

Internet Addiction Disorder and Identity on line: the Educational Relationship

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Abstract

In the mid 1990s people became fascinated with the Internet, a fact which has not only redesigned the geographic borders of communication within a totally new dimension, but has also created new profiles of personal identities.

This paper aims to describe how identities are constructed in cyberspace and outline the risks and the opportunities of such an evolution of human identity.

Moving from the identity concept from the theories of Goffman, Erikson and other authors, this paper intends to answer these questions and to discuss the problem of personal identity in the age of the Internet.

The aim is to introduce and to discuss through a pedagogical point of view, a specific type of mental disturbance of the Internet age called Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD), a disturbance classified through the criteria of DSM IV as a new form of dependency.

Keywords: Identity, social interaction, Internet Addiction Disorder, IAD, telematic communication, educational task.

Introduction: Identity in the Internet Age

In the mid 1990s people became fascinated with the Internet. The Internet has redesigned the geographic borders of communication within a totally new dimension, but it has also created new profiles of personal identities, a subject which has been under discussion for a number of years.

This paper aims to describe, according to recent advances in social psychology and Computer Mediated Communication, how identities are constructed in cyberspace. Personal identity and social identity are meanings which grow within the contexts of relationships that characterise the individual's life; the virtual theatre, in which the performance of oneself takes part and in which social relations take on new forms. What effects does this have on the growing up process of the individual and on identity? And what is the relationship between virtual reality and the real world?

The identity concept has been modified just as the community concept has. Being a member of a social group is no longer determined by the sharing of places and physical borders; individuals who surf the net,

Netizens, cyberspace citizens, are the main participants in this reality. Cyberspace and the physical world are not two detached realities, but are factors which directly influence each other. More recently, cyberspace has become populated by environments called Collaborative Virtual Environments. These are particular environments fostering communication and interaction among social authors rather than user-computer interaction (Talamo, Ligorio,

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2001). Cyberspace appears to be a new arena where interactions and dialogues can be recorded and observed in real time and where everyone can show himself.

The typology of the cyberspace citizen is varied. In the world behind the screen the differences stretch to disappear and the freedom of self expression and performance depends totally on the individual and does not depend on cultural, ethnic and religious identities. The world on line offers various types of dialogue: electronic mail, chat rooms, deferred dialogues of interest groups, newsgroups and the environments of MUD (Multi User Domain). These changes involve two very important pedagogical points: the *identity of self* and the type of *social relations* that can be established in a telematic environment.

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Identity as a Dynamic Phenomenon

Studying identity as process represents one new development of modernity: throughout the 19th and 20th centuries the concept of identity was seen as a stable and immutable concept. Recent approaches adopted by social psychology, consider individual and social identity not as stable characteristics, but rather as a dynamic phenomenon. They agree in their view that identity is not a "definitive fact", and they also admit that various plans of identity can coexist simultaneously and develop in competition with one another.

The structure of self and its actions are the result of the balance and integration of the individual and social dimension. Erikson (the father of the identity concept), states that in the development of the self, the two dimensions are constantly interacting and are, at the same time, in 'crisis', and they find their specific ground for this dialectic in cultural models.

Even as far back as 1902 Cooley, in his social theory of self, through the image of looking-glass self, gave evidence of a new way of looking at the relationship between the individual and social aspects, no longer considered as "distinguished entities", but as two aspects of the same process (Cooley, 1902).

George Mead has explained that the conscience of self occurs in the relationship with others, in particular in the relationship with significant others. He explains that in the construction of the process of identity, attention is paid to the expectations of those who play a part in its relational context. Personal identity is thus identified as a social product, coming from interactions with individuals. The self is "a social structure, and rises in the social experience" (Mead, 1966).

For Erikson the development of the individual happens through a series of evolutionary stages. The overcoming of these stages happens through the resolution of 'crisis' and conflicts in the experience of integration in society, "only an identity of self, berthed to the "patrimony" of a cultural identity can produce a psycho-social equilibrium" (Erikson, 1986).

The identity concept is, therefore, detached from a study of individuality and is directed towards the problem of the relationship between the individual and society, and in particular regards the point of view of the relationship between the degrees of freedom of individual actions and the cohesion of the social system.

Erving Goffman and his "dramaturgic model" of social interaction is more concerned with the analysis of how various aspects of self perform in daily life, a performance that the Author defines as "situated systems of activation," than with the topic of identity (Goffman, 1969).

The Author makes a distinction between 'face' and 'identity'. The first is the image of self and is the result of the interactions of the self with the world, the outcome of the interactions, the acknowledgment and the confirmations of the self in the context. The face takes shape in interaction and is confirmed in every in-

teraction. It is an image of the self that the actor plays in different contexts in relation to the specific demands of a situation. This does not appear to have anything to do with a more complex concept of identity.

Identity, on the other hand, is the result of the process through which the individual assumes social values, shared norms of behaviour and knowledge which allow the individual to feel part of a social group and at the same time, allow him to be recognized. This is what gives real coherence to the various faces played.

Identity, therefore, viewed as part of the psychological dimension that permits the realisation of self, to become and remain the same in one given society and in relation to culture and others, needs the same goals that must be achieved and created by the individual. The evolutionary goals of the construction process of identity regard the acquisition of the sense of *continuity* and *coherence* which are the characteristics which allow identity to remain the same throughout the course of the time. The change of identity comes about through action, behaviour and relations; in every day life these concepts go through crises. In such a sense, identity can be thought of as a constant effort to maintain the continuity in change and the coherence in diversity.

Virtual Identity: The New Face of Self

Continuity and *coherence* of the self are necessary factors in the correct construction process of identity. In face games carried out in social interactions, the closest authenticity of self remains untouchable, however the relations seem genuine, giving this term the meaning “absence of lies,” according to Habermas. Avoiding lying means avoiding being different from how each one shows himself to be. The only way to obtain this result is to try to become how we want others to see us (Ferrara, 1991). The negotiation between being and wanting to be creates an equilibrium useful to our social life.

With on line communication, (excluding problematic communications in which the necessity to show oneself through multiple identities, a result of strong psychological disturbances which would also necessitate scientific study), relationships are represented as sincere, coherent relations and, perhaps, closer to the authenticity that face to face relationships can have, even though, as we will see, these relations do not have the same dimension of ‘responsibility’ that gives stability to interpersonal exchange.

In the digital world it is all too easy, for each and every one of us, to create a hybrid and creative identity, or to create virtual personality or even a mask and therefore deceive the other participants in the community. However, even though this is possible, the most common feature remains to be loyalty to the community in which the participant belongs.

What maintains the equilibrium between honest and deceptive behaviour? And why isn’t the lie the most widely adopted behaviour?

Maybe we should look for the answer in the need for oneness, coherence and stability that characterises the individual. The constant effort is to maintain the continuity in change also in the on line community, a new stage for self expression, for someone who has not yet been discovered.

Multiple cyber-identities seem to fit the dialogical theories of identity, suggesting that each individual is composed of a “multiple populated self” (Gergen, 1991). These multiple faces, using the idea of Goffman, are performed through action and communication which are at the basis of the constructive process of building identities into distributed context, using cognitive artefact and entering into relationships with others.

Virtual environments are, in that sense, the possible contexts in which the performance of self can take part.

New Interaction Space/New Risks: Internet Addiction Disorder

Social relations, mean encountering a culture and its rules. The sense of belonging to a world on line implies the sharing of a world and a culture.

E. Strass, E. Goffman and N. Stone to name but a few, state that a group constituted around a common symbolic system is “a culture area”, not delimited by the confines of territory, space or criteria of formal belongings, but by the limits of effective communication. The sense of belonging to a group, therefore becomes an issue which is more symbolic than physical.

S. Sturm has demonstrated with her research that technological objects are the mediators of social interaction within a symbolic exchange system (Strum, 1988).

In present day society, relationships are more dependent on technology, in particular on telematic technology, at different levels of application and, even though it may seem obvious, it is necessary to remember that the current age is the age of Internet. This great change has led to new problems and dysfunctions. One of the most worrying phenomena is that in American society the concept of *Internet Addiction Disorder* (IAD), a disturbance classified by the criteria of DSM IV (the manual used in the diagnosis of mental and substance abuse disorders) as a new form of dependency, has been growing over the last few years and is now appearing in the European social context.

The term was actually coined by the psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg in 1996 as a joke about an e-mail list-server. He adapted the criteria for alcohol dependency to fit behaviours associated with the Internet. Some psychologists recognized that there were patients that actually displayed these symptoms (Young, 1996), and began to study the condition in terms of a real psychiatric disorder. Over the next five years, the number of Internet users grew exponentially, as did the number of people who showed symptoms of Internet addiction. While there is still controversy about whether Internet addiction is real or not, experts have successfully argued that **as** this behaviour exists, it must be recognized and treated.

Symptoms of Internet Addiction Disorder

The symptomatic behaviour of Internet Addiction Disorder includes: interpersonal problems or problems at work or with study, neglecting friends, family and work or personal responsibilities, withdrawal when away from the Internet, irritability when attempting to stop using the Internet, staying online more than originally intended, lying or concealing how much time is spent online, drastic lifestyle changes in order to spend more time online, a general decrease in physical activity, disregard for one's health as a result of Internet use and sleep deprivation or a change in sleep patterns in order to spend time on the net.

With Internet addiction, people not only behave differently from what society would consider ‘normal’, they also *think* differently from the average individual. They have obsessive thoughts about the Internet, diminished impulse control and feel as though the Internet is their only friend. There is the feeling that the *Internet is the only place where they feel good* about themselves and the world around them.

Psychologist Kimberly S. Young at the Center for On-Line Addictions (COLA) classifies people as Internet-dependent if they have displayed four or more of the behaviours listed below during the past year (Young, 1998). Of course, she is focusing specifically on Internet addiction, and not the broader category of computer addiction:

- Feeling preoccupied with the Internet or on-line services and thinking about it while off line
- Feeling a need to spend more and more time on line to achieve satisfaction
- Inability to control your on-line use
- Feeling restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop your on-line use

- Going on line to escape problems or relieve feelings such as helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression
- Lying to family members or friends to conceal how often and how long you stay online
- Risking the loss of a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of your on-line use
- Continuing use even after spending too much money on on-line fees
- Going through withdrawal when off line, displaying symptoms such as increased depression, moodiness, or irritability
- Staying on line longer than originally intended

A British psychologist, Mark Griffiths studies “Internet addiction” by comparing clinical examples with established definitions of addiction (Griffiths, 1997). Griffiths uses a fairly traditional definition of addiction which involves the following features:

- Salience: the activity or drug becomes the most important activity in a person's life
- Mood modification: feeling a buzz or high, or feeling numb or tranquil.
- Tolerance: Increasing amounts of the substance or activity are needed over time to produce the same euphoric effect.
- Withdrawal symptoms: unpleasant feeling states which occur when the substance or activity is removed.
- Conflict: Interpersonal conflict because of the substance or activity, and intrapersonal conflict within the individual.
- Relapse: the tendency to repeatedly revert to earlier pathological patterns of use, and for the most extreme patterns of use to be quickly restored after many years of control or abstinence.

Conclusion: Pedagogical Tasks

We hold the point of view that the phenomena of Internet Addiction Disorder is certainly a worrying concept which deserves adequate scientific research and expert attention. We must however, take care to not form rigid patterns and generic classifications. IAD disturbance should be observed and understood through a constructivist approach while bearing in mind the features of the context and subject which is under consideration. In the same way, the actions of care and prevention of the problem must be organised holistically and with due consideration paid to systems of interaction which surround the subject (family, society, work, peer groups, cultural systems etc.).

There are no sufficient studies to support a relationship of cause-effect between surfing the net and IAD. There are however, confirmed correlations between the symptoms of common forms of addiction (alcoholism, drug, sex, food addictions and others) and associated mental disturbances and dependency on the net.

Reviews, documentation centres, research and detox centres, validated services of support for families, tests and questionnaires have been produced by specialists in the field; the collective effort in the study of this problem is being directed towards the idea that dependency on the net is a compulsive disorder worthy of entering future editions of the DSM.

All the research that has been carried out has concerned areas of psychology or sociology. Our studies, on the other hand, intend to draw attention to the pedagogical approach to this problem. This means that the study of IAD must be carried out according to all aspects which define the identity profile of the subject.

Internet Addiction Disorder and Identity on line

What is task of the teacher faced with such a problem? What are the subjects at greatest risk? What can be done? These are just some of the open pedagogical questions which should be considered by the research.

The theoretical reflection which comes out of our discourse proposes the hypothesis that Internet dependency and associated psychological disturbances are caused by the *fragility of identity* and by the *disorder of social life* with which the subject has a close relationship. Like other types of dependency, Internet Addiction is also caused, in our opinion, by problems involving the development of personal identity. The weakness of personal identity, which clashes with social reality, can be a reason for which the user sees the world on line as a means of escaping the problems of daily life. If, in some situations, virtual life seems to offer the individual a place for his own action and interaction that is not offered by real life, then it seems reasonable to suppose that it is in the real context that it is necessary to do something so that the individual finds dignity and equal possibilities to express himself.

Educational actions should take part both in the real world, for example in specialised centres or counselling points and also in the virtual world, through the creation of an on line forum and virtual communities which help the subject to understand that the two realities are not detached but are aspects of the same real world in which the individual has to interact and accept responsibility for his own actions. In fact the absence of responsibility regarding the Other is the main characteristic of the world on line and is the very thing which makes relations via Internet simple, but dangerous.

Educational tasks, in such a sense, should be organised to cure the disturbance and alongside this to plan action to support the affective-relational dimension; educational relations, like strategic action, must not only consider the subject in the age of development, but must look at the individual in every moment of his life and therefore, should be seen as the obligation of society in a broad sense and not only of educational institutional agencies dedicated to formation.

Today there is a greater necessity to teach change than there was in the past. This means arranging strategies and methods in order to train the individual to fight his own resistance to change, in order to harmonize the variations that life presents positively and constructively, in order to view identity crises in an integrative way and not in a destabilizing way. This means that the educative task is to guide development, to strengthen and upgrade the individual's ability to understand and choose with the aim of becoming active protagonists in their own lives and not only in life on screen.

The educational purpose must be to develop the realistic sense of self as a positive resource for others, not as an omnipotent creator of a virtual reality but strengthening self-control abilities, increasing knowledge of oneself and opening up to others. In such a way cyberspace can be seen as a new way to experience one's own identity as a member of a group, as a new way to educate to stay together.

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Biography

Stefania Pinnelli is 34. She is a researcher in Experimental Pedagogy at the Faculty of Teaching Science, University of Lecce. Her research interest is Communication Technology in learning and teaching systems and in intercultural education. Her last publication is: *Qualità e Formazione a Distanza: tra misurazione, Management e identità*, Pensa MultiMedia, Lecce 2002.