



Paradoxical Theory Of Identity And The Emerging Conflicts Of Self On Social Media In The Present World

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Abstract: This research paper delves into the Paradoxical Theory of Identity and its relevance in understanding the emerging conflicts of self-manifestations on social media platforms in the contemporary world. Social Media Sites (SMS) since their inception in mid 2000s have facilitated unparalleled transformations in communications and the way people or users can mould their social appearance to be more acceptable and seen. The paper poses crucial research questions, outlines its scope and objectives, elucidates the methodology adopted, provides a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon, and concludes with insights into the implications for both individuals and society. The findings contribute to our understanding of the social media identities an individual may create and why people mobilize towards delving in an online persona.

Index Terms - Paradoxical Identity, Social Media, Identity Conflict, Virtual Self

I. Introduction

We now live in a fairyland. The only slightly disappointing thing about this land is that it is smaller than the real world has ever been (Karinthy, 1929).

We live in an age that is characterized by unprecedented connectivity through social media. Social identity as defined by Tajfel (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) refers to the ways that people's self-concepts are based on their membership in social groups. Social identities are most influential as they are tied to self-esteem and therefore make it almost existential to individuals.

“The fundamental paradox of identity is inherent in the term itself. From the Latin root *idem*, meaning “the same,” the term nevertheless implies both similarity and difference. On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time. For instance, as I write, there is an intense debate in the U.K. about the government’s proposed introduction of identity cards and their potential for addressing the problem of “identity theft.” In these formulations, our identity is something we uniquely possess: it is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. When we talk about national identity, cultural identity, or gender identity, for example, we imply that our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people. Here, identity is about identification with others whom we assume are similar to us (if not exactly the same), at least in some significant ways” (Buckingham, 2008)

The concept of identity and the need to be seen as ‘accepted’ and ‘a part of the society’ has assumed multifaceted dimensions. Self-presentation, therefore, is ‘manageable’ and the individuals have full control over how they come across, have interactions and decide on who can have access to them. External validation, and relatability are some of the key factors why people strive for and try to establish an indomitable presence of social media. Gaining approval and a large following on social media can provide individuals with a platform to share their ideas, opinions, and content with a wider audience. People often use social media to present a meticulously curated version of themselves, showcasing solely the best aspects of their lives. Seeking approval by editing out the seemingly less-likable parts of their lives helps them maintain and enhance this projected public image. This can lead to opportunities for influence, collaboration, and even monetization.

Cultural norms and societal pressures play a role in driving people to seek approval on social media. In some cultures, social media popularity is equated with success, attractiveness, and social status, further motivating individuals to strive for approval.

Positive feedback on social media triggers the brain's reward system, releasing dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. This can create a cycle where individuals seek more approval to experience the same positive feelings.

This paper explores how the paradoxical nature of identity interacts with the virtual realm, giving rise to conflicts that impact individual well-being and societal dynamics.

II. Research Questions:

The identity of individuals is paradoxical even in the real world, in the sense that the identity that is portrayed to the outside world may not necessarily be the same as, if not at direct odds with, their 'true' psychological identity. This may happen for a plethora of reasons which include - uncertainty of acceptance, social norms, customs, laws of the land. Growth of civilisation around the world has included as one of its key components the increasing understanding of this complex nature of human identity, and the consistent human pursuit to gain respect for the traits that were hitherto deemed divergent from the perceived and often universalised societal norm.

While the invention of technology and the resultant digital realms of reality vis-a-vis social media opened up individuals to newer possibilities of existence and self-expression, the pre-existing paradoxes in the construction on one's social identity have carried themselves to the virtual spheres of society as well. It is in this context that the following questions demand pertinent research to better understand the interaction between the real world and the digital realm which is, more often than not, two-way:

- A. How does the Paradoxical Theory of Identity apply to the construction of self on social media?
- B. What are the key conflicts of self that emerge from the interplay between personal continuity and adaptability in the digital realm?
- C. How do these conflicts influence individual psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships?

- D. What are the broader societal implications of these conflicts on a macro level, both in the eventual make-up of the digital world, as well as on the real world?

III. Scope and Objectives:

The scope of this research encompasses the examination of individual identity construction on various social media platforms and the subsequent conflicts arising from the paradoxical nature of the constructed identity. The potential areas of conflict that are relevant to the scope of this research are three-fold:

- a. The impact of the paradoxical identity of an individual in the real world on the creation of the online persona vis-a-vis the traits from the real world that are selected by oneself to be portrayed in the digital realm, and the traits that are left behind for reasons including fear of disapproval or anxiety of appearing as antisocial.
- b. Conflict between real personality of an individual and the created online persona, and how close in characterise resemblance the online persona is to the actual personality of an individual
- c. The slow but almost universal eventual curation of the created online persona, owing to the increasing awareness about what traits are perceived as 'acceptable' in the digital realm vis-a-vis the traits that the online persona originally had at the time of its creation, but get filtered out to gain more following, likes, or acceptance in the virtual world.

To be able to cover all the possible areas of study to gain a holistic idea about the various conflicts imminent in the creation and further curation of a digital persona by an individual, the research is expected to cover the following objectives. These objectives in themselves are open to further elaboration periodically, given the constant development that the technology is undergoing at a hitherto unforeseen pace, with the development of the most intense and realistic forms of immersive technologies like Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, and Metaverse.

- a. Explore how individuals navigate the tension between personal continuity and adaptability while curating their online personas.
- b. Analyse the psychological and emotional conflicts that arise from the presentation of an idealized self in the virtual realm.
- c. Investigate how the conflicts manifesting on social media spill over into offline relationships and societal dynamics.
- d. Study the possible repercussions that this friction in real life have on the online persona, and the resultant probable changes that the online persona may undergo.

IV. Methodology:

This research adopts qualitative research methods, to focus more on the underlying dynamics operating in the background of the creation of digital personas by individuals. By identifying and underlining the potential areas of conflict in the process of creation and curation of online identities, and their impact as perceived in the society itself, the research aims to highlight the possible reasons for the existence of paradoxes in individual identities across the digital realms like different forms of social media. The research then focuses on drawing conclusions that shed better light on the psychological interplay between real and online selves of an individual, which can be a valuable tool in making the digital realm a more wholesome and useful experience to individuals, while also holding the potential to make their real worlds better simultaneously.

V. Description:

The paradoxical nature of identity, as posited by the theory and further explained above to fit the digital expansion of the world, is particularly pertinent in the context of the ever-increasing relevance of social media across demographics and geographies. Individuals strive to maintain a sense of personal continuity with their real selves, while adapting their identities to suit different online contexts. This tension between authenticity and performance gives rise to a multitude of conflicts, such as the fear of missing out (FOMO), social comparison, and imposter syndrome. These conflicts impact the mental health and self-esteem of an individual, and influence their offline relationships as well. The acceptance that an individual seeks to gain from their virtual relationships has already become an irrefutable yardstick upon which their real-life

psychological well-being is often dependent, and this dependability increases with the level of digital presence of an individual.

The concern for staying private doesn't necessarily translate into people's actions on social media, a phenomenon termed as the 'Privacy Paradox' where people say they are concerned about their privacy, but they act as if they are not (Kokolakis, 2017).

But, Philip Fei Wu contends that "the "privacy paradox" in the context of online social networking might not be a paradox per se; rather, privacy concerns reflect the ideology of an autonomous self, whereas self-disclosure answers the innate need for a socially constructed self-identity." (Fei Wu, 2018)

From a more basic point of view, the sociological Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984) gives space for another possible reasoning for such human behavior, including attitude-behaviour inconsistencies like the privacy paradox (Zafeiropoulou et al., 2013). Considering this theory, human behaviour is understood to be a consequence of both individual and social determinants. Indeed, acting on free choices is an important part of human agency. Human beings are, by default and by nature, embedded as parts in different social structures. Hence, behaviour is equally shaped by the intention of individuals and the social systems to which they belong. Thereby, individuals and social structures do not exist entirely independently from each other; they should instead be seen as two distinct perspectives (Kokolakis, 2017).

Giuseppe et al (2015) make an intriguing comment while discussing the nature of new interconnected world that arose from the invention of digital forms of social media. They say, "digital social networks allow the creation of hybrid real-world social networks, at the same time constituted by virtual connections and real connections giving rise to 'interreality', a new social space, more malleable and dynamic than preceding social networks."

However, the rules of social networks typically also allow other members of the network to be able to intervene in one's own social identity. This can lead to unexpected and inadvertent changes in one's perceived social identity (Madden, 2012).

The unparalleled ease with which most social networks allow for the creation and sharing of content has made a large amount of data and personal information available (Stutzman, 2006). This information may include different kinds of personal data, one's likes and dislikes, favorite activities to the places one has visited recently. The result is that following the traces left by different virtual identities makes it easier for others to rebuild our real identity (Gross & Acquisti, 2005).

The lack of distinction between strong and weak bonds in social networks also represents a potential problem (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, & Adamic, 2012; Grabowicz, Ramasco, Moro, Pujol, & Eguiluz, 2012). This lack of distinction between the different kinds of friends on social networks does not allow one to clearly separate the different contexts that one attends and roles that one takes on, resulting in a significant risk of jeopardizing one's social reputation (Geisuppe et al, 2015).

Oliver L. Haimson et al interviewed 28 social media users who had recently experienced major life transitions. The study shed light on important aspects related to authenticity while building a virtual identity, and commented that, "to many participants, online authenticity required presenting a consistent, positive, and "true" self across online and offline contexts. Though most stated that they considered online authenticity achievable, their social media self-disclosure behaviors around life transitions revealed what we call the online authenticity paradox: people strive to achieve online authenticity, yet because doing so requires sharing negative experiences on social media, online authenticity is often unreachable, or is possible only at great personal cost - especially for those with marginalized identities and difficult life experiences." (Oliver L. Haimson et al, 2021) This important recent study makes it clear that the paradoxical nature of identity between one's real and virtual selves is has as one of its key reasons, the probable social unacceptability in reality.

The interaction of the real world and the virtual world also carries with it manifold societal consequences which include the reinforcement of unrealistic beauty standards, polarization of opinions, and the erosion of genuine interpersonal connections. The unparalleled scope for pretence of being ideal that the digital realm provides, coupled with virtual impossibility of verifying the actual truth, reinforces unreal motifs as being the societal norm, which has potential of further widening the gulf of paradoxes between one's real self and their digital avatar. The perils of artificially manufactured consent online are too big to be disregarded as being inconsequential in the real realm, with the emerging evidence about the interference of social media in building social opinion about electoral issues in the United States of America (the Cambridge Analytica

issue). This goes to show how manufactured majoritarian opinions online can very well influence the overall public opinion in real life, and this can further restrict the freedom an individual has in the society.

Thus, better understanding of the paradoxes underlying the creation of online personas holds potential to make both the virtual and real worlds safer and better.

VI. Conclusion:

Social media tools can act as interactive mechanisms which can progressively enhance cognitive and social wellbeing through indulging more towards social capital and civic engagement. Young individuals are making productive use of social networks for cultivating social contacts and enhancing their participatory behavior, thereby positively impacting societal wellbeing (Binesh Sarwar et al, 2023).

Social media indeed is paradoxical. It makes people both isolated in a physical sense and connected in a digital context, at the same time. Social media just becomes beneficial or untoward depending on the user himself. Factors, such as, but not limited to, intention, caution, usage, and self-control, contribute to outcome— positive or negative (Giray, 2021).

The existing research suggests that social identity has multiple dimensions including cognitive, affective, and evaluative. All three dimensions play a key role in determining how one moulds their virtual identity, but, more often than not, the conflicts arising in the portrayal of one's identity in real society carry themselves to the virtual realm as well. The Paradoxical Theory of Identity sheds light on the intricate relationship between the construction of self and the conflicts arising from social media engagement.

The duality of identity – a blend of continuity and adaptability – contributes to the complexity of online interactions. As individuals strive to strike a balance between authenticity and curated presentation, conflicts of self inevitably emerge, impacting both individual well-being and societal norms. These conflicts are two-pronged, and affect interactions between one's real self and virtual self, and also between the very reality of society and the virtual avatar of the society. This paper is both timely and relevant in recognizing these conflicts and the resultant paradoxes in identity, both real and virtual, which is imperative for promoting healthier online behaviours, for enabling to create a more wholesome real world, and for nurturing a more genuine and interconnected digital society.

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