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The Construction of Identity in Digital Space

Abstract: The construction of personality and its development through time is influenced by many factors, and as particularly important from the aspect of this essay, we would stress the social factor as well as the influence of digital space and existence: the participation of the individual in the digital world. The emergence of new technologies and the acceleration of the pace of life significantly contributes to the construction of identities in digital space, based on a number of influences, such as: the possibility of a 'second life', i.e. different presentation of oneself (of life) at the virtual level, an increase of social desirability, changing the perception of oneself and access to new acquaintances and experiences, and knowledge and information and selection of personal data. Digital identity opens the possibility of abuse and consequences. These include the circumstances of insufficient protection of privacy, discovery and illegal use of permanently memorized data in meta-media society and digital space, especially on social networks, and the possibility of manipulating and controlling the identity of another as well as the possibility of placement multiple identities, which brings questions the legitimacy of data. In addition to the fact that digital space has opened up possibilities for changing the way of life in all spheres, it seems that the most pronounced influence (both at the level of quality and quantity) is particularly visible on the changes in the design of the personal identity of the individual.

Keywords: identity; construction of identity; digital space; social desirability

Introductory considerations

This article deals with issues of identity construction on digital platforms from several aspects, primarily on the level of identity itself and the factors that affect the construction, and then, the changes, challenges, benefits and risks from the changes brought by the new technologies. Digital space has made it possible for much larger numbers of users to participate, and to draw attention and point exactly the elements they want to expose to the virtual public, with an opportunity to do it in a different, simpler and more accepted way (which simultaneously ensures raising the level of transparency).

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The behavior of the user on the Internet differs in a greater or lesser extent from behavior in reality. We are interested in how virtual and real identities are connected, and their mutual influence on the personality itself. The question that arises is which methods we should use to interpret the reflections of media-produced reality on the representation of the subject in material reality. In light of the fact that information expansion and the intensity of digital technology development significantly impact the potential and representation of the subject in the modern era, we wonder whether and how it changes the identity of the personality itself.

Schopenhauer[1] presented the thesis that without information of current developments in time and space, the mind is unable to function. But, if pure sensual reflections of things and happenings from the other world would prepossess the mind as raw information, they would be useless. The endless sight of all the newer specialties could inspire a man, but cannot teach him. Nothing that can be learned about a particular thing is of great use if the general is not found in the particular. It is obvious then that the mind, in order to successfully cope with the world, must fulfill two functions: to collect data and to process them. Rudolf Arnheim, interpreting the functioning of the senses, emphasizes[2] that it should be kept in mind that they were not created as a tool of learning for the sake of acquiring knowledge, but were developed as biological aids for survival. From the beginning, they were pointed and focused on those environmental features that made the difference between what improves and what hinders life.

From the perspective of personality psychology, identity is an experience of the essential consistency and continuity of the self in time and space, as well as observations and acknowledgments of existence by others. The construction of identity is based on personal experience, as well as on the perception and recognition of the same by the social environment.[3] In this regard, several questions arise: if identity is clearly defined, how can participation on digital platforms change it? The personality is identified on a daily basis in relation to the identity and the feedback on the social environment, which is also happening at the virtual level. The social backbone in both the real and the virtual worlds allows for identity to construct itself, in order to preserve the image of it. Can an individual save a picture of himself, if there is no "social mirror of recognition" in others who reflect this picture in the digital space? Where are the boundaries between virtual and real identity established, and do these borders contain clear differences? The construction of virtual identity has different criteria, relative to reality. First of all, the spontaneity criterion is to some extent inhibited. Identity construction takes place in certain aspects, at the strategic planned shaping of society. Information is often selective, which defines specific differences between presentations of identity. Differences may only be found in the experiencing of the 'social mirror' by the observers, but also individuals, lead by a concrete intention, can represent themselves in a way that deviates from their

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[1] Patric Plesa, "Schopenhauer's Psychological Worldview: History, Philosophy and Relevance," (MSc. diss., York University, 2014).

[2] Dario Saftich, "Arnheim's theory od aesthetics and figures of speech," *Metodički obzori: časopis za odgojno-obrazovnu teoriju i praksu* 5, 10 (2010): 65–76.

[3] Žarko Trebješanin, *Rečnik psihologije* (Beograd: Stubovi kulture, 2008), 181.

real selves. The question arises: If there are differences, are they non-intentional or are created with a specific goal, and if so, which goal is it? What these differences contribute to and whether and how they deprive the individual or his own integrity? Can the psychological identity construct, as the authentic one, become actualized in digital space? Bearing in mind that digital space in a certain way requires selectivity of data that will represent the subject, that is, his identity, which influences what the subject itself bares for the purpose of constructing its identity in the digital space, having in mind the basic need: active participation. On the other hand Zhao et al,[4] emphasize that identity is not inborn, but acquired, that it actually represents the product of society and the outcome of social demands, that it is not even a characteristic of the individual and that is created according the need for better positioning.[5] Does the authenticity of the social desirability may be virtual?

Before setting out some other significant questions, it is important to define digital space. In the process of establishing the definition of digital space, the Pasi Väliaho[6] hypothesis is used, which reveals the need for binding/joining visual representations with material hosts – that is, materiality that supports subjectivity and provokes an emotional reaction. On the Internet, this connection is defined through creating and designing the user interface, influencing the user experience. Does modern society establish a recognizable pattern of behavior and action in the population that has access to and uses the Internet? The answer to this question has been characterized by the previous theory as confirming, as well as the goals and intentions that are manifested through the hyper-normalization of modern society. The question that follows is how the pattern of dominant social reality is created in the creation of the identity? Power is established precisely through the media content or according to W. J. T. Mitchell[7] through "the shows", which means every presentation, figure, motive or form that appears in some of the media. Those shows are certainly created on several different levels and by various discourses, thus establishing the rhizomorphic structure of the Internet itself and all of its users.[8] Under the rhizomorphism of the Internet, we mean the levels and relations that are established when using and creating content, but they have no clear frame of persistence and temporality. The

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[4] Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grasmuck, and Jason Martin, "Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships," *Computers in Human Behavior* 24, 5 (2008): 1816–36.

[5] The influence that digital space can have in creating an identity, particularly reflects the campaign of the US President Barack Obama, whose victory in the presidential election, or the main factor of it, is seen as a product of a campaign through the YouTube online video channel. The unconventional content through which he linked to the nation directly, the democratization of the content led to the circumstance that the personal became global, and the globalization of digital space provided transparency, durability and wide availability. Sam Graham-Felsen Hughes, Kate Allbright-Hannah, Scott Goodstein, Steve Grove, Randi Zuckerberg, Chloe Sladden, and Brittany Bohnet, "Obama and the power of social media and technology," *The European Business Review* (2010): 16–21.Graham-Felsen HugheGoodstein, Stond

[6] Cf. Pasi Väliaho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (Cambrdge: MIT Press, 2014).

[7] W. J. Thomas Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2, 9.

[8] Žil Delez, Faliks Gatari, "Rizom," in *Moć/Mediji*, ed. by. Jovan Čekić, Jelisaveta Blagojević (Beograd: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2012), 3–30.

only visible part of this structure is the user interface, which creates the dominant experience of the Internet user.

Taking into account the speed of information flow, as well as the digital platform as the principle of global networking, the influence and importance of the cultural construct, is very high in the acquisition of identity, because it represents a simplified and purified picture of a culture that defines what is common and neglects the elements which are a deviation from the community. In the search for what is common, which sometimes is not found, whether it feels unaccepted or fails to accept others to the desired extent to achieve the desired level of interaction, in digital space the person gets the opportunity to construct changes and to present its identity in a way that differs from its real identity. There is something here that could be called a paradox: the need for belonging to a particular community, a virtual/digital community points to the cultural differences of the global and basic communities to which the individual belongs. The feeling of inadequate belonging to the basic community or the feeling of being rejected can contribute to the need to construct a different identity and placing it in digital space. An individual creates an acceptable self, which secures the place and positive social feedback in the digital world of different cultures, thereby increasing/compensating the sense of belonging and self-esteem or, changing its virtual identity for the sake of increasing the acceptance within its culture. Affiliation with a particular culture builds a group identity, in which an individual acquires a sense of belonging, which is one of the basic points of acquiring an identity.

The sensation of the body has an important place in the construction of identity. In this aspect, selectivity is also present in the construction of identity in the digital space, which is manifested in the selection of the visual presentation of *self*. The choice of photographs and overall "performance of oneself" is subject to self-censorship, before being selected in the digital space, and then constructed. The body in the digital space is the most commonly a display of the ideal *self*, but this will be our subject later on.

On the other hand, digital identity is based on the principles of nonphysical – reducing, and sometimes eliminating borders at the level of the nation, religion, gender, race and age. A certain number of participants in the digital space construct their identity without displaying photographs, which may be a response to the question of whether borders can really be eliminated and what does this constructed identity speaks about the needs of the individual. The need for social feedback seems to be the most important element in the construction of identity in the digital space, but the question is whether the construction of unreal identity is sustainable in time, even though it acquires an element of durability in the digital space. The difference between physical and virtual becomes wider, with the possibility of contributing to a better construction of identity and development, but also of become a space of illusions and (self) deception. The starting point is that the ideal *self*[9] is determined by self-idealization; unconscious, unrealistic picture of abilities and characteristics and the lack of

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[9] Bernard J. Paris, "Karen Horney's Vision of the Self," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 59, 2 (1999): 157–66; Eugene M. DeRobertis, "Deriving a Humanistic Theory of Child Development from the Works of Carl R. Rogers and Karen Horney," *The Humanistic Psychologist* 34, 2 (2006): 177.

the (necessary) difference between the realistic and unrealistic notion of oneself. The construction of the ideal self is often present in digital space and perhaps this is the right time to add the category of *virtual me* to the existing forms of the self (*real me, ideal me*) that would help brighten up the identity construction in digital space.

Digital space is often seen as a platform where the birth, age and other differences are tolerated; however, the research of Goldman and associates[10] pointed out the unsustainability of this attitude. Researching the phenomenon called *adultism*, following the workshops on identity and power, as part of the issue of subordination, privilege, community, social action and social issues through the principles of learning and the development of new technologies, pointed to the elements of development and the dimension of identity. Meta-media society,[11] due to new media access techniques, generating, manipulating and analyzing data, basically represents accumulation of memory of all data (via computers) and also emphasizes the radical differences in the use of all forms. Therefore, the digital space, understood as a non-physical space, that makes borders and differences less visible, should only be assumed as such.

The relation between private and public space is transformed into the relation of personal against cyber space,[12] creating an illusion of non-reality.

Identity construction

The moment when one participates in digital space, the identity is constructed, and the individual begins communicating. It is precisely at this point that the question is raised with whom/with what the person is actually communicating? Another individual, or the virtual identity of another person? Using digital content, we come to the *chatterbot* – the human principle, versus the digitally recorded one,[13] which again opens up a new area of research, precisely at the level of the construction of digital identity.

The dualism of the mind and the body[14] becomes acceptable in digital space, and the possibility of changing oneself is growing. The bodiless principle of digital space in a way splits the personality, because behind the presented profile the person uses to participate in digital space – it may be living a completely different life, aware of that fact or not. Digital space, as an endless personal platform, filled with autobiographical (or constructed) content, such as information, images, representations of

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[10] Shelley Goldman, Angela Booker, and Meghan McDermott, "Mixing the Digital, Social, and Cultural: Learning, Identity, and Agency in Youth Participation," *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media* (2008): 185–206.

[11] Manovich, Lev, "An archeology of a computer screen," *Kunstforum International* 132 (1995): 124–35.

[12] Aneta Stojnić, "Digital anthropomorphism: Performers avatars and chat-bots," *Performance Research* 20, 2 (2015): 70–77.

[13] Philip Auslander, "Live from cyberspace: or, I was sitting at my computer this guy appeared he thought I was a bot," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 24, 1 (2002): 16–21.

[14] Predrag Haramija, "Donosi li internet novo poimanje čovjeka? Osvrt na viđenje čovjeka među sljedbenicima digitalne kulture," *Obnovljeni život: časopis za filozofiju i religijske znanosti* 64, 3 (2009): 363–74.

oneself, interests, activities, in other words – overall performance of oneself, remains in most cases permanent and accessible. Contrary to the durability of information as an extraordinary benefit, the richness of feelings and impulses appears to irretrievably disappear in the process often referred to as the 'resetting of borders'. Loneliness, which is often accompanied by the growing need for networking on digital platforms, and even for designing a 'virtually desirable identity', can activate the design of an identity that renounces its authenticity. The relation between online and offline identities, according to Belk,[15] is actually the key to defining oneself in digital time, which would in the psychological terms be co-construction of oneself. The richness of information and its durability, which certainly represents a major contribution of the digital platforms, is on the other hand an attack on the intimacy of the individual, leaving a smaller space for intimacy and secrets, which are very important areas of vulnerability of each individual. Online/virtual identity is the principle of co-construction of identity and at the same time an opportunity to make visible what a person thinks significant and valuable in his or her existence. The construction of virtual identity assists the person to represent the real changes and advances, thus reinforcing his or her real/offline identity. Secrets are revealed, and this is the zone of negative aspects of this element. However, it seems that the positive aspects outnumber the negative, because at the moment, when we speak from the aspect of the time flow, a person can reconstruct its identity and make it immediately visible when it comes to the elements about himself which he wants to disclose.

The quality of participation in digital space is under the influence of number of factors, from the continuous increase in supply (both in terms of products and services, and desirability at the level of the very concept of identity). The concept of identity also contains more possibilities and starts with the personal preferences up to the desirable image, which as such, is revealed during participation. The image of desirability is most often an entirely individual category and contains the principle of Ideal self. It is emphasized that the *ideal me* does not necessarily mean *fake me*, but it can present selected elements of character, events, presentations that are visible in digital space, while the 'unwanted content' is not published. This involves personal information that an individual shares through social networks, the number, the type, dynamics of the posts, pictures, texts, etc. The selective representation of oneself, physical identity control, development of new mechanisms for identity management and virtual social interactions is opening a process of creation of new identity, different from the one in the non-virtual reality[16]. In addition, as the context changes, there is also a change in the attitude toward oneself, developing the circularity in the identity construction, requires a change of relations. The principle cause-consequence, i.e. linearity seems overcame, while circularity becomes more and more evident. A person constructs the aspects of his online virtual identity, which is then influenced

[15] Russel W. Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, 3 (2013): 477–500.

[16] Dana Boyd, "*Faceted id/entity*: Managing representation in a digital world," (master program thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2002): 63, http://www.danah.org/papers/Thesis.FacetedIdentity.pdf, acc. July 10, 2017.

by social virtual mirrors: communication on digital platforms. This influence causes changes in the further construction of identity, which seeks to adapt to the principle of *desirable self* (or *ideal self*). Any subsequent mutual influence of a society in relation to the individual causes certain changes or empowerment of the elements that are recognized as desirable. It is precisely this circularity, the continuous change caused by inter-mediation that contributes to the construction and upgrading, as we have called it – the *virtual self*. Personality adaptation to new approaches and opportunities offered by digital space represents a special level in the construction of 'digital identity', which primarily is not the topic of this essay, but is also an important aspect for further dealings with the topic of identity construction. In this regard, it is important to take into account a number of factors of which Andevski and Vučković[17] speak: the danger of equalizing consummation, realization and level of interest (new forms of sociality and connectivity), digital optimism/freedom (unlimited access to the world from which pseudo-closeness is born) and digital utopianism (digotopia) it is a paradoxical fact that a space that offers answers to all questions has been created, but it does not offer the possibility to wonder beyond it.

The construction of identity in digital space does not only apply to participants/people, but also to the objects, products, information, i.e. everything that is present in digital space and acquires its specifically constructed digital identity. One of the models of relations according to digital identity[18] is based on the *CAARP* model,[19] but, regardless of the objective guidelines it provides, it doesn't seem sufficient for general participation in digital space. This research was based on the differences between digital and physical contexts, and it also covered the issue of privacy, credibility and confidentiality in the digital world, which is a very important element in the construction of identity in digital space. Particularly significant influences on the construction of identity are the visibility (as opposed to obscurity), the problem of eavesdropping, hacking, disclosure of personal information and relating, which is at the basis of the social needs of each individual, and represents a peculiar risk.[20]

The relation between young people and adults has another important dimension when it comes to participation in digital space, and that is the principle of parenting. On the one hand, young generations (children) encourage their parents to become more active participants in digital space, to follow new technologies and trends, which sometimes becomes an obligation for parents, not just their personal needs. Children lack experience, while their level of information is often beyond parental. The validity of information that does not have a sufficient level of verifiability, as well as the strong need for conformism among young people, leaves much room for abuse.

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[17] Milica Andevski and Željko Vučković, "Daroviti u diskursu digitalnog optimizma i nihilizma," *Darovitost i moralnost* (2012): 91–102.

[18] Arthur Allison, James Currall, Michael Moss, and Susan Stuart, "Digital identity matters," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 56, 4 (2005): 364–72.

[19] Allison et al: CAARP model, (C = Currency A = Authority A = Accuracy R = Relevancy P = Purpose).

[20] Marit Hansen, Ari Schwartz, and Alissa Cooper, "Privacy and identity management," *IEEE Security & Privacy* 6, 2 (2008): 1–9.

There are still not enough powerful systems for protection of the safety of children (or adults) in digital space and the question that arises is whether identity control is a matter for society or the parents to deal with.[21] The risks of participation in digital space are not negligible, which practice has been proving for over a decade. This primarily concerns the vulnerability of privacy, in particular with children; security issues, anonymity; credibility and legitimacy of information, but also the identity itself. A special level of risk is the lack of security and the putting users under control; ensuring the privacy of users and governmental requests for data handling, as well as the possibility of multiple identities, as well as the abuse and controlling the identities of others.[22] These segments require much more room for analysis and go beyond the scope of this work, but it is important to mention that the system of identity should legally be (become) a place of trust, due to the increasing frequency of abuse, insufficient authorization, vulnerability of access codes, authenticity of identity.[23]

New and easily available knowledge, the availability of information, both on the personal and the general, and especially the on educational field; development of the social environment and the possibility of increasing social desirability certainly belong to the advantages of digital space. Many of the participants experience the digital space of social networks as an opportunity for a second life, as well as 'broadening' of their personality in terms of creativity and activity, in which they acquire and/or develop a sense of belonging. Digital space sometimes, in a certain way, allows a highly desirable option, but this is a deviation from reality, which in essence means deviation from its authentic identity.[24] The anthropological influence must not be neglected either, but this is a topic of particular importance, which goes beyond the scope of this essay.

Concluding considerations

Every update, especially at the technological and digital level, brings a wide range of new possibilities, which is why it is generally accepted and continues to evolve, while on the other hand it carries risks that are often not possible to control. The emergence out of anonymity, which has always been a zone of ambition as well as the possibility of increasing success, is expanding in the digital space. Equally accepted, and used both by the anonymous population and by those whose success is already recognized in a smaller or global context, digital space produces an increase in the need for networking and interaction, which can again be viewed from two aspects:

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[21] Tanya Byron, "Safer children in a digital world: The report of the Byron Review: Be safe, be aware, have fun," (2008), http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7332/7/Final%20Report%20Bookmarked_Redacted.pdf, acc. July 10, 2017.

[22] Amardeo C. Sarma, and João Girão, "Identities in the Future Internet of Things," *Wireless Personal Communications* 49, 3 (2009): 353–63.

[23] Jean L. Camp, "Digital identity," *IEEE Technology and society Magazine* 23, 3 (2004): 34–41.

[24] Stuart Boon, and Christine Sinclair, "A world I don't inhabit: Disquiet and identity in Second Life and Facebook," *Educational Media International* 46, 2 (2009): 99–110.

as lack of interaction and social stimulation in the 'reality', i.e., compensation for it, as well as a tendency towards virtual reality because it provides the possibility of withdrawal at any time. Although the above aspect goes beyond the needs of this essay, it is important to consider it in the future, especially from the perspective of the protection and security of users, as well as from the perspective of the impact on the construction of identity in digital space itself. The concept of *self,* according to the rules of social desirability, becomes imperative in digital space and directs the construction of identity, increasing the need for acceptance, sometimes at the expense of authenticity. It is precisely this segment that represents a paradox, because the need for authenticity to affirm the identity is subject to the 'laws' of virtual desirability, which in a certain way requires uniformity. The path from virtually desirable uniformity to the actualization of authenticity is not simple or even possible for large number of participants, although the digital space 'tacitly' promises it and actually promotes it.

From all of the above, it can be concluded that participation in digital space significantly influences the construction of identity and alters the experience of *self,* first of all at the psychological level, building 'bridges' from the *real self* to the *ideal self*, via the *preferred self*, where the possibility of losing the real *self* and the basic authenticity becomes a new risk, which is a matter of special importance for each individual, but also for the system as a whole.

Analyzing relations as an intuitive event at the moment of establishing a connection between the person and the device, previously-defined relationships are in constant adjustment to the user, not only to his physical characteristics, but also to his mental processes and intuitive reactions. Also, users are exposed to technological and visual innovations on a daily basis. In this way, the adjustment takes place in both directions – technology to the user and user to the technology. Attempt to represent this phenomenon via unambiguous interpretation gives the conclusion is that the habits of the users are shaped and changed. Interfaces manifest their power over the subject in the form of recursive movement in the space between the mind and the object. The contents on the screen shape the way we consume content, constantly changing the outer and inner, genuine and fictitious scenes of perception.

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