Morality in Digital Economy

Ridhima Bhanot Sharma[1]
Research Scholar
Amity University Sector-125,
Noida (U.P.), India

Dr. Marshal Mukesh Sahni[2]
Dean Student Welfare
Amity University Sector-125,
Noida (U.P.), India

Abstract: The last two decades have been an epitome of transformation in terms of media. The society has witnessed a paradigm shift from traditional media to digital encompassing Web 2.0 platforms like social networking sites, online blogs, photos, videos and ideas sharing sites to name a few.

Ever since digital technologies are capturing the society the implications such as young people's literacy, identity, privacy and misuse of cyberspace are uprising concerns. Ethics and social responsibility are key fundamentals to the effective performance of new media. They should go hand-in-hand with the freedom of new media and social networking use.

In the research paper we would be focusing on the three ethical domains prevalent in digital media from youth's context – privacy, identity and credibility. The paper aims to examine the intricacies of involvement of youth in these digital media platforms.

The research methodology focusses on understanding how young people are managing these issues as they participate in virtual spaces. We interviewed 50 young people who are actively participating in online space like - blogging, gaming, social networking, online selling, instant messaging and sharing creations.

The purpose is to understand youth's perception of the three themes – privacy, identity and credibility as these are extremely ethically significant in the digital age. Are youth redefining the three themes as they engage in digital media? The subsequent results portray that these 3 dimensions are not the final defining ethical fault lines, there would be more and the forthcoming studies can be on finding relationships amongst these activities.

Keywords: digital media, privacy, ethics in digital media, morality, social responsibility, identity, credibility.

I. INTRODUCTION

Media revolution is transforming the society. The new digital media have ushered in a new and essentially unlimited set of frontiers (Gardner 2007b). It permits and encourages "participatory cultures." In the most idealistic terms, the new digital media hold great potential for facilitating civil society, civic engagement, and democratic participation (Ito 2004; Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins et al. 2006; Pettingill 2007). Facebook and Twitter to name a few digital media applications are becoming more important than ever in today's lifestyle. The involvement of youth and society in digital media activities is tremendous. The new media has altered the way of living, thinking, working, communicating, interacting and doing business (Toeffler 1980; Negroponte 1995).

If leveraged properly, the digital media can be a powerful tool for promoting social responsibility. The innovations in digital technologies are so impressive that in this day and age the media is acting as a moderator and a facilitator. However, the social context should not be ignored when discussing the information revolution, the societal responsibility and ethical dimensions are equally important to be introduced and implemented. Concerns about ethical issues in the new media have also been expressed by journalists, politicians, ideologues, and educators, although there is very less literature available for such

studies by scholars. Incidents like illegal downloading, inappropriate content, and cyber safety have become popular issues being addressed these days by the society and the government.

As the involvement in digital media by the society is increasing, the need to educate the society on its moral concerns is at an alarming stage. The transformation to new media is raising concerns and discussions around the positive and negative implications of the new media. People need to understand that anything posted on Internet stays forever. The Ad Council's YouTube videos entitled "Think before You Post" seek to "to make teen girls aware of the potential dangers of sharing and posting personal information online and of communicating with unfamiliar people to help reduce their risk of sexual victimization and abduction" (Ad Council 2007)

Control of Information, Speed of Communication and Volume are some of the major concerns that must be addressed when discussing of the new digital media. Social networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, among many others, have evolved as a result of Web 2.0 concepts and new media technologies. Millions of people around the globe, through social networking (internal, external, or mobile), are recently building online local, regional, and global communities to communicate their shared interests and activities, disseminate information, and interact through a variety of web-based tools. The use of new media and social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Hike, Whatsapp, Google+, Snapchat etc.) has implications for society, culture, and politics that has variety of morality related issues such as: social identity, privacy, ownership, participation and credibility.

The paper thus focusses on the relationship between the three ethical dimensions namely identity, privacy and credibility of the digital media pursued by the youth and the society. In our approach we studied the society from varied aspects to understand what steps, actions and consideration they are taking to manage the ethical issues while participating in the virtual space. It aims to investigate the ethical contours of identity, privacy and participation in the new digital media and inculcate understanding of moral thinking and conduct while being present in the digital dimensions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous history, several studies have been conducted upon the upcoming Web 2.0 technological advancement and innovation. With the time passing by, the adverse effects of the digital age like young people's literacy, social tolerance were the hot topics of argument. Contrasting the theories in the early 21st century, on one hand the studies were conducted discussing the educational benefits of video games and their positive aspects by (Gee, 2003) and (Shaffer, 2006); on the contrary in the similar time frame on the other hand there was work being carried out on understanding relationship between the video games and violence (Anderson et. al. 2004) and (Linder et. al 2004).

Many of the researchers suggest that the audience of the traditional media as compared to the digital media were merely active (Lembo, 2000). Digital media platforms are giving open opportunities to public to speak up, portray their thoughts and opinions. For instance, blogs allow people to through light upon issues that matters to them, social networking is allowing people to increase their connections. Digital media is highly responsible for facilitating civic environment in the society (Moore, 2003). Digital mediums are powerful tools for promoting social responsibilities.

As (Williams, 1974) rightly quotes what promotes good is equally rightful to spread evil. (Green and Hannon, 2007) appropriately discuss the pros and cons of digital transformation of the society. There are always two ways to look at the coin. The digital media on one hand is responsible for spreading the news for support, on the hand is responsible for creating the chaotic situation and after mess. Therefore it's the way individual seeks it – as a risk or as an opportunity (Buckingham, 2000)

Like all innovations digital media will eventually be regulated in some fashion, but it is unclear how regulation will occur and who will gain and who will lose from the regulation. The Blogger's Code of Conduct (2007) and the Deleting Online Predators Act (2006) are recent efforts in the direction of regulation that take two different tacks. The Blogger's code of conduct

is created by bloggers themselves to follow certain guidelines, the latter one is introduced by legislators to restrict young people from entering social networking or any interactive sites.

The understanding behind creating the Online Predators Act was to control the ethical implications of the involvement of young buds in digital spaces. However the argument still resides whether the restricted Internet Usage will control the ethical behavior. The answer is certainly negative. The proper understanding of the morality of usage of the web space, the distinct demarcation of the ethical lines is the need of the hour. There were studies conducted on analyzing the activities that youth perform when they are connected to Internet. Lenhart and Madden (2005) in their study mentions that 57% teenagers are creating contents for blogs. Majority of young children are actively participating in creating avatars through role playing games Green and Hannon (2007).

A recent study by Pew shared statistics which say 55 percent teens are creating their active profiles on social networks, whereas 91 percent are involved in chatting with friends and increasing their connections. Gaming is another activity where tremendous participation of teenagers and youth has been visible. The average thirteen- to eighteen year-old plays fourteen hours of video games per week Martin and Oppenheim (2007). Another set of online activities by youth includes downloading music, watching videos, shopping, research, school work, news etc.

III. METHODOLOGY

Young people today are frequently engaged with Internet. During the research we adopted the process of informally interviewing 50 individuals aged between 18years to 30 years; actively involved in digital media activities like blogging, gaming, online selling etc. The main purpose of the discussion with these individuals was to figure out their understanding on the three ethical domains – privacy, identity and credibility. Is there any code of conduct adopted by them while they are present on the virtual space or it's their freedom to right/ share that attracts them to work on digital applications? What are the pros and cons of digital media over traditional mediums?

A. *Identity*

Identity formation is a major task of adolescence as studied by theorists. As the youth becomes aware of the societal norms, expectations and values they begin to reconsider their self-conception. They tend to try on different identities and avatars to see how they are received by others (Moshman, 2005). Identity formation is not just an individual project but a deeply social one that hinges on social validation, carries social consequences, and bears ethical promises and risks. It is facilitated by feedback from others (Erikson, 1980).

Although opportunities to adopt radically different identities exist in many online spaces, researchers are finding that youth's online self-expressions tend to reflect aspects of their offline selves (Huffaker 2006; Valentine and Holloway 2002). Youth use social media to express their values and cultural tastes, sexual identities, personalities, and feelings about their relationships and experiences.

B. *Privacy*

Privacy refers to how the personal information about an individual is portrayed on digital media. With the web analytics becoming stronger and efficient, the enabled cookies on web browser tracks the individualistic behavior and personal data. The new digital media also can share information with a broader public, it is very important to control the privacy issues. Boyd (2007a) identifies four such properties, including persistence (what you post persists indefinitely), searchability (you can search for anyone and find their digital "body"), replicability (you can copy and paste information from one context to another), and invisible audiences (you can never be sure who your audience is).

It does not summarize that youth do not value their privacy or respect others privacy. It is just the change in mindset that has occurred over the period of time. Their understanding of privacy is different, it's not about hiding the personal information but the disclosure and access is unique (Woo, 2006). The privacy issues are very salient when considering digital media. Young people online are creating practices and beliefs related to their online profiles and lives. The social media sites are best examples where youth likes sharing the incidents from individual lives to other friends/peers constantly maintaining the privacy concern by assuring selective disclosure, and thereby controlling the presentation of identity.

As Weber (2006) says, "public is the new private: young people often realize that their blogs and homepages are public and accessible, but they trust that only their peers are interested enough to view them. Adults are supposed to know where they are not welcome and act accordingly." There are numerous instances where youth are creating more than one profiles as bloggers, or social media activities, one where they only add the close friends and family and the other profile is for people they just know. The common trend on the other set of profiles is hiding their last name, the address, the phone numbers, and other personal data.

The new digital media holds both risks and opportunities. Selective disclosure of information can empower youth, and encourage morality of privacy issues but at the same time careless oversharing of information will be harmful. It is utmost important to preserve a sense of individual privacy while maintaining openness while being present on the digital space.

C. *Credibility*

When speaking about credibility in the digital media, it is about the authenticity and accuracy of the content being posted. The ability to evaluate credibility depends on youth's own capacity. The credibility should be representing one's competence. Credibility is also determined by individual's interest and motivation. Apart from the intensions and motivations which are important aspects of credibility, the authentication still plays an important role. There are numerous fashion bloggers, diet consultants, physical trainers, marketing executives etc. working online. The question is about their authenticity, the professional certification, on-the-job training, and a reputation for competence. The ethical dimension of the new media's credibility arises because of low barriers to participation. Everyone has a voice in varied online spaces which becomes undue advantage at times.

With the increasing penetration of Internet in almost every section from health to education to politics, the credibility aspect cannot be leveraged for free. The information needs to be from an authentic source. The reliability on digital content is increasing and hence the trustworthiness and accuracy's measurement should be considered at every point.

IV. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

On interviewing the digitally active youth, in context of ethical factors related to digital media activities, the following perceptions and perspectives were analyzed –

When interviewing with youth on aspects of their individual Identity, it was noted that the young buds are trying to imitate the styles of their idols. From hairstyles, clothing to hobbies, the younger generation in their online avatars have different passion, are fit and consequently are more confident (Table 1). They try to hide their weaknesses. They find it opportunistic to change their roles on digital space which physically is not possible. The fake identities are eminently prominent on digital media. Merely few percentages are interacting or participating on digital media by their real personalities.
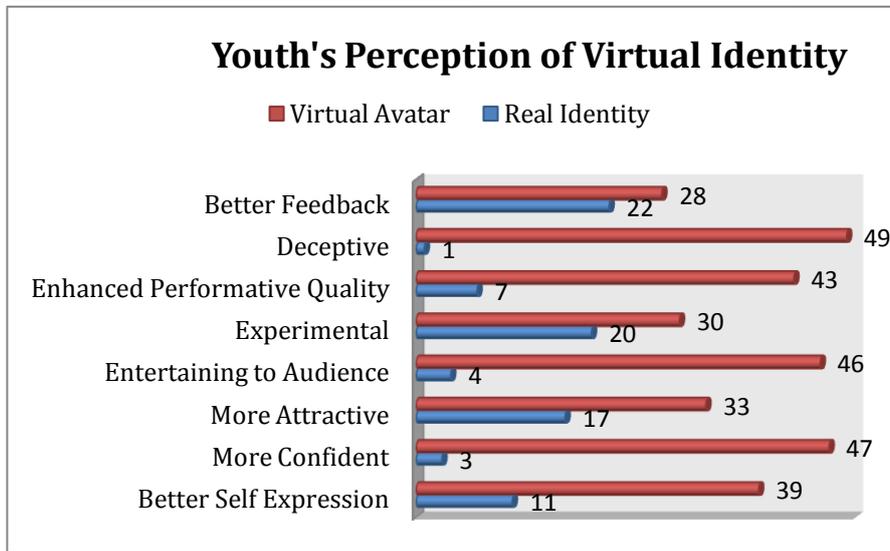
Figure 1: Youth's Perception on Identity

The results suggest that most young people's online identities reflect very few key elements of their offline identity. The friends and strangers connected through online space could be misleading. The long term effects of youth's identity play are still a question mark at this point. The strong desire youth possess for positive feedback and praise from others reflects in an abstract, disinterested way about the ethical implications of his/her conduct.

When considering ethical implication of privacy on digital media activities, the results that were calculated from the interviews were tabulated as follows. (Table 2).
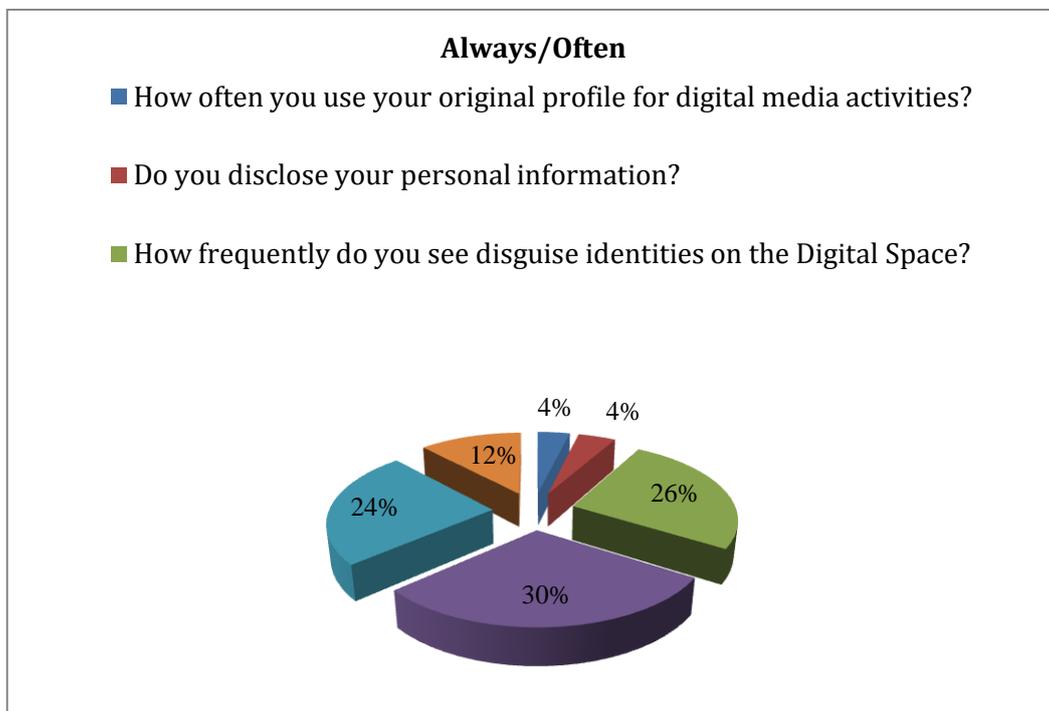

Table 2: Youth's Perception on Privacy

While evaluating the credibility, trustworthiness and expertise are the two important dimensions to be measured. It is more of an objective property. We interviewed youth with statements which allies closely with several concepts, including trust, reliability, accuracy, reputation, quality, authority, and competence. It examines how message or information characteristics influence perceptions of believability. Major dimensions to judge the credibility perspective of the youth was calculated based on these factors.
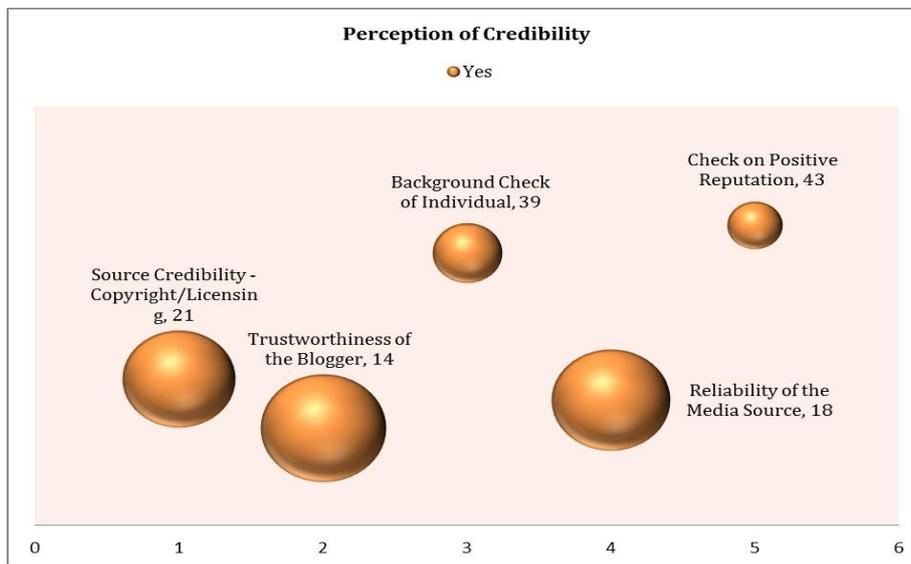
Perception of Credibility

● Yes

Check on Positive
Reputation, 43

Background Check
of Individual, 39

Source Credibility -
Copyright/Licensin
g, 21

Trustworthiness of
the Blogger, 14

Reliability of the
Media Source, 18

Table 3: Youth's Perception on Credibility

V. CONCLUSION

Digital Media have profoundly changed the information landscape, as well as the means of social interaction. The paper has therefore focused on the three most important ethical issues that have come up in digital environment and are required to educate the youth on the moral awareness. The paper also aims at the various codes of conducts formed by the individuals and the Government which should be followed while performing any digital media activity.
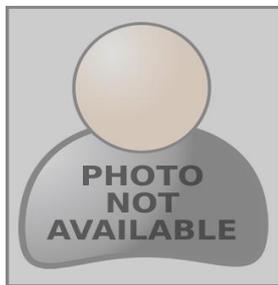
The discussions of ethical domains Identity, Privacy and Credibility during blogging, gaming, socializing etc. must be considered by the youth to avoid the adverse effects of increasing involvement in digital media activities. Although the participation in virtual space is at an uprising stroll; the studies and research relative to moral and ethical stances are very limited. The paper thus ignites the learning on the moral aspects of digital medium. While interviewing the youth on ethical aspects it was portrayed that the society is well alarmed of privacy issues and is confident of partial disclosure and strict settings but needs to concentrate more on the Identity and Credibility issues during their presence on Internet and Web 2.0 technologies.
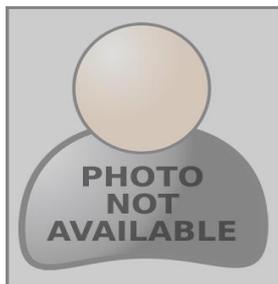
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AUTHOR(S) PROFILE

Ridhima Bhanot Sharma, received the MBA degree in Marketing and Sales from IILM Institute for Higher Education in 2011. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. from Amity University, Noida. She has 3 years of rich industry experience. She works as a digital marketing consultant and is a Google certified trainer for Google Analytics, Adwords, and many other courses.

Dr. Marshal Mukesh Sahni, is a B.Sc, MBA, M.Phil and Ph.D, He is a professor with more than 20 years of experience in academics and academic administration. He has a rich experience of working with the corporate sector (public & private) and has been involved in the launch and marketing of consumer durables and consumer products. His teaching and research interests are in the domain of Branding, Marketing Communication, Process, Project and Strategic Management. He has authored 07 research papers/articles. He has been a visiting professor at Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management, Apeejay Institute of Management, Institute of Marketing Management, Institute of Management Technology and International Management Institute. He has earlier worked as Dean Academics with Wigan & Leigh College and Mangalmay Institute of Management. He holds the position of Dean Student Welfare, Amity University Uttar Pradesh and Head of Department MBA Telecom Management.