An Examination of the Challenges and Opportunities of Students' Identity in Virtual Space

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Abstract: Apart from the positive or negative effects, considering virtual space, particularly the Internet, is inevitable. Objective: National identity as the most essential component of social life is one of the factors that is strongly influenced by the virtual world of the Internet. Results: The present study is done in 2014 to investigate and identify the challenges and opportunities of Iranian students' identity in virtual space. Research methodology is descriptive survey. The population of this study consisted of 112 male and female students of Islamic Azad University of Abhar in the first semester of the academic year 1392-93 who have completed a self-administered questionnaire by random sampling method. The research instrument is questionnaire. After completing the questionnaires, SPSS software was used for data analysis and data has been analyzed with descriptive statistics indexes (frequency, percentage, etc.) and inferential statistics indexes Data (Pearson and Spearman tests, Kolmogrov-Smirnov test.). Conclusion: In summary, in order of priority, the results include. There is a significant and positive relationship between presence in virtual space and less attention to moral values and norms and ethical customs. There is a significant and positive relationship between presence in virtual space and influencing from foreigners. There is a significant and positive relationship between opportunities in virtual space and extension of Islamic and national values.

Introduction

Human social life requires identity and there is no possibility of the development of human beings without an understanding himself/herself (Kajoiyan, 2006). William Martin has introduced informational society as a society in which, as social changes and economical development perspectives, life quality increasingly is dependent on information and using it. In such a society, standards of living, work and leisure patterns, the educational system and the labor market quite sensibly were overshadowed by developments in the realm of information and knowledge (Navabakhsh et al 2011) from Mohnesi, 2002).

In this regard, John Meyers has noted a revolution has been occurred in information and communications in the world and has affected the life of all human on the Earth; a computer-based revolution which has widespread economic, political and cultural effects; that means on the one hand it makes information as a business and profitable product that its acquisition makes people powerful and on the other hand, it has permanent influences on the human personality and identity (Feeder, 2002).

Besides causing a positive change in the areas of economy, industry, information and transport, information society and the increasing development of new media which expands decentralization and lack of time and place, have contributed to identity concerns at different countries; and maintenance of the components of identity for various communities has been seriously introduced.

Questions:

Parallel to the development and spread of an outbreak of virtual space, finding its undeniable role in human life, communication scholars and sociologists have been faced with a very important and necessary question that whether multiple and diverse identities have a place to stay in this new society?

Deleted and lost identities which have been the source of stability and life of many human beings and have valuable history and background of human life have which adverse consequences in the networking community for human society?
In this regard a question that attracts most attention is that in today's interconnected world, how religious and national identity can be maintained with avoidance of international tensions and achievement of sustainable development in all aspects?

Now, our problem here is that what are the opportunities and challenges surrounding the Iranian identity in virtual space?

Background of the Study:
The study by Mojtaba Abbasi Ghadi (2012) entitled "The impact of the Internet on users' religious identity" concluded that data obtained from path analysis for all research hypotheses regarding the existence of variables such as the time of using Internet by users, the amount of using Internet by users, type of use, motivation and users' purpose, participation of users, real consideration of the content of websites by users, economical-social base of users, their education and their religious identity, have been approved.

In the study by Hafez Nia et al (2007) entitled "The impact of globalization on national identity," the authors concluded that today, with an emphasis on "internet and satellite", globalization processes has weakened national interests of students. Students, as one the most populated reference groups of the country, are influenced by information technology and communications and this affection is a base for those parts of identity which have been defined as local-ethnic identity. This process has led to a weakening of national identity of students.

In Khatibi's study (2006) entitled "The relationship of the presence in virtual space and modern identity" it is concluded that the strongest and most complete achievement of the modern identity can be seen among professional maker users with more background in virtual space. Also, due to the anonymity of users in virtual space, they provide an identity different from their real identity in the real world; in fact, they manage and provide themselves, that this method presentation have a relationship with their usage on the one hand and with the quantity and quality of various effects that person accepts on the shadow of presence in the particular virtual space in identity aspects.

In Ahangari's study (2007) entitled "A sociological study of the impact of the information society (satellite and internet) on the identity of the young girls in the city of Sanandaj" the research hypotheses include:

- Utilization of the facilities of information society is affecting the family identity.
- Utilization of the facilities of information society is affecting the religious identity.
- Utilization of the facilities of information society is affecting the individual identity.
- Utilization of the facilities of information society is affecting the national identity.

All of the above mentioned hypotheses have been approved. The result is that the information society and its values gradually enters influencing phase in society and are changing the identity of people.

Research Questions:
- What are the challenges of Iranian identity in virtual space?
- How can we use virtual space to reinforce Iranian identity?

Research Hypothesis:
- There is a significant relationship between Iranian identity challenges and use of the virtual space.
- There is a significant relationship between Iranian identity and the opportunities in the virtual space.

The Sub-Hypotheses:
- There is a significant relationship between virtual space and less attention to the values and norms.
- There is a significant relationship between virtual space and the effectiveness of the foreigners.
- There is a significant relationship between virtual space and the development of national and religious values.
- There is a significant relationship between virtual space and easy and rapid providing of cultural products.
- There is a significant relationship between virtual space and spreading Islamic and national values.
- There is a significant relationship between virtual space and change of users' opinions.

Research Methodology:
This study is a descriptive survey. In this study, identity challenges of one unit of the society that means male and female students of Islamic Azad University of abhar about virtual space, was considered. The statistical population of this study was consisted of the students of the Islamic Azad University of Abhar who enrolled in the first semester of the 2013-14 academic year and a sample size of 112 patients was estimated by Kokoran formula. To collect data, a 43 items questionnaire made by the researcher was used in this study.

SPSS software was used for data analysis. Data have been analyzed with descriptive statistics indexes such as (frequency, percentage and table) and inferential statistics indexes (Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficient and Kolmogorov-Smirnov).
Research Findings:
To check normality of research variables, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is used. Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is as follows:
- H0: Normality of variables
- H1: Non-normality of variables.

Table 1: The results of the k.s test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic</th>
<th>Significance level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virtual space</td>
<td>1.295</td>
<td>0.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iranian identity</td>
<td>1.140</td>
<td>0.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities in virtual space</td>
<td>1.081</td>
<td>0.193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iranian identity challenges</td>
<td>0.853</td>
<td>0.461</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the statistics of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and the test significance level. Since the test significant level for individual variables is more than the acceptable rate of error (α = 0.05), so H0 can not be rejected. That means all variables are normal.

Given the normality of research variables, Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to assess research hypotheses.

Research Findings:
First research hypothesis:
- H1: There is a significant relationship between Iranian identity challenges and the virtual space.
- H0: There is no significant relationship between Iranian identity challenges and the virtual space.

Table 2: Distribution of the sample people in terms of education, sex, length and type of using Internet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>83.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration of using Internet</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2 hours</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 to 5 hours</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 10 hours</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 hours</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of using Internet</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for scientific and educational information</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>58.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming news</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Distribution of coefficients, values and significance level of the variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>Coefficient values</th>
<th>significance level</th>
<th>Number of data (Number of people who answered)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Virtual space, Iranian identity challenges</td>
<td>Spearman</td>
<td>0.638</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Virtual space, Iranian opportunity and identity</td>
<td>Spearman</td>
<td>0.188</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Virtual space and less attention to the values and norms</td>
<td>Spearman</td>
<td>0.315</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Virtual space and the influence of foreigners</td>
<td>Spearman</td>
<td>0.353</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Virtual space and the development of national and religious values</td>
<td>Spearman</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.797</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cyberspace and easy and rapid providing of cultural products</td>
<td>Spearman</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.665</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Virtual space and spreading Islamic values</td>
<td>Spearman</td>
<td>0.307</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Virtual space, change of users' idea</td>
<td>Spearman</td>
<td>0.371</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 shows, the distribution of samples based on contextual demographic variables is as follows:
1. The highest education level is related to bachelor and the lowest is related to foundation degree.
2. Based on sex, 7/6% is men and 3/39 percent is women.
3. The maximum length of using Internet is 5 to 10 hours and the least is less than for 2 hours.
4. The most common use of internet is searching scientific and educational information with the 9/58% and the minimum use of internet is related to e-mail with 7.1%.

Table 3 shows that there is a significant and positive relationship between Iranian identity challenges and virtual space. The second hypothesis indicates that there is a significant and positive relationship between Iranian identity and opportunities in virtual space. About the third hypothesis we can say that there is a significant and positive relationship between virtual space and less attention to the values and norms.

Similarly, a positive and significant relationship can be seen between the influence of foreigners and virtual space. It can be said certainty that there is no positive and significant relationship between virtual space and the development of national and religious values and between virtual space and providing easy and rapid cultural products. About opportunities in virtual space and spreading Islamic values, there is a significant positive relationship. Finally, there is a significant and positive relationship between virtual space and change of opinions among users.

Discussion and Conclusion:
Nowadays, need of people to virtual space, especially the Internet, is inevitable. People use it according to their learned and adapted interests and values and according to their intellectual capacity and facilities. Presence in virtual space and the Internet, especially by young people, is of great importance and by reviewing research hypotheses; most of the research variables have a significant relationship with the dependent variable.

By proofing the first hypothesis regarding the fact that there is a positive and significant relationship between presence and use of the Internet and the challenges of Iranian identity, which includes variables such as non-compliance with the law, spreading of immoral pattern, avoidance of traits such as truthfulness, honesty, integrity, opposition to national values, membership in abnormal groups, illicit relationships and opposition to values, norms and tradition. It means that the less the presence and use of virtual space by students, the more identity challenges they will have.

The third hypothesis demonstrates the point that there is a positive and significant relationship between the presence in virtual space and less attention to the values and norms. That means, more use of virtual space by users, will cause more weakening in their national identity and they are neglected values and norms of Iranian society.

The fifth hypothesis suggests that there is a positive and significant relationship between the degree of presence in virtual space and influence of foreigners.

It is evidential that the more people be exposed to the virtual space; the more likely is the influence of other cultures.

The sixth hypothesis suggests that there is a significant and positive relationship between the presence in virtual space and change of users' opinions. Therefore, it can be said that searching in a virtual world leads to the changing of users' thoughts and ideas and will eventually weaken the Iranian identity of users.

This study followed the research on Golaleh Ahangari (2007), and also research of Abbas. Ghadi (2012) and Hafez Nia et al (2007). The authors have concluded that the use of virtual space with an emphasis on internet and satellite weaken the students' interests and is undermining national and local identity.

Overall, the results indicated that virtual space is effective in weakening national identity and as the beneficial effects that can not be ignored in today's world; its negative effects can not be neglected, too.

REFERENCES