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Identity Constructions in a Networked World: A Look at Young Adults in Malaysia

Introduction

As the year begins to take form in what appears to be familiar and unfamiliar patterns – impending threat of war in the Middle east, call for peace by the usual round of world leaders and activists, further acts of terrorism worldwide, poor stock market performances, famines, crimes, inflation, natural disasters, etc. in the all too familiar places, the issue of what takes place and what goes into the making of identities among the young remains alive. This on-going concern is further heightened by the steady advancements in the development of information and communication technology since the 1990's.

This consistency in the development of computer technologies makes for cheaper and better computers that are readily available just about any place in the world. And the ever-increasing "faith" in the ICTs by world leaders everywhere is certainly a common (and perhaps unifying) theme to be applauded as it is an attempt to embrace and subsequently bridge the digital divide between rich and poor nations. This belief in the potential of the ICTs and in particular the Internet as a tool for education and knowledge acquirement that will result in transforming societies into developed or better developed nations have not only brought about rapid technological advances in computer applications but more so, have led nations throughout the world to adopt an aggressive ICT usage policy among the local populace. Malaysia is no exception to this call into the IT era.

In 1991 the Prime Minister Dato Sri. Dr.Mahathir Mohamad enunciated *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020). This was the policy aimed at steering Malaysia into the Information Age with a determined goal of joining the ranks of the developed nations. All policies and institutions are therefore geared toward achieving the goal of *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020). For Malaysia, the status of a developed nation as outlined in the goals of the *Wawasan 2020* meant that there will be the creation of an informed and knowledgeable society within the framework of local values and spirituality.

Today the Internet has become another source of media activity for the local populace especially the young. Through personal computers either in private homes, schools or at cybercafes, the popular usage of the Internet among the population are growing by the byte. As it is, statistics gathered revealed that there has been a constant increase of Internet usage of among Malaysians. As of the third quarter of 2002, the estimated number of dial-up users was listed as 7,380,000 as compared to 1,215,000 in 1998. The total number of dial-up subscribers stood at 2,460,000 for that period compared to 405,000 in 1998 (<http://www.cmc.gov/mcmc/facts/ststs/index.asp>).

This paper will look at the consequences of Internet usage on the identities of Malaysian young adults (16 to 22 years old) residing in the urban areas. The focus group data will reveal the conceptions of self, labels and norms among these young adults and hopes to identify emerging identity traits and norms.

Internet Usage in the Local Environment

Although computers were introduced into the society in the 1980's, it was not until the 1990's that they became a household item. The orchestrated efforts of the government at encouraging ownership have somewhat expanded the usage of personal computers among the general populace. These efforts are in line with the current policy of one computer per home and thereby, making information technology an everyday way of life. Banks and other financial institutions offer reasonable loans and tax rebates for the purchase of computers. The opening of the Multi-Super Corridor which is to be the nerve center for all IT activities and industries, the identification of

IT and IT- based learning as priority areas have brought the computer age to a full swing.

The current personal computers have the capabilities to enhance the Internet as a one-way ticket to the world of multitudinous-information. Various categories of information that range from educational, medical, geographic, political, sexual, musical and just about anything a young mind is curious about and which appears on-line in color, audio-visual graphics with download possibilities are available. These transborder, limitless and to some extent uncensored information convey not just information but are also laden with cultural values and norms. The adolescent Internet users are in the process of identity formation moving from childhood to adulthood. Their identities are constructed through everyday face to face or mediated interactions.

In the urban areas of Malaysia, Internet usage is popular among the young adults irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds. For these young users, the Internet provides an information database with numerous linkages as well as a personalised menu. Inasmuch as information is public it can also be private, customised and intimate. Thus, the Internet presents and invites them to be more interactive, more in control and an opportunity to manage the communication process.

The general public's concern, apprehensiveness as well as perception of the possible social ills brought by or, attributed to the Internet both in terms of its content and the norms of its usage have generated public debates and forums (formal and informal). Although the number of subscribers continue to increase, each time there is a reported incidence of new patterns of behaviour among the young (such as addiction to IRCs, the Black Metal mania in 2001, cybercafes as alternative social place, junkie syndrome, on-line gambling, robbery and rape by friends met on-line, etc) the Internet is pointed to as the perpetrator of social ills among the young.

As there is no censorship of the contents except for the user installed software filters, Internet usage may open the floodgates to information that may be inappropriate or that require intellectual maturity to discern its value and meaning (NST, Jan 2003; Latiffah and Samsudin, 2000). Once again, just as the issue of western TV programmes and their negative influences on the young continues to have a life of its own, the

local populace has found yet another conveyor of western ideology and culture in the Internet.

Media and Identities

The communication perspective views identity as located in the communication process in which messages are constructed, reinforced, contested and challenged. Here also, attention is given to the creation of identities through the products or words and images that are transmitted through the media or technological channels.

Pearce (1994) described the self as part of a person's social world. It is through the various patterns of conversations with others (face to face or virtual) that the self is (re)enacted as a reflexive consequence of those conversations. This conception of self acknowledged that each self must be viewed within the array of personal experiences and a cultural context. A person comes to know his or her self in relationships with others. Similarly, identity as described by Giddens (1991) is a reflective process that is constantly reordered against the backdrop of everyday experiences and the tendencies of modern institutions. As such, whether it is personal, social or cultural identity one cannot deny that identity formation or the sense of who people are in part influenced and affected by the various episodes that they act and interact into with others. The three forms of identities that is, personal, social and cultural are interrelated and complementary to one another though each form can be contradictory to the other.

The young adults in urban Malaysia participate daily in the creation of opportunities, interpretations and contexts. They are required to make decisions and priorities within their existing social setting. Thus, the local young person's identity is being constructed on a daily basis in social interactions with others, real and virtual alike. First, there are the parents, family, peers and societal members' with their particular cultural practices and expectations. Next, their personal developmental process of childhood to adulthood growth involving physical, emotional and intellectual change. Then, there is the global media penetration that is admittedly rather predominant in the lives of these young people. This media environment offers them with images and information that may or may not conform to existing local values and norms. Lastly, are the

policy designed identities or authority-defined identities that may or may not harmonise with the on-going lived experiences of these young adults. All of these stimuli combined and interact to create an identity that is constantly evolving within the context of the person's lived experiences (Kroeger, 1996; Latiffah and Samsudin, 1999).

Sites of Identities: The Methodology

In light of the above views on the construction and meaning of identities, where does one begin to look for the sites of identity traits and meaning making places? Sites of identity constructions include form and function of discourse texts (Collier and Thompson, 1997), message patterns and themes (Hecht and Ribeau, 1987), labels and norms (Marin and Marin, 1991; Wieder and Pratt, 1990), and lastly, affective, cognitive and spiritual components (Collier and Bowker, 1994).

The study presented here focuses primarily on labels and norms as the modes of expression among young adults and is the site for defining their identities. This is also where self conceptions are defined. Norms are the explicit or inferred prescription modes of appropriate and effective communication. Norms are prescriptive or evaluative because they specify appropriate and acceptable conduct, moral standards and expectations of conduct in social interactions. They provide cultural groups with a criteria to decide to what degree someone is behaving within or out of line with appropriate cultural ways. Norms however may vary across context. In the study presented here, the norms also include the everyday patterns of media use and orientation among these young adults.

Labels are also a way of establishing identities. Labels here would refer to the terms that these young people use to refer to themselves and to others within the context of various daily activities. These labels may differ according to whether they are created and given by members or non members. Hence, they provide varying interpretations to the meaning of those labels in daily use (Collier, 2001).

The data presented here was gathered from three focus group discussions that were held with fifteen young adults residing in the urban areas of Kuala Lumpur, and Petaling Jaya. They came from both middle and lower socio-economic

status as categorised by the Economic Planning Unit of Malaysia's index based on family incomes. All focus group discussions were recorded and later transcribed.

The qualitative study was conducted within the social constructionist methodological framework. Thus, for the conversations with the young adults and the analysis I moved to view the construction of identities as the identifying and identification through symbols that were particular words, phrases or images used to identify a person in a situated act. In other words, the effective meaning of a particular symbol or form is contingent upon its use by someone and the particular episode in which it is used. The conversations and interviews were subsequently organized and interpreted according to the two concepts of labels and norms.

It is felt that the schema is sufficient to allow for the grammars of label attributes and daily norms to unfold and be interpreted subsequently. It is also felt that this conceptual schema provided an insight into the lived stories of these young adults. It needs to be noted that these schemas are not mutually exclusive as some of the data can be included across more than one schema but they have been confined to just one merely for academic purposes.

Labels and Norms: The Analysis

Labels: self

In this study, the young adult informants' conception of the self emanating from their daily experiences and in using the Internet is revealed when they described their feelings of who and how they felt about themselves. Here also, their choice in using pseudonyms, nicknames or real names on-line revealed their traits and reasons why they choose to present themselves in a particular manner to the virtual others. It is learned that Internet usage gave these young people a sense of empowerment, maturity, worldly, inquisitive, contented, though lifeless at times.

The majority of the informants did not share their Internet topics with their parents and only discussed them with their peers. They were adamant that parents should trust them. As a group, they felt that it should be left to the individual to decide how to use the Internet. They objected to

censorship and felt that currently there is inadequate guidance on what to avoid and what to get – *the positive stuff*.

" I feel worldly-connected and mature"
"...empowered"
"makes me inquisitive. Easy to get info"
"contented and lifeless at times"
"getting with the new age"
"happennnnnnnnning.."
"not enough information on how to get the good stuff"
"updated"
"normal cos everyone uses it"
"at least I know how to access"

None of the informants have negative descriptions of themselves as Internet users. They seemed to regard the internet as just another medium and that knowing how to access it is common ability for everybody in their age bracket. It is seen as a tool that keeps them in touch with their daily interest in a fast and easy way for it makes getting information of all kind simple and without exerting much energy – just sit and type. They also appeared to have taken its usage for granted for it is commonly used and is a frequent reference in daily conversations among young people in the urban areas. As for names that are a reference to their personal identities on-line, the older informants noted that they had used rather creative nichnames such as DaVinci, Glossylips, Koshiboy, Chinatits when they were younger and were just starting out in this virtual "game". However, today at 19 years and above they have reverted to using their own names or a nickname that's common to others in their circle.

"use my name for it symbolises me"
"why hide yourself behind strange names"
"when I was 15 I did used a different on-line name"
" used a girl's name to win at pool..."
"aggressive name makes me feel macho..."

As to whether or not they felt that there is a difference in their value system when being on-line and off-line and how that affected their personal being, informants felt that half of the people on-line are not telling the truth about who they

really are. And even within the 50% that is supposed to be telling the truth there are ambiguities as to their personal particulars. These on-line created personas exist mostly in the chatrooms, virtual communities, sales and software inquiries.

"50% are lying and 50% tell the truth"

"all lie..it's just fun"

"create stories to make me interesting..."

"sometimes I fabricate because it's not real..."

"can't be serious about this...all false"

"shouldn't give real particulars could be misused by whoever..."

"all fake so there's nothing wrong but not in real life"

Interesting to note that there appears to be a separation in their values between the on-line and the off-line self. The on-line self seemed to take on a *"free for all"* and *"do whatever it's okay"* attitude. Whereas in real life, the traditional values of telling the truth, being sincere and honest is important to them and they know that these traits are expected of them by all others young and old.

Labels: others

The labels were found to be for both in-group and out group members. Those who are frequent users like these informants are referred to in favourable terms. The focus group discussions further revealed that these young adults were on the Internet on a daily basis between Ω hour to 3 hours per day. The male informants spent longer hours than the females. While those who did not have the *"feel of it"* were referred to as *"backward"*. On the other hand, those who were hung up or addicted to the Internet were deemed more negative terms such as *"no life"*, *"junkies"*, *"time-wasters"*, *"time-killers"*, etc.

"we all use it but we have limits"

"junkies"

"no life"

"should get out more"

"those time-wasters"

"time-killerslah"

"kuno..."

Norms: daily routines

The pattern of usage revealed that most of the informants used the Internet at home late at the night and into the morning. Home usage was an individual activity whereas usage at the cybercafes were in the afternoons or evenings in the company of friends. Most used their pocket money to pay the fees at the cybercafes. However, each person hooked on individually. To these young people the Internet brought both good and bad. From the information gathered most used it for e-mail, chats, search for information needed for assignments, download music and games but many also admitted to having access to the pornographic sites. Although they acknowledged that this was the negative part of the Internet they felt that it was up to the individual to decide what to do.

"the benefits must used in the proper way"

"...brings good if used correctly, bad if misused"

"the internet is a kind of technology where you have to use it alone"

"it discourages group activity but encourages Net group activity in chats"

"self intensive media"

"the Net is a whole load of opinions..."

"instant news, songs and no need to pay"

"amount of porno sites is unbelievable..."

"more leisure things..."

These young adults have radios and compos, televisions, personal hand phones and several have computers in their homes. The computers at home were mostly used for schoolwork and playing games. They either got on the chat sites on their own or in groups at the cybercafes or when parents were out of sight. The most popular and common web sites shared by these groups of young adults included the IRC, music, sports and games. They were introduced to these sites by their friends or found it through surfing. E-mail was another popular use.

As for whether or not their involvement with the Internet has affected their daily routines. The response was a mix of between practising self-control and allowing peers to decide.

"nope.."

"used to but as time passes I grew out of it"

"same TV and radio listening.."

"never missed classes.."

"once or twice when I'm chatting my problem, missed tuition"

"if you know your limits, will not upset your life"

"must control or it controls you..."

"sometimes my friend won't leave so I too stay longer"

"no, regrets...I had fun"

Norms: circle of friends

As for relationships revolving around internet usage whether on-line or off-line, most felt that real friends cannot be compared to the virtual others. Conversation topics and nick names on-line were also topics that they did not share with their parents. Hence, their preference to go on-line in private or in the company of their peers away from the watchful eyes of their parents and other adults. On-line chatting gave these young adults a broader and more international range of people to interact with. They had however met several racist remarks such as "blackies" being addressed to Malaysians. In addition, they had come across perverts and cheats to add "shock" to their nighttime surfing

The on-line chat sites has become the "place" to meet and make new friends in the company of other friends. To these young people it provided an opportunity for them to talk to others without being obtrusive and it took away the awkwardness in face to face interaction. Once a person knows the rules, it is as easy as daily conversation and in fact easier since it is text and not visual.

"yes, through chat and I have met them..."

"made friends on the net and met them, the lesson here is not to meet up with strangers on-line and real life"

"freaks.."

"met a few cheats on the Net"

"many perverts go on-line looking for dates!"

Implications on construction of identities

Inasmuch as the Internet is a part of the everyday life of the young adults in the urban areas, it is not the only media that affects them. The radio and television are still dominant media and so are their handphones! Chatting with friends on their hand phones are an everyday event and they would do this anywhere and anytime. Messages through texting (SMS) is another popular activity that is regarded as more fun than having any real purpose whatsoever. It is interesting to note that these young adults are truly a multi-media generation for in their norms of media use, they would use several media at one time. For instance, it is common practice to be on the hand phone while watching MTV and with the compo blaring in the background!

The Internet to these young adults is more of an entertainment rather than an educational medium. It may have given them the sense of empowerment, freedom to navigate their websites and the endless hours of chat with their virtual others, but they still cannot be without their real life friends! And for that matter they still preferred to have their radios with them should they be marooned on a desert island. "*...the radio makes me happy all the time, just switch it on and it's there... all the time*" said one chirpy young lady.

Furthermore, their daily life is one that is never isolated from other individuals significant to them and these real others include their parents, siblings and other family, peers and lecturers. All of the informants (16-22) are typical of young adults in Malaysia for they live with their parents except during weekdays when they stay in the colleges. Even then out of the fifteen informants only six live in the dormitories while the rest commute to their Colleges daily. Hence, they are in daily interaction with others who contribute to their personal growth and character development. Values that are conflicting or not in harmony with the core local values will be challenged and contested in daily interactions either by parents, other family members or others in the society. Although, informants admitted to knowingly concealing "*certain things that are a no-no*" from their elders, this act by itself revealed that they know that it is unacceptable. Thus, indicating that these young adults are aware of the "rights and wrongs" in this society.

There is certainly a great responsibility on the part of parents, teachers and other elders to guide young people to act in accordance to societal values and norms in lieu of their continuous daily interaction with foreign elements. Nonetheless, this does not mean that all that is foreign is negative and to be abhorred for there are positive values that are commonly felt across various cultures. As past experiences have indicated there are also many positive lessons and norms that can be learned and adapted from other cultures.

Conclusion

In a networked world, the everyday life of young adults in the urban areas of Malaysia is similar to others across the globe for it is one that is filled with a spectrum of media. And the Internet is but just one more addition to their multi-media reality. Nevertheless, the Internet has made steady inroads and today rivals the usage of the old media. As one frequent Internet user remarked, "*it is loaded with opinions..*". The question is whose? And are these "*opinions*" desirable within the local cultural framework?

It is undeniable that mediated images and messages can have pervasive influences among the young and significant consequences on their identity formation. However, one should not view the increasing usage of Internet among the young as a threat but rather, embrace it as a tool for growth and information. It also has the potential to be the link to global understanding especially among the young. What is needed is a concerted effort on the part of concerned global citizens to disseminate untainted information on the Web. There should also be more efforts aimed at educating the young on how to navigate for information and more social responsibility with regards to particular websites. Ample time has already been spent on criticisms and now considerable time should be spent on creating a generation of discerning and critically educated users of the Internet among the young.

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