

MSC 2020**International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.
COMMUNICATION»****PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY:
TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

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Abstract

The article analyzes the features of the dynamics of identity in the light of current trends in the information-digital era. Among the factors contributing to the transformation of personal and collective identity, the authors, in particular, indicate the hyperinformatization of society, arising as a result of the rapid development of the information and communication sphere and appearing in the form of a permanently growing array of both sources of information and information messages of various nature and content. Under these conditions, the systematic and clear perception of the surrounding reality by the subject is largely lost, and it becomes problematic to remain committed to any stable identification matrix. Another reason for the transformation of identity is the increasingly active involvement of people in the Internet environment, including social networks, which significantly increases the possibility of voluntary choice/construction of one's own identity. The article considers the problem of the correlation of the virtual image of "I" and the identity of the individual in real life, defines the characteristics of the new virtual "we-identities", self-determination within which helps to meet a number of urgent human needs. The authors conclude that a person of the digital age should be adapted to existence in a world in which personal self-identification will become extremely difficult, and many familiar formats of collective identity will practically disappear.

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1. Introduction

The next stage of the information revolution, often referred to as digital, significantly changed the image and transformed many areas and institutions of modern society. Castells (1996) defined it as a network; the researchers are also discussing the formation of electronic (Bayeva, 2013) and virtual communicative culture (Glukhov, 2019), digital labor and digital capitalism (Fuchs, 2018). The use of modern information technologies gives rise to new forms of interaction between the state and society. The logic of large-scale technological and sociocultural changes of the last decades also determines the formation of new ideas regarding the essence of a human, the peculiarities of human interaction with the outside world, the mechanisms of socialization and social integration. “Identity” is also among the categories undergoing obvious transformation under the influence of digitalization trends.

Modern science distinguishes such types of identity as personal (“I-identity”) and collective (“we-identity”). Moreover, the personal one can include both an individually-specific identity mode that marks a set of unique traits-features possessed by a given subject (or believed to possess), and a social mode in which an individual defines himself as an element of a certain collective whole. If in the minds of many individuals there is an idea of a common involvement in a certain sociocultural, political or other integrity, we can talk about the existence of a collective “We-identity” (for example, a nation, class, religious community are the forms of “we-identity”).

Some relevant approaches in socio-humanitarian knowledge have already contributed to a radical change in views on this phenomenon. So, in the framework of the constructivist-instrumentalist discourse, which treats identity in the categories of projectivity and fragmentation, it is argued that this phenomenon does not have a substantial basis (or its significance is secondary), but it is invented, produced, constructed by those who are interested in the results of this process. For postmodernism, it is also quite natural to consider identity not as an entity predetermined from the outside, but as a result of the free creation of its carrier (s). The trends and challenges of the digital age, which are discussed below, largely strengthen such ideas about the phenomenon of identity.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. One of the trends-challenges of the digital era that have an obvious impact on the transformation of identity is hyperinformatization, which is the result of the rapid development of the information and communication sphere and appears in the form of a permanently growing array of sources of information production and transmission, as well as messages of various nature and content (Kolomiyets, 2017, p. 3). In an endless stream of news, messages, meanings, eroding the systematic reflection of the subject of the surrounding reality, it is becoming increasingly difficult for an individual to remain committed to any stable identification matrix - personal and collective. Identity is increasingly taking on the postmodern features of fragmentation and variability.

2.2. Another specific feature of the digital age that is of interest in the context of the stated problem is partly related to the first: it is an increasingly active involvement of people in the Internet environment, including social networks. Virtual reality, setting its own criteria and rules for interaction within and outside itself, significantly expands the ability for an individual or group to make voluntary choices/construct their

own identities, to experiment with its contents (Gashkova et al., 2017); a situation arises where “every participant in network communications is able to integrate simultaneously many options for online and offline self-identifications, the set of which is constantly changing” (Shipulin, 2020, p.4).

3. Research Questions

3.1. What new features does the phenomenon of identity gain as a result of informational hyper-impact on people and society in the digital age?

3.2. What are the problematic points of the correlation of the virtual image of “I” on the Internet and the real identity of the individual?

3.3. What transformations do the formats of the collective identity of the modern era undergo under the influence of trends in the information-digital era?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to clarify the specific content of the ongoing transformations in a situation where the phenomenon of identity is transformed under the influence of a number of trends in the digital age, as well as to assess their possible consequences for man and society. To achieve this, it is necessary:

4.1. to analyze the process of relativization of identity in the conditions of information oversaturation, to assess the advantages and risks of self-designing identity by an individual and group subject; consider the relationship between the virtual image of the “I” and the identity of the individual in real life (despite the fact that the former can be unlimited, and the latter often breaks up into fragments);

4.2. to find out how justified is the consideration of new network “we-identities” as a replacement for the usual models of social solidarity, to identify their characteristics.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Talking about giving the phenomenon of identity the properties of processuality and uncertainty of content in the new conditions, the authors proceed from a number of provisions of the postmodern and constructivist methodology, in accordance with which identity seems to be a dynamic phenomenon, losing in modern realities its connection with a particular substantial entity and being formed depending on projective subject’s aspirations

5.2. The authors appeal to the methodology of social constructionism by P. Berger and N. Lukman (Berger & Lukman, 1995), comparing the changes that a personal identity undergoes in a changing digital information environment with the ways the specificity of an individual’s self-identification changes during the primary and secondary socialization, according to the opinion of these researchers.

6. Findings

The overabundance of information inherent in the digital age gives rise to many cognitive, psychological, and social consequences. According to Trufanova (2019), the constantly increasing amount

of resources for the production, transmission and reception of information messages of various nature and the facilitation of access to various sources contributes to clogging the cognitive capabilities of the individual with unnecessary information (“information fast food”); a person becomes more and more confused confronting the avalanche that has hit upon the human consciousness. There is a degradation of memory resources due to the apparent loss of the need to remember something, because it is assumed that any necessary information can be surely received at the right time (Trufanova, 2019, p.15.) The information surplus also contributes to the fact that the flexibility of thinking disappears; the ability to verify received messages and the differences between them is either hindered or completely lost, it becomes hard to distinguish messages reflecting reality in their content from those perverting it for manipulative purposes; the problem of truth and the development of adequate criteria for it acquires a new meaning in the digital age.

The described situation, which results in randomization of the surrounding world picture in the individual’s consciousness, also means that the social identification of the subject, focused on the correspondence of an individual “I” to some external model, is significantly hindered. Several decades ago, E. Toffler argued that in a mass society of the modernity period, characterized by the stability of the information environment, a person didn’t face the problem of identity so acutely ... due to the fact that in conditions of relative limited information resources, “individuals constantly correlated themselves with an insignificant set of role models and evaluated their lifestyle by comparing it with several preferred options” (Toffler, 1999, p. 614). Today, in the post-modern era, a person finds himself face to face with an infinite number of media discourses competing for his attention, each of them presents/promotes the belief system of a certain personality, group, community and offers a model for self-identification to an individual (Sparkes-Vian, 2019).

Under these conditions, identity becomes a much less stable and externally determined quantity, more and more evidently formed depending on the arbitrary choice of its owner. You can find some analogy between how personal identity is transformed during the transition from the old informational reality to the new one, with the way, according to theorists of social constructionism Berger and Lukman (1995), the specificity of the individual’s self-identification changes in the process of primary and secondary socialization. During the initial socialization, which an individual undergoes in childhood, the child does not have the opportunity to choose “significant others” - role models (these are primarily parents). Therefore, the child’s identification with them turns out to be taken for granted, just as for a person in an industrial society the social status is most often ascriptive, due to the person’s existence in an insufficiently varied information and communication environment (as mentioned above). Secondary socialization implies a significant variety of “significant others” and role models, the values and practices of which can be internalized as a result of choosing them as patterns for self-identification (Berger & Lukman, 1995, pp. 212-232). It is noted that “the content that is acquired in the process of secondary socialization is endowed with a quality of much less subjective inevitability than the content of primary socialization” (Berger & Lukman, 1995, p.232). We observe a similar situation in relation to the digital reality of our days: identification images easily accessible for the average layman and broadcast through the media and other information resources are not necessarily accepted, seriously and permanently internalized, the dynamics of an oversaturated informational reality facilitates the ease of changing the model to follow.

If personal identity, which acquires the features of relativity and variability under the influence of mega-informatization, is nevertheless preserved as an attribute of a person of the digital age, then the existence of a collective identity in the essentialist sense of it is in doubt. As already noted, in order to be able to recognize the reality of “we-identity” – national, class, ideological, religious, etc. - it is necessary that in the collective consciousness of a large social group similar cultural, mental, socio-psychological, attitudes are preserved and supported giving its members a sense of belonging to a single community. Maintaining such attitudes becomes very problematic in the context of modern informational pluralism, the permanent transformation of the appearance of surrounding reality and, as a result, semantic relativism, which erodes historical traditions and ideas about the sacred preserved in the collective memory.

The considered transformations of identity phenomenon become even more obvious in the face of an increasing immersion of an individual in Internet reality, and especially in the social networks. It raises many new problems. If in the world of everyday life a personal identity, although it often has a projectively-designed essence, incorporating elements of various character types, does not exist in isolation from a particular person with individual physical and social parameters, virtual Internet identities, which are sometimes exclusively the product of fantasy of their owner, can exist absolutely without any connection with such real physiological and social characteristics of an individual as age, gender, nationality, locus of residence, etc. Often, the reason for the appearance of a virtual image hidden behind an avatar (or many of them) is precisely the individual’s dissatisfaction with the personal position in the world in which this individual was born, grew up and socialized, the desire to find new, inaccessible in ordinary life ways of self-awareness and presentation of oneself to others. In addition, communication with other virtual actors in the online network space, especially if it occurs anonymously, allows one not to feel the interference from the side of congenital or acquired complexes, to present oneself to others as a carrier of qualities that are actually absent, allows for the expression of feelings which in everyday life seems inappropriate (Buyanova et al., 2017, p. 209). It can be assumed that some people would prefer, if such an opportunity exists, not to go back to offline reality at all, finally merging with their fictitious virtual image.

However, one can note another trend in the development of Internet communications related to the movement towards rejection of their anonymity. Indeed, inclusion as a user in a particular network community today often means for an individual the need to provide not fictional, but real personal information, which brings virtual identity closer to real, allows considering the Internet image as a function of a genuine physical and social “I” created for a more effective solution of educational, communicative, professional tasks relevant for existence outside the network. Staying in the online environment in this case is no longer for the purpose of fleeing everyday reality, but is an opportunity to increase the amount of social and human capital within it (Reutov & Trishina, 2015). It is noted that there is a conditional “socialization” of the Internet as a “process opposite to the process of virtualization of society. ... If in the course of virtualization, interaction with real social instances is replaced by anonymous operating with virtual images, then in the course of socialization virtual images are surrounded by real, “living”, personalized social connections” (Tikhonova, 2016, p.148).

In a situation where the proven methods of forming and maintaining a collective identity become less effective (for example, the role of state-owned media becomes not as significant as before), it becomes possible to form new formats in the Internet space. The specific features of the virtual groups and

communities localized there - absence of a fixed duration of existence and permanent membership, admissibility of inconsistency of the declared personal status of group members with real, possibility of simultaneous membership under different status in several communities at the same time - contribute to giving descriptive nature and flexibility to the new variants of collective identity that appear on their basis.

Often, collective self-identification in virtual space occurs due to the fact that it contributes to a better realization of actual human needs: in communication, political activity, implementation of joint projects for the benefit of others. The activities of online communities are able to give impetus to off-line civic initiatives (Masías et al., 2018; Tanova et al., 2017), it has already become a factor that largely determines the content of real social and political life.

7. Conclusion

In the near future, humanity will have to carry out its activities in a situation where personal self-identification in a permanently complicated and variable external world becomes extremely difficult, and the usual formats of collective identity, which previously performed an integrative and stabilizing role in relation to people who identify with them, practically disappear. However, every new challenge to which humanity is forced to seek an answer, as one knows, opens up new opportunities for it. It is possible that modus vivendi in a world where identity becomes a multiple and dynamic category will prove to be less predictable, but more intense, creative, and ultimately common and desirable.

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