

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF BETWEEN THE VIRTUAL WORLD AND THE REAL WORLD

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Abstract: *The paper aims to describing, from a theoretical point of view, the construction of identity and social construction in a context strongly influenced by social media. In particular, individuals form their identity thanks to the various experiences. This is a self-training process that has used, for centuries, face-to-face interaction and physically living environments. Today, the development of the means of communication has exerted a considerable influence and the knowledge passes, increasingly, from local to peripheral. There are, therefore, countless symbolic resources available to the individual; many of which are mediated by modern communication tools. For the postmodern the self is a social construction (Berger, Luckmann 1966) as it is determined by the differences existing between one's own individuality and that of others with whom one interacts in a given social context. The peculiarity of the interaction on the net, in addition to the new forms of sociality, determines a more intimate change of the individual, since the identity of the concept itself is modified. A pivotal aspect of this theme turns out to be, in the family environment, the use of the virtual by minors. The question is often addressed in the family context; as experts, if you think about the first months of life of the child, it is clear that the child needs to touch the objects, put them in their mouth, smell them, manipulate them and throw them. The first months of life are, in fact, necessary for the discovery and stimulation of all the senses and it is clear that the time spent in front of a screen makes it possible to use only two: hearing and sight. Technological innovation does not only lead to negative consequences, as it does not even lead to exclusively positive consequences. There are many areas of innovative applications including that of learning. Therefore, this article aims to retrace the latest research in progress and its future perspectives in a psycho-pedagogical perspective.*

Keywords: *community; intercultural context; communication; identity; social age*

1. INTRODUCTION

You can compare cyberspace to a real square where you can meet, chat, argue, make friends, just like in real life. What distinguishes being present and living in it, is a substantial condition of incorporation. Rheingold (2003) claims that in cyberspace we do everything we do when we meet, leaving our bodies behind. The fact of leaving the bodies behind means that their own existence and being present in the cyberspace-place are elements that are bound exclusively to a name or a pseudonym and a pure description of themselves. From this moment on, it is no longer possible to consider identity as an internalization of the values and dominant normative models in a social system (Parsons 1968), since we are dealing with a plurality of values and models present within the same system, from an excess of alternatives that causes a growing indeterminacy of the collective culture (Rositi 1983).

2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND THE SELF IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Thompson (1998) believes that the Self is a symbolic project that the individual actively constructs on the basis of symbolic materials at his disposal. The individual forms his identity during the course of his existential journey. This is the self-training process that, before the development of the media, used symbols acquired in the face-to-face interaction contexts. For most people the formation of the self was therefore bound to the places where they lived and interacted with others. Subsequently, the development of the media, has exerted a significant influence on the self-training processes which, starting from the press, are increasingly linked to access to forms of mediated communication. Thus we move from a local knowledge to a non-local knowledge, reproduced through the media. The latter gave rise to the overcoming of the spatio-temporal distances in the

quasi-mediated interaction. In this way individuals can broaden their horizons of understanding that are no longer limited to the models offered by face-to-face interaction, but pass through the mass media that constitute social "multipliers of mobility" (Thompson, 1998). The transition from a local knowledge to a non-local one means that the symbolic resources available to the individual for the formation of their own self are increasingly abundant and are mediated by modern communication tools. This also implies the possibility, for individuals, of experimenting with alternative life forms, ie of passing to what can be defined as mediated experience. It follows that this specific evolutionary phase concerns a redefinition not only of the concept of corporeity but above all of the meaning of man as multiple identity: the self can no longer be conceived as a stable, univocal and invariable product of a particular historical moment but, moving away from the behaviorist perspective, the subject on the net has the possibility to represent himself in an autonomous and personal way. For the postmodern the self is a social construction (Berger, Luckmann 1966) because it is determined by the differences existing between one's own individuality and that of others with whom one interacts in a given social context.

The peculiarity of the interaction in the network, in addition to the new forms of sociality, determines a more intimate change of the individual, since the identity of the concept itself is modified. The computer screen, divided into several windows, in each of which the individual can be committed to managing a different role, is the image that Sherry Turkle uses to describe postmodern identity. In this regard, Giuliano (1997) believes that, if, on one hand, the Internet "the decentralized postmodern era system" represents identity crises, on the other hand it believes that it constitutes enormous potential for development as regards the problem of identity formation. In other words, the relationship between computer communication and identity can be interpreted from two complementary points of view. On one hand the network, making camouflage in the game of identities very easy, accompanies the process of obfuscation of identity characterized by increasingly blurred borders. The Internet is therefore the instrument of this fragmentation as the masks are immediately available. However, at the same time, the Internet represents the possibility of transforming the pitfalls of the fragmentation of identity into new resources and potentialities for the individual. The typical incorporation of "cyber-interaction" shapes

a new concept of parallel identity and superimposed on the real one. In fact, in network communication, there emerges the possibility of constructing different identities, contiguous and differentiated from that linked to the principle of a stable identity of a modern mold. The postmodern identity that defines a wandering subject is born from the mimetic capacity (in the sense of Aristotelian mimesis) of the individual, from the multiplication of pseudonyms or avatars. The postmodern individual feels the need to answer the question "who am I?" Without referring unequivocally to "institutional" identities - such as those of wife / husband, father / mother, etc. - because he refuses to identify himself in rigid schemes. The postmodern individual wants to be a pastiche personality (Gergen, 1991), that is a social chameleon that borrows fragments of identity everywhere, to combine them in order to construct a self that is as appropriate as possible to the situation-relationship in which the individual is inserted, rather than coherent with that "true identity" of which modernity went in search (Mantovani, 1995). This is how nomadic identity (Boccia Artieri 2000) can be defined as a multiple and evolving ego, moving within the cybernetic space, with greater ease and freedom than in real life.

Other authors point out that we are in a complex and liquid society (Bauman 2008) in which the transition and the complexity dominate, nothing is lasting; a lot of information is worth just a few hours. In this context we live multiple realities, hyper-reality (whose beginning happened with virtuality), and the mind has to adapt and transform itself to new dynamics; the ego is fragmented by living a multiplicity of the self, multipersonality, changing identities, certainties fall, the spaces of multiple questions advance, communication dominates anyway and everywhere, with any medium; everything must be experienced by sharing experiences, relationships, in real or virtual groups of short duration, or created for the occasion, or lived in community of interests. It would seem that the play of the different identities that takes place in the network and sees the fragmentation/multiplication of identity itself, is the direct consequence of the individual's will to find expression in a "space" free from any social constraint about the way it should appear. The identity that everyone can form in the network, would be in this sense a projection of the real identity and so it bears a name that guarantees its social recognition.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social networks allow us to decide how to present ourselves to the people who compose the network (impression management) and to have a central role in defining and sharing our social identity. The American psychologist Katelyn McKenna showed how people are more willing in social networks to reveal their true self than they are in real life. This is because within a network of "friends" it is possible to share one's own convictions and emotional reactions with less risk of disapproval or social sanctions. This makes the network an ideal tool for narrating each other, deciding in first person which roles and events to present. In this perspective, the social network can be considered the perfect environment of empowerment, as it allows to experiment new ways of being without paying a too expensive cost of the failed experiments. This state of anonymity paves the way for hoped-for possible selves (Yurchisin, 2005), that is to say possible ones. In real life one of the main problems related to the possibilities of self empowerment is that the subject can not change radically, if not with high effort (think about how difficult it is to overcome shyness), while thanks to the use of social networks the individual can choose new ways of being, experimenting with new identities and new roles with the reassurance that nothing happens before a failure. Social psychology, in fact, underlines the importance, in the development of the individual, of acquiring the ability to manage numerous roles; social networks allow us to decide how to present ourselves and therefore represent an ideal tool for narrating, deciding which roles and which events to present. This allows us to play a central role in defining our social identity. In this context, for example, Facebook is a non-anonymous space that offers the user the concrete opportunity to emphasize parts of their identity and to stage a more socially desirable self-image. This image should not be considered as a mere virtual mask: on Facebook we do not tend to disguise or hide our real identity but to modify it.

The Facebook selves seem to be socially highly desirable identities that individuals aspire to have offline, but have not yet been able to embody for one reason or another (Zhao *et al.*, 2008).

The self presentation is an essential component of the communicative experience (Boccia Artieri

2004) in social networks like Facebook. Suffice it to think of the fact that once registered, the first operation consists in building a profile. This requires above all a self-saying that goes through the basic description content of the subject and extends to shared posts and their own relational network (Boyd, Ellison, 2007). An example of online self-presentation is offered by personal home pages which respond to the need to "publish on the web" (Artieri, Mazzoli, 2000) to satisfy a need for protagonism, communication of one's own thought, one's own existence to many subjects. It is possible to distinguish different categories of self presentation through the home pages: individual, with the description of personal characters; as a member of an organization where we present ourselves through a structure defined by others; as a member of a family with individual and personal elements; essential characteristics, where basic information is provided; work, of three types, depending on the objectives to be achieved: essential, curriculum, professional skills (Turkle 1995). In the Goffmanian perspective the home page can be considered as a limelight or a stage on which the subject tries to interpret his own role and where, sometimes, he can exercise self-promotion activity. Being present in a social media therefore has not only an effect on our experience of use, but also on the two components of our subjectivity: the "Self", the subject aware of acting and knowing (Self seen within the minds of the subjects) and "identity", the product of the activity of the self, object of self-reflection and of others (Self seen outside the minds of the subjects). The influence of new media on the Self is twofold. In the first place, the media, for their ability to structure the interactive experience, create, through use, brain schemas that influence the ability of the subject to "situate" the representations and implement their intentions. Secondly, through their contents, the media can propose narratives that can change the emotional state of the subject and its interpretation of what is narrated (persuasive effect). It is therefore possible to use social media effectively to change our social identity (self empowerment) but it is also true that even external intervention can more easily modify the way in which the other members of the network perceive our identity (fluid identity); in social media it is also easier to decide how and what features to emphasize their social identity (personal branding) but following the traces left by the different virtual identities, it is easier for others to reconstruct our real identity (privacy management).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The digital revolution and the pervasiveness of new technologies in which the man of the twenty-first century is now immersed, have changed not only the perception of the reality in which he lives but also the essence of his uniqueness: his identity. Molded on a virtual human scale, adapted to the phenomenology of the Net, rewritten on the screen of a computer, the identity of the post-modern individual loses its fixity and physicality to express, free from the constraints of the body, its multiple selves. The interaction with the media, in fact, has become so intense that it takes the traits of a real symbiosis: this is the position of some authors (Longo 2005; Marchesini 2002) who, eschewing the idea of the fixity of human nature instead, they advocate the perpetration of a "biotechnological evolution", in which it is not only technological artefacts that transform themselves and become more sophisticated and versatile, but also the human being, which has always been a "technological symbiote", the which evolutionary phases have been defined in parallel with the acquisition of new techniques. And if they insist on the body level, certainly the new technologies do not fail to exert their influence on the level of self construction and identity: to anyone who interfaces with the network is offered an almost unlimited package of identity options and membership between to choose from. There is talk of digital splitting of the self (Turkle 1985, Granelli 2006), but it would be even more correct to talk about fragmentation and multiplication of virtual selves, in a sort of "one, none and one hundred thousand" Pirandellian. The individual, therefore, has the perception of being increasingly freed from conditioning and belonging through the seizure of the experience that allows him freedom to manipulate content and self-build identity. Bauman has defined our time "the age of identity": imposed, negotiated or created, its function has always been to make stories and personalities visible and narratable, to distinguish uniqueness and at the same time to manifest its multiplicity.

Kunstler speaks of self-futurology referring to studies on the development of human identity in relation to the progress of the socio-cultural context: The study of the future of the self is concerned with how we define the subject, or the notions through which we imagine it, who we are, how we behave, the qualities we attribute to ourselves. (...) and our notions about the status of

being man have changed over the centuries and continue to change, especially with the great transformations currently occurring in our societies and technologies.

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