



“LOOKING GLASS SELF” AND DISEMBOIDMENT IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT: EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE TURKISH CYPRIOT FACEBOOK USERS AND ISOLATION FROM BODIES

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Abstract

A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his [sic] judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification (Cooley, C. H. 1922)

As it is presented in most of the introductory social psychology books, perception of the self by others and also how we are perceived, play an important role at the construction of identity; especially social identity. Due to this, during the present study which was based on the theory of Cooley, Looking Glass Self (LGS), role of perception of other members of the society at small sized societies was explored. While discussing the theory of LGS, its relation with social media such as Facebook and reason of using such a network was figured out. During the present study it was assumed that “Young adults, in small societies, are willing to use social networks (Facebook) in order to be isolated from the restrictions of the social structure such as embodiment”. For the purpose of the study, online close ended questionnaires was conducted to 100 Turkish Cypriot Facebook users and basic reasons of using such a social network was questioned. Through the questionnaires, relationship between restrictions of living in a small society, significance of how they are perceived by others and being isolated from spatial-temporal factors as well as embodiment was analyzed.

Key words: Looking Glass Self, social networking, Facebook, identity

Introduction

People owe their socio-cultural entity to the ability of communication. It enables people to understand and to be understood. Thus it makes easier to produce and exchange meanings, and it is more than what Lasswell (1948) explained as “who says what to whom to what effect” process. As well as enabling social interaction and integration, communication process plays a significant role at construction of every single part of our lives even our ‘selves’. It covers the understanding process of who we are and who are not...Due to this, most of the discussions in the field of social psychology cannot be done independently from the communication factor. Social psychology, which mostly focuses on the ways in which people affect, and are affected by others, attaches importance to every type of communication that influence people both directly or indirectly. As Krauss and Fussell (n. d.), also stated “It’s difficult to imagine serious discussions of such topics as social influence, small group interaction, social perception, attitude change, or interpersonal relations that ignore the role communication plays” (p. 2).

The social identity perspective, which is a social psychological analysis of group processes, inter-group relations, and the self-concept, was taken for granted during the present study (Hogg & Reid, 2006). However, the rapid development of communication technologies and the outcomes that brought with it should be considered as well while dealing with social identity perspective. An especially new communication environment which is called virtual environment, we believe, plays an important role at social psychological analysis of group processes, inter-group relations, and the self-concept.

Virtual communication vs. traditional communication networks

Beside the “real” communication an “unreal,” virtual communication is taking place. This is communication in which one or more parties are non-real, fictive, or deviates so strongly from the perceived interlocutor that the communication becomes imagined or untrue to reality in one or more respects. It is also implicit communication, where behaviors and actions communicate intentions, values and beliefs. (Bengtsson, 1999: 14)

Bengtsson (1999) tried to emphasize or underline the ‘reality’ of the context, in which communication occurs. However, while discussing the “reality” of the new type communication, it is necessary to keep in mind that, even the concept of “reality” should be redefined within the context of developing communication technologies. Due to this, instead of whether it is ‘real’ or not, it is more significant to deal with such an environment as a new sphere of communication where public one is privatised as well as private one became public.

As Ubayasiri (2006) also claimed the internet, which is prefigured as questionably the surprisingly one of the main developments in modern communication, has formed a global ‘public sphere’ where, every single user may have direct access to a global forum and able to express their ideas and feelings without arbitration, selection or censorship (Ubayasiri, 2006). Therefore it is inevitable, whether accepting it as ‘reality’ or ‘deception of reality’, to accept that it is used by ‘real’ people as a mean of communication. Furthermore, if the public sphere can be defined and conceptualised as an area in which people can come together and freely discuss their societal problems, we would assume Internet as a part of social life and “a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment” (Hauser, 1998: 86).

Before the invention of printing and modern mass media, traditional communication used to refer communication process without using any technological mean of communication. However, by the rapid development of communication technologies even the centralised mass media is called as traditional media, especially after Internet and internet based communication networks became widespread. It would not so possible to claim that it is going to take the place of traditional media or communication but also inevitable to accept it’s socio-cultural as well as political influences people at least as much as traditional one.

Some of the main advantages of internet based communication can be listed as being able to communicate faster, being able to reach more sources, being able to participate to social networking rather than physical one, being able to be isolated from spatial-temporal restrictions etc. For sure as well as advantages, it has some disadvantages like social disconnection, which is also negotiable. However instead of discussing every single probable risks that it might brought with itself, we will focus of new communication networks as a new



sphere of communication and its probable influences on social identity construction.

As it is known, via isolating people from time and space and bringing globe to a single room, Internet based communication provides its users opportunity of experiencing different social relations and interactions. Herewith, social factors which influence construction of identity vary in virtual environment.

Social Identity construction and some cognitive paradigms

'A man is an enigma to himself', he is able to distinguish himself from 'others' in terms of anatomy and physiology but in terms of consciousness, he lacks criteria for self-judgement and self-understanding (Jung, 1958). This criteria develops as one is able to understand their position and existence in a social context which is the 'social identity' content. The debate regarding whether the self is an individual or a collective phenomenon has been researched by social psychologist and in particular psychoanalysts. According to Jung (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005) identity formation is based on collective phenomena which bonds humanity in terms of formation of constructs of the self. These include language, religion, customs and myth according to Wund (1916; Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). A complimentary argument was proposed by McDougall in *The Group Mind* (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005); interactions of individuals give process to a group mind where reality and existence are qualitatively distinct from isolated individuals forming the group.

The existence of the collective gives rise to social identity formation where the contents of the ego properties are somewhat shared and superego content are approved. This experience is sharing of a consciousness, while experiencing on the unconscious level the process of wholeness.

William James (1890, 2007) distinguished 'I' and 'Me' concepts. The 'I' is the conscious me (awareness of who I am), which according to Jung cannot be fully reached; and 'Me', the self as an object of perception. Question of how conscious one can be of the 'I' and how the 'I' is constructed can it be questioned since the 'Me' is a product of the 'I'. The perceptions one formulate depends on the socially accepted and internalised values, whether they are collective irrational or not, which one can argue to be more conscious compared to the real self, conscious 'I'. This is because social identity construction is a compilation of togetherness and collectiveness of individuals values, attributes and beliefs which are also explained by the *Social Interactionism Theory* (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). According to this theory selfness is contrasted via being socially involved in ones' environment and growth of self-conception which is continually modified by experience. This experience, no matter how complex, leads to a formulation of symbols and images of the self- a prediction as it is perceived by others.

This symbolic Interactionism perspective can explain the cognitive paradigms guiding and accompanying social identity construction.

Identity is a process of identification of selves that must always be established, however it makes no sense outside relationships. According to implications of Jenkins (2008), individual identification is the basic cognitive mechanism that manages individuals' social interaction with others. In the sense of outside relationships, identification operates through cognitive mechanisms that maintain an understanding of the self in the eyes of 'individual self' and 'others'.

Identifying ourselves, or others, means classifying things or persons; and to associate oneself with, or attach oneself to, something or someone else (Jenkins, 2008). Besides perception, Jenkins (2008) claimed that identity is linked with classification; however positions and categories are important tools for classification.

People in the social environment classify themselves and others according to their perceptions regarding positions and categories. In general perspective, the identity can be defined as an object which can be categorized, classified or named according to the situation in the society; however categories or groups are bases of social identity perspective and roles of for identity perspective. As Jenkins (2008) also claimed "Categorization is as much a part of our subject matter as self-identification" (p. 12). Furthermore, social identity is the collection of the each identity roles shaped according to the situation in the society. Hogg and Vaughan proposed that psychologically salient categorization provides people depersonalized approach while perceiving themselves and others. Depersonalization approach explained as the treatment or perception of self and others as collective individuals in a social group (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). People make self-identification while categorizing themselves in a social context on the basis of social identity perspective.

However, social identity is the psychological basis of self conception as well as a composition of sense of self and associated some cognitive processes (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). This reflect the fact that group identities are often treated as the most powerful forms of identification in the perception of shared identifications in the social context (Jenkins, 2008). On the other hand, self is a socially constructed entity that social self have multiple selves acting in various groups and associated identities (John, Robins & Pervin, 2008).

The presence of others in the perception of self indicate the interactional self similar to and different from others (Jenkins, 2008) while Cooley has imaged this interaction between self and others as 'Looking-Glass Self' that refers to shaping of self in the eyes of others while other's perception leaded by the self.

According to Cooley (1922) as cited in Scheff (2003) as well, the reflexive self-consciousness of our experience is in close relation with how we continually monitor our self from the point of view of others. He proposed that self-monitoring as the first step of a dynamic social and psychological process by claiming

A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his [sic] judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification (Cooley, 1902: 184).

Role of others at construction of the "selves"

When looking at the concept of 'others' in the construction of the self, the 'other' may also refer the others within the self (internal) or others at the external level. Internal 'other' includes relationship with the mind and rationality whereas outer relationship within the self includes relationship with the body (Ajana, 2005). It is the inner attributes and the inner relationship which determines 'who we are'. Further discussion is Michel Buber's *I and Thou* where it is stated that 'when one experiences, he is disconnected from the real world. For this experience is 'in him' and not between him and the world that the experience arises' (Buber, 1923). 'In him' refers to internalisation of



selfness and the reality of the self, whereas between him is more on the externals level of existence. The other develops through socialisation and encountering of different experiences which one, in particular at childhood develops.

Winnocott (1965; Fonagy, 2001) provided a developmental description of origins of the self with reference to infant-caregiver relationship. The self begins to form with the unity of mother-infant which facilitates personalisation (autonomy) (Fonagy, 2001). This personalisation is in-fact shaped and guided by the parents' attitudes which is projected onto the infant and leaps into development. These form a base of an internal working model guiding relationship with the other and formulation of the 'selves'.

The selves or rather self-structures may appear real, perform and comply and be true in highly selected aspects or based on wholesale identification with the object (Fonagy, 2011) (the other). This is correlated with the 'Looking- Glass Self' concept where how an individual conceives their selfness and conceives their selfless in terms of how others view and rate them; base of the 'other self'. This in-fact is a general procedure experienced at developmental phase in a struggle of identity formation, however in terms of activating the selves in a virtual environment and within the framework of disembodiment it takes a hold in a different direction. The main concern will be the experience of subjectivity and identity. If the conscious subjectivity attached to the identity and the self is dismembered via the virtual reality, through a form of reconstruction of the self, the 'real' experience which is experienced consciously can be a form of 'transcendental subjectivity' (Ajana, 2005).

This also raises the question of conscious experience without self-reference which can be experienced in the virtual environment as a result of disembodiment. One consciously experiences while being disconnected from conscious thought in a form of an aesthetic experience. The conscious thought as a subjective experience in virtual environment can lead to disembodiment via disconnection of thought and body. Body is in-fact existing and experiencing while the thoughts attached are disconnected

Case Study: Exploratory study of the Turkish Cypriot Facebook users , isolation from bodies and "Looking Glass Self" theory

During the present study Facebook as a new space for communication and Facebook users handled as a new form of citizens were investigated to understand the "Looking Glass Self" process in virtual environment, where people are isolated from the restrictions socio-cultural pressures, enforcements and sanctions.

Due to this, for the purpose of the study 100 Northern Cypriot Facebook users were randomly selected and asked to complete an online questionnaire composing of 22 close-ended questions to investigate whether there is an interrelation between changing social environment, disembodiment and identifying self.

Correlation of Gender and 'Looking Glass Self' in virtual environment

According to the results of the survey, there are no gender differences amongst participants belief about the impact society has on them. Both of the majority of males and females believed the way society influences individuals are very important.

Female participants in the study reported to be less influenced by their 'environment' on how they should live and shape their lives, compared to males who reported the 'environment' to have an impact on how they shape their lives and experiences. This question was directly linked to the following question which measured how much societal suppression experiences in childhood and adolescence had an impact on future experiences. Both genders reported societal suppression in childhood and adolescent years to be influential in experience; however female participants reported societal suppression experiences to be more influential. This somewhat contradicts the previous finding suggesting that females in Northern Cyprus experience a form of early suppression which as a result leads to a form of resistance. This resistance is projected onto the virtual environment where there are no forms of suppression or boundaries of experience. Individual is free to express and even create via disconnecting from the perceived self developed as a result of suppression.

Correlation of Age and 'Looking Glass Self' in virtual environment

Consistent with the findings of the research which is conducted; participants aged 27 years and over reported importance of societal perceptions. In addition, participants aged 26 and under reported much more environmental influences on selection of friends compared to participants aged 27 and above. Therefore it is possible to assume that, age as an independent variable plays an important role at "Looking Glass Self" owing to take consideration the environmental influences.

Social, cultural and environmental factors, when taking age into consideration, can be a changeable variable. Respondents aged 26 or below are able to avoid restrictions experienced in their society through disembodiment in their environment. This way, the individual can create a self within the selected environment and identify and experience the 'self' which they were permitted from experiencing.

Correlation of Education Level and 'Looking Glass Self' in virtual environment

According to the results of the research which is conducted, 'society perception of them' is important factor for the participants whose educational status were university or above. In addition to this, there is a belief that if present in another society their experiences and lives could be shaped differently.

However they also claimed that their environment does not have an impact on how they live their lives, their choice of friendships, political stance or on sexual choice.

Participants, whose educational status were university or above, reported that their families do not influence their political choice, friendship choice and religious choice. Therefore, regardless of number of these individuals believe their family and environment do not have an impact on their own attitudes, individuals with university level or above education believe they could be different individuals if they were in another society.

For this reason, it can be suggested that education level as an independent variable plays an important role at "Looking Glass Self" owing to taking consideration the environmental influences as well as possible to assume that these individuals are in an attempt to experience different social structures in the virtual environment.

'Looking Glass Self' in virtual environment

Since social structure is reported to be important for families, perception of the society about the individual is valued. If families did not think



social structure to be of any importance to their experiences and shaping of their lives, the environment will also not have significance on these factors also. Since there is no family factor in the virtual environment individuals are more freely experiencing the *self*. This means individuals who attribute importance to what other individuals within the society think about them are applying a form of restriction in their experiences, which is reflected in the findings of the present study. This can legitimize the reason for why virtual environments are chosen to be experienced which can be linked to Looking Glass Self theory.

Participants while defining themselves and others mostly preferred to identify by emphasizing the geographical position and space which they live in and belong to; such as 'Turkish Cypriot' and 'Turkish Turk'. Thus, it is possible to assume that geography and related issues are independent variables at during the identification process.

'what other think about me is important' and I think 'if I was living in another society I would be a different me'

Majority of the participants who believe 'what other think about me is important' also stated that if they lived in another society they would be positive about being a different 'self'. This measure shows that individuals, although are aware of the impact of societal factors in development of self, they are still under the influence of braking free from the societal pressure if giving the opportunity which shows individuals are in fact in search of the opportunity to re-experience themselves.

Participants who believe 'what others think about me is important' also reported that this is not influential in terms of their political stance, choice of friendship and sexual choice. This finding is quite contradictory since valuing what others view of the individual are and giving importance to how others see the individual influences their attitude formation, socialisation modes and behaviour. As it can be seen in the previous responses individuals believe they are greatly influence by societal pressures and would be able to break free if existing in another society, meaning the acceptance of '*real self*' contradicts the '*social self*' which in return influences individuals self concept and self confidence. This is an example of the Looking Glass Self in action.

Participants who noted 'if I was living in another society I would be a different me' also takes how they are viewed by others in the society into consideration. This shows there is a close relationship between individuals' concept of self and they believe they are influenced by their society.

In addition to this, the survey indicated that approximately half the participants who believed social impact in their childhood/adolescent years were very important, also stated that if they lived in another society this influence would have been shaped differently. This results legitimates the sanction of social interaction and socialisation process at the self construction, thus at the process of 'Looking Glass Self'.

This result also demonstrates that once again that there is a perceived influence and pressure from society which individuals are aware exists and has an impact on their shaping of being.

Participants believing that social structure is important for their family also hold the belief that this would be possible to change if existing in another society. This states that individuals believe attitudes can be changed but it depends on the society within which one exists.

Conclusion and Further Suggestions

According to the research which is conducted and through the literature, which is reviewed, it would be easier to assume that virtual environment enabled people to be isolated from spatial-temporal restrictions and thus they find opportunity to reflect their real 'selves' even if they are not able to do in the 'real' society that they already exist in.

Two of the main differences between 'new age media' and 'traditional mass media' are isolation from bodies and from the spatial-temporal restrictions. As it is known, time and space plays an important role at the communication process. They may influence every single stage from sender to coding or decoding the message. Therefore, via bringing globe into a single room, 'new media age' or that is to say Internet and computerisation, put the selves forward in the process of communication. In the new age, what you look like, the dress that you put on, the car you drive, the colour of your skin, your ethnic origin, or the religion that you belong to are not restriction anymore; at least it is not as much as in real world. As a result of this, it is possible to claim that via isolating its users from the boundaries of space and time; 'Looking Glass Self' theory loses its significance as it has in real life.

To sum up, the results of the research which is conducted; feeling secure, being interactive, being able to reflect internal 'self', not to care about what others think about you or to be able to choose the community to be member of seem as easier in virtual reality (VR) than in the 'real' world. It would be more possible to claim that in Virtual Reality, individual finds an opportunity to construct independent self or dependent but dependent on the system that they prefer to be a part of. Thus virtual communication or social network systems such as Facebook enable its users to be freed from 'the perception by others' factor at self construction process as mentioned in "Looking Glass Self" theory of Cooley.

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