An Ethnographic Note on the Dimensions of 'Identity' and 'Self' in the Space of Virtual World

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Abstract: The present effort is an ethnographic outcome with a qualitative mode of interactions with the participants under study that disposes the reality of the 'self' and 'identity' in a contested virtual space (facebook). As the active users of facebook, the orientations of the researchers help them to get meaningful understanding while conversing with the participants. Simultaneously with this, the researchers merge their experiences on facebook with their participants to form a 'concrete' scenario that pushes the researchers to think and rethink over the issue to frame the inductive findings within this small entry that became very difficult to us. Therefore we neither restricted us to deduct the entire discourses within the effort nor intended to exclude the performative experiences of the participants. The present ethnography is rather an outline to portray what we have understood through the entire course of the research and tries to open the possibilities of further multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary researches on the virtual network insights in the rapidly changing era of digitalization and globalization.
Keywords: Facebook, self, identity, social network, ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

Since the couple of decades the concept of 'self' and 'identity' has gone through a 'paradigmatic' shift. Conventionally the concept of 'identity' has been conceptualized as 'sameness'/'sameselfness' that instigate *the more all less fixed disposition of basic personality feature* [1].

With due course of time, the inclusion of digitalization within the traditional scholarly conceptualization of 'self' and 'identity' dramatized a number of facets which prompt us to think 'self-identity' with the reference to adaptability and diversity. Habermas[2] perceived these self-identity as a *psycho-social construct that represents the meshing, or integration, of personality and the contemporaneous (situational) and historical context*, means, identity and self are performative. Within this networked era the self-'identities' are interpreted in terms of 'self presentation' where the relative onscreen anonymity of individual give them a possibility to embodied the multitudinous facets of 'self-identy' concomitantly.

This increasing pervasive vogue of the social networking sites, specifically facebook in everyday life in India promote an immense opportunity to the current researchers to study the practices of self reorientation and politics of identity formation on the space-'facebook users'[3-5]. Thus came, having an account on facebook does not imply the routinized active consumption of the space[6]. The 'frequency' and 'usage' varies subjectively and dramatically. Through the interpretative lens, it is evident that, the apparent ubiquitous anecdote of identity negotiation and internalization of 'self' in the so called 'networked era' [7-8].

In this context, the authors try to render how the individuals appear to present their identity the virtual space, like- facebook. Further, the endeavor seeks to understand the conditions, positionality and situatedness that reflect their engagement on facebook, and simultaneously their experiences and performances that alters their self-identities in the frame of the concern virtual space.

THE OBJECTIVES

The intension of the present study inclines to focus-
- To explore the perception and experiences of 'self' identity with the virtual social platform, specifically in facebook.
- To understand the dimensions and orientations of the participants' those incline them to perform activities on facebook in their 'everydayness'.

METHODOLOGY

For this research ethnography has been

selected as a method and approach for their exclusive consideration of the 'situated reality' and protagonist role of researchers [9]. The participants are selected through 'purposive' sampling. The conscious ways of doing 'purposive' sampling includes the intimate acquaintance with the participants' life and experiences of their 'self' that opens the opportunity of the concerned researchers to merge their own experiences with the participants in the space of the virtual world of 'facebook' as a social media. The researchers deliberately delimit their focus on to the 20 participants belong to a varied range of age, occupation and social background to prioritize the cross sectional subjective essence and uniqueness of each case.

Data collected for this present work through two mediums of interaction- direct interaction and craze about the kind of picture, video. Whereas the messenger based interaction mainly based on the questions about the frequency and extension of engagement, craze about the kind to picture, video, or quotation upload, positive and negative feedback about this virtual space; the personal interview conducted via semi structured to informal interviews, case study along with in-situ observation of their profile activities to study the issues on profile management and time to time upgradation, criteria of friend selection, maintaining the network, and other relevant information. In the cord of Ochs[10] the collected data are transcribed through verbatim transcription to evince the theoretical goals and objectives of the research. After the data sorting based on the divergent emerging categories from the data set[11], those coded data are analyzed through conversation analysis and thematic content analysis to perceive how participants 'make sense' of their 'self' and 'identity' in the virtual world reflexively. Gradually the findings inclined and contextualized with the research frame that represent the way that make the participants discernible to the larger target audiences. Throughout this process the researchers take care about the ethical nuances, the issues of confidentiality and privacy of the participants.

FINDINGS: THE EMERGING ISSUES
The findings of this research are discussed into a number of inductive themes to get the 'in-depth' understanding of the various facets of the private and public [re]presentation and [re]orientation of the 'self' through the quotidian practices within the virtual world of facebook. Each theme has adjoining participants' narratives as 'supporting text' to depict the subjectivity and eccentricity of the construction of individual selves and the world around them[12].

Being a 'facebook User': the focus on 'Dividuality'
Marilyn Strathern in her book '**The gender of the gift'**[13] conceptualized 'self' as 'partible persons' means the 'self' is constitutive of multiple fragments which have been acquired from other individual with whom they involve in repetitive social transaction. The 'facebook individual' i.e. the 'self' of the user is also corresponds with this perspective. Users advocating a specific 'identity' or belief to have a distinguishing 'cultural capital', in most of the time, either want to be identified with those 'class' or want to exclude from the 'mass' who lack in it. Mr. B.K. Roy, a 22 years old, freshly pass out university student said-*...look all the time this idle chatting with friends is not any more my thing. At this age I use my account as a means to set my career, to get in touch with the scholars and faculty member of my discipline...unlike the past I never send friend request to any random person even old school friends...but if they are from my discipline, my friends are common friend with him/her and most importantly if they held any prestigious position then I send them friend request...because you know at one point of the time you have to compete with these people so you better have to be updated of other scholars' achievement and progress of your discipline...here through your account you can avail a larger forum with a minimal labor.* These composite 'facebook individuals' assimilate their social relations to portray the identity of her/his 'self'.

The 'dividully' constructed social identity formation and representation of it often manifested via the tangible and intangible consumption. Ms. L. Mitra, 18 years old, an aspirant pianist discussed-*whenever I compose something or listen some offbeat music I immediately upload it in facebook...some of my friends think I am show casing my talent and tried to gain popularity among the friend circle... but they can never be able to understand...and I don't care because I know what I am doing and to whom I want to reach...now look last year I got a call from a very well known pianist of Santiniketan who have a international recognition...suddenly one day a massage pop out in my account with a address and call number that he want me to assist him...after everything became confirmed, I posted it in the status...and you know what...those idiots are the first ones to like.* This displaying of one's aesthetic choices or distinguishing status is not a mere mean to reproduce the deliberate segregation from 'real' life, rather it favoring the users as 'being the cynosure of their own virtual space' and empowered with a sense of 'being unique'.

Stratified Structuring of Relationships in Facebook
A series of the scholarly work[14-15] on social networking sites conceptualized the social interaction in the virtual space as new, fascinating and non-stratified one. But the modern facebook structures often allowed users for consciously differentiated sharing of content (ranging from public to only specific friend) in their own virtual space. On this cue, we argue here that unlike the 90s' anonymous chatroom 'facebook phenomenon' triggered the relationships into a hierarchical form which can reproduce or contradict the existing social differentiation of the 'real world'. Ms. B. P. Asharfi, a 16 years old high school student told-*I*

know it's really immature to think like that but I can't help it…it hurt me so much…we were friends since nursery but in high school she [refer to her childhood friend] got busy with her other friends…she is very much addict to try different apps from facebook…some days earlier she tried those kind of stupid apps 'find you top 6 best friend'…based on the sharing and chatting history as expected it counted her so called 6 best friends on FB…but what unexpected for me was…she actually shared the result on her wall even posted a series of comments on it…though I never mentioned about it to her, slowly I distance myself for her…many time she invites me to join her group for hang out but I denied her…and I will continue to deny her.

Even the 'facebook individual' as a social actor has a varied number of roles where each selves has a 'generalized other'[16] or normative expectations from user which often overlap or contradict. In the virtual world when these stratified relational networks come in one space it throws challenge towards the individual 'self-identities' by collapsing the previous network walls. In this context Mr. A. Chatterjee, a government staff said-*I have a lot of colleagues in my friend list…among them there are a number of friction groups…whereas some of them can co-exist with each other while with other…they absolutely detest each other…me in the middle of these networks have to be very careful about initiating any professional communication or sharing any content.* Moreover this networking site permits 'others' for user's networks to post, tag varied contents which sometimes challenge the 'presented self' of the user as for 'other' people the 'other generated contents' are more reliable than 'self generated content'.

Fluidity between 'Virtuality' and 'Reality'
In this digital era rather than the apparently distinct sphere, the 'virtual' and 'real' spaces have become intrinsically interrelated where the 'self' not only live 'with' it but 'through' and 'in' it. To explore this composite self-identity we opt for triangulation which is an inherent quality of the research methodologies, here we apply it to 'triangulate self'[4]. It is an ongoing performative strategy by which individual's identity of virtual space compromise with the identity of the real-world. Ms. U. Sinha, a 19 years old college student narrated-*now I am living in a hostel so I am kind of totally disconnected with my school friends from my native place…even they were not very much active in facebook…so I unfriend some of them…when I went there to attend the wedding of my best friend who also happen to be still in touch with them…when I go to them to mingle up, they…they started to show hostility…their first word was 'hello stranger you know us, we were once your classmates', some of them teased me directly 'now you totally become a cosmo girl'…it's really embarrassing.* This kind of social response show how the real life emotions prompted the online activity and the actions in the

virtual sphere triggered the bodied sentiments.

This situation becomes so critical for some individual that they have to cease the social bonding within a greater network. Mr. A. Sharma, a 29 years old freelancer photographer who recently had a break up confided that-*me and my ex-girlfriend have a common friend circle…so we have more all less similar kind of update as we hang out in a group…but of sometimes I don't know but I kind of feel skeptical about her and started to chase her account and also her friends' account…for hours…then I came to know that she is actually seeing someone from her college and some of our common friends cover up her to me…I feel so cheated…they are also my friends…I not only break up with her but block everyone of our common friend from my account.*

But this fluidity between the virtuality and reality come into an instant suspension when someone for a time being deactivated their facebook account. By doing this they provisionally withdraw themselves from the nexus of the social 'world'. Ms. D. Sen Gupta, a 36 years old marketing professional asserted-*last year I was on my maternity leave…after having baby life became so hectic that I don't have enough time for facebook…near about 3 months I was totally inactive…I clearly remember that day when after the long isolation I decided to upload my baby's first snap…previously I was a queen bee in facebook. Whenever I upload anything within 3-4 hours there would be minimum 80-90 likes on the post…but that day…at the night when I checked my account there was only 11 likes that was also from my family members…I was like…what the hell is going on…no one from my work place bother to call me during these 3 months…even they didn't comment on my post though several time at that day I noticed them online…then I started to check their profile activity and I didn't even grasp what they are talking about…it was kind of a feeling like an alien.* The assimilation of offline interaction within the virtual platform, both synchronically and asynchronically mediate the experiential and relationship meaning attach with the 'self'.

The 'Selfing' of the Socio-Cultural Values in 'Virtual Space'
Hogan[17] theories the 'profile self' of an individual as an iterative practice of performance and exhibition of 'self-identity' whereas the authentication of this 'presented self' depends largely on the affirmative interaction with the (perceived) audiences on the virtual sphere. Though has an uncalculated core, this process of 'selfing' is an usher to user's 'attitude, belief and value'[18]. Ms. H. Oudh, a 24 years old art student specialized on sculpture and modelling said-*I still remember the phases of anxiety and insecurity from my adolescence whenever anyone ask me to get a picture with them…as I have a comparatively a darker skin tone and also have gracious amount of fat here and*

there…majority of the time I avoided it but whenever I took pictures I preferred either to show only face or posing for side profile…now I don't…whenever I post my snaps on facebook I always edit it to make to look flawless…after all at end of the day when no one bothers to look or comment on your snaps it's really embarrassing. The negotiation between the 'online identity performances' *that framed by the normative systems of shared meanings, beliefs, values, and understanding*[19] often reinforced by the virtual interaction between 'selves'. This acts as template for *future offline activities*[20].

'Authenticity' and 'Identity': the Pivotal Concerns in Mediating the 'Self'

By correlating 'digitality' with 'neoliberalism' Martin conceptualized self as *a collection of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed*[21]. The current researchers found this 'self' as a active agent in 'facebook phenomenon' where this space encourage people for a 'neoliberal engagement' with other which stimulate individual to present their 'profile self' as having updated high profiled consumer tastes and unweighted affiliations which may be paradoxical with the 'true self' of individual. By conditioning these 'profile self' highlight, omit and frame the 'self' based content strategically to give it a tantalizing outlook. Ms. M. Sarkar, a 36 years old software engineer shared-*at one point of my life when I just joined my first job…I was in a relationship, it started with an unknown friend request acceptance on facebook…he was so handsome and he was also a engineering student applied for masters…every now and then he uploaded his hang out snaps with his friends at posh restaurants, clubs…it was so fascinating…at first it was only casual chatting, then one day I asked him to meet me but he refused by saying that he had a seminar for next one week, so, we promised to meet next month as for some days I was out of station…then the next month on the day he again backed out…he continued to do this for 2-3 more times…then I started get suspicious because he had immerse time to chat but he didn't get time to meet me…I discussed the matter with my colleague and he promised me to help on this matter…some days later he informed me…that guy was faking his designation, and uploaded status…he was a normal pass graduate student and more importantly he often did it with girls…that day I learned my lessons and totally stopped to accept any unknown person's friend request.*

But there is an antithesis of the above assertion where it is claimed that facebook reinforce to foster accurate intrapersonal information through its architect by providing template categories where the users have to share their 'validated' biographical and demographical details which make them 'detectable' into the 'real world'[22-24]. Mr. M.S. Tripathi, a 23 years old businessman claimed-*if you have to go for other skeptical means to represent you on your*

account…isn't that a insult to the real you…and frankly speaking in this current age no one can keep it secret for a long time if they have upload something mistrustful information on their account…I know the means how to unearth it…it will take hardly two minutes to verify its authenticity. This quintessence of the authentication of the 'profile self' epitomized with the inclusion of 'frictionless sharing' of user's quotidian activity on facebook automatically via facebook news feed. For some of our participants this 'authentic identity' of 'self' is what they strive for and envisage from others. But the over self-documentation in the collective cyber space often degrade the 'self' of the user in the 'virtual' as well as in the 'real' world.

THE DISCUSSION

The current endeavor tried to interpret the process of 'selfing' and the mediation of the identity multiplism within in the age of social networking through the lens of ethnography. In due course, it is crucial for us as researchers to capture the conception behind the dubious meaning of the participants' narratives and the dualistic layers that they often express during the discussion.

The participants under study constantly acknowledge the existence of different virtual worlds. In this course they attach different meaning to both the word 'online' and 'offline', e.g. Ms. B. Mallick, a 23 years old newly married said-*I rarely upload my pictures online, but I send them offline to my friends.* Here by 'online' she meant to make the post visible to the public whereas she attached meaning to 'offline' as to share things via facebook messenger or through personalized chat, a more private platform, though both the online and offline medium is basically belong to the same digital architect.

Findings further reflect that this dilemma of maintaining privacy is a resultant of the neoliberal presentation of self that are not conducive towards the fixation of the romantic connections they have or want to. The users should be flexible, digitally skillful and have pragmatic taste and choices. These 'facebook individuals' attach the neoliberal rationality to their every relationship network. Another problem arise with the indulgence of 'self' in facebook is it will continuously provide updates (via newsfeed) about the identity of the 'user' and 'others' from her/his networks which are the basis on which 'individual' maintained their 'online-offline' social relationship networks, yet the authenticity of these 'truths' are too vague. The facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg declared that-*The problem Facebook is solving is this one paradox...people want access to all the information around them, but they also want complete control over their own information. Those two things are at odds with each other. Technologically, we could put all the information out there for everyone, but people wouldn't want that because they want to control their*

information [25]. This critic the normative assumptions about how the knowledge of 'other self' and relationships are intrinsically related. On this cue researchers raise two questions- does this 'individual' show their 'real self' via facebook compared to their everyday 'real life'? Or may be some people in facebook show their 'real self' which are hindered by the daily communication embarrassment? The framing, methodological stances, and the inclination of findings opens the scope to further intensive and rigorous attempt with full immersion *per se* that may extend the deep insights from the possible alternative angles.

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