

# Constructing identity on social networks. An analysis of competences of communication constituted on Facebook.com



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**ABSTRACT:** Tendencies of mediatization, globalization, commercialization etc. in modern societies cause a loss of relevance of traditional agencies of socialization. Individuals are increasingly challenged to enfold their socialization on their own. Media products become highly relevant for an individual's socialization. To be able to manage the demands of socialization, the individual needs to develop sophisticated competences of communication. The competences of communication enable the individual to identify and reflect his/her personal needs. Identity is conceived as the realization of an individual's competence of construction of communication in interactive situations. Online social networks such as Facebook.com provide spaces of communication, in which individuals can work on their identity in processes of interaction. By methods of network analysis this research explores the impact of structures of social networks on the individual's competences of communication and, hence, the impact on identity constructed on social networks.

**KEYWORDS:** identity, communication, social networks, network analysis, Facebook



## **INTRODUCTION**

In modern, individualized societies traditional agencies of socialization, such as the family, associations, religious communities or neighbourhood, lose their relevance. Individuals of these societies are increasingly challenged to develop an identity on their own. Their socialization is also more and more obligated to their own responsibilities. In an individualized society the socialization of the individual is not given but the individual has to actively develop it. Thereby the individual can shape its socialization. Working on one's socialization always means working on one's identity. Therefore in modern societies a sophisticated social competence is necessary.

Because of the tendency of mediatization in modern societies medial communication becomes the central place for processes of constructing identity. Due to the establishing of internet technologies various media products spread out, which pro-

vide spaces of communication that are used for processes of socialization by individuals. Online social networks such as Facebook.com, MySpace.com or others provide such spaces of communication, in which individuals can work on their identity in processes of interaction.

On the basis of the establishment of social networks as institutions of everyday communication a large part of interaction in social relations shifts to the spaces of communication that are provided by social networks. Therefore, social networks have a high relevance for socialization of the individuals using them.

Social circumstances in modern societies require a dynamic conception of identity. That is why identity is not seen as a product of a process that is completed at a certain point of time. Identity is seen as a continuous process that renews itself in every situation of interaction. To fit this conception, identity is conceived as the realization of an individual's competence of construction of communication in interactive situations. This competence enables the individual not just to construct viable communication in very different social contexts and by very different social role expectations but also to identify and reflect his/her personal needs.

In this research media products are not just seen as resources that can be used for the construction of identity. It is analysed, how the comprehensive presence of media influences the individual's patterns of communication. This research explores the impact of structures of social networks on the individual competences of communication and hence, the impact on identity constructed on social networks. Therefore, methods of network analysis are used, in which structures of interaction are explored to explain social behaviour.

The individual's competences of communication are developed in network structures and are correspondingly constituted. It depends on the network that is used as space of communication, which anticipations of expectations the individual constructs. The aim of the research is the analysis of the competence of constructing communications by the analysis of medial interaction on online social networks. As Facebook.com is the largest and most prominent online social network, it is chosen to be the main field of analysis.

## **CONSTITUTION OF IDENTITY IN MODERN SOCIETY**

In modern societies traditional institutions of socialization have become less important. This leads to a tendency of individualization. Individualization does not mean that the members of a society are isolated or dissocialized. Individualization means a process of dissolving from traditional forms of socialization and the loss of knowledge about traditional norms of social action (Keupp et al., 2002, p. 37).

In pre-modern societies the individual is socialized in a unitary social structure. In modern societies the individual is socialized in different and various social structures. Social affiliations are short term and simultaneous to other social affiliations (Mummendey, 1997). Because of its diverse socializations the indi-

vidual experiences various social perspectives, which it can use for the development of identity. By that the individual's construction of identity gets more and more complex, specific and differentiated from other individuals' constructions of identities.

Because of the fact that the individual's socialization is decreasingly determined by traditional institutions such as the family, school, associations etc., the individual is forced to shape his/her socialization on his own. This was formerly done by the traditional agencies of socialization and it now becomes a central mission in the individual's development. The construction of identity becomes a subjective problem (Luckmann, 2007, p. 226). The individual has to concern questions of the constitution of identity. The effort for development of identity has increased enormously.

### **THE RELEVANCE OF MEDIA PRODUCTS FOR THE CONSTITUTION OF IDENTITY**

The relevance of media products for the socialization of the individual and the development of its identity has increased rapidly. If the individual is responsible for the development of his/her identity on its own, there have to be resources that can be used for the construction of identity. Media products have become some of the most important resources for the construction of identity. Media products provide spaces of communication, in which on the one hand construction of identity by interactive processes take place and which on the other hand shape communication processes by their structures and by that also shape the constitution of the individuals' identities.

In these medial spaces of communication different aspects of identity can be tried out and developed in a playful way. But aspects of identity can not only be tried out, identity is lived out and it is as real as in non-medial situations. Medial products do not just provide virtual playgrounds that are separated from real life, but they provide social spaces in which an increasing part of the real life of the individuals takes place. Constructions of identity that are developed in medial spaces of communication are of the same value as constructions of identity which are developed in non-medial situations. But to construct identity by using possibilities provided by media products, sophisticated media literacy, and mediatized competence of communication, is required. According to the argument that is achieved in this paper, the constitution of identity depends on the individual's competences of communication. Because of the tendency of globalization and mediatization in modern societies, communication processes, social action and socialization take place less and less by spatial dimension, such as neighbourhood or by local institutions such as village communities, but more and more by trans local network structures. These structures can be established according to common interests, shared values, short term needs etc. Not least because of the widespread establishing of Internet technologies these network structures are constituted to a great extent by electronic media products (Castells, 2001).

This research analyses how the individual's competences of communication are developed in medial constituted structures of communication and how the construction of identity is determined by these structures.

In the last few years a new form of media product has been established that has very quickly become very popular and today is known as a social network. There are several of these online platforms with a different bias, such as Facebook.com, MySpace.com, LinkedIn.com etc. Many and particularly many young users spend a lot of time on social networks each day. On these platforms relationships are generated that would not have been generated without these platforms. At the same time, a large part of the daily routine of communication processes of existing relationships shifts from non-medial spaces to the spaces of communication on online social networks. In the establishment of social networks as platforms for everyday activity, the concept of mediatization and globalization of social space of interaction with a tendency to network structures of communication by which competence of construction of communication is determined and identity is realized, is represented very obviously.

The individuals' profiles on social networks are manifest social interactions. The profiles are manifest offers to others to engage with them, to engage with the individual's constructions of identity that are realized on these profiles and to react to them. Social networks are spaces which are made to enable constructions of identity. It is not surprising at all that social networks have boomed enormously in modern societies, which are characterized by a lack of institutions of socialization.

These online platforms do not just provide space for communication but they animate the users to interact with others on the social network. There are provided various medial appliances that can be used for communication. Text messages can be written, pictures and videos can be published and special applications such as the so-called like-button can be used. There is always the possibility for instant feedback to all forms of communications. Pictures, videos and other forms of communication can be commented and shared with others by just one click. By the possibilities for feedback communication that are provided on the social networks, the relevance for the individual's work on its identity increases (Theunert, 2009).

The social network's structures determine the individual's competence of construction of communication because a large part of everyday communication takes place on these online platforms. In these research media products are not analysed as institutions that provide resources for the construction of identity, but this research analyses, how media produces structural processes of communication and thereby determine structures of the individuals' identities.

This research concerns the question of how construction of identity is determined by network structures of communication by analysis of medial interaction processes on online social networks. These online platforms provide space of communication which has network structures. As it is the most used and widest spread social network, Facebook.com is chosen as the object of research.

## **IDENTITY AS CONSTANT PROCESS**

In older models of constitution of the human self, the development of identity is understood as a process that is finished at a certain time. Identity is understood as the static product of a certain development in adolescence of the human being. This static conception of identity is not adequate for the demands of modern societies. In contemporary concepts of human identity it is conceived as a lifelong process that is never finished. Nevertheless youth is seen as a central phase of development of identity because in this phase patterns of cognition and social action are unfolded. The reflection on one's own identity today is omnipresent and everlasting. What do I think? What do I do? What do I feel? The individual thinks of these questions all the time (Keupp, 2003, p. 27).

These questions can only be concerned according to the circumstances of the actual situation because the individual's construction of meaning is dependent on these circumstances. Identity can only be constituted according to the actual circumstances of the situation. This means that the individual can only realize identity according to the meanings, which it constructs in the actual situation. Because of that the individual interprets his/her life in a new way all the time. Memories can be conceived as interpretations of the experienced past. In his/her memories the individual interprets the experiences of his past in the perspective of the actual situation. On the basis of memories meanings are constructed according to the circumstances of the actual situation (Berger, 1973, p. 109). Therefore the individual's construction of identity is diverse in different moments of time and in different situational contexts. Identity is in a constant flux. Nevertheless, the individual perceives him/herself as a consistent person. Identity understood as constant process cannot be conceived as a property, which the individual develops to a completed status. Identity has to be conceived as a quality that is processed in social action respectively in communication processes.

## **IDENTITY AS SOCIAL FUNCTION**

Individuals don't have an identity but they live their identity when they communicate with others (Krotz, 2003). Identity should not be conceived as property but as ability that is developed by the individual on the basis of social actions. Identity is conceived as the individual's ability to be him/herself. That means the ability to identify his/her own needs and reflect on them in various social contexts and situations. The individual's needs are always determined by the circumstances of the situation and the contexts of communication. According to Siegfried Schmid's (1994) social-constructivist concept, processes of understanding and construction of meanings are conceived as processes of construction of communication.

According to the social-constructivist paradigm reality is understood as the individual's own construction. The individual constructs reality by capabilities that

are given to him/her in his/her socialization. Schmidt does not opine the radical constructivist assumption that communication as an autopoietic social system and the individual's cognition as operational system are without any influence on each other. According to Schmidt cognitive systems produce sense under the influence of sociality on the basis of a structural coupling of cognition and communication. The structural coupling of communication and cognition is not conceived as a biological precondition of the human being. The development of coupling of communication and cognition is based on the fact that the human being becomes an individual primal in the process of socialization. Without the reflection on other's perspectives the individual is not able to develop a consciousness of itself as differentiated from its environment.

Because of the fact that the individual cannot think about itself in another way than by the reflection of another person's perspective, all its cognitive constructions are socially determined. The individual's perspective on reality is a product of a reflection and by that it is always targeted on social connectivity. The individual produces sense always as it would be in a situation of communication. By that the social connectivity of the construction is warranted. Every cognitive construction that is done by the individual is orientated by anticipations of expectations, in which the individual anticipates, what the concrete other or a generalized other expects from it. The individual constructs in a way, in which he/she expects that he/she can be understood by others in the way, he/she wants to be understood. Anticipation of expectation is not an intentional process, it is the only way the individual can construct sense because of his/her coupling of communication and cognition. The coupling of communication and cognition is based on the development of self in the process of socialization. By orientating their cognitive constructions by anticipations of expectations individuals can construct a common reality in which they can interact with each other in a meaningful way. According to the mode of orientation of constructions by anticipations of expectations every cognitive construction can be conceived as a construction of communication.

According to this conception of cognition, the identification of the individual's needs and the reflection on these needs can be conceived as constructions of communication. More precisely the ability of constructing communication primary enables the individual to reflect on his/her needs. The individual's ability to identify his/her needs and reflect on them by constructing communication in various situations can be understood as situational processing of a competence of communication. According to this fact identity can be conceived as a social function.

## **SELF AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS**

George Herbert Mead (1969) enfoldes the concept that the development of self-awareness is based on the individual's effort to understand other individuals. But not only because of the reason that it is necessary to present one's identity to others,

so that they have the chance to anticipate expectations by which they can orientate their constructions of communication. To be able to understand another person's communications it not enough to look at the person but it is necessary to put oneself in the other person's position and take over his or her perspective (Krotz, 2004).

By the attempt to take over others' perspectives the individual identifies him/herself from the others' perspective. Mead's pivotal thesis is that self-awareness is not immanent to the individual but it has to be developed in social experiences by the interaction with other individuals. Self-awareness consists of the perception of oneself and one's needs from another one's perspective that is taken over (Geulen, 1977, p. 178).

A new born baby can experience his environment just from its own point of view. It is not able to take over another point of view. The own perceptions of reality seem to be only possible for the baby (Lindesmith & Strauss, 1974, p. 38). If a baby does not see another one, because it has put its hands in front of its eyes, it thinks, that the other one has disappeared. If he removes his hands from his eyes and sees the person, he thinks he has suddenly appeared again. Babies have to learn to take over the standpoint of others. They have to learn to put their experience in relation to the environment. Primary when they realize that their perception is not the only possible way to see the environment, they can understand that the environment is something that exists independent of their experience. The baby realises that he is a subject and the environment is the object of his perception. When children are playing and imitating other persons, they practice to take over social roles. By this they learn to reconstruct other's perspectives so that they can later anticipate them.

This mode of taking over another one's perspective determines every construction of sense. In the process of taking over another's perspective the individual develops his cognitive abilities as a socialized subject. The individual's cognitions are the reactions that are activated by speaking to him/herself. When the individual speaks to him/herself, he/she takes over the role of another one. Mead calls this mode the reflecting ME, in which the individual's socialization is anchored (Mead, 1969).

According to Mead (1969) the acting I and the reflecting ME designate the individual's interactions. The ME takes over the other's perspective. In situations where there is no concrete other person involved, the individual takes over the perspective of a generalized other. Such situations can be situations of abstract thinking, reading of a book, reception of a film etc. The generalized other is constituted by the individual on the base of a lot of different experiences in interaction processes. The generalized other is a product of the individual's socialization. By the ability to speak to him/herself the individual is able to reflect on his/her own point of view. In the process of communication the individual becomes an object of his/her own cognition.

The individual is able to think of his/her own identity as an object of his/her own awareness. His/her own identity becomes an experience of the individual. But this



is just possible on the base of social action (Mead, 1973, p. 180). Because of the fact that the individual can become aware of his/her own identity, it is not completely determined by his/her socialization, because he/she can doubt his/her own construction of identity and can challenge it.

Meads conception of the individual's identity can be understood as a construction that is orientated by the anticipation of a concrete other's perspective or a generalized other's perspective on the individual's self. By this Mead demonstrates that the structural coupling of communication and cognition, which is, according to Schmidt, (1994) the base of the individual's ability to construct socially viable sense, is not biologically given to the individual, but is an ability that accrues from the fact that the individual's self is enfolded in a social process. The individual, who identifies himself in the process of socialization is able to anticipate another's expectations because its subjectivity is a social construction. Meads' conception of the human self implies, that every construction of sense is a construction of communication, because every individual's construction of sense is orientated by anticipation of a concrete or a generalized other's expectations. The individual's identity serves the ability to communicate and without communication the individual could not enfold an identity. Identity can therefore be conceived as social function and as a social construction, which is processed in situations of interaction.

### **IDENTITY AS REALIZATION OF COMPETENCE OF CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNICATION IN SITUATIONS OF INTERACTION**

Identity needs to be conceived as a process, which is fulfilled in communicative actions. The individual needs to be able to construct him/herself as an identical self in various situations of interaction with various contexts and issues and various partners of interaction, who have different expectations (Krotz, 2004, p. 35). To be able to achieve this effort of identity the individual needs to have certain competences. The individual needs to be able to anticipate the expectations of others in a way that enables him/her to orientate his/her constructions of communication so that they are socially viable. At the same time the individual has to be able to identify his/her own needs and reflect on them by his/her constructions of communication. The competence that is necessary to achieve this and which makes the individual an individual, namely the certain one, which it means to be, is defined as competence of construction of communication. This competence of construction of communication is realized to an identity in each situation of interaction based on the situation's cultural and social contexts as well as on the base of the constitution of a concrete other or a generalized other. Therefore, identity is just realized in situations of interaction.

In every new situation of communication new experiences are acquired by the individual, so that the competence of construction of communication is enhanced even further.



In every situation of interaction an enhanced identity is realized. By this conception identity can be conceived as a dynamic process but at the same time as something that stays the same in every situation.

A barking dog is not seen as a creature with competence of construction of communication, as well as a new-born baby that cries is not seen as component in construction of communication. Dogs as well as new-born babies can only communicate as reactions to their environment. The requirement for development of competence of construction of communication is the ability to activate the same reaction in oneself as in others (Mead, 1973, p. 420). That means the ability to make one's own communication an object of one's own awareness. Connected with this is the ability to challenge and intentionally change the constitution of one's own communication.

The individual can therefore communicate based on the reaction to his/her own identity. That enables him/her to identify and reflect on his/her own needs in a social situation. The individual's needs are no longer just the actuator for personal experience but at the same time become an object of the individual's experience. By that the individual is no longer just able to communicate regarding his/her needs, but also by the reflection on his/her needs. Primary by the ability to reflect on its own needs, the individual's competence of construction of communication is realized to the individual's identity.

Identity therefore is more than just a competence. It is the result of the realized competence of construction of communication, the social circumstances and demands of the situational context and the involved partners of interaction as well as the reflection on the individual's needs in general and especially concerning the conditions of the concrete situation.

## **HOW STRUCTURES OF COMMUNICATION DETERMINE THE CONSTITUTION OF IDENTITY**

To describe the constitution of identity it is necessary to analyse how competences of construction of communication are determined by the conditions of communication. The anticipation of expectations that orientate the individual's constructions of communication refers to the partners of interaction, but the competence of construction of communication, which enables the individual to anticipate others' expectations, is determined by the structures of communication on which the interaction is based on, because the expectations of the partners of interaction are also determined by these structures of communication. Individuals are not able to look through another individual's internal processes of cognition. Therefore, they are dependent on the structures of communication, which are provided by the relationship network to be able to interact with others. Individuals are not able to understand each other in another way than by the structures of communication that are given in the networks the individuals are integrated in.

In all forms of medial communication the structures are determined by the space of social action that is constituted by the media products. To conceive media products as providers of space for social action implicates questions of mediatization of social action and communication. Modern society is heavily affected by the temporal and spatial omnipresence of media products. Analogical to this change of the conditions by which social action takes place, the constitution of competence of construction of communication is highly determined by structures of medial communication.

Inseparably connected with the meta-process of mediatization is the tendency of globalization in modern societies. Globalization and medial constituted space of communication promote the establishment of network structures of communication. The establishment of digital media products especially boost the spread of network structures of communication. Social action and communication processes take place in such network structures, which are characterized by condensed connectivity. The network structures are not defined by the individuals, which are the points of intersection, but by the connections, which build the infrastructure between these points of intersection (Fuhse, 2003, p. 1).

Individuals process social network structures when they interact with others; thereby the process of interaction is determined by the network's structures. It depends on the network that is used as space of communication, which anticipations of expectations the individual performs. The anticipation of expectation is primarily determined by the network structure and not so much by the partner of interaction, because the identity of the partner of interaction is also determined by the network structure. Therefore, a generalized other that is constructed by an individual who is integrated in a certain network structure, can be conceived as reconstruction of the network structure to an identity structure.

Of course individuals in the majority of cases are integrated in various networks. Each network refers to other aspects of the individual's self. Competence of construction of communication develops in interplay of various network structures (Fuhse, 2003, p. 9).

### **CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY EXPLORED BY NETWORK ANALYSIS**

This research analyses how communication processes are determined by technological and social structures. Therefore, it needs to be explained how the situation of interaction is defined in the analysed space of communication. In addition, the contexts of meaning that correspond with the space of communication and that expectations of social roles are constructed by the space of communication need to be analysed.

It is analysed to whom the person's communications are directed, and who feels to be directed by the communications in a network structure. It needs to be analysed under which circumstances the users feel directly addressed by communica-

tion and when they feel to be invited to answer a communication. To clarify, how do the structures of communication determine the contents of communication? It needs to be explored, if there are any special issues that are mainly treated within the network. Are there any main topics or any taboos in the network's communication?

Based on the results of this qualitative analysis, the space of communication can be distinctively explained and categories can be defined, by which the structures of communication can be operationalized. Based on this, it can be analysed, which demands the structures of communication enfold to the competence of construction of communication.

In order to explain how the competence of construction of communication needs to be constituted to enable the individual to communicate adequately and effectively on social networks, it needs to be ascertained, how the effectiveness of communication can be defined. The effectiveness of communication, no matter if it is text, video, picture or anything else, can be defined regarding to its affinity to generate feedback communication. Communication can be seen as effective if it generates a high quantity and quality of feedback communication.

Individuals communicate with the intention of generating reactions of others, so that they can identify themselves in these reactions. If identity is conceived as the realization of competence of construction of communication in situations of interaction, then communications on social networks are intentional constructions of identity, because they tend to generate reactions by which the individual's anticipation of expectations that orientate its construction of communication can be verified. By this mode the competence of construction of communication can be enhanced. Individuals construct communication with the intention to identify their identity by the experience of the reaction to these communications.

It is very important for the individual's work on his/her identity to experience social acknowledgment. Social acknowledgment is not understood as social prestige that is given to the individual, but it is understood as a process of getting realized and known by others. Social prestige is certainly also relevant for the process of enfolding an identity, but it is more important for the individual to be recognized and understood when he/she constructs communication and processes identity. It is a basic condition of identity that it is socially acknowledged. For the individual it is deciding to be seen, understood and accredited by others, because this is necessary to be capable of social acting (Theunert, 2009, p. 102).

The structures and conditions of communication provided by network structures determine how a process of communication is constituted. Individuals have to adjust their communications to these structures. According to this fact, the individual has to orientate his/her constructions of communication by the structures that are provided by the network. By the definition, how communication in a network structure needs to be constituted, to be effective, it is possible to differentiate effective constructions of communication from ineffective constructions of com-

munication. On the basis of this differentiation, correlations between effective constructions of communication and the individual's relationship networks can be analysed. Of course a communication's effectiveness is limited to a certain network. A communication can be effective in a certain network with affinities to certain aspects of meaning, but in another network with affinities to other aspects of meaning it won't probably be effective at all. According to this fact different networks give different demands to the individual's competence of construction of communication. This is why correlations can always just be analysed between structures of a certain network and communications that are constructed in the same network to generate valid data about the influence of network structures on competence of construction of communication. The individuals can of course be integrated in various relation networks with various thematic affinities.

Using methods of ego-centred network analysis, the individual's relationship structures in a network are explored with the intention of describing the relationship structures of different individuals in a formalized and abstract way to make them distinguishable into categories. For example the individuals' relationship networks can be categorized as clique-networks. Such networks are characterized by the fact that a high percentage of points of intersection are connected with many other points of intersection that are integrated in the network. Clique-networks' structures are characterized by a highly-developed closeness. The individuals' networks can also be defined as individualized networks. They are characterized by the fact that the majority of points of intersection are just connected with the network's ego but with no other points of intersection that are integrated in the network. Individualized networks' structures are characterized by a low developed closeness. Further on, networks can be differentiated regarding the fact if they are dominated by weak-tie-relations or strong-tie-relations. Relationship networks can also be differentiated, if the members of the network are put together from a lot of different relationship contexts or if they are all integrated in the same relationship contexts. Relationship contexts could be the family background, business environment, contexts of a hobby etc. But these attributes of structure do not exclude each other. Networks can be structured in different ways at the same time. For example a network can have a highly-developed closeness in its centre and a low developed closeness at its peripheries. Strong tie relations can even promote the formation of weak tie relations in the same network.

On the basis of categorization of network structures, correlations between these structures and effective or ineffective constructions of communication can be described. By these conclusions on how communication needs to be constructed to be effective in a network of a certain structure, based on this analysis the demands that certain network structures give to the competence of construction of communication can be described. Furthermore, the individuals' habits of communication regarding the different relationship networks they are integrated in and the effectiveness of their communications in the different networks are analysed. Based on the

research's results, a hypothesis about the effects of network structures on the competence of construction of communication can be established.

## CONCLUSION

Due to the requirements of modern societies, individuals' identities need to be constituted as constant processes. This process is constituted in social action respectively in communication processes. In this process the individual identifies and reflects on his/her needs. The individual's identification of his/her needs and the reflection on them by constructing communication in various situations is understood as construction of identity. The constructions of communication are orientated by the anticipation of expectations. Therefore identity needs to be conceived as the realization of a social competence, precisely as the realization of competence of communication in certain situations of interaction. The individual's anticipation of expectation is determined by the structure of communication and not so much by the partner of interaction. The individual's constructions of meaning are oriented to a reconstruction of the network structure to an identity structure. So if identity is conceived as realization of competence of construction of communication in situations of interaction, the influence of certain conditions of communication and structures of interaction on the individual's construction of identity can be described by methods of network analysis.

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