emotions; Group 3: "Self Potential"; The research highlights the risks associated with identity building, but also the benefits associated with the relational and emotional dimensions of the self-identity. This finding underscores the need for a explorative study about the effects of new technologies uses to plan such use in the educational sector.

To sum up, Arab researches has focused on the cultural and social identities within the virtual framework, where many studies have addressed the role of social media in building identity for emerging groups such as adolescents. Others focused on the impact of digital media on the Arab and Islamic identity. They were mostly based on theoretical approaches. Occidental researches were more

procedural and focused on the relationship between the true self-identity and the virtual one as well as legal and technological issues arising from the use of social media.

This study will address the issue of the virtual identity formation within the framework of social media and its relationship to the real identity of individuals, by monitoring the trends of researchers and journalists' sample active in the virtual space.

### *1.3. THEORITICAL BACKGROUND*

The researcher will start from Foucault's theory and his philosophy about building self-identity under what Bentham calls the "Panopticon" referring to the authority control and the discipline imposed by the social group rules.

In Fact, the Panopticon was a metaphor that allowed Foucault to explore the relationship between systems of social control and people in a disciplinary situation and the power-knowledge concept. In his view, power and knowledge comes from observing others. Foucault argues that discipline is a mechanism of power that regulates the thought and behavior of social actors through subtle means.

Foucault used the panopticon as a way to illustrate the proclivity of disciplinary societies, subjugate its citizens. He describes the prisoner of a panopticon as being at the receiving end of a symmetrical surveillance: "He is seen, but he does not see; he is an object of information, never a subject in communication." This concept is similar to the social media environment where individuals feel that



they are always seen and controlled by others without having the evidence of that control all the time. That's what makes them acting like controlled in a virtual panopticon.

But, it should be noted that the virtual community looms like a panopticon running in a reciprocal system, no longer talking about source-specific and unilateral observation (watchtower towards thousands of prisoners), but the surveillance has become multiple, infinite and unlimited, felt by social media users, and the virtual groups are becoming the source of censorship. The individual also becomes a guard and a prisoner at the same time, since he follows the virtual crowd and makes implicit judgments on it through the comments it produces. This multi-source censorship has forced the self to what Foucault calls social discipline, the blurring of some features of true self-identity or personal identity at once and the reproduction of multiple virtual identities at other times.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The present research descends within descriptive studies. It tries to monitor opinions of a sample of social media users about self-identity construction. It relied on electronic interviews via Messenger, composed by a number of open-ended questions to give the respondents the opportunity to express fluently and freely their views. The researcher chose to contact 45 of her Facebook friends to enter in a deep discussion with each one of them while they were connected.

She reached only 18 of them. Interviews took the form of instant chatting via Messenger. All interviews were realized during the period 11/12/2018 to 10/01/2019. The researcher chose to contact friends that she knows personally from academics and media field, fearing that the data published by the rest of her Facebook friends about their identities may be forged.

### **3. RESULTS and DISCUSSION**

To present the interviews' results in a structured way, three themes were constituted:

- 1- Social Media as an extended "panopticon"
- 2- I Facebook, therefore I am
- 3- Facebook: A space for the true self confirmation or a sphere of new virtual self-sculpture?

#### Theme 1: Social Media as an extended "panopticon"

According to the data, respondents are fully aware of the challenges they face as virtual activists, mainly the virtual control that everyone exercises over all.

One of the respondents explained:

"On Facebook, we are all guards and prisoners because we monitor each other and tacitly or publicly share our content. Positive comments, and thus the identity we create for ourselves is honored by sharing this content".

Social media seem to be a suitable platform for individuals to share the selected material with the crowd, starting with the details of their personalities, their personal data such as the name, age and job, to the re-publishing images and texts on their own pages.

However, content sharing is not just a neutral exchange of information. Often, when individuals share content on social media, they do so with the full consideration that there is a virtual crowd on alert to judge them by what they furnish their pages.

A media professional respondent said:

“There is a self-reflective structure for sharing content on Facebook or Twitter. As actors on a stage, know that audiences are watching them, and designing their behavior to find the best responses, effective use of social media means selecting and framing content to satisfy / or appeal to a particular virtual crowd. ”.

A researcher added:

“A conscious and enduring vision of all over all, this is what Mark Zuckerberg meant when he drew Facebook profiles. All of our work and posts have become visible to the public. So I share the view that Social Media has become a kind of virtual prison. Even Zuckerberg himself has not escaped the crowd's censorship and even announced that he can no longer maintain his privacy as a user. ”

Furthermore, some participants noted that the features of the virtual space that bring it closer to Bentham's Panopticon are not bad, and should not be condemned.

A sociologist, explained:

“Certainly there is no centralized form of power in virtual space, other than obvious things like inappropriate images or misuse by other users of what is being published and practices are prohibited. People are constantly developing, adapting and updating these ideas themselves, depending on their personal relationships - any list Friends - and interactions with others online. Here, self-regulation becomes tougher than the prison’ metaphor, as a social media user aims to display his own identity based on an understanding of what is appropriate, "cool" or impressive. Not authentic. This dynamic is a key element of online behavior."

According to this view, the virtual reality of the Panopticon becomes rooted in specific and not necessarily negative mechanisms, governing human behavior within the Web, and contributing to self-sewing.

Another view shared the same context:

"I think the key point in many respects may be that" governance "within the virtual domain is mostly latent or unrealized. What happens in the first place is that people judge themselves and adjust their behavior according to their understanding of what is needed, without paying anyone another necessarily so much attention. "

The latter is consistent with Michel Foucault's idea of what he called normalization. Feeling transparent in front of others who are watching us is not necessarily sharp. It is about the difference between what is supposed to happen (observation and control) and what really happens (their reactions).

According to the respondents, social media create a virtual prison that affects the psychology of users. The user's awareness of being monitored pushes him to satisfy the virtual crowd by carefully selecting his publications according to the requirements of the virtual community.

From this standpoint, by sharing the published material, an individual is forced to reveal aspects of his or her life to an unknown audience, judged on the basis of what he publishes. This is, according to some answers, a source of concern about the virtual panopticon created by social networking sites. Faced with this concern, self-awareness of the virtual crowd should prompt it to work harder to create a positive identity and shape its identity creatively.

### Theme 2: I Facebook, therefore I am



At this level, we started from the idea that social media are somehow self-made. Some psychologists have talked about the possibility of using social media in an innovative way, as a means of creative self-development.

Some researchers have adopted the words of the philosopher Plato in his book "The Republic": "Never stop sculpting your own

statue", to restore this principle when talking about the virtual field, and ask the question: Why do we formulate ourselves and review ourselves online when dealing with the crowd Default?

The idea of the virtual panopticon explains why people tend to be more important on social networks than in the real life. They are able to exploit the anxiety this space produces to highlight the positive aspects of their identity. This is called "creative self-assertion".

These types of experiences that attempt to elevate oneself through self-construction, reconfiguration and adaptation find fertile scope in the virtual panopticon.

A university professor explained:

“Every Facebook message seems to contain an implicit referendum on who I am, or at least what I believe in. We are trying to express something real about our identity. But we must also recognize that we are also creating something for others to consume”.

This comment leads to an extremely important issue: The individual tries first to promote its true identity and thus to assert itself; when he fails, he is forced to redraw and adapt himself to be worthwhile on social media. The process of adaptation described by the comment above may push the self to rebuild its details and empower the possibility of revealing some submerged self-qualifications and developing others.

In contrast, some researchers deny the reduction of self-identity in belonging to the Facebook crowd, as this respondent noted:

"Just as the Cartesian cogito reduces the reality of the human existence to the saying: "I am thinking so I am", so thinking has

become the cause of human existence, this banner shortens the reason for our existence in being present in the virtual world, through maintaining the Facebook activities. This is something that reaps on the human self. "

According to this view, Facebook in terms of a courtyard for conducting activities of a communicative nature does not rise to be a space to form the identity of individuals.

Another researcher shared the same idea:

"When I talk about the "crowd", I think primarily about the virtual communities that I contribute to build. This is the idea behind the "crowd call" idea: what forces us to share content is not just our desire to express our values and create ourselves online; it is the desire to belong to a society linked to shared values. My sense is that when we put things online, we put them first and foremost for our society. We do not have a clear idea of exactly who these people are in these societies, but at the end this is not important. What is important is that the network value exists, and we feel that we help create and maintain it by contributing to the content. "

The self appears also as a part of others, since it cannot achieve its own autonomy.

" When we share what we love and search on our social networks to get valuable content to share, we come through people who also love the things we love. We love them, friends, and good followers. " This is a prerequisite, in my opinion, so that we can continue to share and receive what they post. In this process, we build

social networks based on shared values and interests, and from these networks we achieve ourselves”, a female journalist explained.

Self-identity in the virtual domain seemed to be fused into a broader identity; social identity and self-dissolving permanently within the group system:

“What is social about social media is not transitory exchange between individuals but rather the way in which we form communities based on the things we love. It depends on how we achieve a niche within our virtual society, thanks to the materials we share with them. By participating, we contribute to a joint venture - building a shared group that is valuable for everyone to enjoy. ”

Other respondents raised the issue of self-making and carving false identity or identities by exploiting the virtual domain and the unparalleled openness it provides in the development of the promoted identity.

One respondent noticed:

"Social media has actually become a means of self-realization; but it is also a way of self-forgery. It achieves oneself by highlighting successes and everything that will impress the community, for example, the rise of celebrities just because they have published pictures of their own lives and what became known as "fashinista" phenomenon in the social media. There are people who derive their presence in the real world by the number of followers on social sites. Even worse, some traditional media owners are running after social media celebrities to attract more viewers”.



The issue of social media engagement with self-identity building was raised by the writer Baki Orenstein years ago in an article about her experience, published in *The New York Times*, where she emphasized the value of social media in the self-building and sound identity sculpture. She acknowledged her passion for using Twitter to prove herself, as using social media for her represented an opportunity to express herself and develop her inner being. Her article was titled "I tweet, therefore I am." Orenstein described how the use of Twitter redefined her experience in life and soul. There was nothing hidden or repressive about this transformation. Orenstein was a participant willing to carve herself through Twitter.

The majority of participants in this discussion tend to support the idea of the value of creative online self-assertion, although some users do not like to register their true identity and resort to falsification. Others are shocked to realize how much they have been absorbed into the web and are stranded in a constant game of acting in front of the virtual crowd.

According to the majority of respondents, social media can be a positive tool for self-assertion. They can really use it as a tool for the art of living, as Foucault said, and it means reshaping self-identity and rebuilding its components.

Theme 3: Facebook: a space for the true self confirmation or a sphere of new virtual self-sculpture?

The 18 answers were consistent and substantially similar. A number of researchers focused on the distinction between the two terms: self-assertion and self-reconstruction.

One researcher mentioned:

“It's easy to make an identity online. We do this when we create Second Life or World of War craft player portraits. We create fictional characters derived from our dreams and perceptions - characters that may have little or no relationship with our true selves. It is somewhat different. Instead of creating an independent identity, it involves emphasizing the creative aspects of the individual - those that are valuable, virtuous and beautiful - and blurring weaknesses and liberation from negative aspects”.

In the same context, another participant emphasized the need to adhere to the true identity and to make it integrate with the virtual self:

"Self-affirmation has to do with reality and imagination. It starts with your sense of who you really are. If your posts, tweets, comments, posts and likes do not really reflect who you are, you are playing the game incorrectly. The goal is to emphasize your true self and make it reflected through your practices in virtual space."

A media expert added:

"It is enough to keep a public figure in front of thousands of readers, and millions of followers through my stories. Anything must be authentic. I don't feel compelled to be anyone else than I am on Facebook!"

A Totally different opinion from a participant who expressed his joy while talking about the precious opportunity provided by social networking sites to escape the true self-identity:

"Real life offers a little space to move anonymously, but Social Media is a vast space to hide. I would like to see that my real

information isn't there, why not? It's fun to go out of yourself. You can't do it with your friends in real life."

Thus, while the virtual world is broad and open, it remains a tempting space for aberration of reality, providing practices that may lead to self-schizophrenia and swing between its real and hypothetical reality.

In the same vein, psychologist Sherry Turkle explored the threats and challenges of creative self-assertion in her book *Together Alone*. She was talking about Audrey, a 16-year-old American student who was popular on the social media. The researcher asserted that Audrey was aware that what she put on the Internet was a kind of performance in the sense of representation. She described her Facebook identity as a "little twin on the Internet," manipulating it and reshaping it in response to comments. Turkle defends her idea of self-exploration thanks to the Internet, especially in the early youth, where Audrey has been able to emphasize and develop aspects of her personality that may feel uncomfortable in launching them in real environments.

Finally, it has to be pointed that many respondents' answers are also consistent with what was previously said about Plato's statement "never stop sculpting your own statue." Through social media, the self constantly carves its statue in front of a living crowd, changing its styles and shaping its features depending on how the crowd responds to what Foucault calls "work in progress".

In fact, Foucault's idea of the art of life seems useful in building a virtual self that is rooted in the true identity of individuals, and which

is constantly changing to transform its anchors according to the requirements of virtual panopticon. If individuals use social media creatively, then they can use it to explore different aspects of their true personality, and to develop their own identity within and outside the virtual panoptic space.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study, about the role of social media in building self-identity, has reached several important results: Social media is seen as a suitable platform to share the selected material with the crowd, starting with the details of his personality and personal data on his own page. However, content sharing is not just a neutral exchange of information. Often, when individuals share content on social media, they do so with the full consideration that there is a virtual crowd on alert to judge them by what they furnish their pages. Furthermore, some participants noted that the features of virtual space that bring it closer to Bentham' Panopticon are not bad, and should not be condemned. Self-awareness of the virtual crowd should prompt it to work harder to create a positive identity and shape it creatively. This could also empower the possibility of revealing some submerged self-qualifications and developing others.

Nevertheless, the virtual remains according to some of the respondents a tempting space for aberration of reality, providing practices that may lead to schizophrenia and swing between the real

and hypothetical reality. But as mentioned long years ago by Plato, persons must "never stop sculpting their own statue." The self constantly carves its statue in front of a living crowd, changing its styles and shaping its features depending on how the crowd responds to what Foucault calls "work in progress". So according to the data, what can be called schizophrenia is to build and rebuild the self and adapt it to the requirements of the virtual reality to which it belongs. So it's a benign kind of schizophrenia that must be encouraged and valued.

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The Panopticon was a prison. It was designed to allow round-the-clock surveillance of the inmates by their superintendent. Bentham's intention was humanitarian; but penitentiaries are not the best advertisement for a utilitarian ethic.

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Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

Año 36, N° 26, (2020)

Esta revista fue editada en formato digital por el personal de la Oficina de Publicaciones Científicas de la Facultad Experimental de Ciencias, Universidad del Zulia.

Maracaibo - Venezuela

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