Examining Virtual Identities in Social Network Communities: Identity Re-construction to Achieve Self-Congruency

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Abstract

Many studies have investigated social networks. So far little work has been done to explore the virtual identity construction in social network communities. The virtual identity that an individual constructed in the social network community may not be exactly same as his/her identity in the physical world. Using self-discrepancy theory and social capital theory as theoretical foundations, this paper reports a qualitative study by interviewing members of communities (or large groups) on one of the largest social network platforms in the world: QQ. The results of this study suggest that some people do indeed construct a virtual identity different from their identity in the physical world. Findings from this study reveal the complexity of virtual identity re-construction and people’s motivations to do so in social network communities. Theoretical contributions and implications for practice are described.

Keywords
Social networks, online communities, virtual identity, identity re-construction, self-discrepancy, social capital, qualitative study, interviews.
Foreword

This thesis is written as diploma thesis for my master study in Department of Information Processing Science, at University of Oulu. The master’s programme that I studied is Software, Systems and Services Development in the Global Environment (GS3D). This programme focuses on “the skills to understand and to analyze the dynamics of the software business environment”. The subject of this thesis, examining virtual identities in social network communities, totally matches the objective of my master programme because the social network community within social network platforms is one of the most popular applications in social network software among the world. And I choose an interesting phenomenon - identity re-construction within the social network communities.

The subject of this thesis is recommended by my supervisor: Li Zhao, assistant professor of Department of Information Processing Science from University of Oulu. I began the research on this subject since September last year. At the beginning, I had little knowledge about this subject. Through the direction of Mr. Zhao, I am able to complete the research. I would like to thank my supervisor. And I am grateful to the anonymous participants for the data collection of this thesis. Their efforts provide me guidance to finish the study and write this thesis.

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## Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................. 2
Foreword .............................................................................................................. 3
Contents ............................................................................................................. 4
1. Introduction ........................................................................................................ 6
2. Knowledge Gap .................................................................................................. 9
3. Theoretical Foundation ...................................................................................... 10
   3.1 The consist of identity .................................................................................. 10
   3.2 Introduction of identity re-construction ....................................................... 11
   3.3 Anonymity .................................................................................................... 11
   3.4 Self-discrepancy theory .............................................................................. 11
       3.4.1 Domains of the self ........................................................................... 11
       3.4.2 Standpoints on the self ..................................................................... 12
       3.4.3 Six types of self-state representations and self-guide ..................... 12
   3.5 An elaborate self-discrepancy theory from users’ own perspective .......... 13
   3.6 Self-congruency (The application of elaborate self-discrepancy theory) .. 13
   3.7 Social capital theory .................................................................................... 15
       3.7.1 Structural, relational and cognitive dimensions of social capital ...... 15
       3.7.2 Bonding and bridging social capital .................................................. 15
4. Methodology ....................................................................................................... 17
   4.1 Research site ............................................................................................... 17
   4.2 Data collection .............................................................................................. 18
       4.2.1 Method ............................................................................................... 19
       4.2.2 Participants ......................................................................................... 19
       4.2.3 Designing questions for interview and questionnaire ....................... 20
   4.3 Inductive content analysis ............................................................................ 21
5. Data Analysis and Results .................................................................................. 25
   5.1 Vanity .......................................................................................................... 25
   5.2 Disinhibition ................................................................................................. 26
   5.3 Enjoyment ..................................................................................................... 27
   5.4 Privacy concerns .......................................................................................... 27
       5.4.1 Security of information ..................................................................... 27
       5.4.2 Avoid disturbance .............................................................................. 27
   5.5 Access to new social networks ..................................................................... 28
   5.6 Escape from old social networks ................................................................. 29
6. Discussion ............................................................................................................ 30
   6.1 Self-discrepancy theory ............................................................................... 30
       6.1.1 Vanity .................................................................................................. 30
       6.1.2 Disinhibition ....................................................................................... 30
       6.1.3 Enjoyment ........................................................................................... 31
       6.1.4 Privacy concern ................................................................................... 31
   6.2 Social capital theory ...................................................................................... 31
       6.2.1 Access to new social networks ............................................................. 31
       6.2.2 Escape from old social networks ......................................................... 32
   6.3 Re-categorize the factors based on motivations ............................................. 32
       6.3.1 Intrinsic motivations .......................................................................... 33
       6.3.2 Extrinsic motivations ......................................................................... 33
7. Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research ........................................ 35
  7.1 Contributions ......................................................................................... 35
  7.2 Implications for practitioners ................................................................. 35
  7.3 Limitations and future research ............................................................... 35
8. Conclusion .................................................................................................. 37
References ...................................................................................................... 38
Appendix ......................................................................................................... 45
1. Introduction

As the Web 2.0 applications grew rapidly, people are facing a new world of collaboration and communication (Cheung & Lee, 2010). Various new ways were developed for people to communicate and socialize (Moore & McElory, 2012). Individuals are connected with more than a billion users around the world when they surf the Internet. They can interact and communicate with each other through real-time messaging wikis, podcasts, discussion posts, comments, and instant messaging (Cheung & Lee, 2010).

Among all the platforms of computer-mediated communication, social network sites influence people’s daily life tremendously (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010; Powell, 2009; Tapscott, 2008). Based on the wide diffusion of high-speed Internet, new generation online social networking and community websites (a Web 2.0 application) have become the significant way for people to interact with others in the daily life. In other words, online social network sites have become an extremely popular “social force” (Posey, Lowry, Roberts, & Ellis, 2010).

Social network sites, by definition, provides a new avenue of interaction, adopting computers as a coadjuvant tool to accelerate the formation of groups and communities and escalate their scope (Kane, Fichman, Gallaughers, & Glaser, 2009; Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009; Ross et al., 2009). As a fast developing networking tool, social network sites have drawn a lot of attention, and the user population keeps growing. It became one of the indispensable parts of some people’s life, especially for young people. QQ (China), Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and other similar online social network sites provide people an online virtual world where individuals can create a own identity and connect that identity to others in the same online social network sites to create a personal network based on the Internet (Cheung & Lee, 2010). Additionally, people can share interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections with their friends through the websites. They also can make friends and chat with them through the Internet even if they do not know any information about these net friends.

In the last decade, the user growth of Facebook is amazing. The monthly active users of Facebook were about 50 million in 2007, and it increased sharply later on. Since 2007, there are approximate 250,000 new registrations per day for Facebook (Facebook Statistics, 2011). In 2009, Facebook have over 250 million active users and the number of active users doubles every 6 months. According to the newest statistic, the global active members of Facebook have rapidly reached 1.11 billion by March 2013, growing 23 percent over last year (Facebook’s Growth, 2013). Among these active users, there are more than half of them use the Facebook websites daily and the average of use time of all the active users is 20 minutes per day (Anonymous, 2009b).

Additionally, the popular social network platforms in China also developed rapidly, such as QQ and WeChat. In the past two years, based on the statistics, the monthly active users of QQ increased from 783.9 million to 815.6 million between 2012 and 2013. And the active users of WeChat reached 236 million in 2013 (Tencent Announces, 2013). Another example is Myspace. In 2009, this famous social networking service provider has approximate 130 million active users which located in and translated into 20 different countries and languages among the world (Anonymous, 2009a). For the overview of the
user population of different social network platforms, Facebook stands in the first place, followed by Tencent (QQ and Wechat) (Tappin, 2013).

For these online social network platforms, the ultimate goal is prompt social interaction and communication among users (Cheung & Lee, 2010). These online social network platforms provide users a space to share everything happened around the world, in words, videos, and pictures with other users. It can also help to connect people with friends and others who study, work, and live around people to build a wide social capital network in the online world. Continuous participation in online social network sites represents a new social phenomenon that relies on the communications and interactions with people in a personal network (Cheung & Lee, 2010).

In the online social network sites, users need to create their own which contain some basic information if they want to use different functions of this websites (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005). For example the name, age, gender, nationality, education and so forth (Facebook.com, 2014). In most online social network platforms, the creation of these personal profiles is based on users’ own input, so no one will assess the veracity of this personal information. In this case, some users choose to create a new identity or create an identity that different from their real identity. In essence, they re-construct their identity. In this case, people can obtain some different feeling that may never experience in the real world. This feature of the Internet, as compared to face to face interactions, allows people to show aspects of their current perceptions of themselves that they would never present to other people in the real world (Bargh, Mckenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Mckenna & Bargh, 2000; Mckenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002).

Within social network platforms, communities are created based on common interests (so called social network communities) (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009). Although the social network community is a basic function of social network sites, it differs from the social network sites. In social network platforms, individuals can select people who they want to make friends with. For example, send a request to the people that you wish to make friend with or reject the friend requests from the people what you are not willing to make friend with. However, in social network communities, since you join in the community, you were connected with others within this community even you don’t know anything about them. In social network platforms, people can join the communities and get connected with others who share the same interests. They participate in community activities, join discussions, and meet new friends. Typically, the community members come from different places. They are geographically separated. Therefore, the profile is the very first channel to get some knowledge about others, just like the corporal body in the physical world (Goffman, 1959). The profile in the social network communities could be managed through the functions provided by the social network platforms (Stutzman, 2006). Some basic personal information is presented, such as name, age, home address, email address, interest and so on. The verification of the information in profiles is difficult (Livingstone, 2008), since the profiles are constructed based on users’ own input. The credibility of the information they input is not guaranteed. Moreover, the members in the community are mostly strangers. Their identities in the community may not be exactly the same as their identity in the physical world. Some users re-construct a virtual identity to interact with others. For example, some may hide certain information (e.g., phone number, home address), and others may fake personal information, like providing fake name or email address. In this case, people re-construct their identity in the social network communities.

With the legal and moral pressure in the real world, most people would like to enjoy the freedom in the virtual world. So some people choose to hide, fake or re-construct their
identity in virtual world. So this paper aims to explore the motivations that people choose to re-construct identity based on the related literature and use some existing theory to explain these motivations. Specifically, the research question of this paper is:

*What motivates people to re-construct identities in social network communities?*
2. Knowledge Gap

Identity re-construction is an interesting phenomenon in online environments, and thus is an important research topic. To have an overview of the current state of knowledge on this topic, extensive search of papers about identity re-construction within social network platforms was conducted. Different key words were used in the search, such as identity construction, identity re-creation, anonymity and so forth. All the related articles were grouped into three categories: 1) very relevant, based on good research; 2) very relevant, weak research; 3) low relevant or too general. The articles in the third category were mainly reviewed to have better understanding of this field, and the sources belonging to the first two categories were used as the primary foundation for this study.

As reviewed, identity re-construction has been explored by researchers for more than a decade (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), there is little articulated research that actually explore the reason why people choose identity re-construction in SNS, especially in social network communities. For example, most researches before 2000 focused on online identity re-constructions in anonymous environment such as Multi-User Dungeons, Chat Rooms, and Bulletin Boards (Rheingold, 1995; Surratt, 1998; Turkle, 1995). With the development of Internet, more recently, most studies began to investigate individuals’ self-presentations in less anonymous internet world such as dating sites (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Yurchisin et al., 2005). In the past few years, with the rapid growth of SNS, an increasingly number of studies were focused on the identity re-construction on Facebook and MySpace (Moore & McElroy, 2012; Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Zhao et al., 2008; Pfeil et al., 2009). This study extends this line of research to identify reconstructions on social network communities within social network platforms.

Additionally, most prior studies adopted the Five-Factor Model (FFM) to explore the relationship between personality and the usage of social network (Moore & McElroy, 2012; Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Zhao et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2009). At the same time, social capital theory and social loafing theory were used frequently when people explore the social networking (Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981; Sparrowe, Liden, Wayne, & Krainmer, 2001). In this study, self-discrepancy theory from psychological field was imported to interpret how various self-guide influences personalities to affect the usage of social network platforms.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the theoretical foundation section presents a brief introduction about the definition of virtual identity re-construction and anonymity, followed by two important theories that can be used to explain the motivations which cause identity re-construction in social network communities. Then, I choose one of the most popular social network platforms in China – QQ – to collect field data. Finally, individual motivations were analyzed based on the theoretical foundations of this study, followed by a discussion of the contributions, limitations and conclusions.
3. Theoretical Foundation

In this chapter, the theoretical foundations are introduced. First of all, the consist of identity and how people construct identity in physical world are explained. Then the concept of identity re-construction and anonymity are illustrated. And finally, the main theories used in this study (i.e., self-discrepancy theory and social capital theory) are discussed in detail.

3.1 The consist of identity

Do you know who and what we are? Individual’s identity is the combination of cognitive and affective understanding of who and what we are (Schouten, 1991, p. 413). According to the “symbolic inter-actionist perspective” (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), "reflexive evaluation" may affect part of the understanding of who or what we are (Solomon, 1983, p. 321), or how other people view us. Our identities are consisting of not only our own personality but also our perceptions of the way in which other individuals in the world see us (Yurchisin et al., 2005).

Apart from this, Markus and Nurius argue that the identity of people is consisted of many different Self-conceptions that mean the different ideas about the people she/he thinks that she/he is. At the same time, Self-conceptions can be divided into one of two parts: now selves, who describe the self that present in the real life and can be perceived by people, and possible selves, which are images of the self that have not yet been perceived but that are expectations or fear (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 957).

Compare to the communication and interaction of face to face in society, the interaction and communication in the virtual world is quite different. In localized face to face communication, identity construction is consisting of three basic parts which based on what we saw exactly (Zhao et al., 2008). First of all, we can see the presence of the corporal body in social encounters. So the physical characteristics comes to our eyes firstly, including sex, race, and looks. After the short communication and interaction, people can feel the social background and personality attributes which help us to determine what he or she is. In this case, identity construction mostly contains the manipulation of physical setting (e.g., furniture and decoration) and “personal front” (e.g., appearance, language, and manner) which could generate a desired impression on others (Goffman, 1959). In addition, some people may try to hide their background and personality to re-construct a new identity when the face to face interactions take place among strangers (e.g., in bars), but the embodiment of the corporal body will still limit this kind of identity re-construction in the interaction when face to face (Zhao et al., 2008).

This kind of traditional conditions of identity construction in the real world has totally changed after the emergency of Internet (Zhao et al., 2008). In the online world, the corporeal body was totally separated from social environment. In some cases, people interact with one another in online social network sites in fully disembodied text mode that proposes nothing about their physical characteristics. Apart from this, even audiovisual mode can be used to present individuals’ corporeal body in the interaction of online environment, some people will still keep re-creating a new identity through fake or hide the information about their personal background, such as name, residence and institutional affiliation (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna et al., 2002).
3.2 Introduction of identity re-construction

According to definition of identity, an individual’s identity will be formed from some combination of both now selves and possible selves at any time. Apart from this, an individual’s identity will not be remaining purely same over time (Yurchisin et al., 2005). Thus identity re-construction in the social network can be seen as a different combination of both now selves and possible selves. People may choose more possible selves that they expected in the virtual world.

Identity re-construction in online environment is the tendency for people to play-act at being someone else or to put on different online personae that differ from their “real life” identities (Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995). In the virtual world, people can hide their undesired physical features and re-construct their biography and personality to make their real identity unknown to others and thereby become anonymous. In other words, people can reinvent themselves through the re-construction of new identities in the cavity and anonymous online environment (Zhao et al., 2008). For example, in online social network sites, a man can pretend to be a woman, a nerd to be a star athlete, and an introvert to be an extrovert.

3.3 Anonymity

In this section, another concept which has some overlap with identity re-construction – Anonymity was presented. Recently, the research of anonymity becomes increasing popular while people discuss about the social network. Pfitzmann and Hansen (2008) defined anonymity as: “the state of being not identifiable within a set of subjects, the anonymity set.” In other words, anonymity means that those individuals re-construct a new identity “without a name” or “namelessness”. As mentioned above, it is a compulsory requirement of most online social network sites that users must have a name even it is a fake one. Thereby in online social network platforms, anonymity means that an individual re-construct the identity while hiding his/her real identity or real name. So in social network platforms, anonymity is typically achieved by identity re-construction.

3.4 Self-discrepancy theory

Given the existence of two identities (real one and re-constructed one), the descriptions of two "actual" selves were found. One is that the individual trusts he or she actually is that kind of people and the other is an individual believes that others think that he or she actually is that kind of people. The "others" can be significant others or the generalized other (Erikson, 1950/1963; Lecky, 1961; Mead, 1934; Wylie, 1979). Apart from these actual selves, some previous studies have already identified a lot of different potential selves (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1987). To explore the relationship among the different self-states with a systematic framework. Self-discrepancy theory (shown in Figure 1) postulates two cognitive dimensions underlying the various self-state representations: domains of the self (actual, ideal and ought) and standpoints on the self (own and other) (Higgins, 1987, 1989).

3.4.1 Domains of the self

Based on the Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1989), there are three basic domains of the self:
(a) The actual self, which is your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you actually are. This self is born and influenced by environment, education, and experience throughout the life.

(b) The ideal self, which is your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) would like you, ideally, to possess. This self derives from the wishes, aspirations, or hopes of yourself and/or others which individual wants to attain or the others wants him or her to attain.

(c) The ought self, which is your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) trusts that you should or ought to be. This self is presented in the real life and can be perceived by others, due to limitations of duty, obligations, or responsibilities.

3.4.2 Standpoints on the self

Apart from the difference among different domains of self, we also need to distinguish among self-state representations by considering whose viewpoint on the self is needed to be involved (Higgins, 1987). There are two basic standpoints on the self (a) your own personal standpoint, and (b) the standpoint of some significant other. Turner (1956) defined the standpoint on the self as a point of view from which you can be judged that manifests a group of values or attitudes.

3.4.3 Six types of self-state representations and self-guide

After the combination of three different domain of self with two different standpoints on the self, six basic types of self-state representations emerged: actual/own, actual/other, ideal/own, ideal/other, ought/own, and ought/other (see Figure 1). Among these six types of self-state representations, the combination of actual/own and actual/other could typically present a person’s self-concept (Wylie, 1979). The rest four self-state representations (ideal/own, ideal/other, ought/own, and ought/other) are self-directive standards or acquired goals for being—in brief, self-guide (Higgins, Strauman, & Klein, 1986, for a review of different kinds of standards).

**Self-discrepancy Theory**

![Diagram of Self-discrepancy Theory](chart)

*Figure 1. Self-discrepancy theory (conceptualized from Higgins, 1987)*

When using self-discrepancy theory, people need to choose different self-state representations based on the different extent to which the attributes of the two conflicting self-state representations diverge for the person in question (Higgins, 1987).
3.5 An elaborate self-discrepancy theory from users’ own perspective

In order to illustrate the dynamics of identity recreation in social network platforms, self-discrepancy theory was elaborated from users’ own personal standpoint. The reasons for doing this only from a user’s own personal standpoint are twofold. First, as mentioned above, the identity construction in social network platforms is based on the input of a user himself/herself. In essence, this identity mainly comes from the own personal standpoint of the user. Nobody will ask suggestions from others when they register to the social network sites. Second, the elaborate self-discrepancy theory itself is more complicated the original version of the theory. If the others’ standpoints are also included, the elaborate self-discrepancy theory would become more complicated, thereby making it difficult to use the elaborate theory to effectively explain the real-world phenomenon. From a SNS user’s own perspective, the three domains of self (Higgins, 1987, 1989) are defined as follows:

(a) The actual self presents the attributes that the person believes he/she actually is. This self reflects the natural personality which is inherent, and is usually concealed or partly covered up due to the external pressure.

(b) The ideal self presents the attributes that the person would like to possess ideally. This self reflects individuals’ wishes, aspirations, or hopes. It is an ideal state that individual wants to attain.

(c) The ought self presents the attributes that the person should or ought to be. This self is the representation of the real identity which individuals use to interact and communicate with others in the real world.

3.6 Self-congruency (The application of elaborate self-discrepancy theory)

As mentioned above, the three domains of self are three different states of self-representation. The actual self is the actual identity that people presented in the real life and can be perceived by others. Ideal self and ought self attributes are referred to as self-guides (Higgins, 1987, 1989) (see Figure 2-b) because they constitute emotionally significant standards for self-evaluation (Strauman 1996). In other words, the self-guide consist of the ought-self guide and ideal-self guide. According to self-discrepancy theory, every people have their own self-guide that they are especially motivated to meet, that why people have different personality. Not everyone is expected to possess all of the self-guides—some may possess only part of ideal self-guides, whereas others may possess only ought self-guides (Higgins, 1987).

In the physical world, the current state of an individual’s actual attributes (actual identity) is shown in Figure 2-a (Higgins, 1987). Due to the limitation of laws and social norms in the real world, people are pressured to achieve ought self. So the actual identity include the part, that actual self already matched ought-self guide, which is named “Fulfilled ought-self” in this study. Additionally, the actual identity also include the part, that actual self already matched the ideal-self guide, which is named “Fulfilled ideal-self” in the study. As mentioned above, the ideal self derives from the wishes, aspirations, or hopes of an individual and/or others which the individual wants to attain or the others want him or her to attain. Owing to the limitations of physical setting (e.g., corporal body, pecuniary condition, personal capability), it is difficult to make wishes, aspirations, or hopes fulfillment. So the “Fulfilled ideal-self” only makes up little part of actual identity. Except the “Fulfilled ought-self” and “Fulfilled ideal-self”, the remaining part is the actual self which doesn’t match either ought-self guide or ideal-self guide, which is the
self-discrepancy between the actual identity (actual self) and self-guide (both ought-self guide and ideal-self guide). As shown in Figure 2-a, the self-discrepancy consists of two parts: I) the gap between “Fulfilled ought-self” and ought self; II) the gap between “Fulfilled ideal-self” and ideal self. By contrast, the self-congruency is the part that actual identity (actual self) matches self-guide (namely “Fulfilled ought-self” and “Fulfilled ideal-self”).

**Figure 2.** Identity and self-guides in the physical world (conceptualized from Higgins, 1987)

Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1989) postulates that people are motivated to ensure that their actual identity (actual self) matches their self-guide (ideal and ought self). The greater the self-discrepancy between the actual self and self-guides, the greater the psychological discomfort (Bizman, Yinon, & Krotman, 2001). By contrast, the greater self-congruency between the actual identity and self-guide, the greater the individual is motivated and satisfied.

On account of the relative anonymity of Internet interaction settings, including the absence of physical setting in text-based, non-face-to-face interactions (Bargh et al., 2002), an individual can construct a virtual identity which is different from the actual identity of physical world (see the general example in Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** General example of identities in different settings (conceptualized from Higgins, 1987)

Typically, compared to the real world, people have fewer restrains (e.g., laws and social norms) in the online world. That is to say, ought-self guide will decrease, and it will be easier for people to fulfill it. In other words, the self-discrepancy between “Fulfilled ought-self” and ought-self guide will reduce. At the same time, it will be easier to construct a virtual identity to fulfill wishes, aspirations, or hopes. Thereby, the “Fulfilled ideal-self”
in virtual setting will increase and the self-discrepancy between “Fulfilled ideal-self” and ideal-self guide will decrease. As mentioned above, the two parts of self-discrepancy will both reduce through identity re-construction in internet world. According to the self-discrepancy theory, the fewer self-discrepancy, the more motivated people will be. By contrast, the greater self-congruency between virtual identity and self-guide in virtual setting, the more needs of people are fulfilled. Through the fulfillment of these needs, people can receive different benefits. Those benefits, in turn, motivate people actively participate in this social network communities using this virtual identity. For example, such benefits may include: 1) The constructed virtual identity reflects more ideal self; 2) The constructed virtual identity doesn’t need to fulfill too much ought self; 3) The constructed virtual identity can protect members’ privacy because people try to avoid potential risks; 4) In general, according to self-discrepancy theory, self-congruency can decrease discomfort, thereby increasing enjoyment in general.

3.7 Social capital theory

Social capital has drawn a lot of attention from researchers when they explore the social networking. Coleman (1998) regarded social capital as the glue that stick people to communities. It is the social relationship between individuals. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) claimed that social capital derives from social structure. It is the sum of actual or virtual resources embedded in the network processed by an individual or group. People can access and/or mobilize these resources in purposive action (Lin, 2001). Therefore, social capital is a set of actual and potential resources rooted in relationships. Individuals or social units can access the resources through the processed network of relationships (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Thus, social capital consists of both the network and the resources embedded in that network.

3.7.1 Structural, relational and cognitive dimensions of social capital

Social capital could be interpreted in three dimensions: the structural, the relational, and the cognitive (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). The structural social capital refers to the overall pattern of linkages between individuals, describing the density, connectivity and hierarchy of all the connections (Burt, 1992). Apart from this, social interaction ties are the main feature of the structural dimension of social capital (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006). The relational dimension of social capital focuses on the specific relationships people have, referring to the resources derived from relationships. It is could be manifested as trust, norm of reciprocity and identifications (Chiu et al., 2006). The cognitive dimension refers to the assets that provide “shared representations, interpretations and systems of meaning (Cicourel, 1973)” among individuals. In addition, the three dimensions of social capital are highly interrelated. For example, the structural strong ties are closely associated with relational trust (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

3.7.2 Bonding and bridging social capital

Apart from the structural, relational and cognitive dimensions of social capital defined by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), Putnam (2000) distinguished social capital into two types: bridging social capital and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital is formed on “weak ties”, which is referred to as loose connections between people. Alternatively, bonding social capital derives from “strong ties”, when people are tightly connected to each other. Due to the nature of different relationships, the assets rooted in the relationships may be different in forms and functions (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe. 2007). Weak ties may provide a wide range of information and new perspectives, but in most cases, emotional support is not found in weak ties. Individuals usually seek for emotional support
from their strong ties, such as from family and close friends (Chang & Zhu, 2012). Bonding social capital focuses on the needs and interests of people, helping people to overcome the problems they face (Cao, Lu, Dong, Tang, & Li, 2013).

Figure 4 explains the difference between bonding and bridging social capital graphically. Robert plays an important role in bridging various social networks together, and he has access to the resources embedded in different networks, but the connections are not very close. Whereas James is tightly connected to others in the same network, he can get strong support from his friends, but his resources are not as various as Robert’s.

**Figure 4. Bonding and bridging (Cao et al., 2013)**

Even though social capital is interpreted in different forms, two characteristics are consistent in these forms: 1) they are part of the social structure, and 2) they provide individuals convenience to take actions within the structure (Coleman, 1990). Furthermore, social capital can also improve the efficiency of action. For instance, weak ties make the diffusion of information more efficient. People can receive new and useful information very fast. Moreover, social capital that based on a high degree of trust can reduce the likelihood of opportunism and diminish the effort for information transaction. (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998)

Previous research suggested that social capital can be formed both in real life and on social network sites. Ellison et al (2007) argued that the intensity of Facebook use is strongly associated with users’ action to build and maintain social capital online.

In social network communities, by constructing a virtual identity (which may differ from the identity in the physical world), an individual can adjust his/her social network. For example, through this constructed virtual identity, this individual can get access to a social network which is not available to him/her in the physical world. In addition, this individual can stay away from the persons he/she dislikes.
4. Methodology

In this study, I aim to explore a contemporary phenomenon of human behavior about why people choose to re-construct identity in social network communities within social network platforms. According to Denzin & Lincoln (1995), the most suitable methods that can be used to explore and understand the complexity of human behavior and perceptions in naturalistic circumstance were qualitative research methods. And qualitative research methods were good means of trying to analyze this kind of fast-moving information systems research topics (Klein & Myers, 1999). In additionally, the case study approach is the most cogent technique for pursuing “how” or “why” research questions within real-life contexts (Yin, 2003). Therefore, a qualitative case study was adopted to acquire enough and naturalistic data (Stake, 1995).

4.1 Research site

The social network communities investigated in this study was selected on the most famous social network platform in China: QQ, owned by Tencent Company. QQ is a combination of instant messaging software and social network sites. With QQ, users can communicate with their friends by text messaging, video and voice chat (QQ.com). Within groups and communities in QQ, users can interact and communicate with each other. Through Qzone and Pengyou (two specific sub-sites tightly bundled with QQ), users can post messages and pictures, and share information with others, just like in Facebook. QQ is the most popular social network platform in China. Figure 5 shows the number of simultaneous online user accounts in China at 9:19 pm on 24.03.2014. It is clear that QQ users cover a large areas of China (the uncovered areas are sparsely populated or less developed). The large population of QQ users indicates that nearly one in two Chinese people obtain a QQ account.

![Image](im.qq.com)

**Figure 5.** The number of simultaneous online user accounts in China (im.qq.com)
QQ is also one of the largest social network platforms in the world. According to a recent report by a social media agency, at the beginning of 2014, there were 2 billion active social network users in total around the world. Figure 6 shows the total number of active users in different social platforms. Facebook still stood in the dominating position, attracting 1.184B users. QQ and its social network site: Qzone, followed up tightly, with 816 million and 632 million users respectively. Whatsapp ranked the 4th with 400 million users, followed by Google+ (with 300 million users). LinkedIn (with its 259M users) and Twitter (with its 232M users) fell behind in the ranking (WeAreSocialSG, 2014).

![Figure 6: Active users by social platform (WeAreSocialSG, 2014)](image)

The development of QQ has influenced the ways people communicate with one another, as well as their lifestyles. That is why I choose QQ as our research site in the study.

### 4.2 Data collection

There are four main data collection methods for qualitative research, include interviewing, participating/observing, structured observation and using existing materials/documents. Among these four techniques, interview is the most useful one (Yin, 2003). The aim for the interviewer is to elicit from the interviewee or respondent all manner of information: interviewee’s own behavior or that of others, attitudes, norms, beliefs, values, perceptions etc. For different research method, researchers can adopt different types of interview to gather data. For instance, unstructured interview is mainly adopted in qualitative research and structured interview is mainly used in quantitative research.

Apart from the structured and unstructured interview, there still are some other types of interview, like the semi-structured interview, focused interview, group interview, oral history interview etc. Additionally, there are two main kinds of questions in the interview technique. One is open-ended questions that “ask the respondents to reply however they
wish”. The other is closed-ended questions that provide a list of answer choices, limiting respondents to choose from those answers (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). Good interviews need to consider many different factors. And it will decide quality of data and study. So a good interview may be an important part in the whole research. In what follows, the instruction of method, participants and questionnaire design of this paper will be presented.

4.2.1 Method

According to Yin (2003), “Interviews are an essential source of case study evidence since most case studies are about human affairs (p.92).” Therefore, I adopted interview as primary method to collect data in this study. However, some issues related to the research question of this study concern interviewees’ privacy, for example, the usage of QQ. Some participants might not be willing to reveal their identity. Thus, anonymous semi-structured questionnaires were also used in data collection part at the same time. The adoption of anonymous questionnaire in this study also enabled researchers to include participants who were geographically distant or time-poor and otherwise unable to attend an interview through online audio call or telephone.

4.2.2 Participants

To solicit responses for interview, I posted the invite of interview in some communities of QQ, such as communities for games, travelling, and cars and so forth. I also spread the link of questionnaire through several famous forums and blogs. After a period of 10 days, 52 usable results were collected in total, in which 5 responses never used QQ. For these participants, they come from different fields, including education, manufacturing, accounting/audit and so forth. Their ages range from under 20 years old to over 50 years old. In addition, they have different education background, varying from high school graduate or lower to doctorate degree or above (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Participant profiles (summarized from data)
4.2.3 Designing questions for interview and questionnaire

To analyze the research question, I design a set of questions for participants. First of all, I need to identify identity re-construction in QQ. While taking part in the social network communities within QQ, people can create the profile based on their own idea, such as using an interesting net name or uploading a funny image as head portrait. The information in the profile will not be validated by the system. That is to say users can build an identity as they wish. They can either use real information in the profile, or create an identity totally different from their real life. In this case, I used a multiple-choice question to identify identity re-construction in QQ communities.

As shown in Figure 8, in QQ, the user profile consists of several attributes of basic personal information. I chose 8 main attributes, including name, gender, age, place of birth, occupation, education, contract information and living address. Among the eight attributes of basic personal information mentioned above, participants were required to choose the ones for which they revealed real information. According to their responses, if there were any attributes for which they didn’t revealed real information, it means that they have re-conducted their virtual identity to some extent.

![Figure 8. QQ profile (qq.com)](image-url)
To collect comprehensive data for the research question – What motivates people to re-construct identities in social network communities? – I designed some open-ended questions for participants who have re-constructed their identities in QQ communities. I asked participants to provide the reasons why they don’t use real information in the eight attributes of basic personal information and the benefits if they hide their real information. Open-ended questions are commonly used methods in survey, which allow participants to provide answers in their own words (Geer, 1988). Many researchers argue that by allowing individuals to answer freely to the questionnaires, the survey is easier to find out respondents’ prominent concerns than the close-ended questions that make people to choose answers from a set of responses (Repass, 1971; Kelley, 1983; Wattenberg, 1998).

Eventually, the final version of question list for both semi-structured interview and anonymous questionnaire consist of 11 questions (see Appendix). Within the 52 usable results, 36 responses (69 percent) came from semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted individually over online audio call or telephone, and the interview average lasted 30-45 minutes, with warming up and ending. A further 16 participants chose to answer anonymous questionnaires to protect their privacy.

4.3 Inductive content analysis

Inductive content analysis was adopted as the method to analyze data, and it is introduced in detail in this section. Content analysis is a method that used to elicit the concepts or the categories to describe a phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The main feature of content analysis is to classify words or text into smaller content categories (Weber, 1990).

The purpose of study determines the way content analysis method is used, inductively or deductively (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Deductive content analysis is based on pervious knowledge. If the purpose of the study is to validate existing data in a new context, such as retesting concepts, categories, models or hypotheses, the deductive approach is recommended (Catanzaro, 1988; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Apart from this, if former knowledge about this phenomenon is not sufficient or the knowledge is not structured, the researchers are recommended to adopt inductive approach (Lauri & Kyngäs’s, 2005). With the cautious examination and comparison of researchers, the themes and categories emerge from the raw data in inductive approach (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). This study aims to explore the motivations of individuals to participate in social network communities from the perspective of self-discrepancy theory. Not much previous research was found, therefore, the inductive approach was used to analysis data in this study.

Three main phases are represented in the process of content analysis: preparation phase, organizing phase and reporting phase (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Inductive and deductive approach differs in organizing phase. A brief procedure of deductive organizing phase can be found in Figure 9. The processes of inductive content analysis are introduced in detail in following part.

The first step of preparation phase is to select the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis means the basic set of text to be analyzed. In inductive content analysis, individual themes are often used as the unit of analysis. It could be a word, a sentence or a paragraph that is expressing an idea relevant to the research question (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). In addition, Graneheim and Lundman (2004) suggested that the unit of analysis should be in a suitable size. For instance, if it is too small, it will be difficult to consider the unit as a whole. If it is too large, the researchers can’t keep it in mind during the process of analysis.
After selecting the unit of analysis, researchers should read through the data, making sense of the data (Elo & Kyngäs 2008).

Figure 9. Preparation, organizing and resulting phases in the content analysis process (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Additionally, researcher could continue to analyze data following the steps in the organizing phase after getting familiar with the data, including open coding, organizing
coding sheet, grouping, creating categories and abstraction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). When doing open coding, researchers need to read through the data again and write down as many notes and headings as necessary in order to explain the content comprehensively (Burnard 1991, 1996, Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Then, these notes and headings are collected and organized onto coding sheets, where sub-categories are generated freely (Burnard, 1991). The sub-categories that are similar or related should be grouped. The purpose of grouping is to organize the sub-categories into higher order categories, reducing the number of categories (Burnard, 1991). After grouping the notes and headings on the coding sheets, researchers need to create higher order categories to summarize the sub-categories.

Mayring (2000) suggested that the organizing phase is iterative. The development of categories is the most significant activity of inductive content analysis. The categories should be rooted in the materials, interpreting the phenomenon from different aspects. An iterative procedure of inductive category development is shown in Figure 10.

![Figure 10. Step model of inductive category development (Mayring, 2000)](image)

After reading through the material, the researchers should have a set of criterion in mind, about how to define categories and the levels of abstraction. Then the categories are worked out step by step out of the material. The most important idea of this procedure is that the categories should be revised iteratively, and are gradually abstracted to main categories. Moreover, the reliability of the categories needs to be checked. (Mayring, 2000) When formulating categories, researchers should also take abstraction into account, which means that the category should be generic and can describe the phenomenon, increase understanding and generate knowledge (Cavanagh, 1997). Figure 11 is an example of the abstraction process.
In order to increase the reliability of the research, the researchers need to interpret the relationship between the results and the original data (Polit & Beck, 2004). That is to say, when reporting the results, it is necessary to explain the process of analysis in detail (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), so that the readers can understand how the researchers get the final results from the data.
5. Data Analysis and Results

Within 47 participants who have user experience about QQ, only one person who is under 18 years old uses real information in all the 8 attributes of basic personal information in QQ profile. In other words, 46 (88 percent of 52 responses) participants have different degree of identity re-construction while they use QQ. To protect the privacy of participants, I used number (from 1 to 46) to represent each participant.

To answer the research question – What motivates people to re-construct identities in social network communities? – I analyzed the answers from 46 participants who experience identity re-construction through content analysis approach. The unit of analysis in this study is the thematic unit. Each answer to the open-ended questions was read and comprehended in the context and then divided into various thematic units and analyzed. I got the coding scheme inductively and refined them continuously throughout the analysis. The following are two examples illustrating how the data were analyzed and coded.

The first example is a student who described the following reasons for not using real information in online profiles: “It is difficult to protect private information if you reveal it. I don't want others know too much about my personal information.” This was coded as “information concern” because the most salient element was the concern about personal information.

The second example is: “I can express my thoughts freely. I feel less restricted.” “I can even discuss some sensitive topics with others.” These two sentences were labeled as “free to talk” because the main idea revealed here was the freedom in communications.

Then I compared the coding labels and classified the similar ones into groups, and totally six categories were generated from the groups. Based on the responses from 46 participants, the factors emerged are as follows. Figure 12 summarizes the categories and their emerging frequency. (See Table 1 for the detailed distribution of the results)

5.1 Vanity

According to definition from Oxford English dictionary, vanity is defined as “the excessive belief in one's own abilities or attractiveness to others.” Totally ten participants indicated that they re-construct their identity because they wanted to act in the way they dreamed of. For the people who are unsatisfied about themselves, they may re-construct an “ideal self” to fulfill the vanity. As respondent 37 elaborated, “I can build an idea image for myself.” Additionally, people may re-construct a fake identity to act as a successful person while they take part in social network communities. Then it may make the excessive belief come true in the virtual world. Respondent 5 mentioned, “I can act as outstanding man to chat with girls.”
With the legal and moral pressure in the real world, most people are attracted by the freedom in the virtual world. Suler (2004) defined the online disinhibition effect as the phenomenon that people feel less restrained and loosen up on the Internet so that they express themselves more freely and openly. The online disinhibition effect was further distinguished into benign disinhibition and toxic disinhibition. Benign disinhibition refers to the positive expressions that could better understand and develop oneself, such as sharing personal feelings with others to gain social support. Toxic disinhibition refers to the negative expressions that can’t bring any personal growth, such as being rude or visiting the dark underworld of the Internet (e.g., crime, violence) (Suler, 2004).

Nineteen respondents stated that they feel free to talk when they are hiding their real identity or using a fake identity. When being anonymous, people usually feel less pressured, and it is difficult to make them responsible for what they said, thus, they can express their thoughts freely, such as publishing comments without being recognized by others. Then they can do whatever they want without any criticism and responsibility after hiding their identity. As respondent 36 said:

If people know each other well, they will be polite to each other, and then it will be a little boring to chat. If people don't know each other well, they will tell the truth. Even though you say something wrong, you won't be held responsible.

Apart from this, shy personality may result in the fear of communicating with people in real world. Online communication is somehow different. When interacting with others with a re-constructed virtual identity, people feel released and can communicate freely.
Respondent 32 indicated that, “It makes me feel more comfortable and less pressured when chatting with others.”

5.3 Enjoyment

Vanity and disinhibition are two direct benefits that the re-constructed identity brings. Further, re-creating identity will bring indirect benefit: enjoyment. Totally seventeen respondents mentioned that they gain enjoyment in the process of identity re-construction. Specifically, people enjoy recreating identity in social network communities in two stages: i) the freedom to re-construct any proportion of ideal, ought and actual self; For example, respondent 30 explained, “I can choose a cool nickname for myself.” ii) the joy that using the new identity brings, Some people want to stay mysterious and attractive to others in social network communities. As Respondent 22 stated, “It is fun and makes me mysterious, especially when hiding age.” An artist may also enjoy acting as a teacher and helping others.

5.4 Privacy concerns

Actually, the privacy concern was one of the most frequent words that mentioned by all the participants in the data collection part. With the development of information technology, internet helps to make people’s daily life more convenient. At the same time, more and more people worry about the risks that may cause by the development of information technology. After the analysis of data, two kinds of privacy concern emerged. One is the concern about the security of personal information; another is the concern of being disturbed by irrelevant people. The detail introductions were presented below.

5.4.1 Security of information

Information privacy reflects people’s ability to decide when, how, and to what extent his/her personal information is transmitted to others (Stone, Gardner, & Gueutal 1983; Westin, 1967). If people have the control of their information, they will be less concerned about their privacy.

Twenty-seven respondents stated that they have considered about privacy issues when constructing their identity in social network communities. Most people, who choose to re-construct a new identity, do not want strangers know who she/he is and what she/he is doing. Some people don’t trust the service provider. For example, respondent 6 indicated: “I'm worried that my information will be leaked out.”

Some are afraid that the malicious third part can access to their information and use it improperly. As respondent 35 explained: “I want to protect my own information, and prevent my friends being cheated by bad guys. If the bad guys get my real information, they may pretend to be me and cheat my friends.”

5.4.2 Avoid disturbance

Apart from this, nineteen respondents indicated that they hide their real information in virtual identities to prevent being disturbed by strangers. Some people don’t like chatting with strangers, they don’t want others get their information. Some are not willing to receive advertisements, so they fake phone numbers or emails. As participant 42 stated, “Prevent others from bothering me.”
### Table 1. Detailed distribution of results

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<th>Disinhibition</th>
<th>Enjoyment</th>
<th>Privacy Concern</th>
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Note. SI – security of information; AD – avoid disturbance; EFON – escape from old networks; ATNN – access to new networks.

### 5.5 Access to new social networks

Seven respondents expressed the willingness to meet new friends with different identities. They think that their current network is saturated. It is more likely to encounter new friends with a new identity. For example, the friends of a nurse are mostly doctors or other people who work in the hospital. If his/her online identity is a writer, the friends he/she meets
online will be different. As respondent 16 indicated, “With different personal information, I can make friends with different kind of people.”

5.6 Escape from old social networks

In total, six participants re-construct their identity to escape from someone they know. For example, they just quarreled with someone or break up with someone. Sometimes, they are tired of maintaining worthless relationships. To avoid conflicts or awkwardness, they decide to use a different identity. Just as respondent 22 stated, “I don't want those who I don't want to contact with find me.”
6. Discussion

In this study, self-discrepancy theory and social capital theory were adopted to interpret the factors emerged from data. And the self-discrepancy theory is rarely used in social networking field. Additionally, the factors which cause identity re-construction in social network communities were classified into two categories: intrinsic motivations and extrinsic motivations.

6.1 Self-discrepancy theory

As mentioned above, the virtual identity that people re-construct in the social network communities can fulfill different needs in the online world. According to the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1989), the fewer self-discrepancy between virtual identities and self-guides in the online world, the people will be more motivated. By contrast, the greater self-congruency between virtual identity and self-guide in cyber environment, the more needs people are fulfilled. Through the achievement of these needs, people can obtain different benefits. Those benefits, in turn, motivate people actively participate in this social network communities using this virtual identity.

In what follows, four factors, which motivate identity re-construction in social network communities, are interpreted based on the self-discrepancy theory.

6.1.1 Vanity

For people who choose identity re-construction due to vanity (Netemeyer, Burton, & Lichtenstein, 1995), the virtual identities, which re-constructed in social network communities, may include more “Fulfilled ideal-self”. In virtual setting, the self-discrepancy between “Fulfilled ideal-self” and ideal-self guided will decrease with the increment of “Fulfilled ideal-self”. In contrast, the self-congruency increases, so that people will be more motivated to use this kind of “ideal identities” to interact with others in social network communities. When construing these virtual identities, individuals may use some fake information to achieve their wishes to match the ideal-self guide. For example, these fakers may act as successful person or ideal person while they participate in social network communities. Consequently, these fake virtual identities which include more “Fulfilled ideal-self” will help to attract more people to make friend with them, because most people are more willing to be friends with successful person rather than normal ones.

6.1.2 Disinhibition

According to the collected data, nineteen respondents feel inhibited in the real world due to the limitation of laws and social norms. In virtual setting, the restraints are released. That is to say ought-self guide is reduced. At the same time, it’s easier for people to fulfill it with the re-constructed identity. Thereby, the self-discrepancy between “Fulfilled ought-self” and ought-self guide will reduce, increasing the self-congruency. In this case, these people choose to re-construct identity to release the inhibition that they have in the physical world, taking advantage of either benign or toxic disinhibition effects of the Internet (Suler, 2004). For instance, due to social pressure, it may be not proper to discuss sensitive topics in public. But in social network communities, individuals can comment whatever they think, because no one knows who they are.
6.1.3 Enjoyment

According to the self-discrepancy theory, the psychological discomfort (e.g., disappointment, nervousness) is positively associated with the discrepancy between actual self and self-guides, the greater the discrepancy, the greater the psychological discomfort (Higgins, 1987, 1989). Therefore, reducing the discrepancy will alleviate the psychological discomfort of individuals, hence, increasing their feelings of enjoyment. In the virtual setting, people could fulfill their desires easily. The re-constructed virtual identity makes them feel satisfied and they have fun in constructing and using this virtual identity. Kim et al (2007) pointed out that enjoyment can affect individual’s intension about the usage of information technology systems. The enjoyment gained in re-constructing virtual identity motivates people to participate in the social network communities.

6.1.4 Privacy concern

Stuzman (2006) found that most people agreed that it is important to protect their identity information in social network communities. In the cyber-environment, there are many malicious people who aim to do bad things through information technology. Cybercrime is increasing and becoming more sophisticated every year (RSA Report, 2013). The privacy concerns arise since people expose to the internet. Most people are worried that their personal information will be stolen and used improperly, causing unnecessary troubles to them. For these people, they choose to re-construct a virtual identity to hide and protect their real information. Thereby, this virtual identity will consist of more “Fulfilled ought-self” and “Fulfilled ideal-self” to reduce the expose of “actual self”. With the increase of “Fulfilled ought-self” and “Fulfilled ideal-self”, the self-discrepancy (area I and II shown in Figure 1) between virtual identity and self-guide will reduce. By contrast, the congruency will increase. So people will be more motivated to take part in the social network communities.

6.2 Social capital theory

Even though researchers have different definitions and understandings about social capital, they generally agreed that social capital is positively associated with competitive advantage (Burt, 2000). Outstanding people usually have higher intelligence and better skills. And they are more articulate and more attractive. From the perspective of social capital, outstanding people are somehow better connected. People who are better connected to others usually get a better position in certain social network. This position provides than competitive advantages. They can have better access to resources than others. (Burt, 2001) But what does it mean to be “better connected”? Some researchers argue that people who are “better connected” interact frequently with others in the same network, while some other researchers claim that the “better connected” people are able to bridges and connect different networks together (Burt, 2000). And I think “better connected” individuals should also be able to manage their relationships with others, keeping it efficient. According to social capital theory, two other factors are explained below.

6.2.1 Access to new social networks

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) identified three dimensions of social capital: structural, relational and cognitive. Individuals’ structural social capital increases when they meet new friends with the re-constructed virtual identity. The number of their network ties increases, meanwhile, their bridging social capital increases. New friends will bring them
new social network. They can get new information and new perspectives in this new social network. If individuals could develop good personal relationships with these new friends, turning these weak ties into strong ties, their relational social capital will increase, so that they can have access to the resources embedded in the new network, and they can receive more emotional support. Access to the network outside of individuals’ close circle provides access to non-redundant information, which may bring them new benefits such as employment opportunities (Granovetter, 1973).

6.2.2 Escape from old social networks

On the other hand, if the user feels that some existing relationships have become their burden, which means they regard the interaction as inefficient, they can’t achieve desired outcomes, and they can no longer benefit from the relationship or even troubled by the relationship, then this kind of relationship turns into negative social capital (Kostova & Roth, 2003). The re-constructed virtual identity helps individuals to hide away from the people they know, escape from old networks, therefore, get rid of the negative influences of social capital.

6.3 Re-categorize the factors based on motivations

Further, all these factors could be summarized and compared based on users’ intrinsic motivations and extrinsic motivations. Actually, these two types of motivations have been widely studied in different areas. In self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), they differentiate the difference between these two types of motivation based on the different reasons or goals that cause the action (shown in Figure 13). The most significant difference between these two types is that intrinsic motivation refers to do something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable and extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome. There are so many researches have shown that the people have totally different performance and experience when they facing intrinsic and extrinsic reasons (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Figure 13. The difference between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivations (Mueller, 2010)
6.3.1 Intrinsic motivations

Intrinsic motivation is defined as an individual process an action because of the inherent satisfactions rather than some separable consequence. This kind of motivation motivated a person to do something for the fun or challenge rather than for external prods, pressures, or rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Actually, the concept of intrinsic motivation was first defines with the experimental studies of animal behavior (White, 1959). White had found that so many animals take part in interesting, expeditionary, and curiosity-driven activities even in the absence of reward or reinforcement. For people, intrinsic motivation is not only a kind of volitional activity, but also it is a pervasive and critical one in our daily life. Since people born from our mother, they are active, intrigued, curious, and wise creatures, presenting a ubiquitous readiness to study and explore, and they do not require extraneous incentives to do so (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Re-constructing virtual identities in social network communities elicits different kinds of inherent satisfactions to users. The re-constructed virtual identity could highly match their ideal self in the self-guide, improving their satisfaction of fulfilling hopes and desires (Higgins, 1987). It can also release people from pressures and make feel less inhibited. People also find it interesting to re-construct and use a virtual identity in social network communities. Therefore, vanity, disinhibition and enjoyment could be recognized as intrinsic motivations (see Figure 14).

![Figure 14. Two kinds of motivations (summarized from data)](image)

6.3.2 Extrinsic motivations

Obviously, intrinsic motivation is a significant type of motivation that helps people to keep working in the daily life. However, there still have some actions that people are not intrinsically motivated. For example, throughout my childhood, my parents usually give me a reward such as a robot or something else when I obtain a high grading in the exam. This kind of motivation motivated me to study hard. According to the social demands and
roles that require people to assume the responsibility for non-intrinsically interesting tasks, the intrinsic motivation becomes increasingly curtailed. For example, some evidence showed that intrinsic motivation becomes weaker with each advancing grade in school (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Then, here comes the other type of motivation—Extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is defined as an individual process an action because of the separable consequence, such as the rewards and income of the activity, rather than inherent enjoyment and satisfactions (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The re-constructed virtual identity could also bring several extrinsic outcomes. People can expand their social network by making new friends with new identities. They can also stay away from people they don’t want to contact by using a different identity. By re-constructing an identity that is different from the real identity, people can keep important personal information safe, protecting themselves from possible loses. Thus, the rest three factors (access to new social networks, escape from old social networks, privacy concern) fall into extrinsic motivations.
7. Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research

In this section, the contributions and practical implications are illustrated, followed by limitations and future research of this study.

7.1 Contributions

This paper explored people’s motivations to re-construct identity in social network communities. The results of this study indicate that the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins 1987, 1989) is reasonable in interpreting the intrinsic reasons for people to re-construct their virtual identities when interacting with others in social network communities. Moreover, the new virtual identities are recognized as different combinations of three domains of self (Higgins, 1987), rooted in different motivations. People use different combinations to re-construct virtual identities to fulfill their different needs in social network communities. For example, for people who choose identity re-construction due to vanity (Netemeyer, Burton, & Lichtenstein. 1995), more “ideal self” is presented when they re-construct their virtual identity. This study validates the self-discrepancy theory in online environments.

In addition, social capital theory (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) is used to explain that people re-construct their virtual identities to change their social capital (i.e., access to new social networks and escape from old social networks). Using the re-constructed virtual identity, an individual can make new friends in the new social network, thereby increasing their social capital.

Furthermore, the factors identified in the interviews were categorized into two types of motivations (intrinsic and extrinsic) (Ryan & Deci, 2000), thereby painting a more complete picture of virtual identity re-construction in social network communities. Three factors (i.e., vanity, disinhibition and enjoyment) were recognized as intrinsic motivations, while the remaining three factors (i.e., privacy concern, access to new social networks and escape from old social networks) were categorized as extrinsic motivations.

7.2 Implications for practitioners

The finding of this study offers important implications for practitioners. For example, the motivations identified in this research, provide a direction for the operators of social network sites to effectively attract and retain users. Among various social network sites, users may choose the one that can better fulfill their needs.

Additionally, as shown in the results, privacy concern (security of information and avoid disturbance) is the most common motivators for identity re-construction. Hence, the providers of social network platforms are suggested to enhance the measures in protecting users’ personal information.

7.3 Limitations and future research

As a qualitative case study, this study has the same limitations with other research which adopted case study method. I only choose one social network platform in the data collection part. The data from the QQ only can present the idea from China. Due to the different culture and background, there must have some other motivations that can cause
Identity re-construction. Due to limitation of time and resources, only 52 participants were involved into data collection. The more respondents are involved, the more explicit results will be. And future research can try to explore more different motivations that may cause identity re-construction with cross-case comparison in different social network sites. Apart from this, the study about the consequence that caused by identity re-construction in online social network platforms could also be extent research of this study.
8. Conclusion

In social network communities, an individual may construct a virtual identity that differs from his/her identity in the physical world. But there is a clear paucity of studies that have investigated why people construct a different virtual identity in social network communities. To address this concern, I have conducted a qualitative study by interviewing members of communities (or large groups) on one of the largest social network platforms in the world: QQ. Self-discrepancy theory and social capital theory were used to frame this study. The results of this study suggest that some people do indeed construct a virtual identity different from their identity in the physical world. Findings from this study reveal the complexity of virtual identity re-construction and people’s motivations to do so in social network communities.
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Appendix

Survey about identity re-construction in QQ communities

In QQ, users can join different communities based on their interest, such as game communities. The information in QQ profile is provided by the users themselves. Nobody will validate the authenticity of the information. It is an interesting phenomenon that many users chose to hide or fake their personal information in QQ communities. This study aims to explore the factors that motivate QQ users to re-construct virtual identities in QQ communities.

Thank you for your participation! The participation of this study is anonymous, and all the collected data will only be used in academic research, it will not be revealed to the public.

1. Have you ever used QQ?
   a. Yes
   b. No

2. How long have you used QQ?
   ___________ Years

3. On average, how many hours do you use QQ each day?
   ___________ Hours

4. The following list is the eight attributes of basic information of QQ profile in communities, Please pick the attributes that you use real information. (Multiple Choice)
   a. User Name
   b. Gender
   c. Age
   d. Place of Birth
   e. Occupation
   f. Education
   g. Contact Information (Telephone Number, E-mail Address and so forth)
   h. Living Address

5. Why don’t you use real information? (Please list at least three reasons)

6. What are the benefits if you hide your real information? (Please list at least three tips)
7. What’s your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female

8. How old are you?
   a. Under 20
   b. 20-29
   c. 30-39
   d. 40-49
   e. Over 50

9. What’s your highest educational qualification?
   a. High school or lower
   b. Technical training
   c. Bachelor’s degree or equal
   d. Master’s degree or equal
   e. Doctorate degree or above

10. How long is your working experience?
    ________ Years

11. What’s your occupation?
    a. Student
    b. Computer software service
    c. Computer hardware service
    d. Accounting/Audit
    e. Manufacturing
    f. Information and communication
    g. Education
    h. Internet/E-commerce
    i. Human health
    j. Social work
    k. Banking
    l. Government
    m. Trade
    n. Transportation
    o. Others

Thank you for your participation!