Self-Presentation and Interpersonal Relationships in the Virtual Space

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ABSTRACT

In a world marked by the rapid ramifications of new digital means of communication at a distance, the way people now interfere with their offline encounters who are physically around them has been mightily disrupted. As people spend more time on social networking sites which are mostly designed on the basis of sharing ideas, online avatars come to constantly share their up-to-the-minute updates with people who they either know or do not know in the physical space. These changes may entail a growing significance of intimate relationships and friendship interactions in both the physical and the virtual spaces. New online relationships have emerged via online settings such as chat rooms, newsgroups, and websites. This paper, therefore, intends to identify, unpack, and touch on broad issues associated with social media particularly social networking sites and the emergence of new interpersonal relationships. Correspondingly, it seeks to explicate how these networking sites have apparently contributed to the changes in the structure of the dynamic process of societies and communities in the terrestrial world.

Recently, a new form of friendship, which we call online friendship, has emerged. This type of friendship initiates and develops through computer-mediated communication (CMC) in online social settings, such as chatrooms, newsgroups, and websites. Although the use of CMC has become one of the most popular means of communication, only a handful of studies have examined the characteristics of online relationships (see Wood & Duck, 1995). In the present study, we focused on friendship, which was found to be the most common type of online interpersonal relationship (Parks & Roberts, 1998), and examined whether the qualities of online friendships are comparable to offline friendships at different stages of development. In addition, we also studied the differences, if any, between same-sex and cross-sex online friendships, with respect to their offline counterparts

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Over the last few decades, people's lives are increasingly transformed in ways by the new communication and information devices that seem to have come as a result of an unprecedented need for fast communication between people who are far away from each other. The proliferation and convergence of these technologies have helped to generate a renaissance of new types of communication through which people attempt to reconstruct who they really are in the physical space. This changing landscape has created new opportunities through which online avatars mostly try to foreground the unrealistically sunny side of their lives, depending on the contextual circumstances in which they are connecting and collaborating. At the same time, the biggest trend of these changes seems to be transforming the world itself into varied virtual worlds that are implicitly designed to make this world borderless, shared, and managed. There are several and diverse subtypes of mediated communication foregrounded to accomplish some personal and collective objectives among people of different ages, belongings, beliefs, and interests. Through communication technologies, especially social networking sites, individuals may recraft their substantive bodies, personalities, roles, and status to create new social relations free of the societal dimensions of the physical world. This paper attempts to present contributions that explicitly analyze the convergence between the new virtual space and the terrestrial or corporeal space that is paradoxically framing most aspects of social progress. This leads to the following series of questions that would be basically stressed on within this paper: How do people establish and manage their social relationships in both online and offline spaces? Have social networking sites made people less sociable in the physical world?

The development of Internet technologies has offered new mediums of communication that have been inevitably accompanied by many social transformations. Before delving deeply into these developments as well as social relationships on social media, it would be necessary to first understand the meaning of the term social media that has provided a space for more predictable camps of thinking. This concept has broadly been used by people in their everyday lives but without having a clear and specific idea about it. Despite its enormous popularity, only a few researchers and theorists who skid over such details and provide some conceptual resources and prerequisites associated with social media as a theoretical concept that extends toward other fluid concepts in their online and offline incarnations.

Social media, including video sharing sites, blogging, and microblogging platforms, are not the first wireless communicating services that have been launched in the history of telecommunication technologies, rather many other services were used to connect computers that belong to either the same computing company or a different one. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, the early Internet service was providing users with some communicating networks such as email and instant messages to chat with people they know in the physical space as well as public-facing services such as chat-rooms and bulletin boards to chat with people they do not know but who have common and shared topics to discuss with.[1] In this context, Danah Boyd points out:

> The services known as social media are neither the first –nor the only– tools to support significant social interaction or enable teenagers to communicate and engage in meaningful online communities. Though less popular than they once were, tools like email, instant messaging, and online forums are still used by teens. But as a cultural phenomenon, social media has reshaped the information and communication ecosystem.[2]

Within her examination, Boyd stresses the issue of communication as a companion to human lives even before the emergence of social media platforms, which could successfully exceed their role as mediating information and communication tools to being part of people's everyday life. Boyd notes that since the first decade of the twenty-first-century social media applications have been developed from being an esoteric jumble of technologies to a set of platforms rooted in the contemporary culture of people in both the virtual and physical spaces.[3] Social media, as part of cyberspace, has also become an integral part of real space. The possibilities provided by the new social media have exceeded all human expectations by exerting power, domination, and mediating social practices. Social media undoubtedly enhance online avatars' ability to share, cooperate, and to take collective actions all outside the framework of the traditional meaning of communal participation and collaboration.[4] In this regard, José Van Dijck suggests,

> "When Web 2.0 first marshaled the development of so-called social media, in the early years of the new millennium, participatory culture was the buzzword that connoted the Web's potential to nurture connections, build communities, and advance democracy. Many platforms embraced this rekindled spirit when they started to make the Web 'more social'."[5]

Dijck thinks that the term social combined with media implies that these platforms are designed to facilitate communal activities. He, therefore, believes that the networking platforms are meant to be online facilitators or enhancers of human networks that emphasize connectedness as a social value.[6] From the same perspective, Mirko Tobias Schafer argues that social media is based around three main claims. Firstly, it is a social phenomenon rather than a commercial one. Secondly, online users are turned into content producers.

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[1] Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. London: Yale University Press, 2014. p.6

[2] Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, p.6

[3] Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, p.6

[4] Marisol Sandoval, "Social media? The Unsocial Character of Capitalist Media" in *Critique, Social Media and the Information Society*. Christian Fuchs and Marisol Sandoval, eds. London: Taylor & Francis, 2014. p. 144

[5] José Van Dijck, The Culture of connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. p.3

[6] Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, p.11

Thirdly, online practices offered by the Web 2.0 are different from earlier media practices on the net.[7]

The virtual space has offered online avatars with an unusual power at their fingertips to be able to potentially participate in social life without having to rely on intermediaries. In this interactive space, people have actual interactions with other real participants who are able to shape, or even create, their own, and other people's personalities. Moving from the passive imaginary reality to the interactive virtual space made people live a converged life based on vehemently diverging elements[8]. Within this context, Tom Boellstorff suggests,

> A man spends his days as a tiny chipmunk, elf, or voluptuous woman. Another lives as a child and two other persons agree to be his virtual parents. Two 'real' –life sisters living hundreds of miles apart meet every day to play games together or shop for new shoes for their avatars. The person making the shoes has quit his 'real' –life job because he is making over five thousand U.S. dollars a month from the sale of virtual clothing. A group of Christians pray together at a church; nearby another group of persons engages in a virtual orgy, complete with ejaculating genitalia. Not far away a newsstand provides copies of a virtual newspaper with ten reporters on staff; it includes advertisements for a 'real' –world car company, a virtual university offering classes, a fishing tournament, and a spaceflight museum with replicas of rockets and satellites.[9]

However, this space's forms of assumption are frequently evolving, changing, and fluctuating, depending on participation and access. As cyberspace grows, individuals' modes of understanding of most aspects associated with both virtual and physical spaces have become questionable. Within this context, Kimberly N.

Rosenfeld states that "Contemporary citizens live in complicated times where fundamental understandings of reality are being expanded and challenged. A growing number of people no longer reside in just one physical reality but live, play, and work in multiple realities: real life reality, simulated reality, augmented reality, virtual reality, and hyperreality."[10] Despite their social and racial belongings, age, gender, and class, millions of people are now forced to live, work, and make relationships in both substantive and online worlds that are implicitly or explicitly different from each other though they are largely converged, cohabited, and collapsing to each other. Some of them still prefer to spend most of their everyday hours in the proliferated online space, which represents an alternative environment through which most of the online avatars adopt new habits, beliefs, and ways of life in general. Users pour the hopes, desires, and interests they have in the offline environment into the virtual space that is devoid of clear boundaries and unbound by mundane laws.[11]

The new social networking sites have come to be crucial features of the new sociable patterns on which most societies are now built on. Besides bringing friends, classmates, and family members who are physically far away from each other together, these sites may also close distances between millions of people all over the planet who do not know each other in the offline world. These platforms may contribute to the appearance of new practices and experiences of intimacy and friendship through new forms of social interaction and new techniques on the created virtual space, especially social network sites.[12] They, therefore, provide the new global ways of making different social systems to better interact beyond all cultural, religious, and political aspects. In this regard, Lidia Varbanova emphasizes,

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[7] Mirko Tobias Schofar, *Bastard Culture: How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011. p.37

[8] Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p.2

[9] Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, p,8

[10] Kimberly N. Rosenfeld, *Digital Online Culture, Identity, and Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. p.1

[11] Kimberly N. Rosenfeld, *Digital Online Culture, Identity, And Schooling in the twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. pp. 5,6

[12] Deborah Chambers, *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. P.1

Only a few years ago, we used to meet only in traditional "offline" spaces – classroom, conference hall, meeting room, university. Today the online communities are pioneering new forms of collaborative processes and production that also revolutionize markets and companies. Not so long ago, a Web portal was just a structured framework of tabs and icons, containing very few images and hyperlinks to other websites. For a very short period of only a few years, the Web portal became a service-delivering online tool, a connector and facilitator, a meeting point, a place to share ideas and gain friends, but also to buy and sell goods and services. It seems more and more that we share our life between the "real" one and the "virtual" one. [13]

In her examination, Varbanova reckons that the web has re-shaped the traditional meaning of the public space as well as social relations in both the terrestrial and online environments. She thinks that the net has not merely transformed the way people live, work, and interact with each other, but it has also shaped the way business, government services, and many other organizations operate. Online virtual publics are primarily composed of global participatory practices persisting within a spectrum, interdependent, and constituted with everyday life in the offline world[14]. Within the same perspective, Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg argue, "one of the results of the sites such as Facebook is that they have transformed the ways in which people can interact. They do not simply offer an alternative way of engaging in the same forms of communicative interaction that were available prior to their emergence; they also provide a number of notably different communicative dynamics and structures". [15] Nancy K. Baym suggests,

When first faced with a new barrage of interpersonal communication media, people tend to react in one of two ways, both of which have long cultural histories. On the one hand, people express concern that our communication has become increasingly shallow. For many, the increased amount of mediated interaction seems to threaten the sanctity of our personal relationships. For others, new media offer the promise of more opportunity for connection with more people, a route to new opportunities and to stronger relationships and more diverse connections. Both perspectives reflect a sense that digital media are changing the nature of our social connections. Over time, as people get used to new communication media, we come to see them in more nuanced ways. Eventually they become so taken for granted they are all but invisible. [16]

People can now derive a sense of themselves and their identities through the relationships they build on social networking sites that are mainly designed to fill the need for companionship. [17] These relationships might grow up in a very short time both in size and complexity to include new systems of trust, credentialization, and anxiety at the same time. Most online participants generally show their willingness to satisfy their infinite need to know people across the globe. Cyberspace has provided many applications through which people who are surfing this space can initially meet other online avatars at any moment, either to socialize with each other or to have romantic affairs. [18] This space has offered new opportunities to build up different genres of social relationships that can be personal means one to one or collective means one to many or many to many. In this context, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev assumes that,

The appearance of computer-mediated communication has introduced a new type

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[13] Lidia Varbanova. "The Online Power of Users and Money: Can Culture Gain?" in *Digital Culture: the Changing Dynamics*. Aleksandra Uzelac and Biserka Cvjetèanin, Ed. p.167

[14] Thérèse F. Tierney, *The Public Space of Social Media: Connected Cultures of the Network Society.* New York: Routledge, 2013. p.2

[15] Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg, "Introduction" in *The Language of Social Media: Identity and Community on the Internet*, Philip Seargean and Carolin Tagg, Ed. England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. p.2

[16] Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connection in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. p.1

[17] Kevin Miguel Sherman "An Imagined Community of Avatars? A Theoretical Interrogation of Second Creating Life as Nation through the Lens of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities" in Second Lives, p.32

[18] Ben-Ze'ev, Love Online: Emotions on the Internet, preface

of discourse and consequently a new type of personal relationship has developed. There are various kinds of computer mediated relationships that differ in some significant aspects: one-to-one or group communication formats, interrelating with real people or fantasy personas, interrelating with anonymous or identified people, and communication in synchronous or asynchronous formats. Such types of communication can be text-based, voice-based, video-based, or a combination of any of these…). Foremost among such types are email, which is asynchronous text-based communication that can be one-to-one or one-to-many, and chat or instant messaging that allows for synchronous text-based communication, either one-to-one or many-to-many. These types of communication take place between real people who, while not completely anonymous, may have not fully disclosed their identity: in most cases, you cannot see or hear the other person.[19]

Behind their screens, people have an entire world's worth of updated digital content readily available to help them implicitly or explicitly find most of the characteristics they basically need to be provided in their mates. They can reach individuals who share common interests and concerns in every country all over the planet without physically moving. Most people, especially teens and adults who look for perfection, now mostly prefer to meet and socialize with people who they do not know in the terrestrial world that commonly limits their options. The virtual space offers online avatars with an unprecedented opportunity of meeting their cyber mates in the way they imagine or wish, as well as their ability to introduce themselves the way they want and provide images of themselves that are not being fulfilled in the actual world. Looking for new friends in social networking sites has become much more visible and more efficient than connecting with friends who already know each other in life outside. Having flesh and blood, as well as the physical presence, are no longer necessary characteristics of friendship in today's world. In this regard, Karl Spracklen argues, "People

flip from one trending form of social media to another, desperately trying to prove they are cool and they belong by joining in the instrumental logic of having more likes or followers or friends than anyone else."[20]

As most participants who now navigate a range of online platforms can share their experiences, what is on their minds, and every phase of their lives with others, they significantly design their updated image through which they can be perceived by online audiences. This audience might have a striking and valuable presence in avatars' appearance online. In this regard, Sherry Turkle shows how people now can change every small detail and aspect of their everyday lives as follows, "We recreate ourselves as online personae and give ourselves new bodies, homes, jobs, and romances. Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. As we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves."[21] She believes that most online participants make the online audience at the highest level of their considerations. They become fully immersed in the virtual representation via social networking sites, which allow them a wider variety of instruments and strategies to purposefully influence other users' reception of the content. This engagement with networked publics might strikingly transform social relationships in the physical space. In this context, Boyd argues that, "they are struggling to carve out an identity that is not defined solely by family ties. They want to be recognized as someone other than son, daughter, sister, or brother. These struggles play themselves out in familiar ways, as teens fight for freedoms while not always being willing or able to accept responsibilities."[22] As mentioned earlier, by indulging in online relationships, most people have become enormously keen on hiding most of the features of their experiences and practices in physical settings. Some of them might offer limited glimpses into their personal lives, but in most of the time, they prefer to have some privacy online. Networked

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[19] Ben-Ze'ev, Love Online: Emotions on the Internet, p. 2

[20] Digital Leisure, *The Internet and Popular Culture: Communities and Identities in a sDigital Age*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. p.85
[21] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. p.11
[22] Boyd, *It's Complicated : the Social Lives of Networked Teens*, p.17

avatars may also abandon their face-to-face interactions and social communication with their family members, neighborhood, and friends.

The rise of new patterns of social interaction has prompted the use of fake identities and role-playing to make online participants live their updated fantasies on different social networking platforms that allow them to maximize the number of their shared content recipients. They usually use invented names and fake profile portraits on the online platforms to independently tempt the kind of participants they want to be friends with. Visual anonymity might help online participants, each with their specific priorities and needs, to freely share their emotions with others who as well can be anonymous. In contrast, John Suler thinks that being behind the screens of communicating devices is sufficient to promote individuals to uninhibitedly interact with their online mates and play the roles they are deprived of in the actual world. He, therefore, points out,

> Even with everyone's identity known, the opportunity to be physically invisible amplifies the disinhibition effect. People don't have to worry about how they look or sound when they type a message. They don't have to worry about how others look or sound in response to what they say. Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can inhibit what people are willing to express (…) In everyday relationships, people sometimes avert their eyes when discussing something personal and emotional. Avoiding eye contact and face-to-face visibility disinhibits people. Text communication offers a built in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted.[23]

Social networking sites have been accused of diminishing face-to-face interaction and everyday interpersonal relationships in the actual world. In addition, they have been considered as anti-social applications as they have "a negative impact on offline communication and offline relationships"[24].

This is mostly one of the characteristic features of modern society that basically includes people who are not physically present and who do not meet each other in the terrestrial space, but who can easily and effortlessly communicate with each other in just a few seconds. However, the changing nature of modern communication cannot generally close the chasm of difference between people who belong to different societies, cultures, and religions.[25]

In conclusion, the appearance of several digital communication technologies, as being discussed over this paper, has created a growing oscillation in the existing offline social relationships. The striking changeable nature of family life and intimate relationships in the contemporary new digital era, has changed approximately every small aspect and norms of most communities and societies as well as the individual appearance of most people in both the virtual and the corporeal spaces. This paper, therefore, attempts to uncover one of the most hidden sides of the public display, particularly social networking sites in relation to human terrestrial intimate relationships that have paradoxically been affected by the explosion in the use of the Internet as well as the seductive relationships created online. The change in family life and intimate social relations in the physical space has brought new forms and strategies of modern social life. These dramatic changes in modern human lives and social interaction may offer fresh opportunities to study and think about many other new aspects, associated with social networking sites and the new conducted personal relations, such as anonymity and privacy online.

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[25] David E. Morrison and Michael Svennevig, "the Process of Change: an Empirical Examination of the uptake and Impact of Technology" in *Access denied in the Information Age*, Stephen Lax, Ed. New York: Palgrave, 2001. p.136

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