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The Resurrection of Modernist Representations of Identities within a Postmodern World: Online Representations of Algerian Identities

التمثيلات الحدائية للهويات في عالم ما بعد الحداثة: تمثيلات الهويات الجزائرية عبر الإنترنت

Boudjelal Mustapha ^{1,*}

¹ University of Mostaganem, Algeria.

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Abstract

This study aims at exploring postmodernist representations of Algerians' identities. It is premised on the claim that the issue of online identities-within post truth era- is a grand narrative of a resurrection of the modernist thoughts in relation to how the concept was approached. The point made here does not exclude the other boons-lucidly explored in the review of the literature -which Internet affords for one's identity. However, it unveils the partial failure of the post-modernist attempts to free identities from their unitary and essentialist shackles in a backward move towards the ideals of modern frameworks. In other words, this article questions the pluralist outfits Internet tailors to one's identity, in this case an Algerian identity. Via exploring 500 images available on "Google Image" retrieved by means of typing the concept "Algerian" on its search screen, this study unveils that via certain simulations and simulacra, individualistic aspects of the self, as individual Algerians, are murdered and moulded unitary, rigid and essentialist suits under the emblem of collective identities, Algerianness. This study also suggests referring to media literacy to access the diversified nature of online identities.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معاينة تمثيلات الانترنت لهويات الجزائريين في زمن ما بعد الحداثة من خلال توضيح فكرة أن مفهوم الهويات على الإنترنت - في عصر ما بعد الحداثة - هو مجرد صياغة اخرى لأفكار الحداثة فيما يتعلق بكيفية تناول مفهوم الهوية. بالرغم من النفع الذي تعود به الإنترنت على هوية الفرد، تكشف الدراسة عن الفشل الجزئي لمحاولات ما بعد الحداثة لتحرير الهويات من قيودها الوحدوية والجوهرية. من خلال تحليل مضامين 500 صورة متوفرة على موقع البحث «جوجل»، تم استخراجها عن طريق كتابة كلمة «جزائري» على شاشة البحث الخاصة بالموقع، تكشف هذه الدراسة أن الصور المتوفرة على شبكة الانترنت، من خلال عملية المحاكاة للواقع، تهمل الجوانب الفردية المختلفة لهوية الفرد الجزائري، عن طريق تمثيلها بدلالات جامدة وجوهرية تحت شعار الهويات الجماعية الجزائرية، مختزلة جوانب عديدة من الهوية المدروسة في تاريخ الجزائر الثوري و شغف رياضة كرة القدم. تشير هذه الدراسة إلى أهمية اكتساب الفرد للثقافة الإعلامية لاكتشاف الطبيعة المتنوعة للهويات الفردية على الإنترنت.

الهوية
المحاكاة
الهوية عبر
الإنترنت
الهوية الجماعية
الجزائرية
الحداثة
ما بعد الحداثة.

1. Introduction

The inception of Internet has urged discussions and debates about controversial issues that spring from the use of the outlined means. However, among these concerns, identity has engendered unparalleled speculations within various research fields (Kendall, 2003). This concept has been a topical issue since its very emergence. It generated divergent sub-concepts and juxtaposing purviews among scholars. Identity, though it triggers off juxtaposing views, acts as a common denominator which unites many fields in the intellectual streams, namely in relation to philosophy, social science, humanities, sociology, anthropology, among many others. It is of due significance to note that the bygone epoch (modernism) portrayed identity in a fashion that would be unfathomable to today's cultures (post modernism), a culture of simulations, simulacra, and digital identities. Nevertheless and as it will be showcased in this article, postmodern representations of identities such as "Algerian identity (s)" echo a failure in accounting for the multiplicities of the afore-mentioned type of identity (s).

2. Understandings of Identity

The review of the literature about the concept of identity suggests that this concept lends itself to many definitions, understandings, and typologies, most importantly. The early classifications of the components of the concept go back to the work of Mead (1934) who differentiated between social and personal identities. The former echoes the sociological component of the self (the me) and (the I) represent the personal component of one's identity (Cited in Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Deschamps & Devos, 1998). These stratifications of the components of one's identity do indicate clear cut demarcation mines, nor do they allude to the rigidity of the concept; every component of it tends to co-exist with the other parts and is called upon in particular situations. (Burk & Stets, 2009).

Following this definitional line of thought, one's identity represents a set of meanings that are both personal and social. In other words, the very construction of identity hinges on how an individual

perceives themselves and the ways others regard that individual. This complex semiotic web constructs one's identity. This semiotic nature of identity is clearly elucidated in the following statement: "the answer to the question of who he is or what someone is, the totality of the different meanings that people attribute to themselves (binds) or the meaning assigned by others ("identity and other identity for themselves" (Beijaard, 1995, p.34).

3. Modernist and postmodernist understandings of identity

The table below identifies the main differences between how modernists and postmodernists perceive the concept of identity.

Table 1

Modernist and postmodernist perceptions of identity

Modernist perceptions	Postmodernist perceptions
✓ Static	✓ Fluid and flexible
✓ Centered	✓ Decentered
✓ Unitary self	✓ Pluralist selves
✓ Context-free	✓ Context -bound

The early philosophical understandings and attempts to provide a cogent framework for the concept of identity had mainly focused on the "persistence" of identity and its continuity over time as a 'recognizable and definable' entity, and as such it had been conceived as a unitary construct. The philosophy of personal identity centered on the issue in relation to the individuals within two historical trajectories: being the same person over time, known as 'numerical identity', and being identical or different from the past and future self, recognized as 'qualitative identity' (Nick Bostrom and Anders Sandberg, 2011).

It may be argued that in today's world, the concept of identity cannot be fully covered without referring to Internet and its manifold online services. This means that bringing both virtuality and reality together

has altered the traditional backdrop against which identity used to be constructed (Meyrowitz, 1989). An alternative approach to identity construction emanates from postmodern theoretical frameworks, which outline that individuals construct identities for themselves using mass media. The continuum that one's identity goes through had been emphasized by Giddens (1991) who pictured it to a project that can be reconstructed. The flexible nature of postmodernist understandings of the concept is grounded on interplay that brought both identity and media-in particular Internet –together. Internet has brought forward a 'disembodied nature of interaction' that allows the individuals to experience 'alternative identities'. In the same vein, radical theorists argue that this means would liberate people from their bodies, blur the lines between human being and technology; at an advanced phase, they claim, it would incept a "post-human era". Sherry Turkle (1997c) underscores the claim that individuals experiences online allow them to embrace different aspects of their identities. By means of online cycling via interactions, individuals explore their unknown selves. Singer (2009) cites that: "one's view of nature and society and one's sense of personal identity might well be changed by the complex and ultimately random nature of internet interactions."

Turkle exemplifies the way Internet generates the different selves in the user by means of versing themselves in various online activities such as online games via "MUDs". Within this online option, the players, she argues, 'can play many selves and none of these characters are any less real than what they think is their true self – all are there to be played out and explored' (Transparency Now, n.d.). Under this regard, Internet mingles between identity, multiplicity and flexibility (Turkle, 1999, p. 643). By the same token, Windows enhance the multiplicity of the selves. Turkle, (1997a): adds: "Cyberspace takes the fluidity of identity that is called for in everyday life and raises it to a higher power: people come to see themselves as the sum of their distributed presence on all the windows they open on the screen".

Undoubtedly, the diversified boons that Internet affords to the user and the flexibility it provides

to their identities cannot be consciously eclipsed. This "disembodied" nature of the afore-mentioned means, even if many scholars question its validity, contributed in mitigating issues of discrimination which stem from race, sex, gender, sexuality, and social class. Now, users may underscore and project certain aspects of their identities (self) such as gender and interests; by the same token, they may downplay other aspects such as age, ethnicity, among many others. Their selves can be conjured up online by means of the available digital tokens such as pictures, avatars, icons, nicknames, fonts, music, and videos. To cut is short, they can be "who they want to be" (Turkle, *ibid.*).

4. The study

4.1 Research Methodology

This study is premised on the claim that the issue of online identities-within post truth era- is a grand narrative of a resurrection of the modernist thoughts in relation to how the concept was approached. The point made here does not exclude the other boons- lucidly explored in the review of the literature above- which Internet affords for one's identity. However, it unveils the partial failure of the post-modernist attempts to free identities from their unitary and essentialist shackles in a backward move towards the ideals of modern frameworks. The study puts the following research questions forward:

- 1-How does the postmodern era represent individual identities online?
- 2-Which framework of identity overrules the postmodern representations of these social constructs?
- 3- How is an Algerian individual represented online?
- 4- Which statement echoes the identification of one's identity in postmodern era?

The study suggests the ensuing hypotheses:

- 1- Individualistic aspects of online identities are portrayed as collective identities in post-truth era.
- 2- Modernist frameworks of identity dominate postmodernist digital culture.
- 3- An Algerian individual tends to be identified within

an essentialist collective identity “Algerianness”.

4- The statement of “who I am” is substituted for who “they want you to be”.

This research explores the issue of identity construction online along Internet simulations and simulacra and hence hinges on Jean Baudrillard’s frameworks of simulations and simulacra in data analysis. The corpus of the study had been objectively retrieved from the Internet browser “Google Image”. The aim behind that was to penetrate the online representations of an Algerian individual displaying an identity which-according to the post-modernist thought, is supposed to engender “many selves”. 500 images had been scrutinized after being neutrally collected via typing the word “an Algerian individual” on the search screen. The data had been grouped according to the common features they displayed.

5. Data analysis

5.1 Essentialist Online Identities in a Post truth era

Internet has taken the lion’s share with regard to its massive use by individuals worldwide. Nevertheless, media scholars such as Jean Baudrillard accentuate the fact that media-in this case Internet, transcends a mere means of mediation. Jean Baudrillard (1994) explains: “There is no longer any medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffuse and diffracted in the real”. On the contrary, media intervenes in the very shaping of one’s experiences. Devin Sandoz (2003) elucidates the point stating: “A “hyperreal” world is one in which media and medium are not simply located in their own hermetically sealed spaces, but dispersed around us, in all forms of experience”. Nowadays, identity construction online bows to certain online simulations and simulacra produced along various virtual settings.

Simulations and simulacra are two concepts referred to in debates about the manipulative mechanisms of Internet, especially as they professionally merge along the construction of online identities. In the field of media, these two debatable terms generate different understandings. Simulacrum is “a material image, made as a representation of some deity, person, or thing,” as “something having merely

the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance or proper qualities,” and as “a mere image, a specious imitation or likeness, of something” (Oxford English Dictionary). Michael Camille (1992) emphasizes the idea that simulacra excel the boundaries of a static image. He adds: “The simulacrum is more than just a useless image; it is a deviation and perversion of imitation itself - a false likeness” (ibid.). Simulation, on the other hand, does not echo a static representation of something or somebody; it triggers off “a process of active representations”.

Turkle (1995b) highlights the fact that the relationship that connects between the computer/Internet and the user is not that clear-cut and apparent. It is rather complex and opaque given the fact it hinges on the process of simulation. Turkle (ibid.) adds that: “the machine is only visible through its effects.” These simulations, she believes, allow the user to experience the different selves as they afford multiple possibilities of dialogues and interactive activities. In this way, Internet via its simulations becomes a culturally powerful means as it display “.....simulations to be explored”; users must “suspend disbelief and become absorbed in what is happening on the screen” (Transparency Now, n.d.).

Recent literature further develops the afore-mentioned arguments. The ways in which simulations and simulacra alter facts and realities is a topical issue in postmodern thought. Online, simulations are believed to create a set of simulacra, the latter as they excel mere imitation, create a new reality. Turkle (ibid.) outlines many bans that gel to Internet simulations. She argues that individuals, in the postmodern era, are immersed in the culture of simulation and as such take it as the virtue”, and more than this, they find the practice of distinguishing reality from simulation bewildering (Dretzin, 2009). Under the same line of thought, Turkle (2007) claims “When interchanges are reduced to the shorthand of emoticon emotions, questions such as “Who am I?” and “Who are you?” are reformatted for the small screen and flattened out in the process.” These chauvinistic mediators tend to deceive the viewer using their personal experiences to

delude them. By means of manipulating one's senses, these virtual constructs transform the 'unrealistic into the only possible prototype. Under the same vein, individuals' identities are processed via these two manipulative agents to construct identities deprived of individualistic and pluralistic features, and which replace the authentic ones.

5.2 Algerianness: an Essentialist online Collective Identity

Snow (2001) points at the essentialist view that underscores collective identities as representing particular common features among the individuals who identify themselves with that collective. Its essentialist perspective emanates from sense of 'oneness' or 'we-ness' established on grounds of certain attributes and experiences among those who are part of the collectivity. The commonality may hinge on features of ethnicity, gender, etc. Polletta and Jasper (2001) claim that these qualities enable 'an individual's cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution' (p. 285). Taylor and Whittier (1992) define collective identity as 'the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences and solidarity' (p. 105). These kinds of identities are recognized "through a common language, and enacted through a set of rituals, practices, and cultural artefacts" (Deaux, 1996).

The way an Algerian individual is represented in relation to certain online simulations along collective identities-in a post truth era- necessitates penetrating the social essence of the concept of identity. Identity is claimed to be a social phenomenon that comes into being by means of interacting with the Other. Under this perspective, society occupies a central role as to the very essence of the process of identity formation, since it dictates, to a given extent, certain behaviours and norms, the individual needs to abide by. A social identity hinges on two main elements: the identifier and the identified (Eralp 1997:19, cited in Hüsamettin İnaç Feyzullah Ünal). The individual comes to fall within the second category while society represents the other, the identifier. In relation this social

identification, the Algerian individual tends to belong to the Algerian society, the identifier. Surprisingly, Internet merges between both social identification where the identified "the individual Algerian with their peculiar selves" and the identifier, "the Algerian society and its culture, as an essentialist collectivist identity, simply referred to as "Algerianness". In connection with this, the issue of simulated Algerian identity brings the concepts of fact and truth to the fore. This engenders enquiries about whether or not the online platforms authentically represent an Algerian individual along post-modern parameters via the various simulacra they generate.

The concept of truth had been the quest that human beings sought from the early past ages. It puzzled philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and many other scholars from different fields of study. The bewildering nature of truth had been intensified as technology dominated individuals' daily life and practices. The existence of truth, one may claim, is articulated along recognizable facts. However, in the post-modern era, known as post truth era, technology undermined the very "credibility of facts" Mary Poovey (1998) said "I think facts died a long time ago, and it has taken people quite a while to notice. She adds that truth got rid of its "authenticity", identified by means of observation, and embraced a system of "fabrication". She claims: "...to create a new kind of truth, one that couldn't be observed but could only modeled- fabricated" (ibid.). Hinging on the previously mentioned arguments, the truthfulness and the facticity of the simulacra of Algerians are questioned.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the postmodern era embraces various means of communication made available by means of Internet. These means include videos, articles and images, posted online to serve the users' needs. An image turns to be "an object in itself (i.e., a cultural sign), and a transmitter of messages through the use of signs"(Roland Barthes, 1985). To push the argument a bit further, one may suggest that images, in this cases online images (simulacra) , tend to transcend a mere depiction of a story or an event; on the contrary they

are the stories themselves; they represent a so called reality along its cultural values. Roland Barthes (ibid.) points at the features that gel to images, in his case press images. He argues that they undergo the processes of selection, composition, construction, and by the same token, are being attired certain ideological norms. The photos below epitomize certain simulacra that stand for every Algerian individual as a being part of a unitary collective identity:

Figure 1

Online Simulacra of an Algerian individual



Source: Retrieved from https://www.google.dz/search?q=Algerian&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiUhtb2-v3SAh_VLPR_QKHwxDXcQ_AUICcGB&biw=1024&bih=613

The way online simulacra transform the diversified aspect of the self (identity into a unitary collective identity) gels to the meaning mechanism is efficiently operates to create “new facts, new realities, better say, an essentialist Algerian identity. According to Jean Baudrillard (1994), simulations go along circular trajectories which do not attribute new means to the imitated sign; on the contrary, they create news signs that, by means of murdering the previous original signs, create their own meanings. As such, the process of substituting signs for others carries on. He (comments: “What if God himself could be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless...never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself in an uninterrupted circuit...” (ibid.). Jean Baudrillard has outlined in his

seminal work “Simulation and Simulacra that when a simulation reaches a higher level of imitation is goes beyond deceiving into substituting the original and as such creating a world devoid of meaning . “He writes: “to simulate is not simply to feign...feigning or dissimulation leaves the reality intact...whereas simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ (ibid.).

The above mentioned simulacra generate the same mechanism with regard to the way an Algerian individual is identified online. The Algerian identity (s) epitomizes various cultural, social, economic aspects. It embraces different activities and cultural manifestations that are present in other cultural identities as well. Under the same line of thought, the Algerian individuals display different identities that are influenced by their upbringings, education, among many other constructivist variables. The first one- in relation to sociology- constitutes the Algerian society and the identifier, and the second refers to the identified, ‘the Algerian individual’.

The immediacy of information delivered via images (simulacra) online eclipses the pejorative connotations it gels to the concept of truth. Batchen (1994) says: “Digitization abandons even the rhetoric of truth that has been an important part of photography’s cultural success...newspapers have of course always manipulated their images in one way or another. The much-heralded advent of digital imaging simply means having to admit it to oneself and even, perhaps, to one’s customers”. Digital images are likely to tailor reality as they alter its very essence, truth. Going back to the pictures, one may notice that simulacra delimit the various aspects of those Algerian individuals to ‘an Algerian collective identity which is restricted to chauvinistic stereotypes of “colonialism and sport (football)”. The other aspects of this identity are eschewed.

6. Discussion

It is of due significance to highlight the fact that the modern perspective of identity and the framework postmodernists embrace are different, if not juxtaposing. The framework embraced by

postmodernists in relation to identity is believed to question the basics modernist have drawn for the debated concept (Ott, 2003). Different understandings, echoed in the postmodernist spirit, underscored the fluidity and the flexibility of identities as an on-going process of construction and reconstruction (McAdams, 1997). With the post-modern era, Internet via its simulations reinterpreted the concept of identity as it redefined basic understandings such as “depth, reality and seriousness” (Davis, 1999). Moreover, the postmodern identity comes to be featured by de-centeredness, transition, illusion, and the lack of core qualities (Walker, 2000). Post-modernist scholars adhere to the belief that “a unitary self” does not echo the postmodern culture of ‘provisional and surface knowledge’ (McCorduck, 1996).

Under the same line of thought, Walker (2000: 100) adds that many selves substitute the unitary and core self. He explains: “: Because traditional communities...have ebbed away, the self now moves unfettered through multiple interactions without reference to a stable, unchanging “core” self” (ibid.). By the same token, Gergen (1991) chastises the self as the focal point of identity as he adds: “We “exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction... each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately playful probing of yet another reality. The centre fails to hold” (ibid.).

Instead of being a static and established “entity”, postmodernist identity accompanies a particular narrative that, in some contextual settings, encompasses heterogeneous selves. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1990) accentuated the fact that “social identity” reciprocally relates to various contexts, and as such individuals may identify different selves, in an attempt to control the impressions the other individuals form about them along certain milieus. The multiplicity of the self, taken by lay man as dishonesty and falsehood, is believed to be the essence of identity.

However, the analysis of the simulacra of the Algerian individual as belonging to “an Algerian collective identity” conjures up the modernist approach to the concept. The data (online simulacra of Algerian

individual) revealed a revival of the modernist perspectives, a nostalgia which underscores the essentialist aspect of identity, outlining the static nature of one’s identity, identified in most of the classic liberal humanist approaches to identity. The online simulations presented above go against the main features set forwards by postmodernist scholars to the concept of identity. To begin with, the multiplicity that Erving Goffman attributed to individual’s social identity in relation to different contexts is moulded in the frame of an Algerian static collective identity. In addition to this, instead of the portrayal of many selves, which many post modernists adhere to, online identity gains back its reference to the self as the core, modernists identify in their framework of identity where the self goes along a linear, logical and hierarchical scale. The shadow of the modernist thoughts, especially in relation to how the retrieved simulacra depict the individuality in terms of a collective “a timeless, placeless and unitary concept of the self” (McCorduck, 1996).

7. The Need for Media Literacy

Given the outlined bans of online simulations and the way they undermine one’s identity, Turkle (1997c) insists on the need for increased media literacy”, she defines as “readership skills for the culture of simulation”. This postmodern literacy entails an awareness of the ways the user relates to computers and interactive and reactive processes carried along simulations. These literacy skills embrace measuring, criticizing, judging and questioning simulations. Under this vein, Turkle (ibid.) sees the duty of higher education a crucial one. Its significance can be reified by means of creating programmes that abet the learners understand the nature of simulations, and this can be done-she argues-by creating simulations that inform about the mechanisms of how they operate (ibid.). This literacy would allow us to distinguish between the forms of simulations and reality as such; in such a way, their effects would be mitigated.

8. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Internet by means of the divergent services it affords for the user affects their identities at

various planes. As it had been discussed above, it abets users to discover and experience unknown aspect of their selves. In settings where race, language, and ethnicity do not matter, at least to a given extent, the pluralist qualities of one's identity are instigated to emerge and to coexist with the other aspects of the self. The disembodiment of virtual settings goes along the post-modernist frameworks of identity construction which defy the unitary and linear attributes of the debated concept. Howbeit, there are some online settings and milieus which function as a resurrecting means as they conjure up the modernist views of identity to the fore. The online simulations via a set of simulacra epitomize individual identities (Algerian individuals) along rigid cores of collective identities (Algerianness). Simulacra and simulations project stereotypical connotations of the outlined identity and eclipse other salient features, and as such turn to be chauvinistic means of "identity representation."

Conflict of Interest

I declare that I have no conflict of interest.

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