



# A Study of the Effect of Online Networks on the Self-identity of Homosexual Groups

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**Abstract.** With the development of the World Wide Web, online socialization has become more and more widespread. The influence of online communication on the identity of homosexual groups has become a topic with discussion value. Through the approach of literature review and theoretical analysis, this study combines previous articles and communication theories to analyze the relationship between the identity behavior characteristics of sexual minority groups and online socialization in the present time. It is demonstrated that the Internet promotes gay self-identification through self-escape, disengagement from old social networks and group support. This process is also accompanied by the risk of detachment from reality and online fraud.

**Keywords:** Social network · Identity formation · Homosexuality · The medium is the message

## 1 Introduction

Online socialization and communication have been increasingly dominating human life with the perfected net [1]. From a postmodernist perspective, more scholars have focused on the online cultural environment, and more on the behavioral characteristics of people's identities in the online environment. Due to the innovative nature of this field of study, existing research has mainly focused on the fragmentation and intersection of mainstream group identities in the virtual and real worlds. The attention to sexual minorities is still insufficient. The anonymity of online social networking opens up opportunities for sexual minority heads to escape and reconstruct their identities, facilitating the growth of queer communities and same-sex cultures. It becomes a weapon for pro-sexual equality activists to promote social equality and justice. This paper focuses on how the internet facilitates sexual minorities' achievement of identity and the potential harms posed in the process. Through an analysis of the principles of media-as-message, techno-romanticism, and identity reconstruction theory, the argument is made with reference to present-day case studies, and the phenomena and results are reviewed. This study combines communication theory with the phenomenon of self-identification of same-sex groups in the virtual world to enrich the diversity of research in the field while focusing on marginalized groups, which can be used as a reference for future investigations.

## 2 Theoretical Analysis of Online Socialization on the Construction of Self-identity

### 2.1 The Medium is the Message

“The medium is the message” is a precise summary of McLuhan’s view of the position of the media in developing human society. This immaterialist theoretical system gives essential subjectivity to the media itself. “We shape our tools and thereafter the tools shape us” [1]. Mc Luhan is more concerned with the human impact of the medium itself than the role of content. When evaluating the significance of the work in which it is embedded, the medium unavoidably exceeds the contents in terms of the value. Therefore, the invention of new media could substantially affect living habits and the form of socialization. For instance, Mc Luhan has pointed out that print was “hot media” which encourages people to pay high attention and actively participate. On the other side, the television and broadcast, the “cool” media reduce the cost of attention while making audiences become passive observers [2].

Now, the development of modern network communication technology and electronic technology has largely influenced people’s media habits, prompting people to be exposed to a large number of cool media. As a result, the features of e-generation are dramatically distinctive from the prior. They can deny and criticize the uncomfortable social norms around them and express their ideal virtual identity online. For example, a young girl could act and communicate as a female adult on the internet. More and more people are going through a process of separation and reconstruction in their identity — they liberate from tribal cognition and recognized their membership in the global village. The condition provides flexibility for marginal groups to escape from defective social structure and hierarchy. In this case, media could be the weapon of social justice and humanism. Therefore, the theory of “media is the message” inspires society with a constructive perspective to analyze the current issues of liberation and identity formation.

### 2.2 Technoromanticism

The theory of Technoromanticism gives people a utopia version of the dynamic interaction between unity and multiplicity online [3]. From Mc Luhan’s perspective, aural culture was tribal and uniform, while the literature culture builds up the urban and fragmentation. Media shape human thinking and social characteristics. Since the presence of the worldwide web, the digital narrative has also profoundly changed human society [4]. Different from the past, individuals in idealistic virtual communication environments are able to get rid of the material constraints and achieve freedom and democracy in the virtual shelter. In another word, people having absolute control of the avatar identity become the master of self-consciousness. As the surrealist world is realized, human personalities get fulfilled through role-playing, designing origins, and editing visual creature features. In the context of the Romantic narrative, human beings are liberated from their minds and gain the right to be omnipotent. In this context, cyber technology as a medium is not only an extension of the human body but also an extension of the mentality.

Under the new fantastic romantic social law, cooperation and confrontation occur between the consciousness of subjects growing up in various realistic conditions. Therefore, technoromanticism reminds people that the internet is both a digital utopia and a

matrix of transcendent “consensual hallucination” [5]. People sharing the same beliefs and visions in the online society ignore labels and stereotypes generated from real identities and form pure interest groups and small communities. This level of identity and cohesion of consciousness has given impetus to the development of radical social reform and democratic activism. And the upper limit of the scope and effect of these productive activities beyond reality is determined by technology.

### **2.3 Identity Reconstruction**

Numerous constraints have been imposed on the ideal identity formation process. According to Leitch and Harrison, “identity is a complex construct” [6]. It represents the internalization of self-cognition and the cooperation with social norms and behavioral expectations. According to the self-discrepancy theory pointed out by Higgins, one domain self is composed of actual self, ideal self, and ought self [7]. Actual self represents the external characteristics and expressions that a person actually possesses; ideal self includes the characteristics that a person aspires to and is eager to possess and achieve; ought self implies the social responsibilities, obligations, and ethical standards that a person believes should be fulfilled within the context of the certain identity. In the real world, people are constrained by a unique set of conditions. Identities, including gender, race, and social class, are a series of objective symbols imposed on individuals from outside. Therefore, it may be problematic to realize the integration of ideal self and actual self.

With the development of virtual communities, reconstructing ideal selves online has become unavoidably a popular trend. The anonymity of virtual context indirectly affects the emancipation of the interaction and communication process. In the digital environment, people are detached from the constraints of reality and endowed with the right to master who they are. Through social pages, social posts, and avatars, users mediated identities at will in the virtual utopia. According to Goffman, a sociologist from the University of Pennsylvania, the behavior patterns of people in a living social structure have been largely depressed by cultural expectations and legal regulations. In this case, one’s true selves and ideal selves are often hidden under social masks, and people are not fully aware of their inner demands [8]. In the process of role-playing and virtual communication, the consideration and exploration of ideal selves have been unprecedentedly improved.

## **3 The Effect of Online Socialization on the Homosexual Identity Cognition**

### **3.1 Escapism**

Social networking can contribute to the self-cognition of the homosexual community by providing access to escape from the internalized old cognitive identity and moral pressure. Self-categorization is the basis of uniting the internal self-cognition and external category. And the individual usually reclassified their identity by conforming to the stereotypes of his self-cognition and rendering his behaviors more tightly to the ideal

community [9]. In a social environment dominated by heterosexual males, it is general for the homosexual community to escape from the old sexual orientation identity given by society to affirm their real sexual orientation. This self-perception is often facilitated by a series of communication activities to reclassify the inner self. The invention of virtual social networking has provided an optimal habitat for objects who are engaging in the process. Richard Coyne, a scholar from the University of Edinburgh proposed the concept of escapism in technoromanticism in 1999. Digital technology “allows a multiplication, fracturing, and dislocation of selves, that is at the vanguard of a new postmodern sensibility” [5]. The internet gives individuals that are confused by self-discrepancy opportunities to explore their real selves. Therefore, potential homosexuals can find self-identity and satisfaction by attempting different sexual identities in the virtual utopia, enhancing their affirmation of sexual orientation.

In addition to escaping from the prior unsuitable identity, homosexuals are also allowed to get rid of the psychological pressure exerted by the deepening social consciousness. The social belief, norms, and culture may establish limited boundaries of homosexuals’ thoughts. In this situation, heterosexual-dominated culture reinforces negative feelings of inferiority and loneliness. However, when they immerse in the internet, they are a member of the global village. And the discourse of any community is respected by others. The highly democratic and liberal virtual world can be a “metaphorical band-aid” which makes the marginal community.

### 3.2 Disengaging from Old Social Networks

Not only can homosexuals escape from psychological pressure but also they can escape the physical environment and social networks through digital media. Firstly, online social networking provides individuals the opportunity to create a new physical identity. Users can edit avatars, and messages, to strategically create a stylish image representation. Therefore, the physical condition couldn’t be the restraint of achieving ideal selves. Meanwhile, the conventional moral standard and behavior doctrine attached to the ought selves has been largely diminished when individuals constructed fabricating personality and figure setting [10]. It is a significant mechanism that accelerates the liberation of queers’ discourses of embodiment and body management. Different from offline space, objects can enjoy the leisure of mediating the portion of spiritual temperaments of masculinity and femininity in cyberspace. For instance, they can pursue queer fashion, designing their image to be more in line with the queer aesthetic, which blurs the binary gender concept. In this case, the “queer-phobic political forces” couldn’t be the barrier to constructing new queer culture norms.

In addition, the anonymity of online communication can prevent homosexuals from being identified and tracked by real-world contacts. Anonymity is one of the most essential qualities of online communication, laying the fundamentals for constructing a digital utopia for homosexuals. This is because the queer can not suck emotional value and intellectual experiences from acquaintances around them. In another word, their offline communication mismatch their goal and negatively hindered their socialization [7]. However, in the online sphere, the marginal sexual group that is eager to run away from the frustrating social capital, can reconstruct an identity to be reborn in a new community. With the new position in adaptable habitats, they could interact with like-minded

people. In this situation, they cut them loose from old social networks and involve in comfortable connections.

### 3.3 Community Support

In addition to escaping from an objective environment and social network, solid and online community support can enhance the homosexuals' self-identity in resisting movement. As gay people engage in online socialization, the worldwide newsgroup and community have been increasingly established to empower the queer culture. McKenna and Bargh, two authoritative scholars from New York University point out that internet newsgroups can enhance the people's membership and sense of belonging to the marginal group by declining the awareness of stigmatization [11]. The united opinion and justified voices of resistance from homosexual groups are the embodiment of the overwhelmed power of the virtual community. In this case, all the members have put joint effort into rectification of their identity. A study of the homosexual movement conducted by South California University has shown that the internet is an embodied space enabling queer activists to achieve rights-based politics [12].

From a moderate perspective, the community in a virtual utopia can be viewed as a soothing homeland for a marginalized sexual group suffering from discrimination. The traditional media can not fulfill the demand of homosexuals, thus resulting in the generation's loneliness. Lacking desired intimacy, stable relationship, and brittle social embeddedness have led to stronger isolated feelings among old gay and lesbian people [13]. Fortunately, different from the prior generations, in the revolutionary age of digital communication, young homosexuals can interact with each other with unimpeded flows of information. For instance, they can develop romantic relationships rapidly online and share the depression of being the minority. In this process of being included, the negative feeling of "otherness" could be further reduced. By establishing emotional bonds and links with friends, gay and lesbians could support, instruct, and encourage each other to overcome their internalized low self-esteem and helplessness.

## 4 Potential Risks of Online Socialization for the Homosexual Community

### 4.1 Virtual and Real Identity Fragmentation

Online networks could be an excellent tool for reconstructing homosexual identity, yet the defective behavioral patterns could fragment participants' self-cognition. Thanks to cyberspace, gay men could separate real and virtual identities to achieve ideal selves. However, it could be confusing if a homosexual views the internet as a shelter to release the possible true selves, and maintain a heterosexual self-identity in the reality. With ambiguous self-images, gay people living in between the two identities becomes chaotic. Markham, in his book *Life online: Researching real Experience in Virtual Space*, clarified the trouble as "really becomes a double negative" [14]. In other words, anything that can be experienced is not unreal, despite not being unreal is not equal to real. Under the philosophy, individuals might deem it normal to engage in a partial true identity in online socialization. As a result, rather than solving the inner conflicts of self-identity issues, some homosexuals may ignore it and become a double-faced person.

## 4.2 Dating Romance Scam

Identity fragmentation is just one of the issues, the online homosexual romance scam is more noteworthy. First of all, online dating is an interaction based on the perception of virtual identities. Due to the anonymity of online identification, people are free to portray who they are. To attract the ideal romantic partner, homosexuals may consciously mediate their appearance, social background, and age to establish a relationship based on their ideal selves. Immersing in digital narratives, they can enjoy a pure idealistic and fantastic romance. However, on the one hand, finally, the human relationship couldn't divorce from the "perceived truths of the corporeal world [15]. Individuals had to move from the ideal world to offline interaction to face the cruel truth. On the other hand, criminals with designs will also disguise themselves as love interests to deceive ignorant individuals. A study from Cloudmark has shown that more than 40% of profiles on Facebook are fake and mediated by malware writers [16]. Except for the high rate of fake accounts, online fraud itself is deceptive. Once the credibility has been enhanced, the criminals will get benefits from the scam. For instance, they will ask for financial support and persuade others to buy financial securities. In China, this kind of popular online fraud has been named Sha Zhu Pan which means "pig-butcher scam". In fieldwork conducted by Chinese sociologist Tao Han, cyberspace is described as a "consumer space gated by erotic desires and economic capital" [17]. Therefore, the online network also brought potential dangers to homosexuals in the process of identity formation.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, through a theoretical level of analysis, this paper introduces the medium is the message, technoromanticism, and self-reconstruction theory. Combining the anonymity and virtual nature of the internet, homosexuals have the opportunity to achieve the integration of identity. In this process, the Internet facilitates the unity of true selves and ideal selves through three dimensions: psychologic escapism, escaping from old social networks, and community support. However, this anonymity may also lead to negative outcomes which are identity fragmentation and online fraud. This study is mainly based on past case studies and theoretical understanding in the field, lacking real data support. In the future, it is necessary to establish samples and conduct focus group interviews and ethnographic studies of the homosexual community.

**Authors' Contributions.** This paper is independently completed by Hanzhang Zhao.

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