

# DISABLED IDENTITIES AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper tries to investigate the role of Social Networking Sites (SNS) in the lives of disabled youths and how they negotiate their identities on social networking platforms. The body plays a crucial role in the interaction process but with the change in medium of interaction, the role of body as the primary agent of social interaction has been replaced with new forms of interactions brought about by internet and social media. The emergences of internet and SNS have given up immense ways of presentation of self, body and playing with identities in everyday life. Against this background, the study will try to explore how disabled youths negotiate their disabled identities on such platforms and helping them maintain, build new relationships.*

**Keywords:** *Social networking sites, Disability, body, identity*

## INTRODUCTION

Body is now central to a modern person's self-identity (Shilling, 2012). The body has been interpreted and studied from various perspectives. In feminism, the body is the source of oppression for women, in consumer culture the commercialized body is central to one's self identity, the next perspective highlighted body an object of control especially in Foucault's work. As Body is a source of identity it is the source of discrimination too, especially for persons with physical disabilities whose impairments are visible. WHO defines disability as "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" and Impairment as "any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function". (Oliver, 1996:29). Disability does not arise from bodily impairments only, social, cultural and other environment barrier makes a situation more disabling. Disability and body is linked to biological /medical discourse, But now it has now moved beyond the medical framework towards a more socio-political framework. An interesting area of study as the present paper will highlight how disabled youths identify themselves and manage bodies in the age of internet and social media. The age

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<sup>1</sup>I have used the term disabled throughout the paper and not used differently-abled as the participants feel they do not have any different abilities that they can be called differently-abled. So they prefer the term disabled over differently-abled.

dominated by cyberspace<sup>2</sup> is regarded as the “emancipatory” implications of new forms of technology (Featherstone, & Turner, 1995). Social networking sites too have immense capacity of inclusion, exclusion as well as empowering. Social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system(Boyd and Ellison,2007:212)

SNS<sup>3</sup> especially Facebook, Instagram, My Space have restructured spaces for body management, personal identities, and formation of intimacies. Less empirical research has been carried out on dimensions of body, disability and social networking sites. Where virtual world has reduced embodiment, SNS create a different kind of re-embodiment through pictures, words and languages. Cregan (2006) defines embodiment as the physical and mental experience of existence. It is through physicality, and through face-to-face communication and interactions, that we function as social beings

## LITERATURE REVIEW

These recent technologies have transformed the everyday life and the role they maintain in the constitution of meanings in our daily lives. As mentioned earlier is the SNS have emerged as a space for young men and women to portray themselves in desired ways, and increase social interaction on online platforms. The purpose of such sites is to increase social interaction in virtually, where communication takes place through information posted in one’s profile (user’s personal page), which often includes a photograph of the member and personal information describing his or her interests, both of which provide information about one’s identity. Through SNS people can add their photos to accompany their profiles that would serve a very specific role in the online self-presentation context (Siibak, 2010). As Goffman (1959) suggested users of SNS have more control over self-presentation and behaviour than in face to face or face communication, which provides a perfect place for impression management. In the light of social media and the internet, youths with physical disabilities may have opportunities to negotiate their disabled identities in SNS and the area has not been much explored. Today’s youths are networked youths, who are active users of such technologies. It includes youths with disabilities too. Considerations of disabled using or participating on such online communicative platforms are ignored. Development of relationships through SNS and its prevalence in the contemporary society is an interesting area to study from the perspectives of disabled youths especially how

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<sup>2</sup>Denotes environment in which communication over computer networks occurs.<sup>[1]</sup> The word became popular in the 1990s when the uses of the Internet, networking, and digital communication were all growing dramatically and the term "cyberspace" was able to represent the many new ideas and phenomena that were emerging

<sup>3</sup> SNS will be used for social networking sites throughout the paper

they manage their impaired bodies, present themselves and construct their image through such mediums.

Heidegger'(1962) cites an example of hammer and its use becomes a mean and a part of the embodied relationship with the body. Same for a walking stick for blind, it is no longer an object but realm of senses. This shows how a body incorporates a tool into its structure and one can experience it. Social media especially social networking sites is a tool or an instrument by which a disabled youth can experience and explore a wide variety of activities in different ways. In order to understand user's experience of body in a virtual environment, one needs to analyze user's accounts, observation and his experience in the journey. Such explorations give new insights to grasp the lived experiences of individuals.

One is capable of knowing the body of another person because it is perceptually accessible to us, but the mind is not. The mind of the other can be known in a shared lifeworld where individuals become intimately familiar through sustained face-to-face contacts. The spread of internet and the emergence of the online world has changed the structure of lifeworld and such changes have produced ways of getting to know others that were previously impossible. ( Zhao 2007:156).The virtual world has reduced the importance of material body during interaction or communication, but it still subsists in the symbolic world created by virtual reality focusing on materiality, spatiality and bodily experiences within realm of virtual space. It enables community building through social interaction, proximity through erosion of time and space, virtual reality by producing computer generated simulation; in short it builds a quest for better life through technology.(Btihaj 2005).

SNS provide immense scope for strategic self-presentation for youths with physical disabilities, they not only provides a platform for interaction, entertainment, leisure, education but also constructs a "private space" for carrying out numerous other activities .SNS like Facebook, Instagram etc. are used for social interaction mostly with offline acquaintances to maintain friendship (Pempek et al., 2009). This space is utilized in number of ways, as formation of identities, pleasure, and management of body. In virtual environment disability is not encountered with any kind prejudices. A study conducted in Iran revealed the role of cyberspace in disabled individual's leisure time, where the cyberspace has been a medium of interaction, communication, information, and also obtaining happiness. It has proved beneficial for women with disabilities as they face double marginalization and discrimination as compared to men with disabilities, so cyberspace and social media has proved more beneficial to them in terms of self-esteem and personal satisfaction.(Shahzeidi and Ghasemi 2014:1). In SNS physical bodies are invisible or are removed from communication. Such experiences, where physical features like the face or the body becomes secondary, it removes bias and prejudice that stem up from one's body or appearances. The expansion of internet and other communicative technologies give rise to virtual identities which are mediated through pictures. The body is thus emancipated and not bound by constraints as it is in the physical world. Interestingly letters and voice call did the same thing, but there is no space of self-management or self-expression through such mediums.

(Whitley,1997:148-149). It is a powerful medium through which disabled can negotiate their impairments and disabilities. "Expressions of new experiences of bodies in our everyday life have become an important part of cyberculture nowadays"(Nemura, 2014:37). This means we can express, perform, present our bodies the way we want on SNS like Facebook, Instagram, twitter, My space. For some this expression is not only confined to presentation of self but beyond it. Social media is not only a platform for expression of freedom and speech, but also suppression of one's actual identities. Disabled people can explore themselves and play with their identities through interacting with anonymous people without disclosing their gender or disability. They can take the pleasure of technological features such as online chats where they can engage themselves in sexual chats, video calling which is immensely private, playing with one's identity in numerous dating sites. There are numerous scopes of exploring oneself, one's body and identity. Studies show that the new experiences with the body are not purely mental but emotional as well.(Nemura, 2014:37).

The most important re-embodiment of body in SNS is by words, language, chats, and pictures.As Francisco Javier Tirado (1999) points out, virtual world gives the opportunities to play and experiment with identities which are different from the real life without any future risks. Such experiments give a second chance for people to overcome the conflict with the real body and the self by better understanding the self (Turkle,1995). Thus for people with disabilities, the virtual world is a kind of a second life, where they can dream or re-invent a new self/body without any barriers and constraints. Therefore, technology implies a reconfiguration of the embodied experience. The body, technology and the world is interconnected to each other. In SNS, the identity of a person is recreated through his/her virtual representation of the self/body

The impact of internet and SNS has been immense in shaping our virtual identities. Though the self presentation varied according to the nature of settings, like in an anonymous surrounding an individual will behave differently compared to his nonymous (known settings).(Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin, J, 2008). Identity is a crucial aspect of self-concept and self-concept is the reflection of a person's thoughts and feelings in reference to oneself as an object. In the physical setting the corporeal body acts as a constraint in forming a desirable identity one wants to, as the claimed identities may not match with the visible parts of physical characteristics. Apart from self-presentation, people with disabilities can use SNS due to any emergency when local social networks break down or inaccessible for them, but SNS may augment the effectiveness of emergency communications through informal information flow. In addition, online relationships may promote great sense of belonging and emotional wellbeing (Shpigelman, 2014). Internet and SNS take on a special importance in the lives of orthopedically disabled learners. They experience distressing situations simply when going out on the streets, because of the problems they experience as a consequence of their orthopedic disabilities – in getting an education, finding work, and having a social life – and in order to overcome them, they feel a need for the internet and social networks(Ersoy,&Güneyli, 2016:44). Now SNS are not only serve the purpose of education and leisure but also give these youths a platform to

interact with people, manage their bodies and identities and help them to explore the SNS in variety of ways other than work and education.

With the spread of internet and related virtual communities, the span interaction becomes more prolonged and identity becomes fluid as the corporeal body is detached from social encounters in the online environment. It becomes possible for individuals to interact with one another on the Internet in fully disembodied text mode that reveals nothing about their physical characteristics.(Zhao et al., 2008).

Online or virtual world represents a space for negotiation of disabled identities. Virtual environments, like cyberspace is regarded as a second life for many disabled. Virtual environments like Facebooks offers immense scope of shaping and managing the representations of their actual identities (Formanet.al,2011:1-2).The second life where visual cues or corporeality is removed, disabled people are identifying as others who identify as being disabled, and this online world removes the visual cues which is the source of stigmatization and isolation. Though there is a lower rate of internet usage by people with disabilities, which could be due to unavailability of resources or access or poorer income mainly in developing countries. Irrespective of that, the virtual world has proved to be a strong platform in negotiating gender identity and disability as well(2011). The study of virtual environments and their role in the lives of disabled youths is an exploratory one and relatively new especially how they represent their identities and manage their disabled bodies and associate with others in an online world.

### **The main objectives of the study**

- 1) To find out the role of SNS in their everyday life of youths with physical disabilities
- 2) To explore how they manage their bodies and identities on such platforms
- 3) To explore the purpose of using SNS by the disabled youths
- 4) To find out whether SNS is an inclusive tool or it creates further stigmatization for them.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Purposive and snowball sampling is used for the study. In depth interviews of 30 youths having physical disabilities mainly locomotor and orthopedic disabilities who have restrictions in movement due to spinal injuries, amputation, within the age group of 18-25 years are being chosen (both males and females) who are active participants in SNS, followed by conversation analysis. Skype and other virtual interactions have also been followed for the study.

## MAIN FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study was an exploratory one. The study aims to grasp the experiences of disabled youths in and around such technologically-mediated environments, their everyday life and experiences in relation to SNS. There was in depth face to face interviews followed by deep conversations with the participants. The study carried out among both male and female youths who are mostly undergraduate and post-graduate students in Kolkata.

The body both in virtual and real world are projected and perceived differently. Modern technologies and virtual culture are changing the definition of body, the nature of embodiment, identity, where bodies are not restricted to geographical space and time. In everyday life of disabled youths, the impaired body comes as an obstacle during interaction, and disabilities become the main source of their identities in public especially in colleges as the participants are college and university going students. All of them have small peer groups and do not feel “stigmatised”, “isolated” amongst friends. Growing up with a disability is an altogether different experience and without the internet and social media they never had chances to explore them beyond the “disabled” image. The only difference between virtual world and everyday physical world is how the bodies are projected and represented. One’s idea about body and identity is measured by its ability and beauty; such ideas are reinforced through SNS as it brings out newer trend and conceptions of representation of self and body on such platforms. Thus disabled youths use this tool for presentation of self, making new friends, as well as hiding their disabilities, and try to negotiate their disabled image. Apart from this, online social interactions trigger empathy, friendships, romance, reconciliation, sexual intimacy, etc. Emotional bonds are formed via private (one-to-one) intimate chats more than in practices with large groups which are not possible in the offline interaction, which is direct and face to face. It is regarded as one of their private zone, and emancipation from their bodily constraints (socially). The participants are active members of various SNS like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter which they consider as sources of various kinds of entertainment and education. In everyday life, the impact of SNS are immense. SNS constitute the private world and they regard it as their “second life”. They cannot do without them. It is the place for their fantasies and dreams. They use words such as “freedom”, “bodiless”, “adventurous”, “private”, “entertaining” to describe the meaning of SNS in their everyday life.

While coming to their online presentation of self, most participants do use such mediums for self-presentation, to portray a self they wish to and mostly do this to build new relationship. None of them have mentioned of any fake profiles or provide anonymous identity, but most of them like to make new friends on SNS and do not wish to disclose their disabilities when interacting with new friends. Very interestingly, some of the participants revealed they have membership of online matrimonies which are designed especially for disabled, where they can connect to people of their choice. Pornographies and other dating sites are frequent for some of the male

participants. The notions on standards of beauty, conventional standard on body in the real world are also carried into the virtual environment. For example, as one of the participant stated that social networking is used as a platform for various activities one of them is connecting old and new friends but nowadays SNS are often dominated by one's appearance as people keep on displaying their bodies, fashion, which constitute only able-bodied and no space for impaired bodies. Even on such platforms, a person's disability is either seen as a subject of ridicule or mercy. But such platforms also help them to present themselves in a way they want minus their disabilities as it depends upon the user what picture to upload, how to portray oneself, what information to give. They also try to maintain jovial relationships with their known peers through regular chats as such opportunities are not always available in physical settings. As stated by one of the female participant with locomotor disability. "Posting a picture in a wheelchair carries stigma into the virtual world too." For both male and female participants, the SNS are now becoming platforms for advertising oneself and representing one's body/self which have a negative impact on people with impaired or "imperfect bodies"<sup>4</sup>. Though there is advantage-like in course of face to face communication, the body becomes problematic but such problems do not arise while interacting online.

Language and words is another instrument of self-expression as well as presentation on SNS. One of them mentioned "In the web or in social networking platform what you see are just words, pictures and language, beauty or body do not define your identity or self". Still most of the participants especially male participants hide their disabilities when interacting with "new friends", mostly female. There is ample scope of managing identities and construct a desirable personality, as "one's identity is shaped through one's profile created on such sites" as said by one of the participant. Numerous friendships are formed but virtual relationships never migrate offline. Some of them are members of online dating sites where they do not wish to put up their real identities, as most members on such dating sites are not mutually known which is not in the case of Facebook, where most friends are known, so hiding their "real" identities become difficult at times. The main advantage of the SNS is not just identity construction or representation of oneself; rather exploring oneself in varied ways. The experience completely disembodied either as emotions require an enormous range of sensory and emotive means of experiencing which are always not expressible in language. But most of them highlighted, though the mind travel further but the bodily pleasure such as touch and other emotions like love, sex cannot be replaced by such technological forces. "We are not cyborgs", as one mentioned but such online interactive platforms give them enough space to enjoy, value some intimate moments, through live chats, video calling etc. To some extent SNS reduced stigmatization, as users do not have to involve into direct physical contact and to some extent are able to hide their disabilities there and helps them in constructing an image like each and every youth does on such

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<sup>4</sup> The word "imperfect" was often used by the participants to describe how their bodies have been portrayed negatively throughout social media and such connotations are common in everyday life.

platforms. For the disabled youths SNS are not just used for self-presentation but experiencing a private space of one's own without any discrimination and prejudices, and living the "self" minus disability or impairment. Such virtual communities are good way to construct and bring their presence by expressing things which these youths cannot put up in public or in immediate face to face interaction.

## CONCLUSION

Social networking communities are popular among youths. For youths with disabilities, such platforms are not only for entertainment and leisure, but also a new way of exploring oneself. With the rise of SNS, forms of interaction and identity formation have changed, transforming the everyday experiences and body performances. Physical abilities have taken backstage and identities are constructed not through corporeality but virtual profiles, images and online biographies. Apart from fluid identities, anonymity, social networking is emancipating for many like people with disabilities. Many youths with disabilities see the advantage of communicating through such virtual communities as it does not question his or her disability or his or her deformities. The body may not move fast enough for some interactions, but the self travels within the virtual world. Though they enjoy being online, but once they are out they still face the stigma, pain and their disabilities are recognized. Some of the participants feel they are happy with the dual identities one online and one offline, which helps them to explore more than any non-disabled person. For my participants SNS helps in self-construction, to facilitate social interaction and empowerment through social inclusion without any prejudices on such interactive platforms. SNS are liberating and emancipating, especially for those people with disabilities.

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