

Globalization of Localized Social Integration: Disembodied 'Selves', New Form of Social Interaction and Re-Identification of 'Who We Are' in a Virtual Environment

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Abstract

Social network systems and virtual environment as one of the consequences of the globalization process, and its influences on its users, are discussed in the present study. Some basic concepts, including the necessity of redefining and even reconceptualizing them, are discussed briefly. This research addresses the facilities as well as the attributes of Facebook as a Social Network System, and particular features of disembodiment, re-construction, and re-presenting social identities which are already constructed as a member of small societies. Due to this, "Whether 'virtual communication environments', 'social networks' are perceived as something like 'escape way' from socio-cultural restrictions or not" was questioned. For the purpose of the study, an online questionnaire consisting of 55 close-ended questions, with brief information about the purpose and the significance of the study, was posted at various FB users' profiles. However, only the first 100 volunteer 'Turkish Cypriot' users were taken as the sample.

Keywords: Globalization, virtual communication, Facebook, social integration and Northern Cyprus

1. Introduction

As any other innovation or novelty that has left its mark in history in the field of social sciences, the rapid development of new communication technologies has brought new discussions, negotiations, and conceptualizations with itself. Interrelations between each technological development and social systems have been a matter of debate for many decades. Most of them drew attention to the necessity of analyzing new communication systems, which are directly related with our everyday lives, and 'anatomizing' their probable socio-psychological influences on potential 'consumers'.

Various globalization supporter scholars claim that increasing technological innovations, especially in the field of communication, has brought the world closer together within the political-economic and socio-cultural context (Jia, 2001).

McLuhan, who can be assumed as the "eponym" of the concept entitled 'Global Village', insisted on the fact that an interconnected global village would be created by linking of electronic information. Apart from this, as noted by Walkosz, Jolls and Sund (2008), Jenkins (2006) highlighted the fact that the development of a "participatory culture" that extends beyond the posting or downloading of media has been contributed by the development of social media. Therefore, the need to redefine and to reconceptualize some social issues such as culture and community was also clearly highlighted by the authors.

Beerkens' (2004:13) definition of globalization also highlights new reforms in socio-cultural, politic and economic framework. Articulated relationship between globalization and changing face of communication is declared by

The world-wide interconnectedness between nation-states becomes supplemented by globalisation as a process in which basic social arrangements (like power, culture, markets, politics, rights, values, norms, ideology, identity, citizenship, solidarity) become disembedded from their spatial context (mainly the nation-state) due to the acceleration, massification, flexibilisation, diffusion and expansion of transnational flows of people, products, finance, images and information.

As has been known and has been discussed broadly by many theoreticians, Internet-based activities widely spread their access beyond the social fields as well as economic and political fields. Social network sites (SNS) as a means of communication or as Internet-based new space of communication have penetrated almost into each part of our everyday lives. Jia (2001) noted the influence of the Internet within the context of globalization by asserting that

Technological progress, especially the Internet, has brought people closer together. International and domestic concerns are becoming increasingly intertwined. Under these circumstances, national borders have lost their previous significance and national sovereignty is becoming both anachronistic and a less valid excuse for idiosyncratic rule within national borders. (Jia, Q. 2001:32).

Social networks can be defined as “communities built around the interpersonal relationships of their members. By keeping track of who each participant knows- and how they know one another- each member creates a private community through a white list of known friends” (Croll & Power, 2009:458).

Hence, opportunities offered within the socio-cultural context can be declared as indubitable. As Boyd and Ellison (online) also stated, SNSs allow its users 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.

Facebook (FB), which is assumed as one of the most popular SNSs, and its probable influences on its users were questioned during the present study. Disembodied communication networks, such as FB, as any other novelty have both positive and negative influences on its users as an individual, and thus, on social structures which are usually entitled as a ‘society’.

As it is known, mass communication technologies, which influence and change the structure of oral culture, were innovated in the conditions that were strictly tied with the rise of nation-states, based on the Fordist economy model, mass production and mass consumption. (Aker, T. 2012).

Social network systems, as a new form of communication, has freed its ‘audiences’ from spatiotemporal boundedness and has also offered its users the opportunity to (re)actualize themselves in a brand new and quite different environment.

This ‘virtual’ environment, and its probable influences on its users, is one of the highly disputed issues by social scientists. Whether being able to choose the ‘community’ that an individual would like to be part of, influence the construction of ‘self-schemas’ or not; whether self actualization of an individual differs in virtual environment because of disembodiment or not; whether e-socialization is a kind of dis-socialization or not; are social network users freed from bounded means of ‘real life’ at a ‘virtual environment’?; if this is so, what are the outcomes of being freed from spatial restrictions?

Questions listed above are only few of the subject matters that are projected by social scientists. Due to this, the present study explored the influences of Facebook as a social network and a means of communication, on its users who are citizens of a small society and surrounded by restrictions of socio-cultural as much as political patterns. For the purpose of the study, this study explored ‘Turkish Cypriot’ Facebook users, who live in Northern Cyprus, as citizens of small and unrecognized country, and the opportunities that they found in a virtual environment. Accordingly, whether their virtual identities are a reflection of their ‘real’ identities or a deception of them was investigated.

2. Literature review

2.1. Globalization via new communication technologies

Globalization, which is defined as “intensification of worldwide social relations linking distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring miles away and vice versa” by Giddens (1999:21), is a term used to describe the interconnectedness of social events and relationships (Waters, 2001).

Scholte (2005) noted five general conceptions of globalization which are distinguished from one another: globalization as liberalization, as internationalization, as universalization, as westernization, and as respatialization. Globalization as respatialization, which provides bases for the present study, brought an end to territorial geography.

Throughout the definition of globalization by Giddens & Griffiths (2006), people all live in one world which is rapidly increasing, and individuals as well as groups and nations become interdependent. They also underline the fact that it is created by political, socio-cultural, and economic factors, all highlighted by communication technologies that have strengthened the speed and opportunity of interaction between people.

This interaction between people was made possible by a wide web of communication technologies. As cited by Aker (2012), Giddens (1991) pointed out the consequential separation of time from place and space as one of the outcomes of the evolution of modernity. He then added that the disembodied social systems or the “lifting out” of social

relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring indefinitely spans across time-space (Akter, 2012; Giddens, 1991).

Communication that involves producing and exchanging meanings occurs within a context; and as it is known, this context is full of social and cultural codes. These codes are interwoven within social relationships which can be assumed as part and parcel of communication process. Influences of globalization, and thus, technological developments lead some changes at structure and context of communication, some of social standards of life. While carrying these socio-cultural, political and economic structure changes, it would also draw attention to spatial-temporal restrictions of our 'real life' (Akter, T., 2011).

Subsequently, new communication technologies eliminated the concepts of time and space as well as minimized the significance of body. This spatial and temporal freedom brought the necessity of re-thinking some concepts within the socio-cultural context.

2.2. Socio-cultural and political influences of the Internet on its users

As it is known, as an outcome of the globalization; and thus, new communication technologies, cultures and societies are no longer bounded by specific places but by the electronic transfer of ideas images, transgressing established boundaries (Akter, 2012).

The Internet, which cannot be considered to encompass a single medium, consists of a range media that gives an opportunity to its participants to have more power to control in determining information experience that will be produced. (December: 1996)

In addition to this, as pointed out by Whitley (1997), the new form of communication environment enables people to socialize with other gender. However, this is not only limited with gender but also with any other factors that are dependent on our physical appearances such as color, race, nation, and so forth.

People, in virtual 'life' practices, are assumed as being isolated from some spatial-temporal restrictions of the real life. Hartley (2002:232), by claiming that "virtual communitarians contribute to the established body of community theory by demonstrating that community is not tied to geographic locations but can exist through mediated communication," did underline facility of establishing, being part of and experiencing 'virtual communities'.

Cyberspace is demonstrated by Rheingold (1993) as a space that provides "spaces where new authentic places are being created, supporting new forms of community" (Dodge & Kitchen, 2001: 52). Computer networks usually are recognized as social networks; therefore, understanding the structure of cyberspace, most of the time, entails an understanding of social structures.

In addition to this, Vasseleu (1997), while defining cyberspace, noted that it can be assumed as the space within the electronic network of computers from which virtual realities, that are computer-generated systems for simulating various aspects of interactive space, among other things, can be made.

Communities, as Smith (1999) noted, are renewed via networks by strengthening the bonds that attach us to the wider social world as well as by concurrently increasing our control and authority in the world. Furthermore, it is also stated that "lack of accountability and facelessness of individuals within virtual communities can lead practices that may not be risked within the norms of real face-to-face social relationships" (Hartley 2002: 232).

The concept of "community" also is reformed by the outcomes of the development of the communication technologies. It made participating within several social networks that are called "virtual communities" possible.

There are various researches, articles, and books written about probable influences or effects of this new form of communication. Guangrong (1998), as one of those scholars, investigated the negative socio-cultural and political influences impacts of the Internet. The author categorized the negative influences of the Internet into three groups: political influence, cultural influence, and security threats of the Internet.

While dealing with political influences, the author stated that the Internet perfectly makes and spreads propaganda about Western democratic values, and degrades and repudiates those countries and authorities that have different ideologies from those of the West. Moreover, Guangrong added that the Internet can be harmful for national domination and conflict with internal associations of other countries.

On the other hand, Guangrong (1998) insisted that the Internet advocates western lifestyles, helps dominant cultures impact and homogenize cultures in an inferior position, corrupts people's minds, and influences and changes people's moral perspectives and ethical values.

However, apart from the negative influences, it is necessary to deal with the positive influences or look on the bright side of these 'negative' influences. While spreading propaganda of western values and being harmful for national domination, it gives an opportunity to its participants to find out a distinctive social structure. Being freed from the boundedness of 'nationalism' and being freed from liabilities, obligations and social pressures that it brings with itself

open a new door for participants; being citizens of a 'global village' and constituting their own communities or to belong to any 'community' with their free will.

The present study neither ignores nor neglects the risky influences of new communication technologies but also insists on the possibility, normality and neutrality of bringing some risks with itself while easing our lives or fulfilling our needs. Moreover, the negative influences which were noted by Guangrong (1998) are a matter of traditional mass media as well. Therefore, rather than structure of influences and their efficiency on its users, it is related with the characteristics of its 'participants'; as being 'active' or 'passive' recipients.

2.3. Reconstruction and re-conceptualization of social integration in 'unbounded' spaces

The concept of social interaction which principally has five fundamental patterns as exchange, cooperation, competition, conflict, and coercion, is one of those concepts that should be re-negotiated by the development of new communication forms.

As one of the most important concepts in social psychology, social interaction and its influences on identity should also be investigated within the context of new spaces that makes interaction possible. Argyle (2007:25) demonstrated that "...patterns of interaction have been worked out by earlier members of the society, embodied in cultural rules and norms, and are taught to the young".

In simple terms, social interaction can be defined as mutual influence of two or more people on each other's behavior (Thompson & Hickey, 2005).

These definitions raise another question with itself: whether it is "necessary" to interact only within bounded patterns of 'real' life to speak of social interaction and integration or it is also possible to comprise disembodied interactions to be able to talk about them. Redefinition and re-conceptualization of the 'system' that provided and required for actualization of social interaction, and thus, integration also brought attention to the problems within the system.

By defining the Internet as an 'arbitrator' or 'carrier' of a form of social integration, Holmes (1997) also highlighted the possibility of social integration at an 'unbounded' spatial-temporal dimension. He also addressed three levels of communicative integration, which is proposed by James and Carkek, to draw attention to the 'un-necessity' of embodied integrations. As he noted, communicative integration can be in the form of 'face to face', 'agency-extended', and 'disembodied-extended' integration. By disembodied-extended integration, the authors highlighted the possibility of overwhelming the restrictions of embodiment by means of technological extension.

Interacting with others in a social environment, whether an individual practices it within spatial relationships or within 'unbounded' spaces, would engender social interaction. Conversation, which is one of the essentials of social interaction, and sustaining relationships, would be enough to constitute social interaction. As Argyle also claimed "...social interaction consists partly of conversation, which is usually a mixture of problem-solving and information-conveying on the one hand, and sustaining social relationships and enjoying social interaction on the other" (Argyle, 2007:69).

Within this context, the problem of the present study was based upon opportunities that are offered by Facebook, as a new form of communication, its influences on 'socialization', and the 'social integration' process of its users.

3. Research methodology

During the present study, the quantitative method was used. Online questionnaires were conducted to volunteer Facebook users who are originally 'Turkish Cypriot' in order to figure out whether their virtual identities are a reflection of their 'real' identities or a deception of them. Only the first 100 respondents were included in the sample.

3.1 Participants

For the purpose of the study, volunteer Facebook (FB) users were chosen as the sample group. Stratified sampling was used as a method of selecting a valid sample from the entire population and to ensure 'Cypriots' who live in Northern Cyprus.

'Turkish Cypriot' FB users were informed about the purpose and the coverage of the research, link of online questionnaires shared via several FB users. More than 100 FB users did respond to the questionnaire but only the first 100 volunteer 'Turkish Cypriot' FB users were selected as sampling. As has been mentioned, only original 'Turkish Cypriots' were asked to answer questions; neither immigrants nor emigrants in Northern Cyprus were included.

The purpose of limiting participants as original 'Turkish Cypriots' was to be able to figure out the 'psychological pressure' of being part of a small society and to examine whether 'virtual communication environments' or 'social networks' are perceived as something like an 'escape way' from socio-cultural restrictions or not.

3.2 Instrument

Whether virtual means of communication are previewed as a kind of 'escape way' by members of the small societies or it is a kind of 'limb' of their 'real' lives was questioned during the research. Due to this, apart from their demographic background, reasons of using the Internet and FB, frequency of using this means of communication, and how they (re)construct their social relations and reasons of this (re)construction process were questioned. Apart from this, the participants were also asked whether their identification in a virtual environment differed from their real environment.

For the data collection method, an online questionnaire consisting of 55 close-ended questions, including demographic ones were conducted to volunteer 'Cypriot' FB users whose mother tongue is Turkish and the first 100 of them were taken into consideration. Previously, this questionnaire was conducted to ICQ users in Northern Cyprus in order to figure out whether virtual identities are a deception of their 'real' identities or a reflection of them (Akter, 2012).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Through demographic background of Facebook users in Northern Cyprus

Throughout the results of the conducted questionnaire, volunteer 'Cypriot' Facebook users were mostly 18-37 years old, predominantly female, single, at least university graduates, and willing to identify themselves as 'Turkish Cypriot'.

The results of the conducted research clarified that 22% of the respondents were between 18 and 22 years old, 24% were 23-27, 22% were 28-32, 24% were 33-37, 6% were older than 37, and only 2% were younger than 18 years old. Apart from this, 74% of the respondents graduated from the University. Due to this, in consideration of their education level and age, it is assumed that 'Cypriot' FB users are conscious in making decisions about themselves, can criticize socio-cultural as well as economic systems that they are involved in, and are able to (re)construct their socio-cultural relations.

The findings of the conducted research indicated that 57% of the respondents were single, while 28% of respondents were married, 10% were engaged, and 5% were widowed/divorced. Hence, it is possible to assume that mostly 'single' people use Facebook as a means of communication in Northern Cyprus. This finding leads to another question: whether there is meaningful relation between using this kind of communication and the marital status of FB users in Northern Cyprus.

According to the findings of the research, 89% of both 'single' and 'married' participants use the Internet every day. However, there is no meaningful relation between marital status and reason for using the Internet. Only 7% of single users and 14% of married users said that they do not ever chat at FB, whereas none of the participants, whether married or single, mislead others about their marital status. Thus, although it has been clarified that marital status as a variable does not have any meaningful cross correlation with other variables, it is also possible to claim that FB users do not need to lie in a virtual environment, but may not indicate things that they do not to mention.

Finally, how 'Cypriot' Facebook users do identify themselves was questioned in order to figure out whether identifying themselves differs in a virtual environment or not. The findings note that 55% of the total participants identify themselves as 'Turkish Cypriot', 33% as 'Cypriot', 9% as 'Turk', and only 3% as 'other'. However, it has been noted that percentages of identifying themselves in a virtual environment differed. The findings indicate that the number of respondents who identified themselves as 'Turkish Cypriot' decreased from 55% to 40%; those who identified themselves as 'Cypriot' increased from 33% to 36%; those who identified themselves as 'Turk' increased from 9% to 13%; and those with no difference at identifying as 'other', but 8% of the respondents claimed that they did not state.

Apart from this, throughout the findings, it has been noted that 69% of the respondents who identified themselves as 'Turkish Cypriot' identified themselves the same at FB but 18% of them changed the way they identified themselves as 'Cypriot'. Moreover, 79% of those who identified themselves as 'Cypriot' in 'real' defined themselves in the same way at FB as well. Due to the frequency of respondents who did self-identification as 'Cypriot' at Facebook, it was clarified that 72% of them defined themselves as 'Cypriot' in 'real', and 28% identified themselves as 'Turkish Cypriot' in 'real'.

These results indicate that 'Cypriots' whose mother tongue is 'Turkish' have the tendency to underline their 'region' though accepting being 'Turkish' but not 'Turk', which may draw a difference between Turks from Turkey and the one from Cyprus.

4.2. Using computer, the Internet and Facebook and 'Judgements' virtual environment

During the present study, which traditional way of communication is similarized with using the Internet was also questioned. It has been noticed that it is mostly familiarized with 'being on the phone' (40%), 'face-to-face communication'

(28%), and newspaper (19%). Due to this, it is possible to assume that because of being able to be isolated from time-space distanciation, 'Turkish Cypriot' FB users similarized using Facebook with 'being on the phone'. One of the common characteristics of 'being on the phone with someone' and 'face-to-face communication' is being involved in one-to-one communication. Therefore, FB social network is preferred by 'Turkish Cypriot' FB users because of their ability to communicate one to one but also face to face.

More than half of the respondents (55%) stated their reason of using the computer as 'for Internet', and 89% of the respondents claimed their frequency of using the Internet as 'everyday'. Reason for using Facebook is stated as 'spending time' by 68% and as 'communicating' by 14% of the total participants.

In addition to this, only 6% of the respondents claimed that they are unemployed. Only a limited number of respondents can be assumed as 'layman' and have no 'activity' in their lives. Thus, 'having nothing to do' cannot be assumed as a reason of using the Facebook social network.

Table 1. Facebook vs. Real Life

		Percentage of people in your FB list that afterwards you become acquainted with				Total
Percentage of people in your FB list that you know in your 'real' life as well		Almost half	All of them	None of them, and it's not necessary	More than half	
Almost half		4	0	0		4
All of them		7	1	55		63
None of them and it's not necessary				1		1
More than half		20		12		32
Total		32	1	67		100

As shown above, majority of the respondents indicated that they do not agree about the enlargement of their social surroundings as well as they do not believe that their social relations are improved via FB. However, a majority (59%) of the total respondents lean toward the fact that they do feel more comfortable about expressing their ideas, mostly they (52%) do feel more isolated from the socio-cultural pressure while chatting. In addition to this, 68% of the respondents claimed that they find opportunity to meet with people who share similar interests and with people who have the same ideologies (57%).

Moreover, 63% of the total respondents stated that they do feel that people do not consider their physical appearance and 69% of them feel that their financial situation is not considered by others in a virtual environment, whereas 71% of the total respondents indicated that their ethnic origin or background loses its significance in a virtual environment. It is also noted that geographic location loses its significance in view of 74% of the respondents.

According to the findings, it is possible to claim that even if respondents are not aware or are not willing to agree, virtual communication networks offer them an environment isolated from socio-cultural and political restrictions as well as suppression of embodied social systems.

5. Concluding Remarks

As cited in Cohen, Brisette, Skoner and Doyle (2000), Thoits (1983) proposed that identities are tied to social roles which are viewed as sets of behavioral expectations and emerge from the social environments in which one interacts. A sense of predictability in people's lives is imposed by these behavioral expectations. As they claimed, it is done by providing information about how one should act.

According to the findings of the conducted research, 'Turkish Cypriot' FB users are, in consideration of their education level and age, mostly mature and well educated. Due to this, it can be assumed that they are conscious and aware of the socio-cultural as well as economic sanction power of the 'real' and 'embodied' social life that they already are involved in. Apart from this, the research clarified that the marital status of 'Turkish Cypriot' FB users is not a conjunctive factor at using this social network system.

Facebook is not just a means of whiling for them, but also a new space to communicate and interact with people. They communicate in a Facebook environment as if they do interact one-to-one and face-to-face. The only difference of Facebook from the 'real' environment is its philosophy; the non-geocentric structure of the system.

As mentioned previously, the virtual environment gives an opportunity to its users to be isolated from the spatiotemporal restrictions of 'real life', making it possible to actualize interaction and thus integration via boundless space. However, findings noted that 'Turkish Cypriot' FB users lean to identify themselves via a geocentric system by underlining their 'region' although accepting being 'Turkish' in order to draw their difference from 'Turks' from Turkey.

Table 2. *Real Social Environment vs. Virtual Social Environment*

	Real Environment	Virtual Environment
Freedom at expressing ideas		✓
Reaching information/knowledge		✓
Feel being Freed from social pressures		✓
Finding opportunity to meet with people with same interests		✓
Finding opportunity to meet with people with same ideology		✓
Not being judged because of physical appearance		✓
Not being evaluated because of education level		✓
Not being evaluated because of financial status		✓
Not being judged because of ethnic background		✓
Not being evaluated because of the place that situated (country)		✓
Total Positive Judgment	0	10

Finally, as shown above, findings of the research illuminated that ethnic backgrounds, physical appearances, political views or interests of 'Turkish Cypriot' FB users are restrictive factors during the social integration process in a virtual environment.

To sum up, a virtual environment enables its users to be isolated from the spatial-temporal restrictions of real life and makes 'disembodied' interaction possible, although identifying it would be necessary to be bounded to the geocentric understanding. This might be applicable for only 'citizens' of unrecognized countries, second- (or more) generation immigrants or those who are not well-known by other countries as 'Turkish Cypriots', in order to put forward their differences from other similar 'ethnic backgrounds' or 'nationalities'.

Apart from this, it was noted that the virtual means of communication were previewed both as a kind of 'escape way' for 'Turkish Cypriot' Facebook users and as a kind of 'limb' of their lives. It is perceived as 'limb' of their lives which enables them to 'escape' from the spatial-temporal restrictions as well as socio-cultural and political pressures of being part of a small society.

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