

DIGITAL CARNIVALS: PERFORMANCE AS IDENTITY AND IDENTITY AS PERFORMANCE

Chinthu Viswanath

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sree Krishna College Guruvayur, Kerala.

viswanath.chinthu@gmail.com

Keywords: Carnival, identity, performance, social media, cyberspace, third place.

This paper explores social media networks in the contemporary cyberspaces as the sites of carnivalesque performances of the virtual identities of the users. Although plenty of serious and information focused interactions occur(ed) in social media universes like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram etc. the users, most often, commonly engage in playful, light, and casual conversational interactions and activities, notwithstanding the fact that there a gamut of grave and harmful cybercrimes perpetrated in these cyberspaces. This paper proposes that in the process of such informal, playful and casual interactions occurs the construction of an alter-identity, often very live and engaging, virtual and integral to the real self of the social media user.

When a social media user opens an account in any of the popular social media, s/he gives personal details and information into the social media for setting up his/her individual profile to be identified by other users. Thereafter, s/he variously engages in tweeting, following, re-tweeting, posting photos, sharing images, commenting and so on. All the activities s/he performs

in the social media is subject to French phenomenologist and philosopher Paul Ricoer's theory of narrative self-construction that: "... we don't have access to our selves merely through introspection rather we come to know about us through mediation.: we construct an image of ourselves for us and others through the way we act, move, dress." (Deumert 24). Just as we construct our real selves through our thoughts, expressions of emotions, dress, movement, gestures, demeanor, and attitudes, in social media, we often create, nurture, and maintain our alter-identities through our actions and behavior in the social media world. (Boyd 11). Everything we do in the social media world be it our posts on different issues, likes, shares, tweets, re-tweets, interactions with friend requests, commenting, following, or blocking, we do so consciously or unconsciously contributing to our social media character, self, and identity. Put differently, it is through our actions, reactions, and interactions in the social media that others get to understand us. In the social media universe, thus, the users, often on a regular basis, maintain an active identity, which is in fact, a volitional dimension of performance of identity that the social media user is entitled to. This paper argues that this volition of performance of our social media identity is an option a social media user enjoys and therefore, the performance itself often becomes her identity in the social media. More often than not, as there exists the primacy of play in social media interactions, it is also true that the alter-identity itself turns a performance by the user in the social media universe. The social media also enable the users to change what is represented online, granting them the rights to (re)design the future of their social media self and identity.

An interesting aspect of the performance of our social media identity, the playful/casual interaction of multiple voices, images, and styles for the entertainment of the spectators and other

participants is just but a revisiting of the concept of carnival discussed by the 20th century Russian philosopher and semiotician Bakhtin. Bakhtin's reflections on medieval carnivals provide a theoretical framework for the use of carnival as an analytical concept in popular culture. Among Bakhtin's tenets of the carnival is the free and familiar interaction between people. He emphasizes the importance of play and laughter as integral elements of the experience of freedom inherent in folk carnivals:

[Carnival] is life itself, but shaped according to a pattern of play[...]. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because it's very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.... (Bakhtin 7-11)

Thus, in a sense, social media becomes a virtual carnival square where the rules of normal social behavior are suspended.

Laughter is central to carnival spirit; and in digital writing, it is epitomised in numerous acronyms such as LOL, ROFL, LMAO, and they function as interjections and as emotive functions of languages: remember emoticons. Images of (in)animate objects, themes or symbols that circulate in social media photo shopped or otherwise modified are sometimes used as profile pictures, fashioning a carnivalesque form of self-representation.

In the carnivalesque social media universe, users often perform their alter-identity enjoying nearly complete freedom, democracy, and equality, the praised and preached values of the real world outside. In a typical carnival square, according to Bakhtin:

“All were considered equal during carnival. [I]n the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age...[F]ree, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind" (Bakhtin 10).

Another interesting example of carnivalesque nature of social media is the scope of select “licensed misrule” famously called “linguistic clownery” (Bakhtin 472). For instance, have a look at various spellings, interjections, abbreviations, and smileys used in Facebook. Often, we use various ways of spelling to convey a happy birthday wish online and it has almost become a social ritual and an opportunity to display linguistic creativity.

Social media sites, a playful make-believe world, have been here for more than a quarter century. The first one among them is Classmates.com that was launched around December 1995. Thereafter, cyberspace has witnessed the advent of at least a dozen social networking websites till date. The users create a personal and public theatre of their own that stands in deliberate opposition to the real life uniforms, schools, home works, rules, customs, laws, social spaces, expected decent behavior and so on. In that sense, social media would mean a “second life” synonymous with a famous social networking application launched in (2003), a 3D virtual and

parallel world. Another similar example is that of Farmville, a facebook game application developed in 2009.

Twitter, Facebook, Orkut and all provides/d digital social spaces where carnivalesque spirit flourishes. Users most often experience a sense of flow and loss of sense of time as they engage in social media activities. Social media universes are more often carnivalesque safety valves where tensions and frustrations of everyday life are temporarily suspended; they often also reflect a deeply embedded human desire to engage in profanity and a deep psychological quest for freedom from constraints, dogma, and authority. Carnival is free-time and free-space.

Social media sites have also gradually grown up to recreate and reinvent third places in the cyberspace. The “third place”, in the context of community building, is the social surroundings distinct and detached from the other two common social environments of home (“first place”) and the workplace (“second place”). The common examples of third places include social surroundings such as cafes, restaurants, clubs, parks, pubs, beauty parlours, bars, street corners, local saloons and so on. In his influential work *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg points out that the third places are important for civil society, democracy, and civic engagement. Oldenburg laments the disappearance of informal public spaces in his later essays even while there was a simultaneous, yet, gradual dawn of digital third places in the larger cyberspaces, the places full of *joie de vivre* where it was one’s responsibility to enjoy oneself, and to keep the conversation going. In a way, the social media websites have eventually turned out to be digital spaces within the cyberspace that could act as the substitute for the real “third places”, the only difference being the digital “third places” are virtual whereas the other is real.

The digital “third places” what were actually launched quite unknowingly with the dawn of the first ever social media site Classmates.com in 1995, opened up enormous possibilities of carnivalesque expression of the virtual identities of social media users in many a number of social media websites. Often, it is possible for the same user to hold more than one account in a social media website leading to the simultaneous performance of more than one identity. Another interesting aspect to ponder over in the proliferation of the number of users in the social media websites is regarding the possession and use of the social media account after the death of the user. The question, pertinent in the ongoing era of a global pandemic, is worth looking into. In most cases, the social media accounts of the dead users are being managed by friends, relatives, colleagues or fan groups who use it as a memorial site of the dead. The account/page turn out to be a space for the loved ones of the dead to gather and share memories of their loved one. In other words, the possibility of a carnivalesque expression of identity in social media in the cyberspace also leads to leave out a large section of the cyberspace as burial grounds or memorial sites also.

In the postmodern era of technological explosion of digital spaces and social media in the cyberspace where one’s identity becomes a performance in itself and that performance itself connotes the users’ carnivalesque identity, the carnivalesque social media could stand for the postmodern digital-virtual versions of third places such as of new café, taverns, malls, pools, and coffee houses or they could even turn out to be burial grounds or memorial sites of the dead users.

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, M.M. *Rabelias and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1984. Print.
- Boyd, Danah. "Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life." *MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning – Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume*. Ed. David Buckingham. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2007. Web.
- Dentith, Simon. *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*. New York. CUP. 1995. Web.
- Deumert, Ana. "The Performance of a Ludic Self on Social Network(Ing) Sites." *The Language of Social Media: Identity and Community on the Internet*. Ed. Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg. London, Palgrave Macmillan. 2014. Web.
- Ngak, Chenda. "Then and now: a history of social networking sites." *CBS News*. 6 May 2011. Web. <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/then-and-now-a-history-of-social-networking-sites/5/>.
- Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place*. New York. Marlowe & Company. 1989. Web
- , "Our Vanishing "Third Places" " *Planning Commissioners Journal*. No.25, Winter1996-97, pp.06-10. <https://plannersweb.com/wp-content/uploads/1997/01/184.pdf>.

