

The Impact of Virtual Communities on Cultural Transformation

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Abstract: The study was carried out for gauging the impact of virtual communities on cultural transformation of youth in Lahore. The main objectives of the study were to explore and analyze the ongoing cultural transformation due to the existence of virtual communities and also to examine the threats, organic/traditional communities face. In order to achieve these objectives researchers have used triangulation method of research. Data was collected by using quota sampling from two public and two private sector universities, University of the Punjab, University of Education, Forman Christian College, University and Beaconhouse National University. The findings of the study conclude that virtual communities play vital role in transformation of material and non-material culture among youth. Online world is threateningly taking place of traditional world. Family and education is being affected the most due to excessive involvement with social media and online communities. Youth is more likely to get influenced by discourses on virtual world. However, virtual communities seem to have less significance over real communities in terms of religion related influences. The study also concludes that social media has gone by the level of extreme addiction among youth which damages the patterns of social interactions of youth.

Keywords: Virtual Communities, Cultural Transformation, Social Media, Virtual World

Introduction

This study explores the impact of virtual communities on the cultural change or transformation among the students of Lahore. This study aims to answer the vital questions that, what kind of material and non-material cultural change have been brought up by the virtual communities among the students of Lahore. Secondly, whether virtual communities are threat for the traditional communities? Thirdly, are virtual communities replacing the traditional communities? In this study, researchers analyze both of the cultural forms, material and nonmaterial and its transformation due to virtual communities.

Virtual Community

Virtual community as it is named “virtual” is a community based on computer mediated communication, there is no boundaries of place and time in virtual communities, people can interact virtually anywhere and anytime throughout the globe. People of every culture communicate with others electronically and can hide their identity too, as Rheingold (1993) explained in his book, *A Slice of Life in my Virtual Community*;

“Virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. In cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games and flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. We do everything people do when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind. Millions of us have already built communities where our identities commingle and interact electronically, independent of local time or location. The way a few of us live now might be the way a large population will live, decades hence.”

Nowadays billions of people use virtual communities for various reasons including education, business, marketing, health, knowledge-sharing, entertainment, and games etc. People share their life happenings, students and researchers share knowledge, teenagers play games, patients find or consult a doctor online etc.

Pessimistic Approaches towards Virtual Communities

Pessimistic approaches refer to those explanations that the virtual communities cannot take place of traditional communities. Here are some explanations by theorists of pessimistic approach;

As we know, virtual communities have extremely involved into our lives, we share our maximum stuff on virtual communities. We share our knowledge, experiences, information, daily life routine, and ideas, etc. Virtual communities are partially replacing the traditional communities but some argued that “cyberspace cannot be a source of real community and/or detracts from meaningful real-world communities” (Benier, 1998; Geren 1991; Kiesler et al., 1984; Stoll, 1005; Turkle, 1996)

In sociology, we study primary and secondary groups and relationships, and these groups have different type of communication with the members of those groups. Virtual communities lack on emotional ties and members have not primary relationship among them.

Members of real communities interact with each other physically as Van Dijk (1999) calls ‘Traditional community’ (comprising face-to-face interactions) is made up of relatively homogeneous group of people because they have several interests in common whereas a virtual community is relatively heterogeneous since only one interest links them all. Therefore, a Traditional community has a better chance of building and maintaining its own culture and identity than a virtual community. Virtual communities can’t replace Traditional communities since they are limited, but perhaps they can supplement and strengthen Traditional communities.

Optimistic Approaches towards Virtual Communities

Optimistic theorists believe that virtual communities have same characteristics of Traditional communities and virtual communities can replace them. Some explanations are as follows;

“A more forceful optimistic argument is that cyberspace involvement can create alternative communities that are as valuable and useful as our familiar, physically located communities” (Rheingold, 1993).

Network ties may exist in cyberspace but they still represent places where people connect concerning shared interests, support, sociability and identity (Wellman, 2000).

Virtual communities are now reaching on the class system, which obviously distinguishes with the social class prevailing in real communities. Premium aspect of memberships in virtual communities, give the impression of class system, emerging in virtual communities. Rich class avails premium services and stay privileged in virtual spaces.

Virtual communities - a cultural model

Nowadays, technology is very common in students’ lives. Their lives have transformed from notepad to iPad. Students study, gain and share knowledge online and almost every student is the part of virtual community according to their interests.

Virtual community has its own culture. Norms and values are defined according to the nature of the community, some of the members do not follow the ethic code of virtual communities but virtual communities do not have that much of check and control so they could capture those members. People can hide their identity and exploit the values and norms of the virtual community.

People use words and symbols to communicate, nowadays virtual communities are not just restricted to written chat but people can communicate via audio and video chat around the world.

People connect with virtual communities according to their interests, a businessman or professional may connect with LinkedIn, Students can use social and distant learning communities, gamers can be connected with gaming communities like Miniclip and for social networking people use Facebook, Twitter, Myspace or Tumblr and OLX, EBay or Alibaba is used for online marketing and shopping.

There are billions of housing interiors, architectural, educational, fashion and political magazines, scholarly articles and videos uploaded in virtual communities. Many people get influenced by those communities and follow fashion trends, housing styles, educational techniques and political knowledge.

Cultural Transformation

Transformation of culture or cultural change refers to the ongoing process of adaption and change in existing living cultures by external or internal forces. Cultural transformation leads to globalization and post-modernization.

Relationship between Virtual Communities and Cultural Transformation

The factors and indicators of cultural transformation include technology and innovation. After the emergence of virtual communities, culture has been transforming very distinctively. Student culture has changed a lot after the excessive involvement of virtual communities among students. Students now share their knowledge, write articles, shop goods and communicate with their friends, etc.

Ideas, thoughts, symbols and languages have been diffusing throughout the globe via virtual communications. Every field of life has been transformed into electronic form and credit goes to virtual communities.

Objectives of the study:

- To explore and analyze the ongoing cultural transformation due to virtual communities among the students.
- To examine what kind of challenges are being faced by traditional communities.

Review of relevant literature

Culture is the building block of any society or community. It is a way of life which includes symbols, gestures, language, dressings, thoughts, ideas, housings and food etc. Linton (1945) stated culture as, “total way of life of any society”.

Virtual communities are those communities which do not have face to face interactions, time and place boundaries and communication is internet mediated.

This study explores the answer of vital question that whether virtual communities can take place of traditional communities or not. There are some explanations and studies which demonstrate that virtual communities cannot replace the traditional communities as they are called pessimistic approaches towards virtual communities, as some researchers believe that “cyberspace cannot be a source of real community and/or detracts from meaningful real-world communities.” Benier (1998). They believe that virtual or computer mediated communications cannot replace face to face communication because traditional communities are based on closed groups, have face to face communication and have strong bonds among them.

Users from specific virtual communities have some specific common interests. According to which people choose their community, like students will use educational and social virtual communities, businessmen and

marketing managers will choose online marketing communities, doctors and patients will use online health facilitative communities as Manuel Castells (2003) described in his theory of '4 layers of internet culture' that the virtual communitarians is the crowds of common users make up the most numerous group belonging to the two diffusing cultures - their mother culture, and the culture of the internet.

There are some theorists and researchers who believe that virtual communities can replace the traditional ones, this approach is called optimistic approach towards virtual communities. Cerulo (1997), discarded Beniger's (1998) critique of the concept of pseudo-community developed by digital mass media, emphasized on re-conceptualizing the term community, as new types of social interaction and bonding is prevailing in virtual communities. Katz et al. (2004)

Now people can communicate through video calls, audio calls, radio and chat messengers. The emotional ties that had been prevailing in real communities are now can be seen in virtual communities as well. Cerulo(1997) also emphasizes that virtual communities are changing the nature and character of social bonds.

In virtual communications, people cannot feel each other; it has distinguished communication patterns from the traditional communities. Rheingold (1993) emphasized that the virtual space can develop substitute communication that have most similar characteristics as real communities.

As explained above that cyberspace involvement can create alternative communities, we develop sociability and identity while being part of cyberspace, which can also be seen in real communities.

Every society or community has its own culture; they have their symbols, gestures, languages, dress codes and communication patterns. Virtual communities or Cyber-space also have their distinguished culture as explained by Lev Manovich (2003) that the internet culture is also the study of various social phenomena associated with the internet and other new forms of the network communication, such as online communities, online multi-player gaming, social gaming, social media, mobile apps, augmented reality, and texting, and includes issues related to identity, privacy, and network formation.

Virtual communities have reformed the definition and nature of globalization. The concept of 'the global village' has more refined now after the excessive use of virtual communities in fact Rantanen (2005, p.4) says that "there is practically no globalization without media and communications".

People's interests, beliefs, ideas, thoughts, dressings, housings and languages etc are diffusing with excessive use of virtual communities. People buy clothes from different international online shopping websites, talk to random persons virtually and learn different languages. People make friends and relationships, and develop close bonding with each other same as mother culture prevails in real communities.

Cyber culture is large culture existing now within traditional communities; Manuel Castells (2001) calls it 'Real Virtuality'.

In the theory of the layers of the internet culture, one of the layers is businessmen layer. It is them who contributed to commercial use of the internet, as well as to its violent expansion. Also in this field we are dealing with phenomenon of diffusion. We should bear in mind that the Internet, as the foundation of new economy, transformed the business in comparable degree as business had transformed the Internet (Manuel Castells, 2003)

Methodology

Study design

The study of Virtual Communities and Cultural Transformation; study of students of the Lahore is based on triangulation methods. The study will examine and analyze the ongoing material and nonmaterial culture change due to exceedingly usage of virtual communities among the students. Sample of twenty .five .students from of hundred baccalaureate students .was taken research.

Sample size and sampling

Data was collected by using quota sampling from two public and two private sector universities which are University of the Punjab, University of Education, Forman Christian College, University and Beaconhouse National University.

Sample of hundred baccalaureate students was taken for this research. Sample of twenty five students from each institution was selected for collection of the data.

Data analysis

After collecting data, researcher organized it into tabulation form using frequency technique. The careful data entry consumed plenty of time. Researcher entered data into tables and interpreted each table in sociological and technological perspective

Findings and Tabulation

Study was conducted from four educational institutes of Lahore. Researcher conducted interviews and organized the data into tabulation. Data was organized by using statistical tally marks and frequency technique because it consumed less time and organized data authentically. Study includes forty three tables; researcher interpreted each finding by giving detailed explanation according to sociological and technological perspective.

Table No. 1: Respondent's opinion about being part of any virtual community.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	100	100%
No	0	0
Total	100	100

Table No. 2: Respondent's opinion about using different devices to get connected with any online community.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Mobile	47	47
Desktop	5	5
Laptop	25	25
Tablet	23	23
Total	100	100

Table No. 3''Respondent's opinion about using different kinds of online communities

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Social	59	59
Business	1	1
Educational	8	8
Religious	0	0
All of them	32	32
Total	100	100

Table No. 4: Respondent's opinion regarding being part of different social communities.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Facebook	74	74
Skype	3	3
WhatsApp	12	12
CSS Forum	3	3
Twitter	8	8
Total	100	100

Table No. 5: Respondent's opinion regarding consummation of time

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
One hour a day	10	10
Two hours a day	8	8
Three hours a day	16	16
Four hours a day	53	53
More than four hours a day	13	13
Total	100	100

Table No. 6: Respondent's opinion about their doings in free time.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Visiting your neighbors	10	10
Play your favorite outdoor game	19	19
Get connected with any virtual community	40	40
Listen songs	25	25
Watch movies	3	3
Watch TV	1	1
Reading books	1	1
Stay alone	1	1
Total	100	100

Table No. 7: Respondents' opinion about faking their identity in any online community

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	29	29
No	71	71
Total	100	100

Table No. 8: Respondents' opinion about why do they fake their identities on cyberspace.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Stalking	21	72.44
Personal	3	10.34
Fun	3	10.34
Money	1	3.44
Flirting	1	3.44
Total	29*	100

*N=29

Table No. 9 Respondents' opinion about how they get out of any kind of frustration.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
By listening songs	14	14
By crying	8	8
By talking to loved ones	5	5
By getting connected with Facebook	53	53
Shopping	3	3
Reading books	7	7
Movies	7	7
Stay alone	3	3
Total	100	100

Table No. 10: Respondent's opinion about the things which make virtual communities more interesting than traditional communities.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
They are globalized	41	41
Less fear of non-acceptance	19	19
Easy to enter and exit	19	19
Less formal settings	21	21
Total	100	100

Table No. 11: Respondents' opinion about virtual communities as a modifier of personal fashion statement.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	46	46
No	54	54
Total	100	100

Table No. 12: Respondents' opinion about how virtual communities modify personal fashion statement.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
They follow fashion trends from Facebook pages	28	60.87
New global fashion in online communities.	18	39.13
Total	46*	100

*N=46

Table No. 13: Respondents' opinion regarding Virtual Communities as Addiction.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	68	68
No	32	32
Total	100	100

Table No. 14: Respondents' opinion about their connectivity to online communities while driving.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	44	44
No	56	56
Total	100	100

Table No. 15: Respondents' opinion about their feeling of isolation while being part of online communities.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	53	53
No	47	47
Total	100	100

Table No. 16: Respondents' opinion about giving less attention to their families due to excessive involvement in virtual communities

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	37	37
No	63	63
Total	100	100

Table No. 17: Respondents' opinion about having virtual friend

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	84	84
No	16	16
Total	100	100

Table No. 18: Respondents' opinion about having face to face interaction with their friends from online world

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	39	39
No	61	61
Total	100	100

Table No. 19: Respondents' opinion about remaining their friends, after meeting physically their friends from virtual world

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Remained friend	31	79.49
Did not remain friend	8	20.51
Total	39*	100

*N=39

Table No. 20: Respondents' opinion about their comfortable place for asking anyone for friendship

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Classrooms	12	12
Neighborhood	3	3
Public Gathering	8	8
Online cyber-spaces	75	75
Nowhere	1	1
Total	100	100

Table No. 21: Respondents' opinion about finding people having mutual interests

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Family Gatherings	7	7
Peer Groups	17	17
Online Communities	47	47
University	28	28
All of the above	1	1
Total	100	100

Table No. 22: Respondents' opinion about getting to know the routines of their friends

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Physical meeting	11	11
By calling them	14	14
By texting them	17	17
Via online communities	58	58
Total	100	100

Table No. 23: Respondents' opinion regarding missing any family gatherings due to busyness in chatting with online friends

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	36	36
No	64	64
Total	100	100

Table No. 24: Respondents' opinion about expressing their affection toward their loved ones on any special occasions like Eid, Birthdays or Mother's Day.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Sending them cards and flowers	8	8
Taking them to their favorite restaurants	5	5
Wishing them on social networking sites	31	31
By phone calls	53	53
By texting	3	3
Total	100	100

Table No. 25: Respondents' opinion regarding lying about their relationship statuses while sitting on cyber-spaces

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	39	39
No	61	61
Total	100	100

Table No. 26: Respondents' opinion regarding virtual communities as factor of change in family interpersonal relations

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	50	50
No	50	50
Total	100	100

Table No. 27: Respondents' opinion about their parent's complaint regarding excessive usage of social media

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	83	83
No	17	17
Total	100	100

Table No. 28: Respondents' opinion preferred learning source.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
E-Learning	63	63
Traditional Classrooms	37	37
Total	100	100

Table No. 29: Respondents' opinion about virtual communities as a factor of effecting academic grades

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	50	50
No	50	50
Total	100	100

Table No. 30: Respondents' opinion regarding comfortable source of reading

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Book	44	44
E-Book	56	56
Total	100	100

Table No. 31: Respondents' opinion about the medium of telling their achievements

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
By throwing party	8	8
By calling your friends and relatives	32	32
By putting up status on Facebook wall	60	60
Total	100	100

Table No. 32: Respondents' opinion about their preferred source of getting latest news

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
News Channels	26	26
Peer Groups	5	5
Teachers	5	5
Social networking sites	64	64
Total	100	100

Table No. 33: Respondent's opinion about showing their affiliation with any political party.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
By taking part in processions	14	14
Liking their social networking pages	55	55
Visiting their party offices	3	3
By casting vote in elections.	28	28
Total	100	100

Table No. 34: Respondents' opinion regarding their comfortable way to express their ideas about possible reforms in the society

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
On cyber Spaces	63	63
By telling concerning authority of specific territory	14	14
Telling your friends and relatives	23	23
Total	100	100

Table No. 35: Respondents' opinion about virtual communities as a factor of change in point of views about politics.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	52	52
No	48	48
Total	100	100

Table No. 36: Respondents' opinion regarding how virtual communities work as a factor of change in point of view about politics.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
More Updated News	52	52
Total	52*	100

*N=52

Table No. 37: Respondents' opinion about their comfortable way of confessing

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Mosque/Churches/Mandir	17	17
Talking to yourself	26	26
Apologizing someone physically	19	19
Apologizing someone on online community	38	38
Total	100	100

Table No. 38: Respondents' opinion about virtual communities as factor of decreasing their affiliation toward religion.

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Yes	32	32
No	68	68
Total	100	100

Table No. 39: Respondents' opinion about their preferred patterns of shopping

Possible Categories	Nos.	Percentages
Physical Markets	54	54
Online Markets	46	46
Total	100	100

Conclusion

The research is conducted to gauge the ongoing cultural transformation due to virtual communities. Researchers conducted one hundred interviews and interpreted findings into tabulation. Researchers concluded the following:

All (100%) of the respondents are fully technologically equipped. Everybody has understanding of internet and social media. Most of the respondents (74%) use Facebook, most of the people (53%) stay connected with Facebook almost 4-5 hours in a day. Virtual communities don't have check and balance on identity, so many people fake their identities for the sake of fun and flirting.

Excessive usage of virtual communities and social media is causing damage in family interpersonal relations and parents complain about children's extraordinary involvement in social media. Pakistani educational patterns are so old and boring. Students now want E-learning based studies in their universities due to its convenience and attractiveness.

Several students get connected with social media while driving which cause severe road accidents, which shows that social media is kind of an addiction. People don't bother now calling their friends and relatives to their homes to ask about their daily routines, they get to know by visiting their social media feeds. Excessive involvement in social media leads to bad academic grades. Most of people are involved with social media by addiction.

People are not politically mature; they just show their affiliation with any political party by liking their social networking page. People feel more easy and comfortable sharing their views about anything on social media rather than traditional media. People don't bother others reaction on something.

Recommendations

The study of cultural transformation was a big task to achieve. Researcher had to cover material and non-material culture. For further researches, following dimensions would be needed to cover:

- Researcher selected data from students, so couldn't cover the e-commerce dimension under the economic culture transformation.
- Researcher couldn't cover all the aspects of religious institution, so it is recommended for further researcher to cover all the religious aspect of cultural transformation.
- Virtual communities and social media have vital effect on politics. It is highly recommended for further researchers to cover detailed aspects of political transformation.

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