

The Digital Space as the Environment of Social Self-determination and Self-Expression

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to highlight the characteristics and features of the digital space as a new social environment, as well as the factors that influence the process of forming a person's identity in the digital space. One of the characteristics of the digital space as a social environment is the abundance of information. This abundance of information, however, is not always equivalent to, or combined with, an abundance of knowledge. Another characteristic of the digital space is its disruption of the boundaries between the real and digital worlds, resulting in the simultaneous existence and activity of a person in both worlds. A third characteristic is also the access to personal data and information to an unlimited number of people it provides, as well as the constant changes present in the digital space as a consequence of rapid technological changes. As for the factors that affect the process of a person's self-determination and self-expression in the digital space, we can also mention the following: the need to belong to a social community, the desire to stay in the mainstream, and the pursuit of social desirability or the "perfect self" and so on.

Keywords: digital space, self-determination, need to belong, "perfect self", social desirability, social environment.

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INTRODUCTION

The "penetration" of new technologies into the life of an individual and society and the acceleration life significantly contribute to human self-realization and self-expression of a person in the digital space. In this way, the digital space provides an additional, unique social environment for human self-expansion. Therefore, one of our day's current scientific and philosophical issues is to shed light on the nature and influence of the digital space on a person's identity.

In this context, several questions require clarification, namely: a) if a person has a formed identity, how can his/her activities in the digital space influence it; b) are there distinct differences between digital and real identities; c) if so, where are their boundaries; d) are the differences between digital and

real identities of an optional nature or do they appear unintentionally; e) if they are optional, what is their purpose; f) do these differences deprive the individual of his/her integrity and distort his/her identity; g) can real identity be accurately reflected in the digital space as well; h) does modern society define acceptable ways of behavior for Internet users; i) how is the predominant social reality reflected in the formation of identity in the digital space; j) is digital identity a stable phenomenon or subject to a rapid change?

The article discusses human self-identification and self-expression on digital platforms. The main emphasis is on highlighting the characteristics of the digital space as a new social environment, as well as the factors influencing the formation of a person's identity. In that context, the positive and negative consequences

of the newest technologies are also analyzed, as well as the induced benefits and the challenges. The article also addresses the issue of the connection between digital and real identities and the additional sphere's impact on a person.

The topic of the research has been salient for the last several decades. It is no coincidence that numerous specialists from different fields and countries around the world have referred to the issues discussed in the framework of the article, notably, those concerning digital spaces and identity (Camp, 2004; Sarma & Girão, 2009), the safety issues of minors in the digital space (Byron, 2008), self-presentation issues (Boyd, 2002; Boon & Sinclair, 2009; Belk, 2013; Deh & Glodović, 2018), as well as both and self-identification and -expression issues (Zhan *et al.*, 2008).

In preparing the article, mainly speculative methods were used, such as observation, generalization, abstraction, and comparison.

Characteristics of the digital space

Scientific and technological progress, including the growth of telecommunication technologies in the 21st century, led to the creation of digital space as a new environment for a person's self-determination and self-expression (Ito *et al.*, 2008; Terpstra, 2016; Ganda, 2014; Klimanova, 2021; Bartoli, 2022; Ledeneva, 2022). Digital self-determination and self-expression are characterized by several features.

The obscuring of boundaries between the real and digital worlds. This leads to the combined presence of a person in both worlds when a person's time is substantially split between the two.

The abundance of information, up to relative limitlessness, and those ample opportunities to make new social contacts. Abundant and diverse information is certainly one of the positive aspects of technological achievements. Nevertheless, it does not always imply or accompany an adequate amount of knowledge. According to Arthur Schopenhauer, information about current events is a prerequisite for the human mind's operation. Even so, the mere sensory reflection of phenomena and events of the external world in the human mind as raw data is useless. Information about any particular phenomenon or event is of little use if the particular does not involve the general (Plesa, 2014). Rudolf Arnheim believes that basic human senses which evolved as biological tools necessary for survival but are not strictly designed for world knowledge (Saftich, 2010).

Ample opportunity for expression. Activities on digital platforms allow a person to point out the issues that concern him/her in a more accessible and acceptable way by drawing the attention of the digital community to them. Another feature of the digital space

is related to this, i.e. *the ability to own multiple identities.*

The same person can have different personal pages with different names (fake pages) on the same digital platform and each of them can be used as necessary and if needed.

Access to personal data and information to an unlimited number of people. Content posted as self-expression in the digital space, such as posts and photos are generally preserved without intermission and remain accessible to others. In this case, the digital space gives rise to some challenges, such as the protection of private life in the digital space, especially the detection and illegal use of data permanently stored in social networks. In the digital space, the manipulation of people's online accounts, outward expression, and identities through hacking is also a challenge (Sarma & Girão, 2009).

Notably, the dangers of being present and operating in the digital space are by no means insignificant. Particularly, minors lack experience and knowledge, while their level of awareness often exceeds that of the older generation. As long as there are no effective systems for the safety of minors in the digital space, this task is left to parents and society (Byron, 2008). In general, abuse, harassment, and other crimes make legal regulations in the digital space an urgent matter (Camp, 2004).

Factors influencing a person's self-identification and self-expression in the digital space

Several interrelated factors influence the formation of a person's identity in the digital world. As such, the first factor that can be pointed out is *the need to belong*. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is one of the basic human needs (Atoyán, 2014, p. 18). It concerns a person's need to belong to a social group or community. Unable to fulfill this need in real life, people may try to do so in the digital world. There, the aforementioned need to belong is also *a desire to exist in the mainstream*.

Perhaps the most important factor that affects self-identification and self-expression in the digital space is the pursuit of the external presentability and desirability via the cultivation of a "perfect self" (Paris, 1999; DeRobertis, 2006, p. 177). Web denizens are constantly striving to increase their level of social desirability. Social feedback is a crucial metric used while creating the "perfect self." It is the external "mirror" in which the degree of a person's desirability is reflected. Both of these aspects help to drive which friends are chosen, which pictures and posts are published, and how one reacts to the exterior materials posted by others.

The individual's desire to adopt mainstream features and build a "perfect self" causes a certain division between his/her self-determination and self-expression. A person becomes the bearer of different features in both the real world and in the digital space. In particular, the physical person may have a worldview that determines his/her behavior, but in the digital world, the desire to be in the mainstream forces him/her to behave otherwise. In the same way, the pursuit of building a "perfect self" forces a person to perform selective actions. Here, we are not talking about lying and deception, but the representation of selective truth when a person, for example, posts a photo or text on his/her social network page that is most suitable for solving the problem of building the "perfect self". And the information and other materials that do not correspond to it are banned.

The selective presentation of the self, the development of new mechanisms of identity management, and social interaction in the digital space are the basis for the process of building a new identity that is different from the identity that exists in real life (Boyd, 2002). A person builds his/her online identity characteristics which are then influenced by digital 'mirrors' - communication (feedback and review) on digital platforms. The latter generates changes in the further building of identity according to the logic of the "perfect self" formation. This circular and continuous change contribute to the creation and development of a digital identity.

The need to belong is also accompanied by the need to build a desired identity on digital platforms. This often leads to the formation of an identity that is unreliable and detached from reality. The feeling of partially belonging or being rejected in real life contributes to a variation in one's self-definition and self-expression in the digital space. In a digital space designated by infinite cultural diversity, an individual creates an identity acceptable to this or that social community, thus securing a place and positive feedback for himself/herself within that group.

Hence, the digital space, in addition to providing the means to present mainstream personas, gives a person a "second life", i.e., an opportunity to present oneself differently. It divides or fractures the person which may be living life in a completely different way, whether he/she realizes it or not (Deh & Glodović, 2018, p. 105). The unitary self, meanwhile, is formed through the simultaneous building of digital and real identities (Belk, 2013). The contrast between real and digital identities is becoming more and more profound. On the one hand, it promotes a more favorable self-determination in terms of social desirability (the "perfect self"). On the other hand, however, it leads to illusions and (self-) deception, as the "perfect self" is built through self-idealization. This is a distraction from reality which basically means a

distraction from one's true identity (Boon & Sinclair, 2009). Therefore, identity is often an acquired rather than innate phenomenon. It is actually the result of social demands and is created according to the need for better positioning (Zhao *et al.*, 2008). The digital space offers ample opportunities for this phenomenon to manifest. The impact of the digital space on the formation of identity was reflected in the election campaign of former US President Barack Obama. The latter's victory in the presidential elections is considered the result of a campaign on the video sharing site - YouTube. The globalization of digital space provided wide access to extraordinary content that communicated directly to the population (Hughes *et al.*, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Any innovation, especially in the field of digital technologies, brings new opportunities for which it is commonly accepted and increasingly developed. Conversely, however, it also contains often uncontrollable dangers such as anonymity, false identity, misinformation, and much else.

The abundance and long-term existence of information in the digital space is, on the one hand, one of the positive aspects of technological progress. On the other hand, however, it opens up ample opportunities to encroach on an individual's restricted personal space and harass him/her in that space. As a result, the space of an individual's restricted personal life and secrets gradually narrows and increases the degree of his/her vulnerability. The digital space enhances the need for people networking and interaction. This phenomenon can be explained by their lack of interaction in real life which is compensated in the digital space. Existence and self-actualization in the digital space significantly affect the process of self-determination, changing the experience of the self. The concept of self, according to the law of social desirability, becomes imperative in the digital space and guides the building of identity, often swelling the level of personal acceptability at the expense of self-authenticity. This moment is somewhat paradoxical because the veracity needed to establish identity is subject to the law of desirability in the digital space.

A "perfect self" does not necessarily mean a fake self. However, its content may have optional elements which are more obvious in the digital space. Meanwhile, unwanted content is not published.

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