Facebook and the Covid-19 Crisis: Building Solidarity Through Community Feeling

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Abstract

In the event of the Covid-19 spread, the entire world has been brought to a stop due to the imposed lockdown, to counter the effects of the spreading virus. This paper proposes to study the change in how people are experiencing a pandemic very differently and what such changes imply with respect to social connections and human interactions. The networked digital citizens come together in the time of crisis, sharing a sense of nostalgia as well as perseverance on Facebook. The paper will refer to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in order to explain the human need for the sense of belonging. A pandemic has not been experienced in earlier time as a global phenomenon with far reaching consequences as in the present context. People across the world are experiencing a similar form of loneliness, boredom, and anxiety irrespective of which profession one belongs to. The absence of physical movement has suddenly caused a great shift of interaction on to the Facebook platform. The corner stone for virtual social interaction had already been laid down with the rise of a 'convergence culture'. Social communities depicting shared interests like music, dance, photography, food, and other aspects of life have been redesigned and restructured as a result of the lockdown. More and more people are sharing videos of activities they are engaging in during this time of immobility. A greater focus of family experiences are being shared by celebrities, creating a semblance of solidarity in fighting against the psychological effects of a long term lockdown. The provision of the care button on Facebook also intensifies this sense of a shared trauma and the human desire to overcome all hurdles together. The paper will focus on a number of Facebook trends, beginning from Dalgona coffee and its perception to music covers of popular songs such as 'Dance Monkey' and Bella Ciao. The historical meaning associated with the term 'crisis' is being redefined in a social context which greatly based on a networked population. This has an entirely different social and psychological implication. Analysing the Facebook updates will go a long way in understanding the term 'crisis' with respect to the time of Corona.

Keywords Belonging · Covid-19 · Solidarity · Community · Crisis

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Introduction

Human beings in general are social beings. From the very beginning of human society, the basic sense of connection and collaboration has furthered the development of the society as we know it today. However, the very essence of inter personal interaction has been transformed with the advancements in computer technology. Computers today are no longer just an aid for human beings; instead, they have become an extension of an individual being. The advent of cyborgs are not restricted to external appendages to human body; rather, the technological tools and human dependency on them have made it a part of the human body, which in turn affects the mind and emotions. According to Castell, the revolutions brought about in the field of information and communication technologies have altered the culture as well. Heidegger first talks about how computer technology would eventually be integrated and interwoven into the very base of human life (Heim, 1992). Instead of the concept of individualism, what Heidegger was most concerned about was the standardization of thought processes. The present development in the sphere of artificial intelligence presumes that machine can emulate human thought process in a structured pattern, thereby creating definite blocks of thought. This presumption is reflected in the structure of Facebook posts and the culture of sharing.

McLuhan had predicted the rise of a society which would no longer be restricted by spatiality. The rapid development in networking and communication technology has resulted in creating a much smaller world which is increasingly interconnected. The concept of 'global village' has become a reality with the development in information technology. The tool which has become prominent in constructing such spaces of interaction is the advent of the social networking sites. Foremost among the various social networking sites is the commonly used platform Facebook. A total of 1.82 billion daily active users access Facebook (Clement, 2020).

Pandemic and Social Attitude

The category of infectious disease has existed since time immemorial. Epidemics and global pandemics started taking root with the advent of technological advancement in transportation. The perception of pandemics has also undergone different phases of transformation. The spread of plague was initially viewed as God's punishment for the sinners. As a result the victims were isolated to maintain the distinction between the sinners and the faithful followers of religious teachings. The secular concept of disease spreading due to concrete observable traits such as hygiene was initiated during the Renaissance period. This first pandemic to be experienced in a global scale was cholera. The spread of what came to be known as the 'Asiatic disease' was enabled due to the increased pace of travel with the aid of Ships and Railways. Cholera spread across the continents of Europe and America within a period of 3 years. Infectious disease spread quicker in urban areas compared with rural areas. This is due to the higher density of population in the cities.

The pace at which the Corona pandemic spread is much higher than the spread of plague and cholera.

Facebook and Interpersonal Interaction

The introduction of Facebook in the year 2004 brought about a conceivable change in the sphere of communication. It provided a virtual space for exchange of information and building interpersonal relations, transcending temporal and spatial boundaries. Since social networking sites provide a façade of anonymity, the users feel more comfortable in interacting with others.

The rise of social network has initiated a sense of instant gratification. The importance of the virtual space has become more essential than that of the physical reality of the world. The removal of the distinction between the real and virtual is a result of postmodernism. In keeping with the concept of the ‘hyperreal’ propounded by Baudrillard, the image of the real world reflected in the domain of social networking sites becomes more believable and real in contrast to the actual society.

Closely connected to the idea of the virtual self is the idea of performance. The age of networked capitalism is characterized by the structuring of consumer culture. The producer and consumer come together in the form of a ‘prosumer’. The ‘prosumer’ works towards constructing an identity which is closely linked to performing one’s own identity. Erving Goffmann, in his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, first talks about the idea of human beings performing on stage in keeping with a desired self. Cyberspace provides an unrestricted space where the user can present oneself as and when he/she wishes to. The user while performing oneself for the audience feels a semblance of control while interacting through social networking sites such as Facebook. However, it is arguable whether the larger cultural beliefs influence the performance of a self or not. Identity, as Taylor and Spencer believe, is a coming together of the ‘personal and collective space’ ‘as it a negotiated space between ourselves and others’ (Korpijakko, 2015). Facebook as a space for showcasing the self leads to the ‘fetishization of the self’.

The interaction of a user with the other users of Facebook together create multiple selves, singularly connecting to each individual. The meaning acquired by this self is derived from a collective cultural exchange, validating the constructed identity. The self is always created through its interaction with the ‘other’, whether offline or online. In the present circumstances, where movement is restricted due to the practice of social isolation, in the wake of the corona pandemic, the self can only access the virtual space for its existence. Sandy Stone comments on the changing manner of the meaning the words ‘meet’ and ‘face’ (Jones, 1998). The social relations of the cyberspace are created on the basis of sharing of information. The physical proximity has been substituted by the presence of spaces of knowledge and information, which bring people together, virtually, to connect in a network of common ideas and viewpoints.

Facebook Communities and the Sense of Belonging

Communities form the base of the society. According to Ferdinand Tonnies, without the sense of community, the society becomes a meaningless collection of individuals. This feeling of community is built around common language, common beliefs, and common interests. Online communities are an extension of the offline communities. What differentiates them from each other is that the interactions taking place in online communities are enabled by internet technologies. In time of crisis, online communities help the members

to seek support from the others. The lack of physical restrictions and the ability to formulate one's own character transform such virtual spaces into centres of belongingness (Lindgren, 2017).

The rapid spread of the Corona virus at a global scale resulted in a rise of Facebook use (Ghaffary, 2020). One of the major uses of Facebook is entertainment (Reinecke, 2014). During the period of lockdown, trapped inside one's home, people are turning more and more towards Facebook for acquiring information and gaining access to entertainment. A number of user behaviour studied with reference Facebook use during the Covid pandemic showed that people have been spending more than usual time on social media platforms, especially Facebook (Kemp, 2020). The shift towards a networked culture was already under process. This, however, has increased to a greater extent during the pandemic. The current situation has further integrated computer technology into every sphere of human life. Computer-mediated communication is increasingly being known as the 'new normal'.

Facebook is akin to a journal or a scrapbook (Alleyne, 2015). Like a scrapbook, Facebook uses snippets of various multimedia forms to create personal stories. The elements of a journal are also clearly visible in the Facebook profile indicating personal information, likes and dislikes, and interests arranged in a reverse chronological order.

One of the features offered by Facebook is the formation of virtual communities based on common beliefs and interest. Within the space of the Facebook platform, users generate content and at the same time share content with each other. The culture of sharing enables the formation of an 'imagined community', unrestricted by any adult interventions. The elements of social connection and shared identities are at the crux of the Facebook structure. Building social capital is at the heart of the motivations for Facebook users. Social capital refers to personal benefits acquired by an individual. Based on the social interactions taking place in an alternate space, which is not constant but mercurial, users acquire a sense of belonging and peer support. This becomes starkly apparent in the sudden increase in the use of Facebook. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the sense of belonging is the third most important need for humans. Staying under lockdown for an extended period of time pushes a person towards a dejected sense of loneliness. This is where the virtual communities play an important role. According to Giddens, individual identity is performed from within the constructs of the private space, influenced by familial beliefs. However, with the rise of the networked society the beliefs of the family have been replaced by the multiple ideas, ideologies, likes, and dislikes harboured by the same person. Virtual communities on Facebook try to create homogeneous spaces out of the heterogeneous nature of the society. Therefore, while performing one's identity, the virtual communities on Facebook play a vital role. Identity in itself is no longer a constant; it changes with the changes 'in the media representations of everyday life' (Korpijakko, 2015). The nature of identity has been greatly debated. With respect to the cyber self in online communities, Turkle focuses on the fragmented nature of the self. She states that this multiplicity of the self leads to the construction of a fragmented online community. She further elaborates on the online connections being temporary. However, in the present scenario, the spread of the Corona virus globally has seen a rise in the use of Facebook. This has led to changes in the form and nature of communication which is expected to leave a lasting effect even in the post Covid period. In spite of the fragmented nature of online communities, the basic structure of such communities is the same. The essential elements for every online community are the ability to identify through the use of interactive platforms. (Kindsmuller, (2009).)

Studies have shown that social networking sites are directly related to the social and psychological well-being (Reinecke, 2014). This idea is based on the assumption that social interaction is essential for human beings. The need for belonging is not acquired

through interaction alone but a sense of connection and caring. Facebook provides these dual functions in the form of ‘friending’. The ties generated through the Facebook friends can be categorised into strong and weak ties. A better sense of psychological well-being is achieved through interactions with strong ties. Acquiring social support is essential for the development of a sense of psychological well-being. This is based on the assumption that social interaction greatly influences the well-being of people. Various interactions taking place on Facebook are mostly for the purpose of gaining validation and support.

Celebrity Culture and Sense of Community

The spread of corona virus implemented restriction on socialization in the everyday physical space. The pandemic being experienced on such a grand scale irrespective race, gender, and social status affected social interaction. The necessity of staying quarantined became the essential way of life. This restriction coupled with the development of web 2.0 created newer standards of communication. Consumer–celebrity relationship in the form of fan clubs has existed for a long time. However, the nature of such ‘parasocialization’ (Jarzyna, 2020) has evolved greatly during the period of lockdown.

Celebrity culture greatly influences the self-portrayal of Facebook users. In the age of consumerism where celebrities define the very idea of self-promotion, the users also follow celebrities very closely. A celebrity figure plays the role of being a social influencer. Both celebrity and non-celebrity population on Facebook have been sharing the same crisis of lack of socialization and restriction on physical movement. As more people turn to Facebook to interact and socialize the demand for consuming self-disclosure from within the personal space have becoming increasingly more important. The space inside homes has become integral to interacting on online communities. Celebrity profiles sharing their activities while being stranded inside their home create a sense of bonding which is readily consumed by members in online communities.

Hollywood stars such as Anthony Hopkins, Dwayne Johnson, Jason Mamo, to name a few, have been posting videos of them spending time with their family.

Anthony Hopkins playing the piano for his cat, Niblo, has been doing the rounds in Facebook. The comments shared for the uploaded videos show a kind of bond among the viewers and also a sense of relief from the monotony of life during lockdown:

“Thank you Sir Anthony, I so look forward to seeing the videos of you and Niblo and hearing your beautiful music 🎵 is there no end to your talents ? Lol what is the story behind your very cute cat 🐱 Niblo ? Where is she from ? P.s. Discovered west world and watched the LOT 🍷”

You have been my saviour during lockdown, stay safe 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷’ (Anthony Hopkins, 2020).

Another comment of a follower on the same video talks about the massive change brought about by the pandemic:

‘Thank you so much. You have been my favorite actor of all time and now I get to enjoy your music and see your lovely dog Niblo as well. You are truly a gift to the world. Thank you for all you have done and carry on doing.. sending a big hug from strict lockdown in Spain.. up to yesterday only allowed walk my Spanish Water Dog 100 mt to do necessities.. now 1 h and 1 km at certain times of the day !! Such freedom

Dwayne Jonson, spending quality time with his little daughter, reminded his followers about their own childhood and time spent with their respective fathers (Fig. 1):

This is a different aspect of the celebrity life which the fans could directly connect to.

The social networking sites have also helped a category of musicians playing covers to popular songs. These videos are mostly shared inside the house or in an open location. A very good example of such popular stars are Daniele Vitale and Karolina Protsenko. Daniele Vitale plays saxophone covers of popular songs, whereas Karolina

Fig. 1 Dwayne Johnson with Daughter; Father's Day Post (Nandy, Dwayne The Rock Johnson, 2020)

‘This is an excellent performance thousands of miles apart. A beautiful blending of voice to produce a masterpiece. Karolina Protsenko is as beautiful as she is talented and the saxophone of Daniele Vitale stirs the heart. A wonderful musical memory to hold in my heart. 💜💚🎷’ (Daniele Vitale Sax, 2020) (Fig. 2).

‘Your music brings such joy to so many people don’t ever stop smiling and don’t let these problems break you spirit Nearly 4 million people are behind you and will always support you what a fantastic talent and I love this new collaboration with Daniele brilliant 🥰🥰💖💖❤️❤️🐼🐼👉👉👉’ (Karolina Protsenko, 2020).

'I've came across you on YouTube months ago, I suffer with mental health issues but your music always makes me feel better, how you play is beautiful x.' (Karolina Protsenko, 2020).

The collaborative performances across geographical boundaries have been increasing in the recent times as a result of the lockdown and social isolation. The sense of validity and coming together as a community with shared interest and beliefs has become crucial to virtual interaction and human relationship. A sense of nostalgia surrounds the comments and content sharing. The various Facebook communities create collective memories of the time before the Pandemic and a hopeful future beyond the period of social isolation.

Fig. 2 Super Dance Monkey collaborative performance (Karolina Protsenko, 2020)

The self, portrayed on Facebook, works as an extension of our perception of the personal self. It tries to portray the sense of self that I one desires. At the same time the virtual self on Facebook is also a study of how the self is perceived by the others (Alleyne, 2015). Paul Ricoeur talks about narrative selves constructed through its recourse to storytelling modes. He, however, believed in a linear and fixed self. In contrast, De Mul talks about the ludic self which represents the multiplicity of self as portrayed through the social media platforms such as Facebook (Philip Seargeant, 2014). The virtual identities on Facebook are formed through its interaction with other selves. For this purpose users avail different forms of media such as images, videos, texts, and emoticons. The present age is characterised by a strong participatory culture. The audience no longer restrict themselves to consuming information but also reacting to it with comments or posts. From being a database for user information, Facebook has now been transformed into a narrative generator. The uploaded information in the form of images, videos, and games are arranged and rearranged to tell the story of the self and to make sense of the social acts. How the story is narrated is based on the perceived audience reaction (Fig. 3).

‘Right we jumped on Dalgona coffee trend this morning in the absence of being able to go out to a coffee shop! Super easy to make by whisking 2 tbsp instant coffee,

Fig. 3 Dalgona Coffee Challenge (Nandy, Donal Skehan, 2020)

2 tbsp sugar & 2 tbsp boiling water to a thick airy blob which you plonk on top of iced milk. Ain't gonna win any barista awards but it does look pretty cool and with coffee and that amount of sugar it's like bleedin' rocket fuel! Demo in my insta stories today... who is ready for the WEEKEND! #dalgonacoffee' (Nandy, et al., 2020).

Daniel Miller says 'Facebook is what people do on Facebook.' (Philip Seargeant, 2014). The concept of 'affordances' is closely related to technology and the birth and growth of social media. As is evident in the words of Daniel Miller, the importance of Facebook as a social networking site rests on the space it provides and the acts it allows. Facebook gives agency to the users to create a self. However, this agency is influenced by the social order of the extended into the virtual space. According to Socialbakers analysis among the various types of posts shared on Facebook, image consists of 70% (Socialbaker, 2020). Most trends on Facebook use images as a response to the popularly known 'challenges'. The dialogue built around the challenges not only work towards gaining validation but also support from a larger audience. The likes, reacts, and comments also become a part of this dialogue which can help in dealing with loneliness and depression. The concept of Facebook Paradox talks about the alternative belief that social media interaction leads to heightened sense of loneliness and depression. Facebook provides an intangible support system, based on information exchange, emotional support, and companionship (Yu, 2013). However, in the present crisis, in the absence of tangible support connected with the real life of the physical world, people can only resort to the online support provided by the likes of Facebook.

The Second Self Who Cares

Images play an important role in self-expression. They provide a concreteness to self, performed in the virtual medium. The virtual self is an extension of the physical self. Drawing from the idea of multiple selves of a God in Hindu mythology, 'avatar' stands for the multiplicity of a person's notion of the self. The process of self-expression through avatar has existed for quite some time now. However, it has undergone a major shift in its appearance. Presently, avatars come with various forms of customization in the form of body shape, color, and physical features. Facebook had earlier introduced virtual characters under the Bitstrip application. This has been revived in the Indian context with the introduction of avatars which can be customized to present a close resemblance of a person. It depicts the perception of a person of the self. The Facebook avatar trend is also an element introduced during the quarantine period, when the virtual self is gradually becoming more important than the physical self.

Another rendition of the virtual self is the category of emojis. These are used for the purpose of denoting emotions and mood of a person. Communication and companionship on Facebook is devoid of a tangible physical presence. This is the most important differentiated marker between real world interaction and virtual interaction. In order to deal with the absence of the physical self, emojis are extensively used. Emojis help in associating a partially tangible meaning to the dialogues between the various users. Facebook introduced the 'care' button in order to spread a feeling of virtual support and companionship (Montti, 2020). The emojis have evolved in order to cater to demand of a system of online support in contrast to social support in general.

Conclusion

Technological advancement in every age has greatly influenced the structure of the society. Human behaviour and social constructions have changed with the advent of complex machinery invented to simplify the way of life. From the change in transportation to the changing neighbourhood culture, social life-forms have undergone major shifts in its structure. The invention of air conditioner slowly wiped away the porch culture of the American neighbourhood. The spread of the Corona virus resulting in a global pandemic has probably completely reconstructed human interaction and social relationship. Its effect still continues to affect the society at large. The range of its effect can only be understood with time. In keeping with Maslow's Theory of Hierarchy and reiteration of Ferdinand Tonnies views, depict how the sense of community and belonging is essential to human existence. The intrinsic value of Facebook has revived its use of as a platform which is best suited to emotion of companionship and coexistence. In comparison to a physical community, the virtual community is often considered to be superficial. However, Facebook has become an essential tool of sociality because of the perceived meaningfulness it affords to its users (Reinecke, 2014). The idea of community is no longer restricted by physical and geographical boundaries. Instead it has been transformed into an ever evolving space with a protean self.

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