

**EEIA 2019**  
**International Conference "Education Environment for the  
Information Age"**

**ONLINE IDENTITY IN MODERN RESEARCH**

Natalia A. Pakhtusova (a)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) PhD (Pedagogy), Associate Professor of the Professional Training Teacher Education and Subjective Methods Department in the Federal State-Financed Educational Institution of Higher Education "South Ural State Humanitarian Pedagogical University", Chelyabinsk, Russian Federation, Pakhtusovana@cspu.ru

***Abstract***

Modern state of online identity research on this phenomenon is discussed in this study. Different interpretations of the not well-established term "online identity" are examined, the research trends among Russian and Non-Russian authors are determined. Terms "virtual identity" and "online identity" are identified. Reasons and factors influencing the online identity formation on the Internet are analyzed. Individual online image formation features associated with self-regulation and self-presentation processes in IT environment are identified. These features are oriented on individual self-positioning built on other people's expectations and limited ability to choose social roles as well as self-presenting outside of these roles. This, in return, violates the self-identification process and the formation of one's own identity. Virtual identity construction factors of a person are described. Usually virtual identity emerges because of dissatisfaction with real identity traits or due to identity crisis as a means of compensating for real socialization. It is also a window of extra opportunities for self-expression and maximum personal fulfilment. The approaches to the structural and substantive content of the online identity phenomenon are considered. Online identity is a complex entity presented by a set of a person's online image traits reflecting real individual characteristics and ensuring the integrity and identity of a person during Internet interaction. It is concluded that continuation of studying the online identity problems in the Internet environment is necessary. It opens up new possibilities for extensive search of possible alternatives in society's perspective development and provides modern people possibilities to overcome identity crisis.

© 2019 Published by Future Academy [www.FutureAcademy.org.UK](http://www.FutureAcademy.org.UK)

**Keywords:** Online identity, network society, IT environment.



## **1. Introduction**

Informatization of society, the spread of Internet communications in modern conditions influence different aspects of social and economic public life, culture and a web of relationships, consciousness and self-consciousness of modern people, the ways and strategies of their interaction with the world, with other people, with themselves.

As a result, the boundaries between the actual and the potential, the real and possible are erased: virtual reality becomes the so to say “informational counterpart” of the life world, the way of being of a modern person (Flenina, 2014). And “identity” being an essential category acquires other features and characteristics.

Identity being the most important element of the person’s personality structure means the sequence of a person’s mental life which provides it with the necessary foundation for development. Person’s identity is not their individual characteristic rather than it forms in the process of socialization and enculturation. On the one hand, identity gives a possibility to feel their own uniqueness, and on the other to feel their belonging to the public, to feel united with it.

Person’s identity is a dynamic system of a person’s self-perception formed within individual self-determination and its determination by other essentials. Personal stress is associated with these ideas. Identity may be interpreted as the psychological core of the personality, since it (i.e. identity) includes central personality components: self-awareness, axiological and regulative spheres (Soldatova & Pogorelov, 2018).

## **2. Problem Statement**

However, in high modern social and cultural dynamics rate, under transformation and adaptation to changing conditions a person has to find themselves constantly and their identity. These changes in modern society and consciousness are reflected in identity mechanisms increasing complexity, as well as in the way of understanding it. According to Asmolov and Asmolov (2010), if we are talking about personal development through the information resources in offline environment then we could only guess how identity is constructed in the virtual world. In this regard, the study of processes associated with changes in the individual identification structures in modern information-oriented society gains special significance.

## **3. Research Questions**

Identity is significantly affected by the Internet environment. The Internet environment as a space of network culture, where the person formation takes place through inclusion in virtual communities, cannot be considered as a territory of universal equality and unlimited possibilities. Creation of unusual effects such as a change the value-semantic foundations and social groups forming subcultures is associated with attempts to transfer the real-world patterns to the network which entails the formation of online identity. By this concept Skorodumova (2009) characterizes an integral part of the individual sociocultural identity, which gradually realizes its belonging to a certain (not always fixed in a real

society) community, working (mainly knowledge and information consumption and transfer) in informational and communication environments - in the computer virtual space of the Internet.

It should be noted that the studying online and virtual identity problem is interdisciplinary in nature and is reflected in the studies of foreign and native philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and cultural studies. In our country the active study of "virtual identity" is reflected in the works of Zhichkina & Belinskaya (2019), in the study of the participants of the blogosphere (Asmolov & Asmolov, 2010) etc.; extensive work about online identity was performed by foreign experts (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012; Suler, 2007; Turkle, 1995).

However, such a diversity of approaches to the study leads to uncertainty, and identification concepts often contradict each other. For example, in foreign sources one can come across different formulations: "virtual identity", "virtual personality", "online identity", "digital identity". Native researches reveals such concepts as "virtual personality", "virtual identity", "network identity", "mobile identity", "electronic identity", "online identity", "Internet identity", "Internet personality" and etc. Therefore, the widely used terms of the social and humanities sciences "identity" and "online identity", like many others, need to be clarified, and the insufficient degree of research on online identity in the Internet virtual space makes the study relevant and timely.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of our study is to describe the theoretical field of online identity study and to considerate this phenomenon through the prism of the individual self-presentation mechanisms in the network space.

#### **5. Research Methods**

To solve the goal, the following methods were used: descriptive method, context terminological analysis, synthesis, generalization.

#### **6. Findings**

Before turning to the online identity research analysis the most commonly used terms "online identity" and "virtual identity" must be clarified since these terms are most often found in scientific research and are not identical or interchangeable from our point of view. And we share the views of Vojskunsjij (Vojskunsjij, Evdokimenko, & Fedunina, 2013) on "virtual identity" existing within virtual worlds constructed by means of special computer graphics software, while online identity is constructed during Internet communication in order to be explicitly presented to other people.

Scientific literature analysis showed that most works on online identity do not properly explain the concept. The researchers often only name the online identity characteristics judging by their own opinion.

Astaf'eva (2007) views online identity as an integral part of social and cultural personal identity associated with the realization of a certain group affiliation (not always tied to the real society) which engages in the information and communication based activities (mostly knowledge and information consuming and transferring), virtual environment above all. She believes that online identity is

determined by the degree of identifying oneself with the “people from the Internet” who are highly skilled in computer technologies and techniques.

In our opinion, the online identity phenomenon is fully explained by Flenina (2015) as a set of hypertext components of an individual’s online image formed by them within the online environment for the purpose of self-presentation and reflecting the real aspects of their personality, as a personality project, creatively revealed within the interface capabilities of the used online platform.

Unlike before mentioned authors the following interpretations of online identity are considered in the context of self-presentation of a person's network space.

Thus, for example, Fadeeva (Fadeeva & Semenekno, 2012) determines online identity as the identification of a person (user) with one or another group created in the online environment; virtual self-presentation as a kind of spatial identity.

Zhichkina & Belinskaya (2019) also believe that that a person, experimenting with various real identities, forms a special type of identity as a self-presentation of their “facade I”. This identity does not require a person to abandon real identities but is generally shaped by accepted rules and technical capabilities that give online platforms self-presentation.

Zvonovskij (2009) notes that the formation of personal identity on the Internet is possible through the formation of oneself in the virtual space as an active subject through two fields for the representation of one’s identity: the social world, which sets the framework for self-categorization, limited by gender, age, nationality, professional affiliation, etc. and a fundamentally unlimited information world (virtual), which also requires solving the problem of self-determination and the presentation of the personality in it (Pecherskaya et al., 2013).

According to Sungurova (Sungurova & Karabuschenko, 2015), identity is associated with self-presentation and self-determination of a person. Modern Internet technologies open up possibilities for vivid manifestation of an individual personality and self-presentation variety. However, Internet environment is dangerous because of identity shift, leveling of an individuality of a personality, formation of an unrealistic “I-image”.

Non-Russian scientific studies also reflect the personal self-presentation aspect as an online identity formation factor in virtual environment of social network.

In his work "The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture" M. Castells noted that in the modern world "[the search for identity] is just as important a source of social development as technical and economic changes. He believed that the spread of the virtual reality culture makes modern society more and more “structured around the confrontation of net and self (Kastel’s & Shkaratana, 2000).

A leading cyberpsychology expert, the author of cyber-identity management theory in cyberspace, Suler (2007) says that multiple aspects of identity can be dissociated or integrated on the Internet and different channels or services express various aspects of online identity. Online identity can be associated with real life or can express the hidden aspects of identity. That is why, according to the author, in their unconscious needs with the emotions only surfacing in online identity. Creating online identity different from the real one may be associated with dissatisfaction with certain real identity traits. In this case virtual self-presentation may be a dream come true, the one impossible in the real world, a dream of power or affiliation and understanding.

However, there is also a possibility of a reverse influence – virtual identity influence on real identity. One of the forms is inclusion of affiliation to a certain social network in a real social identity. Turkle gives one of the examples for such virtual self-presentation influence on real identity (Turkle, 1995, 2012; Turkle & Kiesler, 1997). In this case, we are talking about changing the personal aspect of identity rather than about changing its social aspect which had previously been widely discussed in the scientific community due to such Inter communication peculiarities like anonymity and limited sensory experience, which give rise to a unique opportunity to create an online identity different from the real one.

It should be noted that the possibilities of self-presentation, self-identification and self-construction, which represent the Internet environment, are qualitatively new, and studying them is particularly important. The study of these processes through the prism of the identity concept allows us to reveal the hidden mechanisms, which lie in their basis.

The peculiarity of online image construction in the Internet environment is that self-presentation is made according to the “I perceived by the Other” principle which is the inability to be perceived by other people out of the context of these roles. As a result, the processes of self-construction and self-identification are violated and do not contribute to the formation of one’s own identity and the creation of the “I-image” in the end.

However, there are individuality limits that are manifested in online communication with minimal distortion such as the transfer of personal meanings related to opinions, beliefs, the emotional value field, behavioral responses, and also such characteristics of a person that relate to their inner world: erudition, intelligence, wit, ability to creativity, reflection, etc. And an adequate reflection of identity on the Internet is quite possible provided that the individuals do not focus on themselves and purposefully create the “I-image”, but on some external object, and captures (reflects) his interaction with such objects in online communication.

It should be noted that there is no unique view on the reasons for virtual identity formation in the scientific world. Some authors believe that the creation of virtual personalities occurs as a result of dissatisfaction with real identity, it is a consequence of the deepening identity crisis, in which an individual loses some integrity, the inner core and turns out to be formed of random elements. Thus, I. Shevchenko (2019) writes that the Internet provides a person with the possibility of realizing personal qualities, playing roles, experiencing emotions, which are, for one reason or another, frustrated in real life.

At the same time according to another point of view people on the Internet have extra opportunities of self-expression and virtual identity helps to understand oneself better. In her work Zhichkina (Zhichkina & Belinskaya, 2019) identifies the following reasons for creating a virtual personality: motivational (virtual personality acts as a compensation for real socialization) and “search” (virtual personality is created to expand existing possibilities of real socialization, to gain new experience).

Vojkunskij (Vojkunskij et al., 2013) revealed two factors in the online identity structure: external self-presentation of the personality and internal space of the personality. In the case of real identity, the first factor is preserved, and the second is decomposed into two independent factors: relational (“I with the others”) and personal identity. Real online identity factors correlate significantly with each other that

is why structural components of online identity as a personal entity can legitimately be determined by analogy with real identity.

As part of our research, it is important to consider the structural or substantive content of the online identity phenomenon. It is necessary to assume that traditional components of identity (affective, cognitive and behavioral) are likely to take place, however, they are probably differently organized due to the fact that online identity is based on virtual environment, where behavior is implemented not at the physical, but at the cognitive level (Flenina, 2015).

Psychosemiotic approach applied to the analysis of online identity allows us to consider it as a whole set of visual semiotic components of a personal online image, as a kind of verbal and non-verbal cultural texts specific to the “visual text of communication”.

Defining online identity as a complex entity presented by a set of a person’s text and visual online image traits that reflect real individual characteristics and ensure the integrity and identity of the person in the process of Internet interaction, Flenina (2015) considers the cognitive-behavioral and affective aspects as the semantic components of an online identity. They are related to the individual’s activities on the Web (numerous images of the virtual “I”, self-presentation, behavioral strategies and tactics that are motivated by needs, determined by personal values, manifest at certain levels and implement various functions).

Thus, online identity as a special entity tied to a modern person is characterized by a plurality of component composition and does not have an unambiguous and clear approach to its meaningful content, which makes this research direction relevant and promising.

## **7. Conclusion**

Using a variety of approaches to the study of the online identity phenomenon, we may conclude:

1. The problem of online identity studying is one of the central as in modern life the Internet, being a new communicative environment, plays a much bigger role in intrapersonal relations, while Internet communities become new channels of social activity and gain influence on real world events, processes associated with changes in the identity structures of the individual in the conditions of the modern information society.

2. Online identity is a component of the individual identity. It is associated with the activity of the subject and ensures the individual integrity and identity in the process of interaction in the Internet environment, expanding its possibilities for self-expression, and maximizing the potential of the individual.

3. Features of individual online image formation associated with processes of self-regulation and self-presentation in IT environment are identified. These features are oriented on individual self-positioning built on other people’s expectations and limited ability to choose social roles as well as self-presenting outside of these roles. This, in return, violates the process of self-identification and the formation of one’s own identity.

4. It is concluded that continuation of studying the problems of online identity in the Internet environment, which opens up new possibilities for extensive search of possible alternatives in society’s perspective development and provides modern people possibilities to overcome identity crisis, is

necessary. One of these promising research trends is the problem of online identity formation in virtual educational environment.

## Acknowledgments

This research paper was prepared with the support from RFBR, project #19-013-00492A

## References

- Asmolv, A.G., & Asmolv, G.A. (2010). Ot My-media k Ya-media: transformatsii identichnosti v virtual'nom mire [From We-media to I-media: identity transformations in the virtual world]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta*, 14, 3-21. [in Rus.].
- Astaf'eva, O.N. (2007). Virtual'nye soobshchestva: "setevaya" identichnost' i razvitie lichnosti v setevykh prostranstvakh [Virtual communities: "online" identity and personal development in network space]. *Visnik Harkivskogo nacionalnogo universiteta: Teoriya kul'turi ta filosofiya nauki*, 776, 120-133. [in Rus.].
- Fadeeva, L.A., & Semenekno, I.S. (Ed.) (2012). Setevaya lichnost' [Network personality]. In *Politicheskaya identichnost' i politika identichnosti. V.I. Identichnost' kak kategoriya politicheskoy nauki: slovar' terminov i ponyatij* (pp. 67-70). Moscow: ROSSPEhN Publ. [in Rus.].
- Flenina, T.A. (2014). Semanticheskoe prostranstvo ponyatiya "setevaya identichnost'" [The semantic space of the concept of "network identity"]. *Izvestiya Rossijskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta imeni A. I. Gertsena*, 141, 310-314. [in Rus.].
- Flenina, T.A. (2015). Setevaya identichnost' v samosoznanii rossijskoj molodezhi [Online identity in the identity of the Russian youth]. *Izvestiya Rossijskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta imeni A. I. Gertsena*, 178, 76-79. [in Rus.].
- Kastel's, M., & Shkaratana, O.I. (Ed.) (2000). *Informatsionnaya ehpora: ehkonomika, obschestvo i kul'tura* [Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture]. Moscow: GU VShEh Publ [in Rus.].
- Pecherskaya, Eh. P., Zvonovskij, V., Merkulova, D. Yu., Pleshakov, V. A., Matskevich, M.G., & Sablina, O.I. (2013). *Internet i deti: social'noe povedenie molodyh rossiyan v internete* [The Internet and children: social behavior of young Russians on the Internet]. Samara. [in Rus.].
- Shevchenko, I. (2019). *Nekotorye psihologicheskie osobennosti obscheniya posredstvom Internet Flogiston* [Some psychological features of communication through the Internet Phlogiston]. Psihologiya iz pervykh ruk. Retrieved from <http://flogiston.ru/articles/netpsy/shevchenko> [in Rus.].
- Skorodumova, O.B. (2009). Kul'tura informatsionnogo obschestva [Information society culture]. *Voprosy psihologii*, 3, 3-15. [In Rus.].
- Soldatova, E.L., & Pogorelov, D.N. (2018). Fenomen virtual'noj identichnosti: sovremennoe sostoyanie problem [The phenomenon of virtual identity: the current state of the problem]. *Obrazovanie i nauka*, 20(5), 105-124. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17853/1994-5639-2018-5-105-124> [in Rus.].
- Suler, J. (2007). *Human Becomes Electric: The Basic Psychological Features of Cyberspace*. Retrieved from <http://users.rider.edu/~suler/psyber/>
- Sungurova, N.L., & Karabuschenko, N.B. (Eds). (2015). Virtual'naya samoprezentatsiya lichnosti: gendernyj aspekt [Virtual self-presentation of personality: gender aspect]. In *Psihologiya i pedagogika veka: teoriya, praktika i perspektivy* (pp. 316-329). Moscow: RUDN Publ [in Rus.].
- Turkle, S., & Kiesler, S. (Ed.) (1997). Constructions and reconstructions of self in virtual reality: Playing in the MUDs. In *Culture of the Internet* (pp. 143-155). Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers.
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*. New-York: Simon&Schuster Publ.
- Turkle, S. (2012). *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Basic Books.

- Vojskunskij, A.E., Evdokimenko, A.S., Fedunina, N. Yu. (2013). Setevaya i real'naya identichnost': sravnitel'noe issledovanie [Online and real identity: a comparative study]. *Psihologiya. Zhurnal Vysshej shkoly ehkonomiki*. V.10.2, pp. 98-121. [in Rus.].
- Wilson, R. E., Gosling, S. D., Graham, L. T. (2012). A Review of Facebook Research in the Social Sciences. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 3, pp. 203–220.
- Zhichkina, A.E., Belinskaya, E.P. (2019). *Strategii samoprezentatsii v Internete i ih svyaz' s real'noj identichnost'yu* [Self-presentation strategies in the Internet and their connection with real identity]. Retrieved from <http://www.psychological.ru/default.aspx?0a1=870&0o1=1&0s1> [in Rus.].
- Zvonovskij, V. (2009). *Sotsiologiya prostranstva povsednevnosti* [Sociology of everyday space]. Samara. 168 p. [in Rus.].