



Impact of Virtual Selves on Familial Cohesion and Amity

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Abstract

While the extensive incorporation of virtual life has opened new hallways and unique prospects for users to explore and experiment with newer identities, it has also left negative effects on their real-life relations, familial cohesion and amity. This study examines if users are too involved in ideally presenting and building their self-image and sharing details of their day-to-day routines with old and new friends on free and converged (social) media applications and websites to pay attention to their families. It found a gap in literature on the impact of virtual life on Pakistani family relations and amity. It used a survey questionnaire to collect data from 650 students enrolled at University of Lahore to study the effect of virtual life, time, social engagement, and ideal self-presentation on deteriorating real-life relations, family interactions, and bonding. It was found that virtual life has a negative effect on real life and relations. The users spend more time online building their social media personae and relationships than investing their time in constructing real-life identity, and interactions and bonding with the family. The family interaction and social bonding (dependent variables) were tested against time spent on social media (independent variable). The linear regression analysis showed that time consumed on social media significantly predicts deterioration in family interaction and family bonding, $F=62.757$, $p<0.05$. It indicated that the time consumed on social media played a significant negative role in shaping family interactions and amity (family bonding) ($b=0.794$, $p<0.05$). The results pointed to the negative impact of time spent on social media on family interactions. $R^2=.073$ reflected a 7.3% variance in family interactions and family bonding. They pointed to a dire need to guide youth to balance their association with social media sites and improve their family interactions and family bonding.

Keywords: online identity, family interactions, family bonding, real-life identity

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid adoption of the internet has affected social communication patterns of users with both their virtual and real friends and family. Real life relations and communication platforms are strongly hit by the 4G internet and affordable smartphones that work as catalysts in rapid growth of social media relations and platforms (GSMA, 2019; Kemp, 2022). Technology has replaced spectrum of real life style with the virtual around the globe. Social media, as the love child of web, has overcome almost all the domains of life (Farrugia, 2017). Virtual communities: blogs, social networks, twitter, TikTok, micro blogs, virtual gaming apps, photo sharing podiums, chat apps, forums and business networks have globally replaced many parallel real communities. The technology has played an inevitable role in the development of modern virtual communities that seemingly have bridged communication gaps, created new connections, and gratified the young users from different cultures, lifestyles, family structures and religions. These communities appear more appealing and better places for having social relations with peoples of all kinds. Various virtual or social media platforms allow users to create, manage and present their self-image as they wish. Users invest more time on virtual platforms than real life, which has generated a debate regarding their impact on real-life norms, values, social relations and communication patterns. Pakistani scholars have raised similar concerns about the impact of virtual life on real life social and family relations, considering Pakistani norms and values provide a contrast to the western epistemology: system of thought and knowledge of culture.

Pakistan is a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic Muslim country with a conventional, mail dominating, family centered social structure. It is largely dependent upon joint and nuclear family structure. Here, time spent with the family system is viewed as the foundation of social practices, values and norms. It is essential to interact with parents, sibling and relatives, which is considered a mandatory component for strengthen the familial bonding. This norm is further strengthened through day gatherings and conversations with family and relatives over matters of joint interest, worries and issues, or giving and getting censure on choices while having meals or tea (Khan, Qadeer, Ansari, & Waheed, 2009). Families expect their individual members will fulfill certain obligations and commitments for propagation of family customs and standards and morals or ethics of the society. All family interactions and formal or informal meetings intend to support family relations and bonding (Pandele et al., 2021). While the internet and social media, which is only the tip of the iceberg, distract attention of youth, involve them in cybernetic socialization and sway them away from their customary real-life social trends (Pandele et al., 2021).

Youth spends too much time building their online personae. Online life reduces their family time, communication and bonding. The digital gadgets though have increased their contraption choices and abilities to present them in virtual world, they have decreased their real-life time sharing, communication and bonding. They attain more attention by shrinking the nature and time of joyful interaction with the friends and family (Hao, Farooq, & Sun, 2018). Even when the people are physically-present with their families, they intellectually or joyfully engage with their virtual friends via cell phones. They find their virtual life and persona more

persuasive than their parallel in real life (Koya, & Roper, 2020). They invest a lot of time constructing virtual personae that directly affects their real life matters: makes them physically inactive or lazy, decreases time they can invest in real social life, weakens their real communication and deteriorates their family structure.

Youth gives a higher priority and time to building their internet based personae than genuine real-life character building (Muhammad, 2019). Abbasi et al. (2020) argue that youth and teenagers are the early-adopters of new media technology and digital change. They spend much of their time online with virtual communities (Abasi et al., 2020). It facilitates learning of new concepts and affects development of cultural identity based on diverse interpersonal relationships in online social contexts, which may be quite different from those of their ancestors in real life (Buckingham, 2007). Shyam Sundar and Anthony Limperos (2013) also reported a shift from customary communication methods to new media and technology generated tools and pleasures. Its highlighted certain dynamically controlled characteristics such as sociability, novelty, coolness, ideal presentation of self, pragmatism and interactivity. This alteration transformed the conservative implications of uses and gratifications premise fulfilled by media. Pakhtusova (2019) pointed to a mounting debate on benefits and harms of these online identities on real life of users. This topic has generated much speculation and excitement, as it allowed its users to leave their real self behind and create a new online self entirely based on creator's choice of the way they want other to see them. Due to such disbursement of information, our virtual lives are no longer separable from, what Uğur Gündüz (2017) calls, our real lives, as they both second each other. This paper examines if 650 internet users/students enrolled at University of Lahore are too involved in ideally presenting and building their self-image in virtual lives to pay attention to their real-life family relations, cohesion and amity. Though Pakistani researchers have greatly gauged the effects of social networking sites (SNS) on youth and children, this study is unique as it deals with negative impact of virtual life on existing social norms, values, communication patterns, and social relationships. It can help in devising means and methods of handling antisocial effects of online identities.

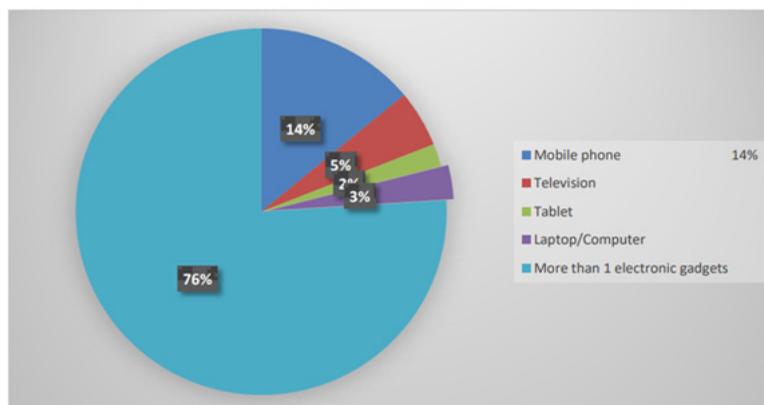


Figure 1.1. Daily screen time after the Covid-19 lockdown in Pakistan (Shahid et. al., 2021, pp.3)

Statement of the Problem

Digital convergence, 4G technology and free social media applications has increased the screen time of youngsters in virtual world. Limitless choices provided by these virtual communities to create and manipulate online persona has made it easier for the youngster to get excessively involved with their ideal presentation to manage their online identity. This increase time people spend online building their social media personae and associations has affected their real life time they use to invest in constructing their real-life identity and maintaining relationships. The literature of this research article established that managing online identity is a time consuming activity which negatively affect youngster's overall wellbeing by decreasing the family interactions and bonding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researchers studied literature on the impact of SNS on users and found a gap in literature on effects of online life on family relations and bonding in Pakistan. It is a complex phenomenon as it involves multiple factors, and has advantages besides disadvantages. According to Feher and Katalin, the virtual world has successfully established itself as an equivalent of real world (2015). Social media users connect and develop relationships in online and offline worlds, based on consequences and results of presenting their self-image, its retrieval by receivers and level of gratification on both sides. Though people use the same cognitive process and intellect to connect with others in real and virtual environments, consequences differ and perceptions and decisions are rewritten differently in both lives. Foresight Future Identities (2013) reports that the differences between online and offline identities are getting blurred with time. Smartphones have increased, what Robert Putnam calls, a sense of time displacement (1995a, 1995b), resulting in social media overuse and a decrease in the sharing of private time with friends and family. They physically sit with family, but mentally remain involved in the virtual world (Pandele et al., 2021).

Hao, Farooq and Sun found that Pakistani youth believes that virtual communities help them understand the cultural-diversity and improve their well-being by sharing their feelings with new acquaintances and social media friends (2018). They choose to use social media-applications, and podiums like Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok for virtual communication with virtual and real relations (Koya, & Roper, 2020). They allow them to develop new connections, present their self-image, and share their thoughts free of regular Pakistani stress to watch their conduct and communication. Youngsters share just anything, own photographs and of cultural events, highlight their social values and jokes, and sometimes even discuss their personal or family issues with their real and virtual friends online (Koya, & Roper, 2020). They find these platforms beneficial even if many believe the platforms are crushing the values of their ancestors (Koya, & Roper, 2020). The extensive global screen time of 12.5 trillion hours per month (Kemp, 2022) further supports that youth and adults globally less believe in leading an active real lifestyle as opposed to virtual. Youth has slipped too far into a virtual world, creating new identities, and losing a sense of real life and priorities in real life (Wallace, Buil, de Chernatony, &

Hogan, 2014, p. 21; Kemp, 2022). They are mentally engaged online fantasies and personae. The increased screen time has decreased their attention to their families and their affairs (Altamimi, Skinner, & Nesbitt, 2015). These phenomena are greatly affecting the family relations between the generations and have an impact on the collective social efficacy (Hao, Farooq, & Sun, 2018).

The processes of creating and maintaining online identities and personae are complex, and they incorporate effects of several factors on the creation of identity of the users (Warburton, 2012). Little can be controlled in virtual communities or spaces, and many users find them suitable for venting several conventional and non-conventional behaviors. Users manifest or bring to life numerous known and unknown positive and negative aspects of their imagined identities in virtual spaces (Warburton, 2012). They feel strong associations and developing new relationships with their online respondents while communicating with them online. Newer contexts keep emerging, and raise questions on users' new experiences and earlier identities (Warburton, 2012). They themselves create their online social identities for introducing themselves to online communities in the manner they wish (Warburton, 2012). The nature of online identity creation varies from person to person. Some people use their actual names whereas others use pseudonyms with the sole objective to sharing only limited information on the internet (Given, 2018).

VIRTUAL IDENTITIES AND FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Many oppose virtual ties against the real, arguing that real-life family ties depend on the strength of communication among the family members. Family bonding will be strong if family members are permitted to express their thoughts while communicating with each other (Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006). Those supporting virtual ties argue that real-life families limit freedom of expression, which helps in overcoming communication problems and increasing understanding between parents and children. It boosts up confidence and individuation of children at young age. It strengthens parent-children bonding (Caplan, 2003 & Freire, Pope, Coyle, 2019). Social media gives them the freedom they lack in real life. Its use leaves serious effect on children's behavior and the way they relate to each other and with their families, isolating themselves from families and spending more time in front of the screen. K.M. Hertlein & Van Dyck, argues that social media has changed the concept of accessibility and acceptability (2019). It has a strong effect on the real-life family relations, and it has redefined rules and roles within the family, and the concept of limitation (Hertlein & Dyck, 2020). It involves new kind of intimacies, rituals, and attitudes towards family engagements and cohesion, isolates children and makes them lie to their families (Cardoso et. al., 2008). Many deny while Carvalho, Francisco, & Relvas (2015) argue in support of benefits of social media platforms that bring families closer and strengthen their bonding by keeping them in touch, ensuring their safety, helping them make real life plans, and linking them with each other in difficult situations (Hesley, & Fox, 2012). It encourages communication, offers unlimited virtual checking of their movements in real life and build up their relations (Devitt, & Roker, 2009).

ONLINE IDENTITY AND OFFLINE IDENTITY

Social media especially Facebook users use educated guesses when they create impressions of respondents in their minds. According to Jimm Tylor (2017), youngsters have strong association with their self-created online personae and communities, and they desire to carry their virtual identities in their real lives. He established that unlike online identity construction, real life identity construction depends on the society, family, friends, schooling, peers, culture, belief system and many natural and sensory cues (sense of touch, facial expressions, sound its pitch, verbal and non-verbal) which helps people judge the nature and level of truthiness (Tylor, 2017). Online identities reflect new types of intimacies and gratifications through uploading, following, accepting, liking and disliking content shared on virtual websites. Amo, Alier & García-Peñalvo argue that users manage their impression and choose to mask and unmask different aspects of their personalities as they sometime do in real life situations (2020). Many users remain anonymous as per need and remain comfortable with other's anonymity (Amo, Alier & García-Peñalvo, 2020). They think anonymity is a blessing to express their point of view on any topic, and support all kind of ideas or groups without any hesitation. Miller reviewed these factors as complications with the online identity, as online identity is fragmented into many highly segregated fields (2013). He found that anonymity adds entirely contradictory values to online and offline identities, as online gives people the freedom to explore, secure and shift to a newer type of identity, without the fear of anyone knowing, or condemning them (Miller, 2013). On the contrary, Facebook not just diverges the loss of anonymity but also all aspects of privacy through tagging photos online. The internet has facilitated users to have identities that look unusual in their immediate setting (Miller, 2013, p. 5). Users can now network online with parted virtual communities on the basis of a shared identity. By contrast, Facebook began with friendships but families, colleagues and others joined, which in effect puts various distinct identities in a cluttered online setting. Though the Facebook and internet though have a constant effect on identity, they are diametrically far from each other (Miller, 2013).

Objective:

To study the impact of online identity management on family bonding and amity.

Hypothesis:

H1: Extensive association with virtual self is significantly associated with the weakening of familial interaction and amity.

H0: Extensive association with virtual self is not significantly associated with the weakening of familial interaction and amity.

THEATRICAL FRAMEWORK

This study supports the hypotheses with Robert Putnam's theory of time displacement from real to virtual social-capital settings in the public arena (1995a, 1995b). Putnam argues that social-capital is essential for keeping up with social

relations and connections, which get disturbed when the social media users spend an excessive amount of time in virtual worlds, managing their online identities (Putnam, 1995a, 1995b). It displaces the time that they were supposed to spend in significant activities, aiming at building interpersonal communication and relationship with their families on social occasions. Time displacement helps to understand how a new tradition, norm or bonding displace the older ones, causing an extraordinary decrease in the family bonding and efficacy (Putnam, 1995). He found that excessive screen time (TV watching) isolated individuals from family and disintegrated social capital in America. Similarly, user devote extensive time to virtual communities to create and maintain their online identities, reflecting a decrease in time they spend with friends and families in real-life (Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta, & David, 2004). Just as Putnam says TV added to the downfall of social capital, Kraut et. al. (1998), Lavin, Marvin, McLarney, Nola, and Scott (1999), Nie and Erbring (2000) also argue that social media caused reduction in hope, friendly cooperation, correspondence and wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY:

We collected data from 601, 18-32 years old students enrolled in undergraduate (78 %) and graduate (22%) programs in top ten universities in Lahore based on HEC ranking through a well-structured survey questionnaire, comprising three scales. Their family incomes ranged from Rs. 29000 to Rs. 250000. We finalized and removed all inconsistencies from the survey questionnaire through a pilot study. We calculated the reliability of the scales by using the Cronbach Alpha values (measures of internal consistency that illustrate close relations in a set of items in a group of variables). The Cronbach Alpha values were accepted with in mentioned range (<0.70) and the scales were found highly reliable with the values of .819 and .822. The scale-1 covered general demographic questions, social media usage, types of social media usage and time spent on social media. The scale-2 focused on the process of online identity formation and perception of online identity through 33 questions. The scale-3 analyzed the level of family bonding and interaction among family members through 17 questions. The scale-4 measured the effect of online identity on family bonding and communication with family members through 21 questions on participation in family affairs, interest in real as opposed to virtual communication, issues, ideas, commonalities, screen time and technology use. The study examined the respondents' relationship with their families and found it contrasted with their online relationships. The collected data was analyzed through SPSS version 26 and results were generated.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was collected through a questionnaire from 601 young adults enrolled in top 10 universities in Lahore. The objective was to study their perception and formation of online identity on different types of SNS on a 0-10 scale where 0 meant no interest and 10 meant the best. He interpreted the ratings at digit 0 as 'Not Interested', the scores from 1 to 2 digits as 'Least Interested', the scores from 3 to 5 digits as 'Average-Interest', the scores from 6 to 8 digits as 'Interested', and the scores from 9 to 10 digits as 'Highly Interested' on virtual communities.

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH:

The 601 respondents included 324 (54%) males and 277 (46%) females. 421 respondents (70%) were living in nuclear family settings and 180 (30%) in joint family settings.

Table 1.1. Statistics of the Time consumed on SNS

	[Face- book]	[Twit- ter]	[Insta- gram]	[Pin- ter- est]	[Linke- dIn]	[Snap- chat]	[Any gam- ing site]	[Whats App]	[You- tube]
N		601	601	601	601	601	601	601	601
Mean	3.34	1.57	3.62	1.18	1.51	2.67	2.27	5.30	6.18
Std. Error of Mean	.070	.065	.071	.055	.060	.077	.081	.065	.050
Medi- an	4.02	1.02	3.01	1.01	1.01	2.01	2.01	6.01	6.01
Mode	5	0	3	0	0	0	0	7	5
Std. Devi- ation	2.001	1.893	2.041	1.575	1.717	2.215	2.266	1.858	1.451
Vari- ance	4.011	3.586	4.162	2.482	2.952	4.901	5.131	3.455	2.101

96% respondents had multiple accounts on different social media platforms. Starkle (2017) argues that each account on social media represents a different partial identity. It can be said that the respondents had made several accounts that represented their multiple partial online selves on multiple social media sites. The 601 respondents often accessed a total of 3442 accounts altogether on different social media sites. Majority of the users had account on Facebook, tailed by YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Pinterest and Twitter in the order mentioned. 34% respondents kept looking for updates 24/7 and were continuously logged on their social media accounts. 18% respondent checked their accounts every half an hour. Most of the respondents used different devices like mobile phones (46%), tablets (33%), laptops (16%) and desktops (5%) to access their social media accounts. It was apparent that the mobile phones not only had reduced the tasks and screen to palm size, they also had facilitated 24/7 access to SNS free of spatial and temporal constraints of the desktops of the past.

Virtual platforms have replaced face to face communication with computer mediated communication. Nearly 65% of the respondents argued that majority of people in their friends' circle had first met online. 53% respondents used social media in the

company of their loved ones. 65% respondents spent less than one hour a day with their parents and +1.5 hours a day with their siblings, reflecting decrease in the levels of face to face communication. The students said they were highly involved in creating and maintaining online personifications. 62% respondents said they always shared true information online. 80% respondents said they always edit their pictures before uploading them on virtual sites. 42% respondents said their online identity is a true reflection of their real life identity. 39% respondents agreed that they have no issues representing their true selves online. 65% respondents agreed that they can easily express their true thoughts on social media than in real life. 76% respondents stated that flexibility of time and space has played an important role in developing and strengthening their online relations.

It was found that social media allow users to create and control their virtual personae. Multiple factors helped users to remain anonymous online. While 43% respondents believed that most users use fake identities online, 69% respondents claimed that they used their real names for creating online identities. 29% respondents had no issues with people faking their identities online while 48% considered it inappropriate. 43% respondents believed their online lives were more interesting than their real lives. 32% respondents preferred to hide their online activities from their families and cousins. 38% said they feel more connected with online activities than real. 48% said they avoided social gatherings in real life. 44% said their old family members did not understand them and 39% felt disconnected from their family members.

H1: Extensive association with virtual self is significantly associated with the weakening of familial interaction and amity.

H0: Extensive association with virtual self is not significantly associated with the weakening of familial interaction and amity.

Linear Regression Analysis of Time Spent on Social Media & Familial interaction and amity.

Table 1.2 Explaining Model-Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1.2	0.273 ^a	.075		.073

a. Predictors: (Constant), Time on SNS

Table 1.3 Showing ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	R e - g r e s - s i o n	7794.0345	1	7794.0345	62.757	.000 ^b
	Residual	98231.140	600	124.193		
	Total	106,025.174	601			

a. DV: Familial interaction and amity

b. Predictors: (Constant), Time on SNS

Table 1.4 Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta				
1	(Constant)		4.779	1.24.034	29.675	.000	
	Time Spent on SM		.794	.098	.273	7.971	.000

a. DV: Familial interaction and amity

Table 1.5 Summary

Hypothesis	Regression Weights	Beta Coefficient	R ²	F	t-value	p-value	Hypothesis Supported
H ₁	TSSM FC&FB	.794	.73	62.757	7.974	0.00	Yes

Note: * $p > 0.05$, TSM: Time spent on SNS identity (while being online), FI & FB: Family Interaction & Bonding

The hypotheses test the impact of time spent on social media on familial interaction and amity. The dependent variable familial interaction and amity were regressed on predicting/ independent variable (time consumed on social Networking sites) to test the hypothesis. The statistical analysis of linear regression analysis shows that time spent on SNS significantly predicts family interaction and family bonding, $F=62.757$, $p < 0.05$, which specifies that the time consumed on social media maintaining online identity plays a noteworthy role in determining family interactions and family amity ($b=0.794$, $p < 0.05$). The statistical analysis of linear regression explains the impact of time spent on social media on family interaction and bonding. $R^2=.073$ shows 7.3% variance in family interaction and family bonding as shown in the summary table 1.5. It predicts that Extensive association with virtual self is significantly associated with the weakening of familial interaction and amity. Hence the The Hypothesis H1 is Supported and shows family relations are significantly affected by time spend with online identities and their maintenance as true identity.

CONCLUSION:

The study examined the perception of youth regarding their online selves, constructed on different social media platforms and its effect on their familial interactions and amity. The findings predicted significant displacement effect of online identities on real life relations and social capital at top ten universities of Lahore. The statistical analysis of linear regression clearly showed inverse association between the virtual identity and familial communication. It implies that hypothesis H1 is supported

and Null Hypothesis H0 is rejected. The results indicated that the users' association with their online identities/personas has a significant negative effect on their family interactions. It blurs the boundaries between real life and virtual life, personas and relationships. This finding was in the same-line with the conclusion drawn by (Megan et. Al, 2020 and Liu et. al., 2020) that online identity management is a time consuming activity and leads to much increased screen time of social media users and results in decreasing the time to spend with their families (Faltýnková et. al., 2020). Online world offers appealing choices including ideal presentation of self, spatial and temporal flexibility to communicate with friends and almost free access to abundant information on any topic of interest. It is of addictive nature and clinches the attention of young adults by connecting them with people around the globe. It leads to the conclusion that there is a dire need to guide youth to work on their association with social media sites and improve their family interactions, bonding and efficacy. Excessive association and time spent on social media to create and manage a desired image and impression of self reduces their family time.

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