Identity Formation in Cyberspace: Exploring Means, Motives, and Manipulations

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ABSTRACT: *Stephen Greenblatt in 'Renaissance Self Fashioning from More to Shakespeare' (1980) defined the human attempts at the creation of an identity as 'self-fashioning', as a conscious process of constructing ones identity according to a set of socially acceptable standards. Established institutions such as religion, state and family have controlled the formulation of individual and collective identities down the centuries. In the present day however, the proliferation of social networking sites, digital media and superfast means of communication, information and dissemination have resulted in the creation of a virtual domain, a non-material, non-physical, non-tangible space that gives individuals a certain level of conscious control regarding how they are perceived by others. This virtual domain has now become the space where identities can be created, managed and manipulated in ways unthinkable just a few decades ago. This paper makes an effort to discuss these intangible but very 'real' virtual spaces such as digital media and social networking sites that have become indispensable in the present day. It uses the concept of a self that is constructed wholly in the virtual domain to problematize issues of identity, otherness, belonging, being and presenting oneself. The economic, psychological, and literary dimensions of virtual identities will form a part of the discussion. In doing all of the above, it will attempt to raise questions about the validity and value of virtual identities.*
KEYWORDS: *identity, cyberspace, digital media, social media, psychological impact*

Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) defined the human attempts at the creation of an identity as 'self-fashioning', as a conscious process of constructing ones identity according to a set of socially acceptable standards. W.E. Herman(2011) notes that identity formation can be looked upon as the multifaceted approach by which human beings create a unique perspective of the self. He further emphasizes that the process is characterized by continuity and inner unity, and connected to the idea of comceptualising the self, personal values, and personality development. The objective of formation of a personal identity is to garner a cohesive and coherent view of the self. Established institutions such as religion, state and family have controlled the formulation of individual and collective identities down the centuries. In the present day however, Oscar Wilde's enigmatic claim, 'Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation', could perhaps be an intriguing perspective from which to describe and discuss the concept of identity in the 21st century. The quote above, an 'outrageous conundrum', (Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence,* 2006, xv) highlights the multiple aspects that go into the framing of modern day identities, whether personal or social. It also problematizes the act of self-formation as one where self-realization does not lie within reach of the individual but is influenced by changing fashions, ideologies, and trends, and thus, constantly deferred. In today's digital age, the proliferation of social networking sites, digital media and superfast means of communication, information and dissemination have resulted in the creation of a virtual domain, a non-material, non-physical, non-tangible space that gives individuals a certain level of conscious control as well as considerable freedom regarding how they are perceived by others. This digital domain has come to be a site where identities are re-formed, so to speak, as they come in contact or collision with forces that today control culture in its myriad expressions.

If the word 'identity', on the basis of its primary definition in Webster's Dictionary, can be understood as 'who or what a person is', the 'who' and the 'what' are determined, according to Greenblatt, by the ideologies and equations of power in play at the time. Humans fashion, are fashioned, and are aware of being fashioned by discourse. The discourse that guides identity formation in the 21st century is predominantly the one that concerns digital media. One of the most overwhelming consequences of both globalization and consumerism, digital media today dominates the creation of identities that are not only virtual, to state the obvious, but also, malleable, multiple, and manipulable. The dichotomy between one's private and public self has always been a fundamental factor in the understanding of identity. Today, this dichotomy is further complicated by the appearance of the 'virtual' self: one that is both public and private, and at the same time neither, because it is a consciously deceptive effort to present oneself in a particular way to an unprecedented number of unknown and unseen entities (individuals as well as groups) with whom one shares tenuous links.

The question here is: How and why has the digital revolution come to be such a crucial factor in the creation of identity? Psychology and genetics both prove that humans are not born with identities. Traits are inherited, personalities are not. Identities are constructed through a process of experiential learning and experimentation. The pliable nature of digital media is such that it can significantly extend and enlarge the experimentation aspect of identity formation -- providing users the opportunity to reshape their identities as they are perceived by others and to experiment with multiple versions of the self in an environment that is open and offers a relative level of anonymity. On a digital forum, one can be visible, yet invisible. Also, because of the vast reach of digital media, individuals can be exposed to political, ethnic or artistic identities and ideas, and recognize similarities and interests they may not have been previously aware of. It is in the individual's power to make this interest/s a part of their identity or to move away from it; both of which are conscious choices fashioned by the prevailing discourse. In the present context, this means that rather than becoming relatively stable as an adult moves into a fixed life role, identities, even in adulthood, are continuously subject to experimentation in the virtual space through social media, allowing people across the globe to interact with and influence each other. Such a process of identity formation both derives from and creates new stereotypes. One's picture on a digital platform, the groups one joins, the causes one chooses to espouse, the quotes (mostly by others) one likes to display on their timeline, in short, the information that one chooses to display on a virtual forum, all these go into the making of virtual identity; and this identity may or may not be one's true self; assuming one knows who they are in the first place. This brings to the fore another aspect of identity formation in the digital age. The inherent disconnect between real-world identity and virtual identity has resulted in a fragmentation of the self, an unprecedented split personality syndrome where the individual can be, to cite a personal example, a plain looking fifty something woman in private, a spectacle wearing sometimes smartly turned out college professor in public, and an absolute haute couture model on her social media profile. I may be one of these, or none of these, or some of these. Conscious falsification of one's image, both pictorial and intellectual, is rampant in the virtual world, not only because of the physical invisibility it provides, but also because it enables individuals to conform remotely to creeds, fashions or ideas they may not espouse in real life, but adherence to which is perceived as beneficial to their public persona. The reverse is also true. In the virtual domain, one can indulge in wish fulfillment and explore or experiment with identities that are unacceptable or unachievable in real life; video games being a particularly rich example of the above, as pointed out by Grooten & Kowert, in 'Going Beyond the Game: Development of Gamer Identities Within Societal Discourse and Virtual Spaces' (2014). For many, the discrepancy between who they actually are and who they profess to be in the digital domain can be so jarring that they begin to exist only in the virtual space. Self-esteem, self-confidence, and inter-personal relationships begin to determined by the number of 'likes' on one's page, the virtual friends one has and the number of virtual groups one is a member of. The virtual is as much a space to conceal, as to reveal. A deconstructionist can have a field day exploring and analyzing the margins of a virtual identity and the vast swathes of the concealed that lie cleverly hidden between the enticing allure of the revealed. Life on Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat, to cite a few examples, is one long happy moment, where one is at one's beautiful and witty best, surrounded by laughter and friends and happy occasions, and declaiming intelligently about the world and its myriad problems. The occasional gory, heart rending, obnoxious or satirical photo one encounters or displays is never of oneself, but of somebody else in another location for whom, either sympathy, outrage, or humour is solicited, thereby emphasizing one's professed commitments to causes. One's imperfections and insecurities lie securely behind that laughing, pleasant demeanour. In contrast to one's public self, which is still determined and confined by responses to authority and to change, the virtual self is comparatively autonomous, anonymous and therefore, liberating. One can call it a kind of 'virtual sprezzatura', an affected nonchalance, which spells out one's identity as, 'I'm like this only', or to say it with more attitude, 'That's me.'

Socially, the concept of a digital identity has practically done away with the caste-class divide. The relative anonymity of the virtual world as also its emphasis on the visible as opposed to the real/actual, is conducive to an inter mingling of various socio-economic strata in ways unthinkable just two decades ago. The virtual space is going on to obliterate social hierarchies, creating a world where people from diverse class/caste divisions can meet and converse on a common platform without attracting bias or prejudice because of their backgrounds. This becomes possible because of the quantity and the quality of personal imagery and information shared in the virtual arena.

Literature as an identity construct is emerging in unprecedented ways on the digital front. The virtual world provides a free, non-judgmental platform for expression of ideas that is not dependent on the wiles and whims of publishers, or even for that matter, on a readership. A blog, an e-book, a status update, a Tweet, a WhatsApp message even, are means of expression that are now gaining attention as popular literature in the digital age. Individuals now have a greater say, stake and scope in literary expression. While aspiring writers have always struggled to find readership, the digital arena has provided them with a liberating space where they can find validation and commonality of ideas and purpose. This revolution has far reaching consequences as far as definitions of literature are concerned, because it turns all traditional delineations upside down. (Luckhurst,

'Modern Literature and Technology' 2016) It constitutes a subversive, subaltern universe where authority, in the form of the canon, can safely be undermined, challenged or reinforced, as the case may be, without necessarily putting oneself at risk. As stated earlier, the anonymity, as well as the physical inaccessibility afforded by the digital realm is a major contributing factor to the cause.

Identities have a choice: to follow or to break stereotypes. Digital media, like traditional media, influences the choices we make. The commerce of identity formation in the digital age gives the individual not just helpful hints about who or what they may be perceived as, it insidiously propels them to make that choice. Notice the number of online shopping portals that encourage you to shop for the 'complete look'. Mannequins in shop windows did that for the consumer in the earlier decades, but never was the 'look' available on so vast, accessible and inexpensive a platform. Identities of companies and business establishments are determined as much by their digital presence as by their physical existence. In fact, they need not have a geographical, physical, or material presence anymore. The start-up culture, as much a child of the digital age, is replete with entrepreneurs who owe their success to digital media. An idea can constitute an identity in the world of commerce today, as proven by the existence of businesses like Snapdeal. Flipkart, Practo, Amazon, Craig's List, Uber, Ola, Urban Company, and others.

There is also a flipside to this revolutionary change sweeping across our lives. I would like to call it freedom of expression versus the narrative of hate. Without being judgmental, let us cast a cursory glance at any Facebook post, Tweet, Instagram, Twitter, or WhatsApp message. The deluge of partisan, bigoted, and plain nasty messages/comments that fly across our screens at the slightest pretext are symptomatic of a larger, deeper malaise. We have stopped being tolerant. It seems that the more information we have, the less willing we are to see the other's point of view. This in itself is a contradiction in terms. If we know, surely we know better? The wall of anonymity and physical inaccessibility accorded by the virtual seems to have given us the license to abuse raucously, to hate vociferously, and to condemn indiscriminately. Virtual groups can turn into virtual lynch mobs. The commoner and the celebrity are both trolled with impunity. No matter what you post on a public platform, it seems there will always be one fringe or the other that will be offended enough to protest, to chastise or to pronounce a sentence. The uncontrolled dissemination of information is also leading to an uncontrolled spread of hatred. Are we as intolerant in real life? Does this letting off of virtual steam make us better human beings in the real world? Are we at that juncture where our virtual identities will clash violently with our actual selves? And to state a philosophical poser, who are we eventually going to become: the virtual or the real? Finally, is the virtual now the real?

The digital platform is an eminently accessible space. Paradoxically, it is amenable to the creation of identities that are both physically inaccessible and materially non tangible. The freedom that this unique feature gives to the individual in the conscious construction of identity is in inverse proportion to the validity of such an identity. Having said that, it is impossible to deny that self-fashioning in the digital age is an act that is carried out predominantly in the virtual domain. Its stimuli are the various digital platforms that enable the confluence and free flow of ideas, interests and ideologies in all fields. The digital world is where the modern institutions of authority and their subversions collide or collude. Art in its various manifestations (literature, painting etc.) has been a primary force that causes men and women to be the way they are in a given culture. In this view, art becomes a means of self-fashioning or the power to control identity, one's own, another person's, or a group of people. Today, that power is vested in digital media.

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