



## IDENTITY MANIFESTATION IN REAL, VIRTUAL AND HYBRID COMMUNICATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

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### ABSTRACT

*Identity has manifestations in many spheres: personal life, profession, society, hobby, and is made meaningful at different levels. Identity can be personal, national, European, professional, gender, religious, political, ideological, etc. The dynamic development of the Internet, social networks, platforms, software and applications create, on the one hand, conditions for quick access to information resources and as a result identity manifestations can inhabit relatively new user environments. On the other hand, there are new communicative situations that result from the development of artificial intelligence and a person being an active participant in virtual communication using digital tools. The hypothesis is that the dialogue is now not only on social networks, virtual forums, echo chambers, etc., but it is between human and chatbot, between chatbot and user, even between chatbots in different micro communities in a virtual environment. This raises the question of the identity of the individual and it can be a subject of research through an interdisciplinary approach. The focus of this paper is on presenting directions for future research on the identity of the individual while delineating new research fields on linguistic and communicative levels. Research methods for cyberethnographic observation and content analysis are suggested as adequate to the proposed study.*

**Key words:**

*Identity, Real and virtual communication, Hybrid environment*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Identity in a virtual environment is a current and significant topic. It implies the use of an interdisciplinary approach due to the rapid development of social networks, on the one hand, and on the other, due to the rapid renewal of digital tools for its maintenance. At the same time, the topic is wide-ranging and therefore in this article there are some limitations in the selection of research objects. The aim is to bring out the manifestations of identity in a virtual environment by the criteria of creation and construction, features, digital tools, authenticity of the information.

The article introduces concepts and terms through a brief theoretical overview about identity and virtual environments; it presents the research design of the study and announces the research results.

## **2. THEORETICAL OBSERVATION**

This article does not focus on a detailed theoretical observation of the notions and terms, but explores manifestations of identity in different situations and settings. Therefore, only the types of identity are highlighted. There are different definitions of identity and a variety of different factors are brought out. The authors apply different criteria in their studies and identity can be personal (Werff & Steg 2016: 107-114), group and organizational (Sarasvuo 2021: 788-805), political (Jung, & Mittal 2020: 55-73), national (Vaara, Tienari, & Koveshnikov 2021: 2052-2081), religious (Wibisono, Louis, & Jetten 2019: 1-12), etc.

Andrew D. Brown accepts that this perspective is characterized loosely by five broad sets of assumptions: "... (i) selves are reflexive and identities actively worked on, both in soliloquy and social interaction; (ii) identities are multiple, fluid and rarely fully coherent; (iii) identities are constructed within relations of power; (iv) identities are not helpfully described as either positive or authentic; and (v) identities are both interesting per se and integral to processes of organizing." (Brown 2022: 1205).

Alexandra Giannopoulou and Fennie Wang introduce the term "self-sovereign identity", explaining basic features and presenting the following definition of the term: „The concept of self-sovereign identity (SSI) describes an identity management system created to operate independently of third-party public or private actors, based on decentralised technological architectures, and designed to prioritise user security, privacy, individual autonomy and self-empowerment“ (Giannopoulou & Wang 2021: 1-10).

Yaru Chen and Trish Reay talk about manifestations of identity in specific business circumstances concerning professional carrier: "We wanted to understand how professionals can restructure their professional identity in response to job redesign." (Chen & Reay 2021: 1541–1571).

Authors Milad Mirbabaie, Felix Brünker, Frick, Nicholas R. J Möllmann and Stefan Stieglitz investigate identity in the context of workplace, but their research is set in a new context when people use artificial intelligence and the focus is on understanding the AI

identity threat at the workplace: “Artificial intelligence (AI) is being increasingly integrated into enterprises to foster collaboration within human machine teams and assist employees with work-related tasks. However, introducing AI may negatively impact employees’ identifications with their jobs as AI is expected to fundamentally change workplaces and professions, feeding into individuals’ fears of being replaced.” (Mirbabaie et al. 2021: 73–99).

Aspects of an identity model, human–computer interaction, online behaviour, virtual identity, the virtual reality are analysed by researchers Peter Nagy and Bernadett Koles and they aim to present identity “as a conglomerate of personal, social, relational and material aspects” and to study new opportunities to study the identity in virtual worlds. (Nagy & Koles 2014: 276-292).

Morteza Vesali Naseh talks about a domination of virtual environments in aspects of human personality and that the freedom of identity, anonymity, irresponsibility, authenticity and identification in cyberspace are some of the legal issues, considered as challenges of virtual identity in particular of Netizens. (Naseh 2016: 1-22).

Research on identity, in particular of young people in the digital world, has been the subject of findings, for example Camilla Hällgren and Asa Björk do such a study and find that „This paper suggests a research approach that extends previous research at the intersection of identity, young people, digital technology by outlining extended ways for thinking about identity in a digital world that can be useful for investigating identity as an existential practice, extending beyond identity representations, in conditions mediated by contemporary digital technologies and in collapsing contexts.“ (Hällgren & Björk 2022: 49-61).

Some features of identity are presented here, without any claims for completeness. Identity is a social and psychological construct, it is intricate and it is the result of strategic decisions and tactic solutions. At the same time, it is a complex notion and it is a part of long scientific discussions. It is not easy to clarify the scope and content of the notion “identity”, but also it is important to investigate the changes and trends. Consequently, it is necessarily to use suitable methods or an interdisciplinary approach and to research dynamic changes of identity in different contexts.

This section briefly presents research on the Internet on its functions and contemporary manifestations, while not going into depth, taxonomies and periodisation. The analysis is synthesized, bearing in mind that detailed information in systematization about social networks, virtual forums and echo chambers, chatbots can be found in a number of publications. For example, in the article, Nicole Ellison traces the chronology of social networks, their types and their development on a global level; the author presents information on their mainstream positioning as media and makes predictions about their development (Ellison 2007: 210-230).

The analysis of social networks in the context of identity: personal, digital, virtual, corporate, organizational, etc.; is studied by the authors as they focus on one social network for a given period in a given domain. Researchers use the methods of content analysis, qualitative and quantitative methods to establish the degree of familiarity with social networks

in the context of their work (Salas-Zárate 2022: 271) and their use regularly and effectively specifically for activities in society, business, culture, etc. Analyses are done for video content and video social networks, mainly to bring out the possibilities of improving the quality of the content as well as the possibilities of distributing, sharing etc.

### **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

The hypothesis is that the dynamic development of social networks, platforms, software and applications create new opportunities concerning identity and virtual communication is now not only on social networks, virtual forums, and echo chambers, and the dialogue is between human and chatbot, between chatbot and user, and between chatbots as well.

The assumptions are:

- On the one hand, there are conditions for easy and quick access to information resources and as a result identity manifestation can inhabit relatively new user environments.
- On the other hand, there are new communicative situations that result from the development of artificial intelligence (AI) and a person being an active participant in virtual communication using digital tools.

The period of study is from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2023 and the corpora includes selection of more than 200 posts, video clips, comments selected from social networks: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok and from virtual conferences, echo chambers and dialogue with Chatbot GPT.

The method of cyber ethnographic observation is well known. The cyberethnographic method has been used in different studies concerning online communities, for example Katje J. Ward presents results of a study aiming to analyse a feminism (Ward 1999). Natalia Rybas and Radhika Gajjala (2007) presented the method in the publication “Developing Cyberethnographic Research Methods for Understanding Digitally Mediated Identities” and they explain that “the production of subjectivities at the intersection of local/global and online/offline environments through an engagement with the contexts ethnographically, to illustrate a methodology based on epistemologies of doing” (Rybas & Gajjala 2007: 35).

The cyberethnographic method is an appropriate research tool considering the selected material from social networks, echo chambers, virtual forums, virtual conferences, dialogues with a chatbot. The author of the article has applied the method to selected virtual communicative situations in which she is a participant; anonymity is preserved and ethical norms are followed. This method was applied to each research object.

#### **4. RESULTS**

The results of the study are presented progressively in three subparts. Initially, the presentation highlights features of communication in real and virtual encounters. It then proceeds through individual social networks. In the third subpart, the specificities of identity in virtual forums, echo chambers and in chatbot dialogue are outlined.

*Identity in real communicative situations* includes real participants (face-to-face) in the same place at the same time. The recognition and academic or business affiliation are very important concerning the identity for every single member of the audience. Self-identification is at physical, verbal, visual and non-verbal levels. The participants demonstrate sincerity or politeness and at the same time they follow the rules of etiquette. The credibility of facts and official information on behalf of the organisation is an obligatory part of their identity. The members of the audience can check the facts with background information. They prefer to validate preliminary information concerning claimed identity declared by participants in real communication.

Results of research concerning *identity and virtual conferences, webinars, virtual classrooms* show that again real actors take part in different communicative situations in a virtual environment. The communicative situations are mediated by computers, mobile telephones, softwares, applications, AI, etc. The clarification of the information is on a verbal, visual and non-verbal levels. Participants prefer to establish academic or business affiliation but in different circumstances. Members of virtual audiences follow rules of netiquette and politeness. They have ability and literacy to check the credibility of prior information from online resources. Virtual identity is validated by participants by searching, listening to, viewing online resources. The comparison between online and real identity is reasonable and suitable.

Results of the research concerning identity in social networks display that there are different identity manifestations. There are real participants in various social networks and they announce real facts but some people avoid to demonstrate credible facts from their life. It is reasonable to say that there are fake profiles in social networks and disinformation and misinformation.

People have different profiles and more of them are not homogeneous and it is not possible to conclude that there is cohesion between self-presentation and identity. The performance is different in social networks. People select the information preliminary and clarify the sources. However, some of them demonstrate different degrees of spontaneity in identity representation during the process of online publishing. Consequently, there are different degrees of credibility and pre-prepared data and facts. Some people prefer to present their virtual avatars using exaggeration concerning advantages and litotes concerning disadvantages. These rhetorical devices for online identity construction are preferred in comparison with identity presented in a real life.

The assumptions about identity in different social networks are:

Instagram is dedicated to presenting identity including luxury, beauty, wonderful experiences.

LinkedIn as a business social network is oriented to building business identity and enhance one's business image and positive reputation. Online identity construction in LinkedIn includes specific communicative techniques, for example announces events, business activities, belonging to business communities, associations, branch societies, etc.

Facebook continues to support social contacts and social activities, to present personal moments (pleasant and unpleasant) and to show belonging to groups, involvement in causes, etc., therefore personal and group identity.

Twitter helps quickly reaching audiences with hot news about personal and business insights, spreading the word, consequently official and personal identity are established by news.

YouTube is dedicated to providing knowledge and expertise, claiming creativity, managing electronic content. Therefore, identity is on the professional level and it includes real facts.

TikTok plays the role of visual representation selecting moments from personal life, it includes a claim for creativity but identity is a little bit fluid and not official or semi-official.

*Instagram* has association with luxury, beauty, wonderful experiences. Users or owners of profiles of this social network post photos and videos presenting positive information from private life. They try to build and show their identity positively and consequently they use applications, software, filters, etc. to present real situations better. People using Instagram prefer to take part in specific virtual communication and they follow the manner of avoidance of negative facts and news concerning private life. Consequently, the questions about the truthfulness, the credibility of facts and the authenticity of visual and verbal messages is very important from an ethic point of view. Influencers accelerate positive emotions and visual likes by emoticons as well as positive evaluations. The number of impressions and followers is a tool to demonstrate virtual image and popularity. Some people using Instagram avoid comparing real facts with virtual representations as well as to write critical notes after posts, photos, video clips published on this social network. More of them prefer to follow socially acceptable behaviour and don't compare hypocritical evaluation and formal verbal likes with realistic identity.

*Facebook* is used to present moments from social, private and public life as well as to conduct social contacts and demonstrate affiliation or belonging to virtual communities. Supporting ideas or participation in digital activities in Facebook groups is specific representation of personal identity. Facebook identity could be changeable if somebody follows more virtual constructed models and socially acceptable behaviour. Facebook identity could be coherent if people prefer to present credible information concerning their business and public life. Facebook has different functionalities and digital tools about construction of virtual identity: personal, business, corporate, institutional, social, arts, etc. Experts can manage electronic content about the identity in Facebook if they have digital and media

literacy. The traditional use of Facebook is to announce events and publicise already realised events. Electronic content is traditional and familiar: invitations, announcements, photos, posters, placards; less often there are links to video clips and multimodal content. Hashtags are now used for optimisation or reposting and to maintain identity as quick recognition in the online environment and through modern digital tools.

*LinkedIn* is dedicated to presenting a business image and positive reputation.

Users and owners of LinkedIn profiles prefer to present business activities such as announcements and brief information. It is manifestation of virtual identity during the pre-communicative stage. People, national and international institutions and business organisations think about image and reputation starting with recognition in a specific virtual environment.

Business activities as live stream is the next digital tool used during the communicative act again in virtual environment.

Business activities as results are inseparable parts of dissemination and from a post-communicative stage. B2B (business-to-business), B2B2C (business-to-business-to-consumer – e-commerce model) manners are acceptable and suitable concerning business identity. People aim to demonstrate belonging to a business and they prefer communication officially. More of them show on the posts in LinkedIn affiliation in clubs or business communities or represent facts concerning agenda settings in business. The third group inform about participation in philanthropic events or activities and support for eco activities. LinkedIn enlarges applications as new media channels in business and support a publicity. One of the main features during the process of establishing the identity is using credible facts and authoritative sources.

*Twitter* is a social network with specific functions and one of them is to help reach audiences quickly.

Twitter disseminates hot news about business, institutions, celebrities and support spreading the facts in front of a virtual audience. Identity building on Twitter includes more digital tools if people, organisations and institutions prefer of have effective dissemination of hot news. Twitting and retweeting combine media and digital literacy as well as an attempt to conduct social commentary and to connect with different audiences. Twitter is a dynamic platform for sharing information and for updating information on an ongoing basis by presenting credible information and by citing real and authoritative sources to demonstrate that virtual identity is correctly represented. Timeline is a stream of tweets from the accounts a user follows, comments on and evaluates and indirectly concerns identity. Hashtags, mentions and notifications help to contribute to reaching the virtual audience and accelerate the creation of a virtual identity.

*YouTube* is a visual social network and a platform which provides knowledge and expertise. Youtubers claim creativity and demonstrate ability to manage electronic content. Personal identity is more popular and preferable. Some business organisations and universities start to build their identity through YouTube focusing on pragmatic approaches

and dissemination of positive reputation principally. YouTube is not a homogeneous virtual space but more video clips present credible information and personal experience. Digital media literacy is a basis for successful building, enhancing and improving of virtual reputation and identity.

*TikTok* plays the role of visual representation and building virtual identity. Tiktokers select moments from their personal life and they claim creativity concerning personal identity and popularity. The border between private and public life is fluid and it is a negative activity concerning personal identity. TikTok is used during political campaigns and video clips include parts of speeches and irony and parody are the preferred verbal and visual tools in connection with discreditation of political opponents. Consequently, TikTok disseminates mostly viral content and information breaking ethical norms. The aesthetical criteria analysing the quality of content of some video clips are not fulfilled.

The intersection between *virtual identity and virtual forums* is interesting and it relates to digital citizenship and netizens. The main manifestation of this kind of virtual identity has connection with digital activism and participants in virtual forums demonstrate civic engagement to current and significant processes in society. They engage in ideas, policies, causes. The members of virtual forums consciously involve in activities. They discuss important public issues and present arguments for or against following their political belonging. It could be reasonable to say that trolls and trolling are negative manifestations of virtual identity and the reasons are that some of them are hyper active participants creating tension and demonstrating intolerance in virtual space. Influencers have virtual identity but, at the same time, it is not real, it includes exaggeration. The next relatively positive manifestations of virtual identity are prosumers. Therefore, it is not possible to conclude that identity in virtual forums has homogeneous manifestations.

Results about *identity in echo chambers* includes different manifestations. Identity is personal but members of echo chambers demonstrate belonging to a group, party, movement, etc. Identity is presented through ideas and ideology. Participants demonstrate political convictions and beliefs, they explain about causes and principles, they formulate or repeat political topics and present information supporting or arguing the claims on the basis of the ideological framing and propaganda. Identity has manifestation on personal, civic, regional, national and European levels.

*Identity and chatbot* is a relatively new topic in research. The dialogue between human and chatbot is mediated by algorithms pre-prepared by the artificial intelligence. Sincerity, frankness, adaptation to the virtual environment are questionable topics yet. It is not possible to conclude that chatbots can structure self-identification independently. The conversation between humans and chatbots about its identification gives reason to draw the conclusion that chatbots repeat often: Virtual assistant and Language Translator Chatbot inform that they use natural language and software but AI plays the main role. Negative connotations are not typical of chatbot today and it observe ethical norms and rules which are created by humans using software and artificial intelligence. Therefore, it is not reasonable to talk about authentically created identity concerning chatbots.



## **5. CONCLUSION**

Identity on the Internet is not uniform and homogeneous and one of the reasons is that there are different opportunities, moreover, the virtual environment is dynamic and it includes new communicative situations. Identity is relatively static and stable, compact and not fluid on institutional websites and business blogs and one of the reasons is that the official and credible information is preferable during the process of institutional and business identity construction. Identity varies across different social networks; it is not compact and permanent. Social networks have different functions and use specific tools about virtual identity construction. Virtual identity is personally or institutionally constructed using modern verbal, visual and multimodal approaches. Identity is relatively static on LinkedIn and during virtual conferences. Virtual identity in social networks is changeable depending on audiences, goals and tools.

Identity in social networks has connection with the decision to use authentic information, credible sources, aims concerning one's virtual image and popularity, the border between private and public life, digital media literacy, etc.

Social network identity and the manner to construct and develop self-esteem in virtual environment are the next factors enhancing establishing identity online. Social network identity and social maturity have cross-points during the process of building virtual image and enhancing one's virtual reputation.

Some interesting topics in future research could be the relations between virtual identity and emotional intelligence, cyberbullying and privacy of information, virtual life and addictions.

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