



The Faces of Teens: The Exhibition of Multiple-identity in Social Media

Bhubate Samutachak¹, Kullatip Satararuj² and Reena Tadee³

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บทความวิจัยนี้ใช้กรอบทฤษฎีอัตลักษณ์ทางสังคมเพื่อศึกษาการสร้างพหุอัตลักษณ์ของวัยรุ่นไทยในพื้นที่สื่อสังคม แม้ว่าพฤติกรรมโดยทั่วไปของวัยรุ่นแต่ละคนไม่ว่าจะเป็นพฤติกรรมระหว่างบุคคลไปจนถึงพฤติกรรมระหว่างกลุ่มจะยังคงไม่เปลี่ยนแปลงระหว่างพื้นที่ออนไลน์และพื้นที่ออฟไลน์ บทความวิจัยนี้มีสมมติฐานว่าสื่อสังคมเปิดพื้นที่ที่เอื้อให้ผู้ใช้สามารถสร้างอัตลักษณ์ที่หลากหลาย และสามารถช่วยจัดการอัตลักษณ์อันหลากหลายเหล่านั้น เนื่องจากมีช่องทางต่างๆ มากมายให้ผู้ใช้สื่อสังคมเลือกใช้ได้อย่างเสรี วัยรุ่นสามารถใช้สื่อสังคมได้อย่างซับซ้อนจนสามารถสร้างพหุอัตลักษณ์ขึ้นมาได้ งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้เป็นงานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพเก็บข้อมูลด้วยเทคนิคการสนทนากลุ่ม 16 กลุ่ม มีผู้เข้าร่วมเป็นวัยรุ่นอายุ 16-18 ปี จำนวน 101 คน ผลวิจัยพบว่าวัยรุ่นการพัฒนาอัตลักษณ์ของวัยรุ่นมักได้รับอิทธิพลจากผู้มีอิทธิพลทางความคิดในโลกสื่อสังคมหรือที่เรียกว่าเน็ตไอดอล และวัยรุ่นมีแนวโน้มที่จะแสดงอัตลักษณ์ที่แตกต่างกันในแต่ละช่องทางของสื่อสังคมเพื่อลดการเป็นบุคคลชายขอบภายในกลุ่ม ในขณะที่การทำเช่นนี้เป็นบางครั้งทำให้วัยรุ่นรู้สึกเติมเต็มในสิ่งที่ต้องการแต่บางครั้งนำไปสู่ความคับข้องใจและความขัดแย้งในตัวเอง

คำสำคัญ : พหุอัตลักษณ์ ; วัยรุ่น ; สื่อสังคม ; การสร้างอัตลักษณ์

ABSTRACT

Based on the social identity theory this paper investigates the development of multiple-identity of Thai teens engaging in social media. Although the range of behaviors from interpersonal to intergroup remains unchanged in both online and offline spheres, this article hypothesizes that social media offers more options for individuals to manage the development and the deployment of their identities. Hidden within the unfathomed and far-reaching space of social media are myriad of fragmented channels in which one can freely choose. Engagement in social media therefore has become more complicated and leads to the development of complexive social identity and multiple-identity of teenagers. This qualitative research collected data through sixteen focus group sessions with 101 participants, aged 16-18 years old. Findings from this study reveal that online contents delivered by influencers, so called net idol, induce teens' characters and identities. Teens also tend to exhibit different identities in different social media platforms mainly to de-marginalize one-self among the members. While the exhibition of multiple-identity can be one's personal fulfillment, inner frustrations are controversial.

Keywords : Multiple-identity ; Teenager, Social Media ; Identity Formation

¹ Assistant Professor, Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, Thailand

² Associate Professor, Graduate School of Communication Arts and Management Innovation, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Thailand

³ Researcher, Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, Thailand



Introduction

It was one of the common high-schooler hangouts at a fancy mall restaurant in the downtown area of Bangkok. Everything looked normal and routine-backpacks, soft drinks, cool pants, stylish haircuts-except for one thing: everyone faced down at their smartphones, busy scrolling up and down the screen, switching from one application to another, occasionally pausing to take self-photos (or popularly called 'selfie'), and then back to the screen again. 'Face-down (Phubbing) society', as it is humorously called, is looming over Thailand and other countries, provoking both positive and negative comments (Barry, Sidoti, Briggs, Reiter & Lindsey, 2017).

According to the Global Digital Statistic Report 2019, internet penetration in Thailand was 82% in early 2019. The country has maintained remarkable rank in respect of mobile phone and social media usage. Social media penetration was 74%: Facebook alone had 50 million active users while its population is around 67 million. Mobile phone penetration was 133% with 92 million mobile subscribers while the world average is 67%.

Among the social media users, teenagers are among the most vulnerable groups as social media presents limited mechanism for content screening and surveillance, while there are endless opportunities for them to experiment with their identities (Kennedy & Lynch, 2016). What is to be concerned is their fragile volition and judgment. The limited capacity for self-regulation and susceptibility to peer pressure of teenagers exposes them to risky navigation and experiment in the world of social network (Stern & Odland, 2017).

The rapid advancement of digital device and social media create greater private space and time for users. Accessibility to and engagement in such space can be totally unseen even when they walk in the most crowded place or sit in front of their parents at the dining table. Once they face down against the light radiating from a smartphone

in their hand, they flee into their wide virtual world.

Some of early literature on social media presents different limits of different site. Facebook, for example once had its limits on emotional expression, and photo and text-oriented nature. However, the later introduction of new features makes the site most possibly comprehensive. Now, one can decorate one's Facebook page and even post videos to display as much emotion, identity, and information as desires. Even a less sophisticated application such as Line, a chat platform, offers functions to display information of various forms. This development of site and application in turn develop personal strategies to express and display one's self and identity to better appeal and connect to other people.

Appearing in each online community, one can choose to display the true self or disguise in any characters as one can freely invent. In an effort to conform one's self to the normative behavior of the group, one develops different characters. Unconsciously, this results in multiple identities. And this makes the voyage through social media platform more exciting and stimulating, especially for the self-experimenting ages.

In this paper, the authors seek to report identity and multiple-identity developments of teenagers, through socialization in social media. The issue is addressed through the lens of social identity theory of intergroup behaviors. It is argued in this paper that social media can influence identity development in teenagers as they absorb and conform to the normative behaviors of the online groups in which they participate. And because social media presents opportunities to teenagers to expose themselves to various online groups, they are induced to develop different characters, thus multiple-identity, to fit each group.



Social identity theory, social media and identity development of teenagers

As a part of an attempt to reestablish the collectivist approach to the social psychology of the self and social group, (Robinson & Tajfel, 1996) introduced the social identity theory. The core tenet of the theory explains that individuals derive self-concept from the social group and categories to which they belong. It is the attempt of members of the group to conform to the group's norms that makes possible the group's influence on members' behaviors. Desire to be accepted into the group either voluntarily motivate or pressure its members to follow the group norms (Hogg, 2016).

Roaming through the world of social media, teenagers pass through a plethora of social communities and choose in which to enlist. Information and experience provided by those social media sites are richer and of greater variety than traditional offline world. In conjunction with their psychological stage of identity formation (Crocetti, 2017), teenagers, either intentionally or unconsciously, develop their identity to conform to the group norms. Teenagers develop identity, create profile, and network with others in the online community (Boyd, 2014). A person strives to achieve '*positive distinctiveness*' and demarginalize oneself (Hogg, 2016) among the group members, or even depersonalize only to fit in. The effort will remain as long as the group adds affirmative characteristics such as power, self-efficacy, and the need to belong, to the personal social identity (Cheng & Guo, 2015).

Identity experimentation of teenagers is particularly more convenient through internet communication and social media. Two fundamental characteristics of internet and social media stimulating the experimentation are reduced cues and reduced social repercussion (Hall, 2016). Different from face-to-face communication of the offline world, online communication is more flexible inasmuch as cue concern-a person can choose to reduce the auditory and visual effects. These reduced cues allow teenagers to easily emphasize, change or

conceal their self. In addition, the ability, of the online communication, to conceal the self can help reduce social repercussion if things go wrong with the experiment.

Multiple-identity: many faces of teenagers

While the sense of belonging to a group makes a person conform to the group norms and influences self-identity, membership of multiple groups induces a person to develop multiple-identity. In this regard, social media plays an important role by offering a person opportunity to learn about a great number and variety of groups with most efficient means to join many groups simultaneously. Never before could a person enlist into as many groups at the same time as present. And this is possible only in the virtual world, mediated by social media. Of course, it is true that the world has been well connected since the invention and proliferation of internet. However, it is social media and the ease to access that make the connection faster and more time-efficient than ever since 2003.

Scouting and choosing groups to connect are parts of the identity experimentation. In order to effectively maintain these heterogeneous connections, one develops impression management skills (Roulin & Levashina, 2016). As the norms of each group demand different behaviors, a person produces virtual alternative identities when present in each respective group, motivated by the emotional fulfillment, according to the social identity theory, to fit into the desired groups. Multiple-identity is more convenient in the virtual world both because of the time efficiency and identity-concealing affordance in the online setting. It permits teenagers more opportunities to experiment. Curiosity in the abundance of excitement in the social media magnetizes teenagers to their devices, e.g. smartphone, notebook, tablet. Where will they be led and lured is beyond expectation-anywhere even traditionally taboo and restricted to the underage. In addition, multiple-identity is necessary in prohibited areas in the online world as well as in



the offline. Being able to disguise themselves makes teenagers feel safer, from social reproach, to experiment and reside. Name and profile can be a mere front-anything that would be appealed and acceptable to other group members, anything that one aspires to be, or any qualifications that one desires to possess (Homayoun, 2017).

Method: Participants and Procedure

This qualitative study employs the focus group discussion technique to investigate the development of identity and multiple-identity of teens when engaging in social media. The technique is favored over the in-depth interview as it better reveal common experiences and opinions through discussions among the participants. The participants were 101 Thai students: 50 males, 51 females, aged 15-18 years old from high schools and vocational schools agreeing to participate in the project. Recruiting the participants, the researchers contacted teachers or guidance counselors of the selected schools and asked permission from the schools' principals. Participants were those who reported as regularly using social media and having their own smartphone. There were 8 high schools and 8 vocational schools agreed to participate in the project. Four of each school category were considered the schools of medium-to-high socioeconomic status, while the other four of medium-to-low socioeconomic status. In the total of 16 schools, 8 were located in Bangkok and the other 8 in Chiang Mai, a northern province. While the capital city Bangkok, according to the national statistics of internet usage in 2018 (National Statistical Office, 2018), reports the highest internet usage in the country, Chiang Mai was highest at the provincial and regional level. These two areas were chosen as the data-collection sites.

At each school, the researchers conducted two sessions of focus group discussion, one for male and the other for female students. The focus group sessions were arranged according to gender and socio-economic homogeneity to reflect their

effects on social media use (Hsu, Tien, Lin & Chang, 2015 ; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Each group had 6-8 participants. The sessions lasted around 2 hours. The researchers conducted the sessions following the focus group discussion guidelines of Krueger and Casey (2014). The moderator's guideline comprises of 6 parts: Introduction (of the project background, moderator, and participants) and ice-breaking, daily life in and habit of using social media, communication in social media, self-concept promotion, identity search, and self-presentation in social media. The moderator's guideline obtained the ethical approval no.COA 2018/10-287 from the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, Thailand. The focus group sessions were completed during January-March 2018.

In order to obtain most candid information, the moderator used various qualitative techniques, such as third-person technique, word association, picture frustration, sentence completion, etc. The recorded conversations were transcribed and the thematic analysis was conducted to reveal the participant's patterns of reality. The next section presents the results and discussion with exemplary quotes from the participants. Pseudonyms are used, showing in parenthesis with F for female, M for male, HS for high school, VS for vocational school, BKK for Bangkok, and CM for Chiang Mai, in order to preserve anonymity.

Results and Discussion

Teenagers and smartphone: an inseparable pair of pals

As a matter of fact, what teenagers are addicted to is not the device, but rather the conversation and information. The phrase '*play with my phone*' becomes very common among the participants, described as checking the Facebook, reading and answering to the Line, uploading photos and following their friends in the Instagram. These activities proceed in circle and can continue



whole day long-as long as the time and occasion allows.

'It can be all day if I have nothing to do, especially during the weekend.' (Ben: M, HS, BKK)

'Breaking my eyes in the morning, I first check my (smart) phone before doing anything else, to see if there is any notifications and the updates of my friends (on Facebook). And just have it on for all day.' (Joe: M, VS, CM)

'From getting up in the morning until going to bed' (Pink: F, HS, BKK)

'It is not allowed in classroom. So, I do it on the way to school, during the lunch break, between classes, on the way back home... everywhere that is not in the classroom.' (Pim: F, VS, CM)

The emphasis here is by no means the smartphones, but rather the applications they used-all social media. After reading their responses, the researchers asked the participants to elaborate. All of them talked about their fun time watching drama series, concerts, or gossips about superstars on Youtube, updating their statuses on the Facebook and waiting to see how many 'likes' they would get, responding in repartee to the comments, posting photos on the Instagram, and chatting in the Line.

'Net Idol' and identity development of teenagers

The social identity theory explains how an individual attempt to blend into a circle of people with common interest, by creating positive distinctiveness thus developing identity. Social media influencer, 'Net idol', appear to be an important catalyst of such process. 'Net Idol', or popular figures in social media or internet idol, appears to be something that most of the participants referred to as an important source of influence. Net idol can be a superstar, Thai or foreign or even any local popular persons who become an issue of teen discussion. Following these net idols as fan club, these "idol disciples" (the term is literally used in the Thai context)

exhibit shared identities, derive sense of pride, and feel confident. Thirty-three participants mentioned that they have their net idols who were superstar, while 15 had been following net idols that were seniors of their high school or other high school. They admitted that these net idols had influences on their habits, attitude, and behaviors.

'I love watching superstars giving interview when they have some kind of scandals. I think I learn a lot how to react when I have an argument with someone.' (Pook: F, VS, BKK)

'I read Pearypie (most popular blogger, writing about facial make-up tips) before going to bed every night. I think she possesses me. When I'm doing my make-up I think of her and it (make-up) came out just like her!' (Poom: F, HS, BKK)

'Pee Pang (a popular game caster) is super cool. She is a goddess of gamers. I can watch her demonstrating games all day' (Big: M, HS, BKK)

There were four participants who spoke so much about how social media influence them about their future career. They explained that it started from searching around Youtube and became interested in something, then following those topics until it came to what they wanted as a profession. Boom (M, HS, BKK) told that he wanted to be a doctor after he had watched a tumor operation on Youtube many years ago. He then started to study hard and seek for more information about preparations to be a medical student. Also, he followed the page 'Born to be Moh' (Moh means doctor in Thai) and actively frequented the page.

TiTi (M, HS, CM) decided that he wanted to be a documentary producer. He did not know why or when it happened: but he enjoyed searching for documentary of all kinds on Youtube, not for the content but the way it was shot and what the producer looked like. He became an amateur documentary producer of many VDO projects of his school, buying his own small camera and having a movie editing program at home. The other two participants had quite similar



stories: surfed through Youtube, fell in love with a career, sought for more information, found their selves, and follow their dreams: one a judge, another a sound engineer.

It is not a new knowledge that social media is an important and huge source of information. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the exposure of these teenager to social media during their age of identity and character formation is particularly important. Social media has become the new environment, emerged during the 20th century, that can significantly shape teenagers' identity. Nowadays, they are exposed to worldwide contents that are presented to them conveniently in their hands all most all day long. They can swipe and scroll their smartphone until they find the contents that attract them. They can revisit the thread of those content as often as they desire, and be inspired by them. We could also see that Poom (the participant who talked about how the facial-make up blogger influence her) was a girl wearing light make-up and looked like having experienced hands. Perhaps, the list of social media sites that a person frequently visit could be help to predict the identity of that person.

Multiple-identity: faces of a teenager

When asked the participants if their true self and self-presentation in social media were different, most of them positively confirmed. *'I am more confident and braver than my true self (when contact through social media),'* Kong (M, HS, BKK) backed up his answer. It was explained that because both sides of the conversation were not physically there, and they had more time to think how to react. They were less fear for face-losing if anything went wrong. It was safer when not total identity presented. Making friends on Facebook or Line for courting and intimate purpose is common among teenagers.

There was a rare case of one female participant, (Fern: F, HS, BKK) who admitted that she was a 'Y' girl. Recently more prevalence, 'Y' girl in the Thai context is characterized by a girl

who loves to make a match of boys to be gay lovers, in her imagination. The matched boys may not actually be gay. Watching gay male movies or reading novels of the kind makes her fulfilled and happy. Fern joined a gay host-club page, faked her profile as a gay to go after the web master.

'We have been talking to each other for two years. I think I like him very much and I think he likes me a lot. But neither of us asked for an actual meeting. Perhaps we are both a fake. It was a very happy moment chatting with him. We have our regular chatting time!' (Fern: F, HS, BKK)

Concerning the inconsistency between true self and online self-presentation, and multiple-identity, it is more likely to find in female than male teenagers. Particularly in the issue of social conflict among teenagers, multiple-identity was reported to most easily seen. When the conflict seemed to be settled and everyone agreed to normalize the relationship, bad temper might splash even harder on Facebook or Line.

'Many girls look very polite and sweet outside (offline), but on Facebook they are so spicy and dark.' (Tom: M, VS, CM)

'Girls fake online more than boys; I don't know. They are different person when online' (Ploy: F, VS, BKK)

'Boys are more real both online and offline, I think. Besides, I don't think boys do Facebook as much as girls.' (Petch: F, HS, BKK)

Participation in multiple groups is another reason for multiple identities. Protocols, expected manners and characteristics in each group may be greatly different. Group participation can be either compulsory or voluntary. In the space where members of many groups overlap, a person will be more cautious in expressing the self. This may include proper language, moderate photos, update of status and upload of information. Only in the closed group can a person present the selective self that fits the respective group.

'My elementary school group (on Facebook) and high school group are so different in characters. So I have to be different.' (Mint: F, VS, CM)



'When I have a night-out, I go with a different group: not from my school. Most of my classmates are nerds: they don't hangout too much. I have two Facebook accounts: one for each group. I can't let my classmate know what kind of night life I have.' (Eve: F, VS, BKK)

Although it seems evident in this research that social identity and multiple identity development were found more in female than male, we could not detect differences between the teens in the provincial (Chiang Mai) and capital city. These might suggest that social media, in a sense, provide an equal platform of influence to all teenagers no matter where they are located. However, it can be seen that influences on career-related identities were found more among the cases of high-school than vocational.

Social media also allows a person to appear simultaneously in different channels, with unprecedented temporal efficiency. These online channels or communities features different functions, purposes, and, perhaps, members. It is perhaps because of various interests that induce a person to enlist in many different communities (Balkaya, Cheah, & Tahseen, 2019). Some community might be decent for public attention; some might be a guilty pleasure that must be kept private (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015). In attempt to be accepted and respected by other members, one tend to de-marginalize oneself by conforming to the norm of each group (Chua & Chang, 2016). This might include the attempt to construct different identity for each respective group.

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Conclusion

Social media is a big world. It is an even bigger world for teenagers as they live a large part of their lives in it. Various countries have experienced rapid growth of internet usage especially among young adult population. Smartphones and social media have become the closest friends of teenagers and instrumental in the development of their identity and multiple-identity.

In the case that the participants were strongly identified themselves with the group, the attempt to comply to the group norm was even stronger. Having opportunity to associate in multiple online communities at the same time, one can develop multiple-identity to fit each different community in which one participate. This can be helpful in human development strategies in many ways.

It is not the argument of this article that a person never develops multiple-identity before the social media is invented. But, rather, social media's nature offers more opportunities and even encourage a person, especially teenagers, to do so. This is manifested by the exhibition of different characters in different social media sites depending on the norms and collective character of the members. In a positive side, multiple-identity allow a person to more efficiently interact in the respective community, and reduce pressure of online interaction. On the other hand, it might create conflict and confusion within a person and among peers.



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