

# Virtual Identity and Its Effect on National Identity

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the development and extension of technology and the rise of new media and communication tools, formation and qualitative and quantitative growth of the Internet has created a new environment which is called Cyberspace; this space has affected human life in various cultural, economic, social, military, and political fields. One of the most important effects of cyberspace is the changes that have occurred in the area of identity and have created virtual identity. National identity and the factors that constitute this identity is one of the areas that have been affected by digital and electronic developments. The purpose of this study was to answer the question of what is the impact of virtual identity on national identity. To answer the question, it was hypothesized that the formation of virtual identity within the digital space would add a new layer to layers of identity and would wear away the national identity. To analyze the data, the present article has used analytical-descriptive method; data analysis showed that virtual identity which is fluid, global, and beyond location has disintegrated national identity which is a centered, location based identity shaped by the historical commonalities of the people enclosed in a land.

**KEYWORDS:** identity, cyberspace, national identity, virtual identity

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## INTRODUCTION

### Introducing the issue

With the advent and development of communication on a larger scale that led to the emergence of the internet as a social network worldwide, a new atmosphere came into being which can be called cyberspace. Cyberspace has provided a new environment for the communication and interaction of millions of people from different countries and regions of the world. The Internet has revolutionized human life and has influenced the human culture. Cyberspace has given unprecedented new features and options to people, leading to their understanding of and interaction with different cultures and attitudes across the world. The Internet and cyberspace has changed the way of communication among people by providing facilities and reducing the differences and boundaries made by human beings which has led to emergence of greater understanding and common points among the people present in the space and fading of their differences. While this environment has created a favorable space to become familiar with different cultures and behaviors, regarding the facilities, tools, and specific conditions, it has also created a culture that belongs exclusively to cyberspace, which in turn can be associated with a variety of cultures in the real world, and can create interactive effect. In this context, the spatial, economic, racial, cultural and social differences which are more prominent in the real world become less significant in this environment and people try to pay more attention to their similarities to others to acquire a new identity. This new space with variables such as being beyond time and space, high speed, permanent access, universality, and fluidity is in contrast with the real world which is dependent on space and time; and in the same way that it is affected by the real environment it will equally and perhaps more significantly affect the real environment. People who find each other in cyberspace are strangers to each other before entering the internet, but in the new environment is bonded together by common interests that have no relation to their nationalities, and thereby causing the change in the concept of identity and this new identity formed in the virtual space affects national identity.

This study is divided into five parts. In the first part, after the abstract and introduction, the theoretical framework is presented which is Anthony Giddens' Structuration theory. Then the identity, definition, concept, and its various dimension is investigated. Then, in detail and in three parts, national identity, cyberspace and virtual identity are analyzed. And in the last part, the main topic of the research, "virtual identity and its impact on national identity", is examined.

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### **Significance of the study:**

Nowadays, the internet, cyberspace, and its different dimensions are gaining evolving and wide significance, shaping an important part of people's lives and societies in the world today, gaining more use and influence day by day, in a way that today living is impossible without the internet. Virtual identity has also emerged from cyberspace and had affected the specific and old identities such as national identity, causing many challenges in this field. Therefore, examining and understanding it is necessary, leading to forming strategies for better understanding of this important topic, helping us to determine its cause and nature, and in later stages, shedding light on its disadvantages to stop the harms and to make use of its benefits.

### **Questions and hypothesis:**

The main question of the present study is as follows: What is the effect of virtual identity on national identity. The hypothesis to this question is that formation of virtual identity in the cyberspace has added a new layer to identity layers, disintegrating the national identity.

### **Theoretical framework:**

Anthony Giddens's Theory:

We have set the theoretical framework of the presented study based on Giddens' identity theory. Giddens' had examined identity under the conditions of modernity. In his opinion, the extraordinary dynamism of modern social life consists of three main elements:

1. The separation of time and space and organizing activities which are not physically in the presence of each other.
2. Disembodying, pulling out the social relations from local contexts, and restoring them to their separate pieces again in unspecified fragments of time and space specified by means of signs, titles and expert systems.
3. Institutional reflectivity, systematic application of information and knowledge about the social life and ongoing change of condition based on fundamental form and optional emergence (Giddens, 1999: 41), intermingling of events and social relations, in a distant land with topical and local texture of other communities, and intersection of present and absent are features of the new era. . Giddens believes that the basic question that everyone in the contemporary world should answer are "what should be done" and "what kind of person should we be". Asking about the role of existence, of the relationship between the outside world and human life, the existence of other people, and capturing and identifying characteristics of people, are among Giddens' main questions (ibid: 76). He believes: self is like a reflexive image of ourselves that the individual takes its responsibility and we make our own true self (ibid:112). And this making of self is influenced by our choices. We are always doing self-interrogation. He believes in the new era, emancipatory politics has led to freedom of people from the limitations and boundaries of the traditional world and individuals have taken control of their lives in the modern world (ibid: 295). Due to the emergence of choices and options in the possible worlds, the nature of routine life is constantly affected and transformed by the interaction of local and international elements, in a way that individuals must establish their identities constantly and every day, and support and protect it in their reflexive activities (ibid: 81). So the modern personal identity is a kind of reflexive achievement. Modernity causes radical changes in the quality of daily life and affects our most personal experiences (ibid: 15). One of the radical changes is disembodying in order to build identity. Interaction of local and global factors rebuilds the everyday life. At the macro level as well Giddens believes that globalization simultaneously increases the importance of regionalism, local nationalism, local ethnicities, and non-centralization.

### **Identity**

Identity (Hoviat) is originally an Arabic word stemming from the third person pronoun he (hova), meaning essential unity or compliance (Altaie, 2003: 34). Etymologically, identity is derived from the word identities which has two apparently contradictory meanings: 1 - Absolute homogeneity and uniformity 2 - a distinction which includes stability or continuity over time(GolMohamdi, 2002: 14). Identity was first defined by Ericsson and analyzed by Watermaan and Acher. Ericsson has described identity as general internal sense. For him, identity is combination of personal changes and social needs for the future. For him, identity formation involves the creation of a sense of identity and unity of personality that the individual senses and others recognize and is consistent over time (Rabiee, 2008: 151 and 152).

The concept of identity which is rooted in the mathematical sciences is referred to the similarity and harmony existing between the two methods (difference of zero percentage) in mathematics. . The lack of difference in

mathematical science is related to the unconditional and absolute nature of things. In this context the term identity has been used in the social sciences. In social sciences, collective identity is referred to as members of a group or category that consider themselves as different from others (other groups or categories) and similar to other members of the group (Hajiani, 2009: 332). Identity is defined by similarities and differences. Similarities with those like us and differences from those who are not like us (Hajiani, 2009: 333). In the past, "identity" was considered essentially as a philosophical category closely and sometimes exclusive connected to the category of "self", and was examined in the context of personal identity. With the emergence of so-called nation-states, this concept was formulated in the broad context of social, political and economic modernity and was considered as one of the main components of the nation-state phenomenon (Nozari, 2006).

The Arabic word for identity in Dehkhoda dictionary means "individuation" and also means identification in terms of authentication and identifying the personality ([www.loghatnaameh.org](http://www.loghatnaameh.org)). For Castells, identity is the source of meaning and experience for people. He regards identity as a meaning-creation process based on a cultural trait with a set of interrelated cultural characteristics, which has priority over other sources of meaning, and had differentiated the three types of "legitimizing identity", "resistance identity" and "project identity" (Castells, 2001: 113). Anthony Giddens also in his define of self-identity emphasizes a distinctive feature that individuals understand based on their reflexive autobiography. Della Porta defines identity as: "the ability to define self, others, and the content of relationship with others shaped during the action". The creation of identity is subject to a positive or negative definition of self and others, including our relationship with those who are opposed or neutral towards us (della Porta, 2002: 195). Jenkins regards the identity of the individual as something made by society, having two senses "absolute similarity" and "difference" (Jenkins, 2002: 5). Different aspects of identity include: personal identity: definitions of "self" based on personal or unique characteristics of a person is called personal identity (Doran & Manouchehri, 2007: 114). From this perspective, identity is defined as the (feeling of personal distinction, a sense of personal continuity and a sense of personal autonomy.) (GolMohamadi, 2002, 222). Giddens believes that personal identity is in fact the self that the individuals accept as the reflection of their lives. Here also identity means the continuity of individual in time and space and the individual identity is a changing reflection that the individual has formulated from it (Giddens, 2003: 82). Social Identity: Social Identity is a set of similar social, cultural, psychological, philosophical, biological, and historical features and characteristics that indicate the unity and similarity of their members, differentiating them from other groups and their members in a specific time and place in a clear, conscious, and acceptable way (Jenkins, 2002: 5). Social identity can be regarded a self-identification of the individual in relation to others. In fact, identity is mainly focused on the recognition of the boundaries between self and others which is mainly results from social contrasts and split into groups from other groups. This concept is essentially defined with two opposing concepts: similarity and difference (GolMohamadi, 2002: 225). Religious identity: in the discussions of identity, religion is defined as our understanding of self and others by recourse divine concepts. (Nasri, 2008: 19). Religious identity can be studied in two levels, individual level that is individual religions, and collective religion or religious community or nation (Doran, 2004: 84).

### **National Identity**

The history of the concept of national identity is rooted in the evolutions that immersed the Western world and consequently in later years, beginning with the renaissance that is the emergence of the contemporary civilization of the West (Kachorian and JavadiYegane, 2005: 53). National and nationality are new words that developed in the social sciences after emergence of European governments and, industrial revolution and the rise of nationalist sentiments. National identity also for the same reason is a relatively new phenomenon that refers to the relationship between a person and a large territorial unit, which is larger than the place of birth, the ethnic and tribal living location, and even state and federation. With the spread of nationalism and political-economic conflict after the Industrial Revolution for the colonial-imperialist rivalry, feelings of belonging to a particular territory and governments increased. Westphalian system also with consolidation of nation-state helped to strengthen the national identity. National identity and sense of belonging that comes from two things; 1. A recognized territorial unit 2- state and political system that leads this unit (Ahmadi, 2009: 64). National identity can be seen as a sense of belonging to a particular nation. A nation that has its own particular symbols, traditions, sacred places, rituals, heroes, history, culture and land ( Golmahamadi, 2004: 62). Anthony Smith noted that national identity involves a sense of political community. A political community in its own turn refers at least to some common institutions and a single set of rights and responsibilities for the community. Political community also refers to a definite social space, a land having recognized boundaries, that members thereby define themselves and have a sense of belonging to it.

Handler defines national identity in relation to three aspects of human experience: First, in relation to human beings as individuals, second, the collections and human groups that are thought to be distinct from each other, third, the relationship between these the two, and the ways in which people regard the elements of collective identities

similar with their own unique identities (Ahmad, 2009: 66). According to Thompson, the basic concept of national identity is the "sense of belonging" to a nation. In fact, people always want to be a part of their nation and thereby be identified with it (Hajiani, 2009: 360). Behzad Doran defines national identity as a community identity based on meaningful and regular similarity between members of a group called nation in the framework of a specific land and national nation state and with religious values and beliefs different from other groups (Doran: 2007: 94). National identity was highlighted as a significant concept when the latent feelings of national communities, based on a will to intention and awareness, was used as a base for a political, economic, and cultural plan. Developing this awareness and the rise of national consciousness was provided by the new civilization. Thus, awareness to identity as a subjective element that is "national feeling" which is also referred to as "collective spirit" or "collective conscience" helped the creation of identity (Zahiri: 32). National identity which is derived from the concept of identity is those features that determine the nations. National identity is a means of separating one nation from other nations with an emphasis on common awareness about the concept or concepts which are defined collectively, and as long as there is no common consciousness to separate self from the other, there is no possibility of formation of national identity (Eivazi, 1999: 205). national identity is the most inclusive and at the same time most legitimate identity in all social systems. National identity is a set of tendencies and positive attitudes to the factors, elements and identifying and integrating patterns in the nation as a political unit (Zahiri, 2005: 33). Having a common language and common geographical and economic bonds among the people who have lived a long time together are the factors that give similar experiences, an extent of similar worldviews and shared aspirations. Typically, these people have lived together, have a sense of happiness and joy together and have been suffering together (Zahiri, 2005: 35). When you see someone for the first time, the first thing that unconsciously comes to our minds is that they must have a nationality, just as they must have parents. The reason is that Earth's surface is divided into a relatively large number of nation-states (Martin Barrett, 2002: 13).

### **Cyber space (Cybernetics)**

Cyber is derived from the word keybermetes meaning navigator or governor first introduced in 1948 by a mathematician named Norbert Wiener in a book called cybernetics and control in relation to animal and machine. Cybernetics is the study of control mechanisms in human and machine systems of machine and computers. It is like the nervous system of organisms and the development of the systems equivalent to them in the electronic and mechanical devices. Cybernetics has compared the differences and similarities between living and non-living systems. Cyber is a prefix to describe a person, an object, an idea or a space that is related to the world of computers and information. During the development of the Internet, many compound words that have the word cyber have emerged that here we refer to a number of them (Zandi, 2011: 38). Some argue that cyberspace is a term developed by the science fiction writer William Gibson to describe collection of information resources available through computer networks. In his book *Neuromancer* published in 1986 for the definition of the virtual world he says: graphical expression of information taken from the computer banks in the human system (ShokrKhah, 2011: 55, 56). But Gibson says he has taken the word from the book *Wave surfer* by John Brunner, but Brunner himself attributes the root of the term to Alvin Toffler's book "Future Shock" (Doran, 2003: 58).

The process that led to the emergence of the Internet in the world dates back to the 1960s

when the government of the U.S performed a plan called ARPA which stands for "Advanced Research Project Agency" for defense functions. This project involved the plan that the computers in different cities could be able to connect to each other with their stored information if needed to transmit the data. In this regard, four computers were connected to each other in two different states of America in 1961 to create the ARPANET network (Shirudi, 2008: 183).

The origins of the Internet dates back to the year 1984 and to the Ministry of Defense of America. Internet leakage out of the Pentagon at this year and quickly spread, and by the mid-1980s, its capacity has doubled every year. In the early 1990s, the number of network users in the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and some European countries has been growing every year more than one thousand percent (Foster, 2000: 35).

Cyberspace is in fact a kind of meta-space and mental space, a space that is everywhere, but nowhere, a space that in the light of providing broad and fast access to information, gives a more symbolic power and broader psychological security to the individual, but at the same time makes them more dependent, less powerful and more anxious than before. It is a fluid and limitless space, always easily available, but with the simplicity that is created can be destroyed and wiped out. It is a space that in light of facilitating social interaction conditions, creates a deeper social consensus and wider integration but at the same time from another point of view due to its private and unique functions expands social isolation and differentiation (Zokaei and Tayebi, 2006: 112-113)

The Internet is a global organization, an environment that provides the communication and interaction of millions of different countries and cultures, a media that we can choose to use as it is, or we can ignore it altogether.

That is the only thing that we can do. But our ability to influence the environmental is greater than our impacts on the televisions or telephones; because we are at the same time the creators and users of information in the internet but with regard to the inflexible media such as television, the issue is whether or not turn on the device or which program to watch (Fatahian and MahdaviNur, 2004: 108). Our time is dominated by digitalized process of information which creates a specific experience of transparency as users of ever present computers (for example, using wireless technology such as mobile phones and Internet connections). We now have used to the ability to access the "instant" information about anything and anywhere at any time. Being instant is a new form of transparency; time and place does not matter, the past and future does not matter, just here and now is important that with the use of ever present computers has become anywhere and anytime (Loun, 2009: 149).

### **Virtual Identity:**

The word "virtual" is derived from the Latin word "virtualis" or French word "virtuel" meaning potential that is something which is not real, but is possible to be. A virtual object is not physically real, but has the properties of the desired material; in other words, it is the representation of that object. So we can say there is a virtual object, but not palpable (.F Nasiri, 2005: 121).

The Internet through its social interaction can create the conditions that can to some extent affect organizing the interests of people a formation of new identities, while in general it seems that social institutions of identity have changed radically in cyberspace. Identities shaped through online interactions are the so-called virtual identities (Pishgamifard, Ansarizade, Karami, Parhiz, 2010: 190).

In the virtual social situations that the Internet provides a the virtual world and due to its special use and capabilities, people are able not only to adopt and implement "selves" and different roles, but even different "identities" without limitation or much less restrictions than the real world social situations. When via internet we let go of real life and enter the unreal world of the Internet or network our world too becomes virtual. In other words, network takes us from reality to virtual world. That is why instead of reality we are faced with virtual reality there and we attain a virtual identity in this virtual space (Akhgari, 2009: 29).

Cyberspace has transformed the way people interact. This space has facilitated human access to information, communication and relationship development. In parallel with the evolution of the offline situation of the real world to the online situation of the virtual world, the concept of identity has changed (Sabaghian, 2011: 57).

Identity in a virtual environment is significantly different from the identity of the real environment because there is a difference between the environments. A person is free to use or not use his real identity in a virtual environment. In a virtual environment, individuals' identity is shaped in a way that they want to demonstrate it to others. In other words, they impose their identity to others (Rabiee, 2008: 162).

The manner of human interaction has changed in the cyberspace. This space facilitated human access to information, making connections and development of relations and caused online transactions at local, national and international levels. Cyberspace and virtual space are differences from the real space in many ways. In the light of these differences the meaning of identity has evolved and in this direction new challenges are facing designers and users of online environments (Sabaghian, 2011: 53).

### **Virtual identity and its effect of national identity**

Nation-states are formed, sustained and survived based on the shared beliefs, values and norms, according to Castells, advances in technology and communication had led to the formation of a network society, has changed the confined national identities. Human beings experience an interactive environment in cyberspace which has impact on other users and virtual space and which is also influenced by them and attain new beliefs, values, norms and identities that is outside the influence of territorial boundaries and influence people's national identity.

Of course, the negative impact of virtual identity regarding the internet cannot be absolutely accepted and there are different views about the impact of cyberspace and virtual identity on various identities and especially national identity. The more the usage of Internet and the more time spent in these environments it is more likely that their national identity be affected by virtual identity and this can affect loyalty to national identity and strengthened the virtual identity of its users.

Information society creates new communities and identities. In a society based on communication which uses print, television and telephone as means of communication, production practices are in such a way that creates integrated identities, but in the information society, a society that is dominated by the electronic communication unstable, dispersed and multilayered identities and subjectivities appear (Paster, 1998: 68-69). Mark Paster in his 'second media age' emphasizes that in the new period that the Internet and electronic communications dominates the world, the data and information or, to put it more clearly, virtual communities make up the identity of individuals. (Kozer, 1999: 527).

People who view globalization as a threat believe that politically, information technology created virtual communities within electronic networks that weaken government control and surveillance of the space and territory of the country (Sadughi, 2001: 20).

One of the traditional component or example of the political authority of "nation - state" is monitoring the space and scope of political borders of the country to stop others from interfering in their internal affairs. The exercise of power and political control over a territorial land was possible with the rise of fixed boundaries. In fact, the modern "nation-state" systems were evolved when the political boundaries were gradually fixed. During this process, the "nation-state", with destruction of rival centers of power, and authority within ,created an impersonal, independent, and hierarchical political system, that is a definite legitimate power structure with legal authority on a land territory . One consequence of this process is the construction of national identity, and one of its most important outcomes is creating a relationship of adherence and loyalty that the nation-states use to from legitimacy. In this system, the government controls the behavior of citizens and all those within its territorial boundaries to conquer the time (sadughi, 2001: 157).

The digital nature of the virtual environment, with the open doors and windows, with allowing interaction and engagement with real-time distance, with real-virtual nature, with being decentralized and having virtual memory, provides various capacities with the physical world which leads to three macro outcomes :

1. Creation of nested cultures, dense cultural diversity, the simultaneous presence of different cultures together, and even the loss of the boundaries of language due to the capacity of automatic translation of texts;
2. Increase of freedom of ideas, values, and intellectual feedback to each other;
3. Globalization of living space, emergence of the world in the city, the city in the world, and in other level, shaping of the world in home, and home in the world; in a lower level, emergence of the world in individual, and the individual in the world. (Ameli, 2005: 24- 25).

Jessica Matthews believes that virtual communities through eliminating the problem of distance and boundary can change perceptions of people from the community and disembody them from their own historical societies (Sadughi, 2001: 165). Virtual communities can enable the individual interests and identities to defy at a national and global level, thus causing social and political fragmentation. Virtual community divides the individual is the historical societies of the real world within the new boundaries. In these communities, individuals and groups, without a physical presence or formal institutions are related to each other for collective action. These are non-hierarchical network organizations with various bottlenecks where individuals and groups interact and work together for common goals (Sadughi, 2001: 165).

Because of the inherent and conditioned differences between the virtual and the real world, it is natural that everyone in any world has identity independent of the other world; as many of the Internet and the real world concepts are different and each are well accepted in their own worlds. In terms of identity too, everyone could have an independent identity in the virtual world and an independent identity in the real world.

Information and communications technology directly connects the communities and ethnic and local identities to the global identity, and cause to undermine the foundations of solidarity and common identity in the national community level, and thereby cultural and national identities are driven back in favor of globalization (Sabaghian, 2011: 112).

## **Conclusion**

The subject of identity has been an issue since the ancient time, and existed in the form of individual, social, ethnic, religious and national identities, and all of these identities have almost common features and dimensions, such as being related to time and location. With the advancement of information and communication technology, extensive changes occurred in human life which made it undergo a massive transformation. One of the major changes that improvements of the information have caused is the emergence of the Internet and cyberspace, which has created an unprecedented transformation. Cyberspace has changed the lives of human beings and has created an environment that, despite the fact that human beings themselves have caused this change in the environment and are in interaction with the virtual environment, have been under the influence of the factors and frameworks of this space, and have acquired a new identity beside other dimensions of identities, an identity which is limited to the virtual world and is in a great extent different from the real identities of the internet users. This new identity that is beyond the man-made conventional bounds has been able to go beyond the borders and beyond the location which is one of the features of national identity. Virtual identity has managed to reduce conflicts between users in this space, to pay attention to the common points, to create a similar culture, to eliminate borders, and thus has posed a

challenge and confrontation to national identity and has weakened the center of loyalty to the national identity more than before and has given a new form of identity to the internet users.

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