

Psychological impact of Social Networking Sites: A Psychological Theory

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ABSTRACT

The preponderance of social networking sites such as Facebook, Youtube and others, have altered the way in which people interact socially in the real world. In fact, much more can be said about the impact of these modern technologies on the basic structure of human personality: the id, ego, and super-ego. The paper proposes a psychosocial theory that modifies Sigmund Freud's (1923) basic relationships and interactions of the id, ego and super-ego in his Psycho-analytic Theory. It is claimed that an individual's engagement with virtual reality (social networking) portends a segregation of the super-ego from the id and ego. In a virtual world, social interactions are not constrained by societal norms and standards (super-ego) so that the tendency is for the id (instincts and drives) to merge with the ego (what is real) and they become indistinguishable. The sociological implications of this theory are also explored in this paper.

Keywords: *psychoanalytical theory, psychosocial theory, id, ego, super-ego*

I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the dawn of modern computers and the worldwide web, Freud's (1923) psychoanalytic theory served as a cornerstone of psychology and the analysis of the structure of human personality. Freud believed that personality has three structures: the id, the ego and the super-ego. The id is the structure of personality that consists of instincts. It is totally unconscious and has no contact with reality. The ego is the structure that concerns with reality and is considered as the "reasoning" and "decision-making" part of personality. Both the id and the ego have no morality, an aspect of the personality taken care of by the superego. The superego is often referred to as the conscience.

The rapid and accelerated developments in

information technology have changed the way in which people do things, pervading all aspects of life. The invention of social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo Mail and others, paved the way for a virtual human interaction cutting across geographic, time, race, and socio-economic boundaries. Thus, human civilization is now characterized as a civilization living in two worlds: the real world and the virtual world. This state-of-affairs is very much different from the world perceived by Freud (1923) and Jung (1948). Consequently, it is not surprising that personality theories were crafted and developed when the world was a simpler world, has to be refined and enhanced to explain what modern human beings are experiencing.

In cyberspace, Boyd and Ellison (2007)

claimed that SNS offer rich naturalistic behavioral data confirming an earlier claim by Wellman and colleagues (1996) that using SNS gives people access to maintain their existing connections and meeting new people. Bargh and colleagues (2002, 2004) spoke of the positive effect of SNS to people with low mental and emotional well-being. Ellison (2007) averred that virtual relations do not necessarily take people away from their real world. As a matter of fact, it can be used to bring back relationships and preserve people who want to be in contact with each other regardless of changes.

While these authors proclaim the positive benefits one derives from SNS, other authors have found the downside of the phenomenon. Benezes (2010) said that engagement of oneself with SNS is a great way to let users direct themselves and show the world their real selves. This statement is both accurate and revealing: that something more profound yet unobtrusive is happening in the personality structure of a person. This paper aims to deduce this phenomenon.

II. THEORY FORMULATION AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

This section is focused on the formulation of the psychological theory.

Pew, as mentioned by Kiss (2011), claims that genuine emotional support and well-being are provided by online social networks and these include advice, information, and companionship. It was found out that the use of a well-established system in measuring the well-being of a certain individual who uses the internet has practically provided them with significant emotional support. Facebook is found to be the most particular among the social networks and that its users were able to establish and form closer relationships and bonds. Further, the study has revealed that the user's regular online activities' over the site have made them more trusting of others than non-Facebook users.

Moreover, the SNS offer the individuals such as the students, professionals and other who go

online the opportunity to create a positive self-image. For them to be seen by others the way they wanted to be, they create profiles emphasizing the best qualities in them. With this activities going online greatly show that one cares about his/her reputation.

In the journal *The British Psychological Society* (2013), Behavior and Information Technology has found out that a person's psychological well-being can be constructively influenced through strong use of the social networking site. In addition, the study found an interaction between Facebook and psychological well-being measures. The study advocates that students who are experiencing low self-esteem or those who are not even gratified with their lives at present can take advantage from making greater use of Facebook and its capability to bond them to others.

Axiom 1: Online social network tools can be of help to individuals who have low psychological well-being.

The capacity to bring evocative and meaningful bonds to people who might be shunned as outcasts is one of social networking's paramount profits. These SNS can be a virtuous way to sort connections with people having the same interests and goals. The SNS can be a very good outlet not only in making connections but also in meeting people that an individual may not have the chance of experiencing before. People on social networking sites are into sharing about what interests them, like news on current events, lifestyle, fashion, and even about people. For individuals who go online and share those interests, or for those who just wanted to stay updated, they can read stories on the site and share them with their own circle of friends and/or acquaintances.

In a study cited by Novotney (2012) in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* (2010), lonely adolescents go online in order to meet new friends. The study manifests the significant impact of online communication

especially to those individuals who have claimed loneliness as the reason why they go online. Further, the study has revealed that the most frequently shared topics are more personal and intimate compared to those individuals who never reported that they are lonely. Moreover, these teens have also indicated that online communication is more frequent because of the notion that in their online world, they do not feel any shame and that they can share and talk more freely happily and that they can dare to say anything.

Wellman, et.al (1996) on the other hand stated SNS strong linkages have helped in preserving relationships regardless of the frequency on the movement of an individual from one offline community to another, notwithstanding the geographical locations. Steinfield, et. al (2009) have catalogued that social capital generates limitless networks of these three: strong, weak and long-term ties. It can be noted too that the use of social networks are becoming more non-exclusive. It has also been found to lower obstacles and it has allowed people to retain bonds effortlessly. Furthermore, Steinfield, et al. (2009) established that the more an individual uses SNS, the grander expanse of social capital he will have.

In short social networking expands the horizons of what sort of contacts people can make in their lives.

Axiom 2: The use of social networking sites gives people an access to maintain existing connections or meet new people.

On the bases of Axioms 1 and 2, we deduced that:

Proposition 1: SNS enhances a person's confidence and psychological well-being making him more socially active.

The rise of the internet usage and the ever evolving technology that brought about the existence of these SNS and social capitals brought

about one of its greatest benefits and that is the ability of bringing meaningful rapports to people who might otherwise be eschewed as outsiders.

The study of Daria J. Kuss and Mark D. Griffiths (2011) indicated the chief use of Social Networking Sites for social tenacities. It is mostly associated with maintaining recognized offline networks. Moreover, SNS are used for social enrichment by those identified as extraverts and as social compensation for those who are identified as introverts. The findings have greatly left an impression related to usage, low conscientiousness and narcissistic tendencies.

Nguyen, et.al. (2012) believed that the social networking sites are the merging of emotions among people within a social network and that it has potentially resulted in the happening of an unprecedented event in the real world.

Axiom 3: Rich sources of naturalistic behavioral data are provided by social network sites.

Steinfield, et.al (2009) revealed in his study that these SNS have managed to get online support actions from the offline world. Further, they have revealed that both social networks and social capital also backed the impression that the new surge of virtual interaction is not actually taking away the people from the real world. These SNSs have helped maintain, create, and strengthen new ties thus permitting the social groups to be more closely bonded, contribute and give back to their respective networks. The interactions online via social networking sites do not necessarily remove people from their real world. These interactions have further maintained and sustained relationships as individual change or transfer from one community to another. This use of technology keeps them in contact with each other more often.

Further, Steinfield, et. al (2009) noted that a well bonded, bridged and maintained social capitals help people make a close, loose, or long-term relationships. These were attested in the

surveys and when their benefits are looked into and considered, the connections they produce are tremendous.

Brenan (2010) cited Ellison's (2007) that individuals who make use of SNS craft more social capital order to preserve social connections from the past. These so-called sustained social capitals do not only maintain relationships but also congeal temporary acquaintanceships. In addition, offline interactions can maintain relationships once online relationship ends. This impression supports the idea that virtual interactions compliment and do not unavoidably replace the face-to-face interaction.

Strong, weak and long-term ties are the boundless networks that the social capital builds with the use of the SNS. Recently, networks are becoming non-exclusive and because of this, it has lowered the barriers and has allowed more people to stay connected and maintain their ties. On the other hand, social capitals have broadened networks and have provided individuals with countless contact to people and resources be it in their respective workplace or within their respective circles.

Brenan (2010) further stressed that SNS positively takes part in the development of these connections. The increase in social capitals has greatly emphasized (1) the idea of what is offline to online; (2) what does it show despite the rising of the new technologies; and that the rise of these networks is not reducing the face-to-face interaction. The existence of SNSs and social capitals do not only create, support and strengthen offline ties. These SNS serve not as a menace to the total loss of the old-style social connections; it actually compliments and upholds them with the use of the state-of-the-art technology.

Axiom 4: Virtual interactions do not necessarily remove people from their real world.

Thus, we claim that:

Proposition 2: SNS and the real world are almost identical to the user.

In the new age, SNS are considered as virtual societies, wherein the users are given the freedom to create their individual public profiles, correlate with actual friends, and meet new acquaintances based on the interests they share.

These SNSs are web-based amenities that permit personalities to: (1) produce an unrestricted or semi-restricted profile within a constrained system, (2) express to other users with whom they have shared a connection with, and (3) see and go over their list of networks and acquaintances within the system. It is in these conventional groups where the focus is centered rather than on making new connections. To wit, these SNS offer entities a lot of opportunities not only in interacting and media sharing but also in adopting the worldwide web alongside its characteristics and the framework of its specific structure (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011).

As Ellison (2007) has cited, these social networking sites create social capital that is not a supplementary of direct interaction because this social capital permits individual to showcase themselves. It also gives the individuals opportunity to articulate, establish and maintain influences with others.

Keeping in contact with family through the phone or even over email presents a challenge, however, these social networking sites have allowed the individual to share their day to day life in a secure but public forum, which other members of the family (who may be in the other parts of the world) can watch and experience. Putnam's (2000), views have portrayed that the social capitals' bond echoes stronger family ties and other relationships. These are ties formed within families and friends who are in the better position to give support emotionally especially when sources are scarce and rare.

On the other hand, Novotney (2012) in her study quoted Jeffrey Hancock saying, "Unlike a mirror, which reminds us of who we really are

and may have a negative effect on self-esteem if that image does not match our ideal, Facebook can show a positive version of ourselves... it is not a deceptive version of self but it's a positive one."

The internet and other new forms of network communication have amplified reality and text messaging and that it includes issues that are related to protection, confidentiality, and network formation.

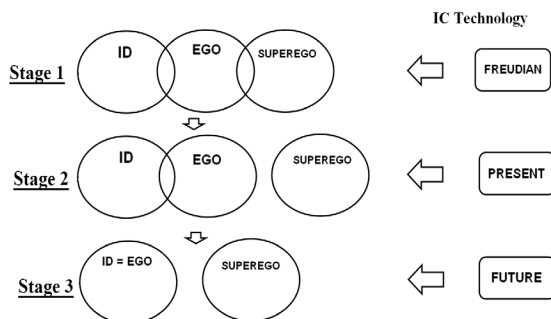
Axiom 5: Social networking site (SNSs) is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual.

These axioms lead to:

Proposition 3: In the long term, the user derives the same satisfaction in the virtual and real worlds but since SNS occupies most of his time, the virtual world becomes the real world.

In sum, we deduce the following Psychological Theory:

Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Psychological Theory



III. PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

Evolution of the structure of personality from the classic psychoanalytic theory of Freud (1923) to the information age portends a separation of the superego from the id and the ego as illustrated in the diagram. The emergence of a virtual world induced by the pervasiveness of social networking sites (SNS) creates "netizens" or real people interacting in cyberspace where traditional norms

and standards of behavior are virtually non-existent. The so-called conscience or superego is no longer felt while the id (human instincts) and the ego (real self) combine in a seamless border. The more time spent by people in this virtual world, the more they develop confidence and a sense of psychological well-being driven by the id and the ego. The virtual world is a world without restraints where everyone exercises unbridled freedom of expression.

IV. SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The pervasiveness of SNS not only enhances the person's confidence and psychological well-being, it also makes him more socially active and since SNS lodges more of the user's time, the virtual world becomes the user's real world. People in the virtual world can be aggressive and expressive but they can be the exact opposite in the real world. Many will find the restraints of the superego in the real world as oppressive and thus, find comfort and freedom in the virtual world.

Social interactions in the virtual world are practically without responsibility and self-accountability. People feel safer in this context: no reprisals and no commitments in a virtual Hedonism. In the real world where societal norms are present and where conscience prevails, people are more guarded and more circumspect. The net effect is that the real world social circle of an individual shrinks while his virtual social circle expands.

Since the virtual world has very little or no restraints, the concept of societal outcasts has no immediate meaning. Psychopaths and deviants are devoid of meaningful interpretation and, for lack of appropriate terms, are referred to as "cyber bullies". They are not considered criminals in the real-world but they are treated as disturbing annoyances. Only when psychopathic or deviant behaviors manifest in the real world do societal laws apply.

The notions of equality and equity pervade in the virtual world. Here, there are no ranks, authority, power and domination. The virtual

world equalizes the rich and the poor; the powerful and the oppressed; the intelligent and the dull. In fact, it is precisely this characteristic of the virtual world which makes it very attractive for most people. Benezes (2010) succinctly describes this as “being who you are and what you are.”

In the virtual world, an action neither conforms nor follows prevailing norms. It takes place when norms are absent or unclear as Park (1921) laconically refers it to social processes and events that does not reflect existing social structures and laws but emerged in a spontaneous way. Alfred Schutz’s social phenomenology argued that people depend upon language and the “stock of knowledge” that they have accumulated to enable social interaction. For him, people both create social reality and are constrained by the pre-existing social and cultural structures that are created by their predecessors.

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