

# Online identity

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## Abstract

Social media have become an arena of rapid dissemination of information, global communication, self - promotion, freedom of expression, but also hot debates and powerful tool of shaping identity. Identity is the concept socially attributed. Social media identity is regarded as "an extension of everyday life and cultural change tool." So, identity formation as a social concept is being transformed with new global methods. This transformation is happening thanks to social media. Social networking platforms enable the creation and placement of real or false identity in the virtual world.

Online identity paper analyzes the creation of identity, motives that push individuals to create these identities, compares the creation of identities in the virtual and real world and the way of communication between users.

Also addresses the problem of communication with anonymous users, with whom the impression of individual identity is explored.

**Keywords:** *social media, formation of identity, real identity, false identity, online identity, privacy online, virtual world, social networks, communication, facebook, twitter, linkedin, internet, instagram, mask*

## Introduction

Social media are web-based software and platforms that allow individuals to interact with each other, sharing details about their lives, professional information, photos and personal videos and updates from different fields of information.

At the outset, social media born as a personal tool to connect people to interact with friends and family, but later history of their use and spread with the speed of light, testified that they changed their approach to communication, to individuals, to information and

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generally changed human society, causing "death of distance" and once and forever transformed the way of life of billions of people who live in the digital era.

Through social media approach a person can interact with millions of people present online.

Thus, the individual becomes "user" using unlimited space on the Internet to satisfy his communication with "users", mass that uses social media.

Manuel Castells has called social networks "self- mass communication" referring to a global system of interaction on the network - a system in which platforms like facebook, linkedin, twitter, instagram, google plus provide important tools to boost performance of online identity.

Social networks devote extraordinary importance to users, giving importance to identity, reputation and relationships between people. In the case of Facebook and Twitter they are focused on the dissemination of information and the reputation of users, while the function of YouTube is video posting and distribution.

Many social networks are intended to combine the functions of interoperability framework.

Authors January H. Kietzmann, Kristopher Hermkens, Ian P. McCarthy and Bruno S. Silvestre in an article published in 2011, presented the framework that defines social media using seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, distribution, presence, relationships, reputation and groups.

The first block and the most important, according to the above authors is the identity, a topic that addresses this paper. According to the authors Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre identity block represents the extent to which users reveal their identity in a social media environment. The discovery of identity can include data such as name, age, occupation, location, and also information that portrays users in certain ways.

This paper addresses the problem of online identity by focusing on creating identity, presentation of one or more profiles, the causes that encourage users to contact the anonymous persons and other aspects that accompany this phenomenon of modern communication.

The method of research for this paper is empirical through the survey. One hundred and fifty social media users have responded to the questionnaire drawn up by twenty questions. Each question has been left to chance in response to two or more options.

Focus group research were persons aged 20-45 years, with different occupations of both sexes.

Of the respondents, women were 79, while males 71. Respondents were selected from different cities of Kosovo.

Most of the respondents answered the most questions. But there were difficulties in the reluctance of giving answers to questions that relate, directly of creating a false identity and communication with anonymous persons.

Thesis of this paper is to show how individuals through the use of the mask shape their identity online, increasing the confidence of personal information disclosed on social networks, communication with anonymous persons and comparison between real and virtual world of users.

### *Creation of online identity*

Called also like Internet identity or IID, online identity is a concept that is used by users in social networks, where individuals create their social profile. IDD differently in literature is called creation of self - presentation.<sup>1</sup>

What is identity? Identity is the concept socially attributed. Identity relates to self -image, self-evaluation and individuality. According to Myers identity it is the ability to organize our thoughts, feelings and actions. <sup>2</sup>

Authors Junglas, Johnson, Steel, Abraham and Loughlin consider that the creation of identity involves two processes, research and dedication. The research is the period when someone is looking for his

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<sup>1</sup> Junglas, I. A., Johnson, N. A., Steel, D. J., Abraham, D. C., & Loughlin, P. M. *Identity Formation, Learning Styles and Trust in Virtual worlds. The Data Base for Advances in Information Systems* : 2007, pg. 90-96.

<sup>2</sup> Myers, D. G. *Exploring Social Psychology, New York, 2007, pg.68.*

convictions and goals, while commitment is when they decided to invest in convictions and goals.<sup>3</sup>

Where and in what form individuals begin to explore their identity is related with the fact when they become social media users.

Creating identity and its exposure represent the moment when individuals use spaces where they can create it and display to a social context. And they reveal their identity profile of users in social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, google plus, etc.

The discovery of identity is associated with a range of issues as personal data, privacy etc.

Online identity concept in the literature has raised many questions, making this phenomenon a complex issue. In the academic world studies on online identity are called "technoself" studies.

### *The concept of the mask*

Authors Dorian Wiszniewski and Richard Coyne in the book *Building the Virtual Communities*, approached online identity as a concept of "masking".<sup>4</sup> They assert that wherever the individual creates social interaction in the social sphere he portrays mask of his identity.

An individual responds to specific personal questions when creating a social profile.

Individual online publications also add more information to his mask in terms of writing style, vocabulary and content that he is posting.

The type of mask that individual chooses, reveal something from behind his identity.

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<sup>3</sup> Junglas, I. A., Johnson, N. A., Steel, D. J., Abraham, D. C., & Loughlin, P. M. *Identity Formation, Learning Styles and Trust in Virtual worlds. The Data Base for Advances in Information Systems* : 2007, pg. 90-96.

<sup>4</sup> Wisniewski, Dorian, Coyne, Richard. *Mask and Identity: The hermeneutics of self-construction in the information age*, London, pg.191.

Online masks not actually reveals the identity of a person. Even if a person chooses to hide behind a false identity, online identity often reveals fear and lack of confidence which is behind that mask.

For many reasons, people are reluctant to create interaction in online communication.

But putting the mask they enter the secure network. Fear of theft or abuse to identity theft limits many users to post personal information and disseminate photos. But the placement of the mask, it seems like, frees users from this feeling and creates more confidence.<sup>5</sup>

### *Anonymity*

The element of anonymity in the virtual world provides the user a secure private arena of communication to explore their identity. But, on the other hand presents a problem for other users in the virtual world, the problem of trust.

Here starts speculation about online identity of an individual, whether is real or false.<sup>6</sup>

Adrian, refers to the virtual world as a "field of liquid identity" because nobody knows "who" is individual and virtual identities can very quickly "self-determined than the pre-set".<sup>7</sup>

Authors Boon and Sinclair concept these anonymous identities of virtual world as "second life" as it is impossible to reveal the identity of the real user. In "Second Life" users are not obliged to reveal their real names when opening a profile. So they disconnect automatically from the real world.<sup>8</sup>

Freedom of researching identity is attributed to anonymity that virtual world offers. It provides the individual the opportunity to be

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<sup>5</sup> Wisniewski, Dorian, Coyne, Richard. Op.cit, pg.19.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian, A, *No one knows you are a dog: Identity and reputation in the virtual words*. The computer Law and Security Report, 2008, pg.336-37. 4

<sup>7</sup> Adrian, A, Op.cit, pg.367.

<sup>8</sup> Boon, S& Sinclair, *A world I don't inhabit: diquiet and identity in the Second Life and Facebook*. Educational Media International, pg. 106..

free from social norms, family pressures and challenges faced in real life.<sup>9</sup>

But the consequences of anonymity reflect on the formation of identity. If a person creates a virtual identity, unlike real-life identity, psychologically it needs more effort to keep the false identity.

So user will merge two identities to make it looks real, both identities real and virtual, will delete virtual identity, and create a new one.<sup>10</sup>

According to Junglas “What motivates the individual to create virtual identities, can play a dominant role in real life.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Results of the survey**

Of course that literature represents an important recognition of this problem. However the results of research conducted for this paper provide interesting findings.

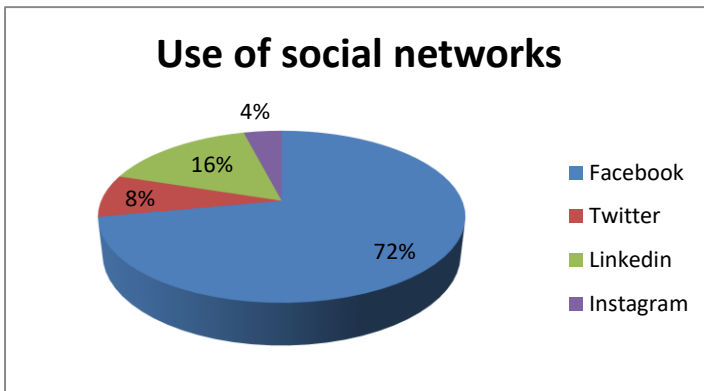


Chart 1. The use of social networks

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<sup>9</sup>Junglas, I.A., Johnson, N.A., Steel, D.J., Abraham, D.C., & Loughlin, P.M. *Identity Formation, Learning Styles and Trust in the Virtual worlds*. The Data Base for Advances in Information Systems:2007, pg. 94.

<sup>10</sup> Junglas, I. A., Johnson, N. A., Steel, D. J., Abraham, D. C., & Loughlin, Op.cit, pg. 94.

<sup>11</sup> Junglas, I. A., Johnson, N. A., Steel, D. J., Abraham, D. C., & Loughlin, Op.cit, pg. 94.

From the survey results it appears that the social network Facebook has the biggest number of users. 108 or 72% of the respondents use network Facebook, 24 or 16% use network linkedin, 12 or 8% use Twitter, while only 6 or 4% of respondents use instagram.

Social networking users use one, two or more social networks simultaneously. 36 use three social networks Facebook, twitter and LinkedIn. 24 use Facebook linkedin networks, while only 12 have reported that they use Facebook and Twitter networks. Only 6 respondents use facebook and instagram.

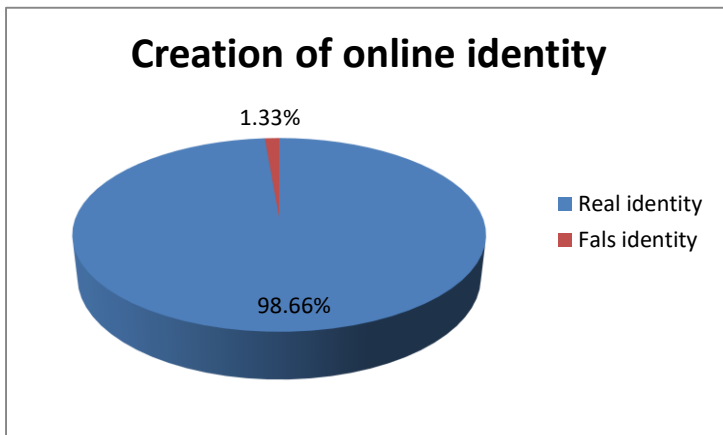


Table 2. Creation of identity in social networks

Just 1:33 % or 2 respondents answered that use fictional identity, 98.66 % or 148 stated that they use social networks using their real identities.

Regarding the disclosure of the identity data, 87 respondents answered that provide accurate data for themselves. 27 do not always reveal accurate data on their identity, while 36 answered that reveal information that are convenient to them.

Of the respondents, most often from personal data, profile picture change 96 users, 29 change data about their profession, and 25 change data of their age.

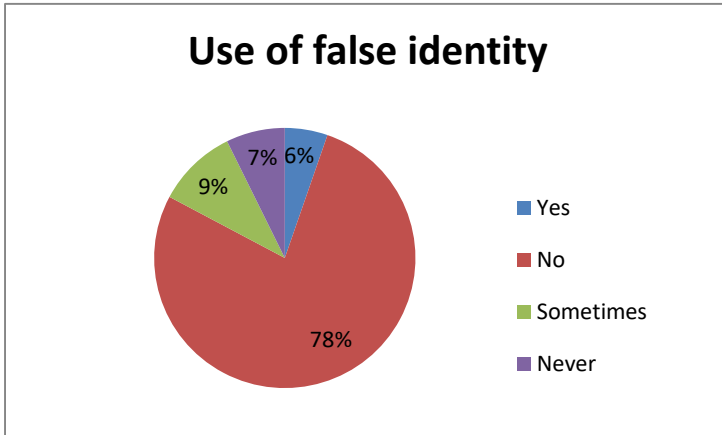


Chart 3. Use of false identity

This question has caused trouble and confusion among the respondents, during the research survey. 117 or 78% of respondents answered with No. 15 respondents or 9% answered that sometimes use false identities. 11 or 7% answered that never have used a false identity, while only 8 or 6% have false identities. Interestingly, users who use false identities, think they get more likes from their friends.



Chart 4. Communication with anonymous persons



Regarding communication with anonymous people on social networks, 74% or 111 respondents answered that they do not communicate with unknown / anonymous persons while 26% or 39 answered with Yes. Interestingly to elaborate is this part of the research because of gender. Of the 39 respondents who communicate with anonymous persons, 37 are males and 2 females.

The reasons that motivate users to communicate with anonymous persons are: 5 answer that does not know the reasons, 2 because of the profile pictures and 32 users motivated by curiosity.

The majority of respondents, 124 of them responds that in the communication with anonymous users they hindering of anonymous messages and friend invitations, while 26 respondents were hindering by anonymous comments from anonymous users that are not listed in the friend list.

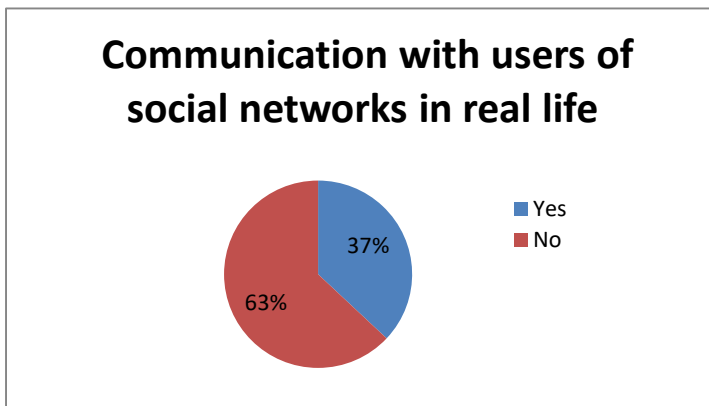


Chart 5. Virtual- real communication between users

Although 148 respondents perceive online communication free from difficulties in communicating in real life, they surprise with the response whether communicate in the same way as in the virtual world also in the real world with social network users. 63% of respondents answered that they would not communicate the same to the users of social networking in real life. 37% of respondents answered that they would communicate the same way.

Even to the respondents themselves, is not very clear whether they are the same persons in virtual and real life. 124 of the respondents believe that they are the same persons as in the real world and the virtual one. 8 answered that are not at all the same persons, while 18 do not really know who they are.

## ***Conclusions***

Social media represents a powerful tool shaping identity. This concept of identity as a social attribute comes as a kind of extension of daily life, but completely transformed by the method of communication, the global technological trends and motives that push individuals to use the space provided on social networks by disclosing personal information, times discovering accurate data, often revealing information only selectively or hiding behind a disguise -thus creating a false identity, looking fictional own individual identity through communication with anonymous users.

Results of research conducted for the purposes of this paper, confirms the thesis on the fragile world of the individual-user in creating an online identity, the uncertainty which accompanies this journey and challenges of online communication, although this type of communication is defined "free from obstacles arising from real communication, "emphasized suspicion in themselves - of users in their real identity, as some of them do not really know who they are, are the same individuals as in real life like in a virtual world.

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