

Leveling the factors of commodification of identity in light of the expansion of social networks in Iran with a futures research approach

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Receive:

05 September 2025

Revise:

19 November 2025

Accept:

06 December 2025

Abstract

The aim of the present study is to classify the factors of identity commodification in light of the expansion of social networks in Iran with a futures research approach. The present study is applicable in terms of its purpose; descriptive in terms of its data collection method, and exploratory in nature. The statistical population of the study includes 21 prominent Iranian academics and experts in the field of social networks and communication sciences. These individuals have excellent academic knowledge and work backgrounds and experiences. The sampling method in this study is purposeful. The data collection tool is a semi-structured interview and a questionnaire. The MICMAC method was used to analyze the findings, and in line with futures research, interaction analysis and scenario building methods were used. After in-depth interviews with experts, 22 categories were identified in six dimensions; the cultural planning variable was identified as the most influential component or variable, followed by the education component in second place. The third place in terms of impact in the direct impact matrix is related to the variable of improving social skills, while in the indirect impact matrix this position belongs to the variable of self-interest. In the scenario section, 7 scenarios were identified, which are: changes in lifestyle, strengthening communication, advertising, creating a new identity, personal and behavioral factors, educational-skill factors, cultural factors, international and political factors, technological factors, and social factors.

Keywords:

Cyberspace,
Social networks,
Advertising,
Commodification,
Identity.

Please cite this article as (APA): Moghayadnia, A., Poursalimi, M., Hosseinzadeh, A. and Ghasemi Nameghi, M. (2025). Leveling the factors of commodification of identity in light of the expansion of social networks in Iran with a futures research approach. *Journal of New Approaches in Management and Marketing*, 4(3), 271-291.



<https://doi.org/10.22034/jnamm.2026.573662.1249>



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Publisher: Research Center of Resource Management Studies and Knowledge-Based Business

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has changed the lives of people in various fields (Prabowo et al., 2020). The emergence of information technology has created major changes in global markets. Information technology gives all people in the world the opportunity to engage in virtual business via the Internet, and also enables them to communicate with people around the world (Hosseini et al., 2022). New information and communication technologies have given individuals and societies new identities in new forms by enabling the emergence of a networked society (Sohrabi et al., 2021). The spread of new technologies has been accompanied by the formation of virtual spaces; with a different identity and function than the tangible spaces of the past, that rewrite the values, concepts, and beliefs of the past in a way (Moharbi et al., 2023). The concept of "identity" is not a new issue and has been preoccupying humans for a long time. However, not only has it not become outdated, but it is also considered the most important concern of modern humans. This concept is one of the most abstract and complex concepts; so that "it is difficult to find a common agreement on the formation of this concept" (Wibowo et al., 2021).

Identity in today's societies is not a fixed and predetermined data, but rather has a fluid form that must be constructed and revised at different times. The processes of rationalization and disenchantment, which began in previous centuries, have led to the decline of traditional values, the weakening of traditional authorities, and the increasing multiplicity of value domains. The result is uncertainty and a kind of cultural abandonment that leads to the collapse of traditional foundations of identity. (Kohestani et al., 2024) But having a coherent and specific identity is a human need. This need is no longer given to the individual in advance, but the task of constructing it is the responsibility of the individual himself. In other words, personal identity in late modernity becomes a project that must be "constructed in a reflective way. But this task must be carried out in the midst of an astonishing diversity of choices and possibilities" (Sharifi et al., 2023).

Social media are a new generation of social relations space and, although not very old, they have managed to find their place in people's lives. People's alignment with social media has intensified in recent years; and this has continued to increase with the spread of the coronavirus. So much so that today it is very difficult to imagine life without virtual networks and virtual social communication tools, and this human dependence has caused some people to use these tools to offer their products, productions, and services (Sharifi et al., 2023). Therefore, the main question of the present study is: what is the leveling of the factors of commodification of identity in light of the expansion of social networks in Iran with a futures research approach?

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity

Social identity refers to the characteristics that distinguish a society from others. This category, which has undergone major changes with the entry of virtual social networks, is more important in relation to young people than any other group; because youth is the stage of developing an independent identity and gaining independence. Social identity influences young consumers' actions towards brands in a two-way interaction with social media (Sharifi et al., 2023).

Kohestani et al. (2024) conducted a study entitled "Fame on Social Networks: A Study on the Why and Consequences of Becoming Famous on Instagram" by conducting in-depth interviews with a qualitative approach. The findings from the interviews include 6 main

themes and 12 sub-themes. The results of this study indicate that generating income and acquiring economic capital, a shortcut to success, and an opportunity to be seen and heard are among the main reasons for users to seek fame on Instagram, which lead to consequences such as standardization of taste, consumerization of daily life, and transformation of values and norms in society.

Zand et al. (2023) conducted a study entitled; The Effect of Using Social Networks on the Social Identity and Job Performance of Employees of the Tehran Municipality Sports Organization, which showed that the use of social networks has an effect on the social identity and job performance of employees of the Tehran Municipality Sports Organization.

Research Methodology

The present study is applicable in terms of its purpose, descriptive of survey type in terms of data collection method, and exploratory in terms of nature. The statistical population of the study includes 21 prominent Iranian academics and experts in the field of social networks and communication sciences. These individuals have high-level academic knowledge and work experience. The sampling method in this study is purposive. The data collection tool is a semi-structured interview and a questionnaire.

Research findings

The MICMAC method was used to analyze the findings, and in line with future research, interaction analysis and scenario building methods were used. After in-depth interviews with experts, 22 categories were identified in six dimensions; the cultural planning variable was identified as the most influential component or variable, followed by the education component in second place. The third place in terms of impact in the direct impact matrix is related to the improvement of social skills variable, while in the indirect impact matrix this position belongs to the profit-seeking variable. In the scenario section, 7 scenarios were identified, which include: changes in lifestyle, strengthening communication, advertising, creating a new identity, personal and behavioral factors, educational-skill factors, cultural factors, international and political factors, technological factors, and social factors.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to classify the factors of identity commodification in light of the expansion of social networks in Iran with a futures research approach. The results of this study are consistent with the results of Kohestani et al. (2024), Zand et al. (2023), Sharifi et al. (2023), Tavani et al. (2022), Asgharpourmasouleh & Davari (2022), Dwivedi et al. (2023), Nafees et al. (2021), Katherine Cao (2020), and Cirklová (2020). Tavani et al. (2022) showed that factors related to users' identity include: self-reflection and the growth of reflective thinking, interactions and communications on Telegram and Instagram, the experience of disorientation in time and space, the experience of anxiety and trust, the experience of freedom, individual independence and the power of idealism, the communicative transformation of controllability and insecurity. The main and final concept is the power of direction, which expresses the role-playing and power of action of the user in cyberspace compared to the real world, and the user can simultaneously experience diverse and sometimes contradictory roles and functions, which is due to the user's power of direction in the social network.