Theatrically Digital: Education and Online Identity

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Abstract

The dramaturgical aspects of using social media are applied in this study from a sociological perspective (Goffman, 1959) to describe the process of gaining a sense of self through learning in online-environments. The exploration of data in this qualitative case study sheds light on the theatrical dimension of virtual self-presentation which can encourage individuals to become engaged in interacting online and, in the process of doing so, learn actively though using social media via its unique audio-visual digital content. Social media tools provide a space for information sharing to fill the gaps when students are unwilling to communicate in face-to-face classrooms because of a particular socio-cultural context. The codes and themes from six months' Facebook analysis of adult social media users were analysed based on the self-representation of the digital self with relation to their language and cultural background and its influence on the formation of identity. The 'actual self', as described in interviews, was being manipulated by individuals for different reasons such as its influence on their social/cultural identity and the development of the self-image. Increasingly, educators in all educational domains are using online social media platforms to support engagement in teaching and learning. It is hoped that this research, by offering increased understanding of the importance of online-communities, will have implications for learning from online contexts, particularly in contexts with socio-cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Digital self-presentation; cultural identity; education; dramaturgy; sociology.

Introduction

The increasing attachment of individuals to online social media, particularly Facebook, all over the world has inspired a rich literature forecasting the impact of online interaction on users' social communications (Lerner, 2010). In many societies, Internet users' unwise decisions about what content to share and with whom, can have consequences such as job loss (Wang et al., 2011). Sometimes users will choose not to share content for a variety of reasons, such as to protect their own and others' identity and privacy. This self-censorship is more marked in conservative societies due to more serious results from openness in expression of identity which may be in conflict with societal norms. This paper draws on a larger study of online identity and self-presentation of adult social media users in Iran. The study examines online interviews and Facebook activities to explore how the decision of identity representation can lead to educational improvement.

Iran is a good case study as it has the highest number of Internet users in the Middle East. According to the Internet world statistics in November 2015, 46.8 million Iranians were social media users (http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm). Facebook as a popular social networking site has been blocked since 2009 in Iran (Austin, 2009) although Iranians have external access to the Internet through VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) (Reardon, 2012). Iranians make use of the Internet as "a means of mobilization, communication, and education" (Lerner, 2010, p. 571).

The victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) was the end point for the 2500-year-old monarchy. This was followed by the eight years of war with Iraq (1980-1988). The authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran had emphasized the Islamic philosophy for the betterment of the nation. The education system after the 1979 revolution in Iran moved towards being religious which was completely different from the previous secular education system that the Islamic republic inherited from the Pahlavy dynasty.

Engagement with Social Media

Our experience of time and location has been changing since the Internet was invented. The Internet enables us to reach beyond the physical aspects of everyday life and be engaged with multiple interactions simultaneously without any geographical boundaries. It is the individuals' social participation that counts as their presence rather than their physical proximity (Meyrowitz, 1986). The unique potential of social media tools such as Facebook creates a situation that links self-presentations of the past to the present ones. The virtual space manipulates the traditional concept of human relations where people can build and edit all the specific communities in which they are interested. The version of self who is interacting in these artificial online communities presents us with its 'avatar' format(s). These 'unreal realities' of the online world influence individuals' presentation of selves and learning about social behaviors in society.
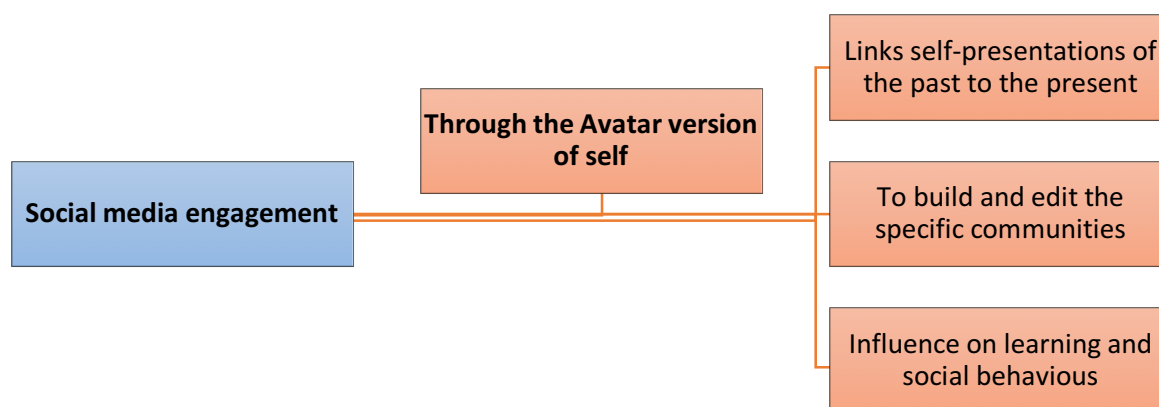
Figure 1: The nature of online life.

Whether we want it or not, our everyday lives are saturated with digital technology which has revolutionized the ways we communicate, learn and gain information. We experience a constant digital connectivity to the outside world and to other individuals that could be significantly different from the real life experience of having connection to whatever is surrounding us. The digital environment provides us with the chance to experience our own representation of identity on a personal and social level. From a dramaturgical perspective, we are performing various roles for known and unknown audiences through different online platforms. We decide to share, post, react, like, dislike, put comments, reply, start/join a conversation, add/remove friends/connections, delete information, revise/edit/create, filter/cut photos, introduce ourselves, and represent ourselves as confident, successful, brilliant, outstanding or contrarily as depressed, deprived and being unsatisfied with clear or vague issues. In an online environment such as Facebook our activities are being published in a context that is accessible by a vast number of people. The process of making decision about this public presentation and learning through online platforms is affected by feedback we receive and the imaginary self we are creating or developing virtually.

The nature of social media is being with many 'others' who can be very close, known or strangers. This version of togetherness is complicated and alien for those who are not comfortable using social media tools. The competent users or those who can at least use it independently and with enough confidence may think about their understanding of interactions and engagement in social media. In social media the reality of users' identities is mixed with ambiguity, insecurity and imaginative interdependence.

Social Media Code of Conduct

There are various announcements from 'friends' that we may encounter every day on Facebook. The range of information can be from their status or profile photos update to breaking news they share with their friends or a wider online population. Erving Goffman (1959) introduced the sociological theory of dramaturgy which describes the process of gaining a sense of self through interacting with others. In these theatrical-like interactions, a role is constructed and being performed to an audience by an individual. The theatrical dimension of a social media tool such as Facebook encourages its users to participate and learn more about their participation. They need to learn about effective and acceptable social norms of online communication, the language of social media and the particular interpretation of the visual aspects of the digital world.
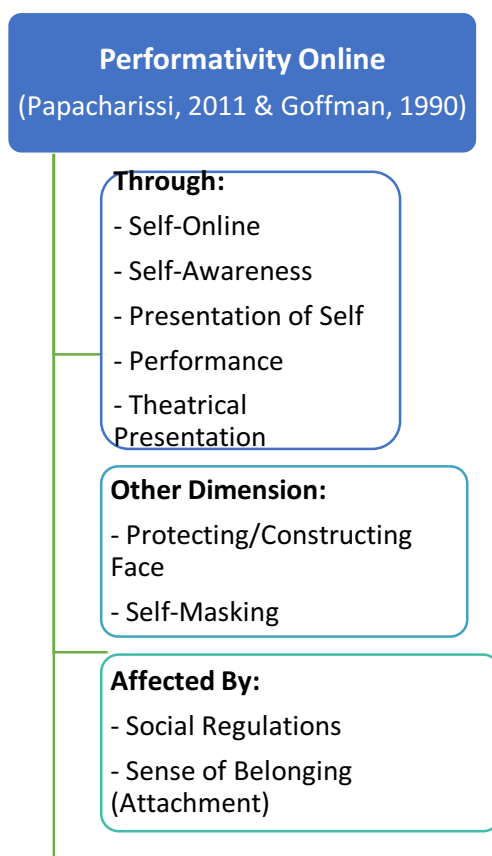
Figure 2: Theoretical framework.

Individuals' behavior on social media is very similar to the interaction of actors while they are playing their roles in theatre. As an example, when the audience laughs, it affects the actors' performance especially considering the reason for this laughter. The laughter might be as a result of missing a line of script or a sympathetic reaction to an unexpected act or word. The latter may result in a pause and accommodating an appropriate response to the audience whereas the former may make the performer nervous and they unconsciously react more quickly (Hare & Blumberg, 1988). Social media users' reactions are affected by how they have been performing on the stage of these various platforms and in front of their contacts as their audiences. Online activities are affected by the audience. Social media users are aware of being observed by other users who are their contacts or the general public. The majority of their online interactions are observed by known or unknown individuals. This constant observation can explain the way in which most online activities and users are acting as performers who play their roles.

Dramaturgy studies ways of finding meaning in the lives of human beings. It concentrates on "connecting action to its sense rather than behavior to its determinants" (Geertz, 1983, p. 34). Two fundamental elements are associated with meaning which are first, the behavioral results or product of human activity and performance and second, the distinguishing attributes of what is being called a social act (Mead, 1934). Human behavior is not only expressive but human beings are also aware of this expressiveness. People may care too much about how they appear to others; sometimes they completely ignore this. The significance and openness of the audience will directly affect an individual's degree of awareness of their expressiveness. The actor's level of awareness of themselves and the acts is built by the degree of their engagement with the audience and their acceptance.

Performativity Online
(Papacharissi, 2011 & Goffman, 1990)

Through:
- Self-Online
- Self-Awareness
- Presentation of Self
- Performance
- Theatrical Presentation

Other Dimension:
- Protecting/Constructing Face
- Self-Masking

Affected By:
- Social Regulations
- Sense of Belonging (Attachment)

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The Facebook Audiences

Facebook exposes us to two different types of audience; our activities are monitored not only by this social media service and the country's authorities but also by the imaginary people with whom we share. In Facebook's virtual world we watch and implicitly judge each other as we share content. The people with whom we share consume the content when they become interested in it and share the post themselves. Our virtual contacts or friends shape the identity that we create by sharing the content (Rayner, 2012).

The act of content sharing on Facebook is similar to the actors playing on stage. The users share a content recognizing that they are being watched by the audiences who are not all known. The act of content sharing on social media might be for the aim of impressing or informing the crowd. Therefore, we can express and introduce ourselves by the shared contents (Rayner, 2012). Orenstein (2010), the award-winning author of New York Times, published her experience on social media in an article, 'I Tweet, Therefore I Am'. She describes how using Twitter redefined her experience of life and self. Twitter provides her with a chance to express herself and to articulate her inner self. Orenstein shaped her subjectivity through using Twitter. We define our identities by sharing content on our profile and share it with our friends. The experience with Twitter made her more aware of herself about who she is or who she believes herself to be. It led to the sense of empowering and anxiety that she was exposed to anonymous audiences who might judge her on the content of what she shared. Thus, use of languages and how it might further enrich this sense of self add another layer of complexity which is linked to the aims of this study.

Language of Social Media

The online environment provides a context in which we express our experiences and also create them through different medium or forms of languages. In social media we communicate through words, visualization and voice in many distinct forms and versions. Various aspects of culture are embedded in the medium in which we choose to communicate (Kramsch, 1998) and express ourselves in front of the online audience. The signs and symbols we implement may vary from time to time and are based on the social identity that is associated with a particular community. Socialization through Facebook provides a context to represent, create, develop, destroy and manipulate a culture via the version of language that is being employed.

The Social Network Sites like Facebook provide a context of languages use. The Facebook users' experiences with different languages would be influential on their identity development. Language learning and use develops a new identity for a person (Benson et al., 2013). This individual is different from the one who has no knowledge of that language. Language identity refers to the aspects of an individual's identity which are connected to their knowledge of that language and how they are using that language. The individuals' identity is under the influence of the specific languages that they are using and the cultures associated with them (Benson et al., 2013). Language is more than just a code. Instead, it is 'the very foundation upon which the concept of "self" is based' (Wolf, 2006, p. 17). Language is also a meaning-making system which constructs the 'meanings that we call "our"selves' (Kramsch, 2009, p. 2). Experiences of language learning and use are intertwined with experiences of life.

Methodology

In this study, internet identities are part of a changing process involving self-presentation and learning. Particular attention is paid to the version of languages on social media and tools that people use to present and represent their identities. Another important aspect of online identity is the way individuals manage their online identities among their multiple communities, friendships and affiliations. The interviews examine the strategies that individuals employ to manage their affiliations as social media user.

Research Approach – A Qualitative Study

This research explores an in-depth insight into the context of languages' use with regard to using Facebook and how this plays a part in the formation of adults' identities. As such, it is positioned within a qualitative, multiple case study approach. Given the aims of this research and in line with Creswell (2005), it follows that 'the participants can best voice their experiences' by 'an open-ended response' (p. 215). Therefore, the researcher asked the participants general, semi-structured questions through online interviews. The interviews have been video-recorded and then, transcribed (or translated if required).

Participants were identified through snowball sampling. There was an attempt to select participants through random sampling via the social networking site, Facebook. The researcher's Facebook friends were invited through an invitation post. The invitation post in this study was open to all her Facebook friends who were mostly between the ages of 26 to 41. They were invited on two occasions and several weeks apart through timeline posts and privately by sending messages. Fifteen individuals of 30 volunteers were considered as key participants who were productive based on both their interviews and Facebook activities.

Data collection was done by conducting two different methods of data collection: the semi-structured, open-ended online interviews (Creswell, 2005) through online video chat tools as well as the examination/analysis of Facebook contents and reported activities of the participants. Part of the data collection process in this study was one-on-one online interviews with the participants who are geographically dispersed and unable to come to a central location for an interview. This process involved gathering data using online chatting tools (Creswell, 2012). The researcher created prior-interview checklists, and write while-interview notes and post-interview reflection reports. These data were kept to inform the data analysis process.

Data Representation

Representation of Self on Facebook – Text, Photos, Jokes – Online Identity – Individual/Group – Shared Patterns/Themes

In this section, the participants' representation of self as well as its underlying meaning has been discussed based on their Facebook profile activities; such as shared posts and upload photos. Rana and Avaa are two female participants who demonstrated a wide range of activities in line with the purpose of this study. The driven themes from Rana's Facebook analysis were more relevant to the aim of this article and have been explained in more details.

Rana

Rana often posts informative posts about the fruit and plants produced on their farm. She shared the best animation of the year (a silent video); a documentary about Iran's beauties and attractions for tourists (English language video with Persian caption); a video with Persian language declamation (a woman's voice) to glorify the traditional Iranian women's day; a video about the negative influence of stereotypes on children's future life (Language: English and Indian with English subtitles and English captions).

Rana posted a photo with a text in Persian about the lack of water in Iran – an issue that needs serious attention. She also shared a post from a page called "In my country people mock whatever they do not understand" which demonstrates a positive point about traffic in Germany. Rana has written a funny text about herself that says 'she is a good person'. Her current profile photo is black and white and has been cut.

Her other profile posts include entertaining videos about animals with English captions; a fun video of children with English/Persian captions and other funny animation videos. She described watching a Hollywood movie. She also shared a video of nostalgia for her generation in Persian language and her Facebook year in review.

She expresses her feelings in an artistic and indirect way saying she has been hurt because of being too attached to others or feels that she lacks close attention from other people. She demonstrates this by posting a photo with Persian caption to those people who have forgotten her. She used an application which shows through her photos how she has changed over the past years.

Underlying meaning:

Rana shared informative posts about their farm, Iran and children through using both English and Persian. She appears to care about her country's problems. Her self-representation has been demonstrated through Facebook's application shared result. She shows signs of conservatism on her profile photos. She is interested in sharing entertaining and reminiscent posts. Rana seems to express her focus on her own emotions, her sense of loneliness and being forgotten.

Avaa

Avaa shared several posts from a Facebook page related to feminism. She shared posts about women's rights in Iran. In one video a child is complaining about sexism in choosing the color of toys for girls and boys. Avaa shared a post to encourage assisting poor immigrant students in Iran. She introduces books and articles in her profile.

Underlying meaning:

Avaa showed interest in women's rights and feminism, helping people in need and the academic area.

Representation of Self in Online Interview – Self Description - Individual/Group – Shared Patterns/Themes

Participants' representation of self and their self-description have been analyzed in this part with regard to the driven data from their online interviews.

Rana

Rana talked about the privilege of access to internet and foreign movies through languages. There is a paradoxical situation for foreign languages at schools. It is not satisfactory but "it is better than nothing". She introduced herself as a nonstop English learner who worked with this language. Persian is her mother tongue and she uses it "all the time in life".

It was not possible for her to use internet without anti-filtering devices. There is censorship in the national TV and satellite channels because of the religion and rules. On Facebook it is possible to be with people you know and you choose. She does not present everything on Facebook. Rana chose to use other social media tools more because they are not filtered and they are easier to use.

Facebook has given a chance to Rana to interact with her international friends. She mentioned that some users use Facebook to show off or spread false information about themselves. She can find her old friends and hang out with them on Facebook even if they are not in the same city. Rana is comfortable with both online and in person communications.

She wanted to take advantage of the educative and informative potential of Facebook but slow pace and interruptions did not let her. It is not possible to watch movies online and there is no real copy of movies. She has learnt through Facebook which information is real and which is not.

Avaa

Avaa believes that these days technology makes the life easier but there is lack of spirituality. She loves her first language, Persian, and wishes it was more important. The avoidance of westernization in the education system prevented them learning anything about the culture of the West. Westernization avoidance led to the emphasis on Arabic language rather than English. Although Avaa declared the importance of English as an international language, she was still more interested in Persian. In order to understand the Middle East happenings better, she put emphasis on learning Arabic as well.

Avaa explained a form of censorship which is sorting the data by internet searching engines. Considering where a person is and when they are searching in google, the driven information would be different. Iranians inside the country are suffering from the internet filtering. They know well how to overcome this censorship through anti-filtering devices. Facebook is a source of news for her but she feels that she should be careful in trusting the information.

Comparison of Facebook Identity/Interview Identity – Similarities and Differences – 'Doing and SAYING' and Links to Identity Literature

Rana

Rana expressed her dedication to her mother tongue, Persian, in her Facebook posts as she was claiming it in her interview. She has been selective to take time with specific friends on her Facebook. Rana tagged their names on her posts and interacted with them more frequently. She shows her conservatism in the photos she chose as her profile's picture.

Rana uses her Facebook page to express her feeling about others as well as about herself and how she is feeling in a particular time. She did not mention this role of Facebook in her interview. She is not communicating directly with anybody in these posts and she is just expressing herself in a virtual way.

Avaa

In her Facebook activities, Avaa showed interest to women's rights and feminism, helping people in need and sharing posts in academic area. She talked about shifting the conservatism of Iranian women through using social media. She believes that women have started to be more themselves and express their identity closer to who they really are. For instance, women started to post their photos without headscarf on Facebook if they would not wear it in reality if they could; such as private occasions or when they travel abroad.

Avaa mentioned that with Facebook she would miss her friends less but her visible activities do not show lots of interactions. It is probable that she has personal interactions with her friends through sending messages. Avaa referred to her own self-presentation on Facebook and claimed that she does not manipulate her online identity. She was unsure about this idea and unpacked her saying by saying that the online self is an incomplete version of herself. She explained that online space provide a chance to become familiar with another version of people which used to be hidden from her. While individuals do not want to reveal some aspects of their identity in their offline life, they may unconsciously express it through their online interactions. For instance, even if they say they are not interested in politics, their political comments on their Friends' post (which could be public) would demonstrate their inclination to these information.

Results and Discussions

First Representation of Self on Facebook: Profile Overview – Photo/Graphic/Text

Facebook users may decide to apply different degrees of privacy to settings for the shared information and visual presentation of their profile overview. The way in which they are presenting themselves to us might be very much different before and after becoming a Facebook friend. In this section, the researcher draw a comparison between the images the participants are presenting of themselves to those who are not our Facebook friends and the images that they present to their current Facebook friends.

Participants – Initial Identity Being Presented

One of the participants, Shervin, said, "On Facebook people mostly want to show that they are cool." He mentioned an underlying reality of many social media users' activities. Most of the time we choose to upload a photo or share a post designed to increase our popularity in an online community and among our Facebook friends and the public in general. Avaa stated, "I just do some other things that I don't publish on my Facebook. I don't change my real photos but it's not the same for the general public."

A variety of issues may influence our choice of identity representation in the online communities that we are part of such as our family background, education, social class and the society that we are living in. Therefore our identity is being determined by both outside and inside factors. A part of our identity formation is under the influence of parents, family and friends and another part is being constructed and formed through our social interactions. These influences may lead to the formation of selves that are not a 'true' representation of our 'real' self. Although people might be hiding their 'real' self, they know there is a 'real' version of identity inside them, the person that they believe themselves to be, that might be waiting for a chance to find its voice and represent itself. Here this issue was expanded through some examples from the participants. In each case their face was covered to protect their identity.

Golab is not sharing much information about herself to the public. Her current profile photo is limited to her face circle and it is not easy to recognize whether her hair is covered or not (Figure 3). She seems to be in a personal dilemma about whether to upload her photos with uncovered head or not. She may see this moderate conservatism as being necessary for saving her family/personal social face or for not losing the (future) job opportunities. The only information she shared to the public is the name of her hometown. Golab shares her education, date of birth and more with the people in her list of friends in whom she has more trust.
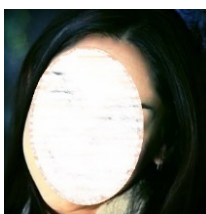

Figure 3: Golab.

Rana only shares her job experience and the place she is living in although her friends are given more detailed information such as being married and to whom and her education background. She used filters for some of her profile photos and changed their colors to make them unclear (Figure 4). It is possible that she has been controlling her photo sharing to the public in different stages for personal advantage. Therefore, these edited/filtered photos could be less problematic for particular situations. For instance, if she wants to be employed in a job the employers might look at her online profiles. Her application would not be accepted if she has shared photos and content which do not follow socio-political guidelines.
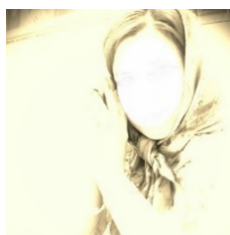
Figure 4: Rana.

Shared Themes from Online Interviews

The participants answered the online interview questions based on their description of self in relation to Conservatism (online and offline) and Social media (access and use). Participants were asked to describe their challenges in overcoming the boundaries in their online life and its reflection on the formation of their identity was also explored. Socializing through social media and its entertaining nature create a unique educational environment in which the information exchange provides an opportunity to discuss topics that are regarded as taboo. In the following table (Table 1) the most frequent shared themes in online interviews have been categorized into two groups: Conservatism and Social media.

Conservatism	Social media

• Socio-political guidelines
     o Sexual contents
• Limited Internet access
• Conservatism
     o Trusting
     o Being fake
     o Unreal/real selves
     o Saving face
	• Entertaining
	• Informative
	• Educational
	• Connecting people

Table 1: Shared themes.

General Themes of Online Interviews

Online interview data provided me with a number of general themes. The conversations with the participants were mostly about: Censorship and Social media. The following diagram unpacks the aspects of "social media" (Figure 5) based on these themes.
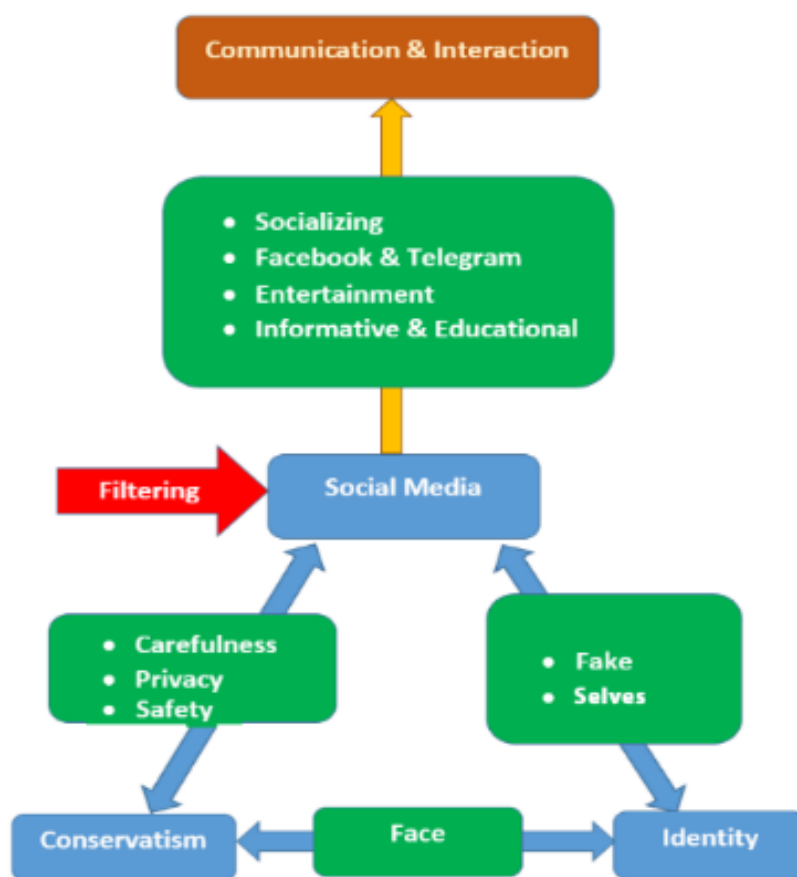
Figure 5: General themes.

Conclusion

This research has discussed that individuals' identities are being socially constructed and socially formed in the context of societies in which they are living. Social media users' representation of self has been changing throughout time. Users have been struggling to keep their online image in accordance with the society's social norms. Therefore, they kept modifying their online behavior assuming that they might be monitored by imaginary users. The researcher acknowledges that her Iranian participants were, to some extent, trying to be the person others wanted to see and this reason led them to learn through this platform consistently. This research contributes to the influence of having an online life on individuals' formation of identity and learning. Participants reported their thoughts about deciding which content to share on Facebook and which to hide and their reasons behind these decisions to represent the idealized self. The 'actual self' was hidden by an individual for different reasons such as its impact on social status, education and careers. There is hope that this research may have value for education contexts, particularly in countries that are experiencing social media or online filtering, by offering increased understanding of the importance of online platforms which provide a space to talk about social topics and to present the virtual ideal selves of those who are hiding behind the virtual gates. The unique role of social media is in supporting education particularly from the sociological perspectives in closed societies. This would address the general public's needs and provides a context for them to become engaged and to communicate with each other. Social media's destructive effects may also be diminished while individuals tend to benefit more from the educational and informative features of online media.

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