



SOCIAL MEDIA AND MODERN IDENTITY:

An Application of Hecht's Communication Theory of
Identity

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Introduction

Some people share preferences, make similar choices, or share ideas, but in the end each person is an individual. The focus on the individual grew from the Enlightenment and has gained continuous attention in media since. Throughout this period, discussions concerning self-identity have surfaced. This paper will illustrate the role media plays in the creation of individual identities. The paper will attempt to argue that Social Networking Sites (SNS) have fragmented and complicated the identity process of modern people, leading to social issues such as anxiety and depression. A Social Networking Site (SNS) is defined as an online service that allows individuals to construct profiles within a closed system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and engage with their connections through media and discourse (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 210). To begin, the paper will elaborate on modern ideas regarding identity and will discuss Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity pertaining to Social Networking Sites (SNS). Hecht shares the stance with many scholars that identity is a process (Hecht, 1993, p. 78). Therefore, the paper will discuss how identity process occurs through SNS compared to traditional media. Furthermore, the paper will attempt to illustrate how modern youth navigate the identity process by engaging with fragmented media and will conclude with a discussion surrounding the impact SNS have on people's identity.

Modern Identity

There is currently a consensus among several academics that modern identity is not a fixed possession, but rather a continuous process (Bolter, 1997) (Stald, 2008) (Giddens, 1991) (Hecht, 1993). Here, the paper will elaborate on this identity fluidity and then will continue to focus on Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity pertaining to SNS. As Giddens exemplifies, the problems surrounding self-identity are modern and have roots in the origins of Western individualism, which stems from the Enlightenment era (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). In pre-modern

times, the focus on individual identity ceased to exist. Instead lineage, gender, social status and other attributes constructed relatively fixed identities (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). This emphasis on fixed attributes stems from the limited number of lifestyles that individuals previously occupied. For example, in pre-modern times, individuals consumed less media and had fewer occupational options such as a baker, farmer, housekeeper, or tradesmen. This societal structure restricted the abundance of individual identities because people lived in social settings that were closely connected with each other physically and ideologically (Giddens, 1991, p. 84). In this sense, Giddens argues that the plurality of choices which confront individuals in situations of high modernity derives from several influences such as occupation and media consumption (Giddens, 1991, p. 83). Per Belk, traditional ideas about identity were tied to notions of authenticity, for example being a farmer and only a farmer. However, in modern times, online experiences actively subverted this authenticity (Belk, 2013, p. 83). Not only can a modern person be a farmer, they can also be a blogger, business owner, and student simultaneously. These fragmented individual occupations are then further complicated through the consumption of fragmented media and entangled within other social behaviours to create a modern identity. In consequence, identities in the modern age are fragmented, shifting and partial (Weber & Mitchell, 2008, p. 43). These three identity attributes lead to social issues that will be discussed later.

Furthermore, these identities are facilitated through the mobile devices carried constantly by anyone who can afford them. As McLuhan argues these devices have become “extensions of man”. Extensions like mobile devices help people communicate their individual identities. For example, clothing hundreds of years ago was a new extension of man that helped shape identities. In the past, to change identities, a person had to acquire new clothes, relate to new

literature, or find a new occupation. Today, individuals constantly change identities as they consume fragmented media, wear unique outfits daily and switch jobs frequently. In summary, these examples further illustrate how traditional identities were restricted; whereas, modern identities are fluid, multiple and only bounded by the limits of the web.

Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity:

Here the paper will discuss Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity in relation to SNS. Hecht's theory argues that identity is fundamentally a communication process where messages are exchanged through symbolic linkages between people and expressed through communication rituals (Hecht, 1993, p. 78). For example, the identities formed on SNS communicate with other users on SNS through symbolic meanings, and are expressed through cues in blogs, videos and newsfeeds.

Hecht's theory is comprised of eight assumptions. The eight assumptions are: 1) Identities have individual, social and communal perspectives, 2) Identities are both enduring and changing, 3) Identities are affective, cognitive, behavioral and spiritual, 4) Identities have both content and relationship levels of interpretation, 5) Identities involve both subjective and ascribed meanings, 6) Identities are codes that are expressed in conversations and define membership in communities, 7) Identities have semantic properties that are expressed in core symbols, meanings and labels, and 8) Identities prescribe modes of appropriate and effective communication (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). When discussing these assumptions in identity process in the digital world of SNS, all these assumptions and frames are valid.

Assumption one; SNS allow users to create profiles, which are then linked to online social circles, which in turn form digital communities.

Assumption two; when an individual creates a profile, it endures throughout time so long as the network is online. However, the profile and identity continually changes as the individual engages with the platform by liking, posting, or commenting.

Assumption three; these SNS help shape an individual's identity by provoking emotional responses, altering social behaviour, demanding cognitive power and most importantly providing a space for self-reflection.

Assumption four; as the identity is formed, its content (ie. liked pages, social groups, and engagement patterns) can be interpreted as well as the relationship held between different individual identities. For example, as one individual shares a video, not only does the video shape their identity, but also other individuals responding action or nonaction shapes their identity.

Assumption five; individuals portray a subjective image of themselves onto the SNS which they ascribe to themselves as others perceive and engage with the individual's digital profile and identity.

Assumption six; the identities shaped by SNS are encoded and expressed in conversations within the platform. Furthermore, an individual's identity is also defined by the various virtual communities and platforms they are engaged with. It should be noted that identity is also shaped by the virtual communities an individual in *not* engaged with.

Assumption seven; the SNS give individual identities heightened semantic properties as profiles state gender, education and preferences of media consumption. From these meanings and labels, identity is further created and continually in flux on the SNS as the meanings of education, media consumption and gender shift.

Assumption eight; the identity process is complimented by SNS appropriately as individuals effectively express themselves in the digital age.

In summary, the SNS allow individuals to create multiple identities that are fluid and fragmented; however, it should be explicitly stated that these identities are complementary to an individual's non-digital identities. As digital media continues to penetrate daily lives, the lines between virtual worlds and real worlds blur. To prevent or reverse current social issues, the identity process should be grounded in more traditional ways.

SNS Identities Compared to Mass Media Identities

In this section, a comparison will be made between the roles SNS and traditional mass media play in the identity process. Per David Bolter, technology raises issues of identity (Bolter, 1997, p. 131). When traditional mass media was the social norm, identities were largely shaped by the segmented programming found on broadcast radio and television. The relative structure allowed people to consume media, engage with the programming through formal reviews and oral discourse with friends and colleagues, and then wait until the next program was aired. These mass media programs taught lay audiences self-knowledge based on culture and identity within the bounded medium where the identity process occurs slower than in modern SNS media. Giddens stated it quite eloquently, the more post-traditional the settings the more lifestyle impacts the very core of self-identity, its making and its remaking (Giddens, 1991, p. 82). This focus on lifestyle is where the abundance of identity creation occurs; therefore, as an individual navigates through life changing their lifestyle, their identity constantly undergoes change too. Even though there was a focus on lifestyle in traditional mass media, the focus is relatively weak compared to its focus on SNS.

For example, music's role in the identity process differs significantly when compared between traditional media and SNS. When music was consumed only through traditional media

channels, people connected to others in the community simply by consuming the media that promoted certain values and interests; however, individuals online strive to connect with the community by consuming, appropriating and integrating cultural symbols into their personal sites (Stern, 2008, p. 113). This additional layer of reflection personalizes the process of identification and causes each person to identify with specific niche values and interests within a larger message promoted to the mass audiences. In consequence, this additional layer fragments the identity process further.

In summary, the new SNS create a media landscape that is more fragmented, which in turn, leads to an increase degree of fragmentation in the identity process. Compared to traditional media where the identity process changed at the same rate as culture, SNS have unbounded this rate of cultural change resulting in an abundance of unique identities created by the individual. As individuals selectively repurpose the media to suit their current identity and share this constantly moving target, their network, whom they engage, with is simultaneously shaping and reshaping their identity. In consequence, individuals today struggle to create identity that last longer than their smartphone batteries.

SNS Role in the Identity Process:

At this point the paper can elaborate on the role SNS play in the identity process. As the dominant medium of media in the early 21st century, it is worth noting that SNS play a ubiquitous role in the identity process. The increased integration of technologies into daily life have made their roles as mediators of identity and learning almost invisible (Weber & Mitchell, 2008, p. 44). As the social norm continues to side with the over consumption of fragmented digital media, this issue is worth examining. The issue stems from lifestyles that marketers communicate, giving consumers choices in terms of desire and belonging, as well as separation and distinction causing consumers to define themselves by their choices (Willett, 2008, p. 54).

This presence of lifestyle marketing is found in nearly all media. With each like, post or comment people are processing, digesting and exchanging information, deliberating what to do, what to choose and what to think. In consequence, their continuous interaction with media shapes and reshapes their identity (Stald, 2008, p. 145). In addition, the social norms of these sites that cause users to consistently engage with the platform proliferate the identity process issues. Many people feel obligated to consistently engaged with these sites, update blogs, profiles and continually question their own identities as they determine what or what not to post (Stern, 2008, p. 102). Furthermore, this activity requires authors to evaluate how their self-as-presented matches the self they envision causing identity development and self-learning to operate in tandem, propelling the identity process forward (Stern, 2008, p. 114). Rather than its predecessors mentioned above, SNS, like blogs, are expected to be unending and incomplete (Stern, 2008, p98).

A prime example of this phenomenon is the author's own personal blog, mitchellsteinke.com, where the purpose is to “Keep it Kaizen”, meaning to constantly self-improve. As a young author who browses the web curating content he creates an identity that is never fixed. With each new piece of media, the author questions whether to post and identify with it or continue searching for media to curate a fluid identity. Furthermore, the author finds the experience is quite therapeutic, similar to other bloggers. The blogs that are created center feelings, consider dreams, actively engage with problems and most importantly, allow the authors to consider solutions (Stern, 2008, p. 102). This differs largely compared to the behaviour found on social media where little effort is made to simply share and write miniscule posts about surface level issues. Thus, a fake façade is likely communicated via these social media channels which create anxiety in the profile owners upon any substantial reflection. Their

impulsive, non-reflective behaviour removes the therapeutic aspects of these quasi private diaries and replaces them with an yearning to fit in. Unfortunately, this leads to an increased amount of anxiety as the cultural fads move more rapidly through time and space leaving individuals feeling inauthentic, lost and depressed.

SNS Impact on Modern Youth Identity:

In today's high-modern societies, found mainly in the Northern hemisphere, youth understand the complexity of digital media and mobile devices and actively express the dual functions of production and consumption their smartphones have. Unlike the generation of their parents, where traditional mass media was the norm and no direct engagement occurred, youth today have increasingly more autonomy over their media engagement practices through tailored features such as personalized newsfeeds and intelligent algorithms. However, with this autonomy comes responsibility which youth struggle to appropriately utilise. They believe they are in full control of their media practices, but unfortunately youth are deceived as modernity only opens the project of self up under conditions strongly influenced by the standardizing effects of commodity capitalism (Willett, 2008, p. 55). In consequence, modern youth overestimate their media consumption and production autonomy causing them to identify with consumer culture, unconsciously or consciously, while they enter a key period of identity formation.

Unfortunately, youth today can hardly turn to the past to learn how to properly handle this new responsibility. Their parents and grandparents never would have imagined the freedom of identity seen in youth today. In some sense, even the parents of youth today are learning how to remain "with it" from their children, as they attempt to stay connected with their children. From this perspective, adults are catching up with youth by co-opting or integrating aspects of youth culture, such as lingo, into their lives (Weber & Mitchell, 2008, p. 25). However, as the reverse relationship plays out, an increasing number of youth and adults are swept into the fluid identity

process with no meaningful purpose and little reflection. This causes anxiety due to the lack of authenticity represented by their digital selves. Because large populations of youth and adults do not contain the digital literacy or critical thinking attributes to navigate the complex modern world where identity is fluid, several individuals feel increasingly more isolated in a hyper-connected time leading to feelings of depression. In summary, SNS have significant impact on modern youth identity as a tool or weapon depending on how youth approach their relationship with SNS and the identities created in the digital world.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, SNS impact the modern identity process more significantly than traditional media does and ever did. In recent history, the media landscape has become increasingly fragmented which in turn has caused the growth of fragmented fluid identities. This causal chain has led to youth who suffer from anxiety and other psychological issues because they lack direction and authenticity in their individual identity. This paper has laid its foundation on Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity towards Social Networking Sites and elaborates on how these mobile sites impact the identity process in youth and adults. Furthermore, the paper argues that this additional layer of complexity pertaining to the identity process has caused an acute spike in mental illnesses in youth such as depression and anxiety. In summary, this paper illustrates that as media fragments, identities fragment while maintaining its modern definition of a fluid concept. These identities propel the modern world forward constantly becoming and never arriving to a fixed wholesome identity.

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