Cultural Imaginary
and Communication Patterns

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From Multitude to Convergence:
Contemporary Trends in the Study of Online Identity

Abstract: This paper focuses on the concept of online identity and tries to highlight some relevant trends in its interpretation from the beginning of the Internet until today. The early research focused on the multitude of possibilities brought by the new technologies, the great freedom of anonymity, the endless ability of playing with numerous aspects of the digital self etc. Today, the dominant discourse about identity is changed and one major component of the online identity – the online self-presentation – was chosen to illustrate this change. The contemporary forms of computer-mediated communication brought, beside the positive things, some difficulties and some constraints of the identitary construction. The diminution of the use of anonymity, the large number of sources through we can verify the identitary information, the importance of other-provided information are some cues of this change. Also, the "context collapse" and the challenges addressed by the online archive delineate other difficulties. Consequently, the dichotomy online – offline was nuanced and an identitary convergence seems to be the premise of the contemporary approaches that also integrate the Internet into a functional component of everyday life.

Keywords: online identity, self-presentation, archive, impression management, context collapse, other-provided information

1. Online identity – past and present

The problem of identity is a major one not only in the field of philosophy, but also in the social sciences, art or religion. The development of new media has brought some new perspectives in this research area that have made the approach of this subject even more complex. Most studies in online identity have focused on anonymity, the

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presentation of the self, the conception of the online persona, the self disclosure or the subject seen as integrated into a virtual community or a network. Martin Lister et al. have emphasized the augmentation of modalities that concern the experimentation of the self in the digital era; also, they detach three important research traditions (Lister, Giddings, Grant and Kelly 2003). The study of anonymity was one of the first investigations in the field of computer-mediated communication and the pleasure of being anonymous online constituted the premise for this early research. Of course, the study was done in a very polarized way, because the anonymity was postulated whether as being essential for the freedom of speech and the expression of the self, or as comprising a dark side, with too many dangers for the construction of personality and for the future of the communication through Internet. Nowadays, the research of anony-mity is substituted with the examination of avatar based communication, a new domain that grew up with the online gaming. The second tradition is the research of the digital self seen as a part of a community or a social network (the focus is on self publication or the use of home pages). The third tradition especially covers the investigation of intricate relations between online and offline, real and virtual experiences, and in those intersections the identity reveals itself in different manners. Even in this classification we can notice some changes in the approach of the identity in the course of time; of course, those differences are significant and I try to highlight a few of them.

In the 1990s, the dominant discourse about identity was formed around the idea of the great freedom in construction of a new, different identity/identities using the characteristics and the tools of the Internet. In this direction, the influence of the poststructuralist doctrine is obvious; the online identity is rather a liquid process than a stable and fixed product and the person is in a continuous quest of his own self. The online construction of the self is shaped by the discourse; in this respect, this assumption is congruent with the first stage of the computer-mediated communication which was mainly textual: "Internet discourse constitutes the subject as the subject fashions him or herself" (Poster 2001, 184). The similarities with the postmodern conception about self and alterity are also relevant; the postmodern subject seems lost in the whirlwind of the rhizomatic communication, so that the *screen* and the *network* designate in many postmodern papers the best metaphors for this society of communication. The unity of the self is broken in fragments; in Baudrillard's terms (1988), we are witnessing a development of the human subject in the form of an "ecstasy of communication" (the subject

himself/herself being nothing else than a terminal inside a communication network). Furthermore, the complexity of postmodernism is considered by some authors (Rodowick 2001, Söffer 2010) as the setting which facilitated the development of New Media. Thus, the general characteristics of New Media, such as interactivity, lack of intermediation, hyper-textuality, dispersion, anonymity, virtuality, networking, time compression, etc. seem to be interrelated with some important ideas associated with postmodernism (the death of the author, intertextuality, dialogism, carnival etc.).

The early analysis of computer-mediated communication expand the idea of multiple identities that computer can offer. Sherry Turkle's works are very suggestive in this respect and also for the effort to describe how new technologies affect our vision about self, world, alterity, mind, body and machines. The possibility to construct and reconstruct the image about our identity seems to be a very old one, but the living in the interface is different, because "the self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times, something that a person experiences when, for example, she wakes up as a lover, makes breakfast as a mother and drives to work as a lawyer. The life practice of windows is that of a decentred self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time" (Turkle 1995, 14). Thus we become aware of the multiple online roles that we have, the „portfolio" of characters that creates a "cycling through" different identities concomitant with the transition from one window to another (Turkle 1997, 83). The self is seen as a "distributed system" and the computer is seen as subjective other, as a "metaphysical machine", our „second nature", because it shapes our development as humans: "the computer as it affects the way that we think, especially the way we think about ourselves" (Turkle 1984, 13). Hereby the discourse about online identity is interspersed with eloquent metaphors as windows, screen, play, mirror, etc. The general premises that can describe this research tradition are the multiplicity of possibilities that new technologies brought, the great liberty of anonymity, the endless ability of playing with numerous aspects of the self (as in Donna Haraway's approach of the "knowing self", that is "split and contradictory"), the freedom to give voice to certain pent sides of identity or, simply to try to explore some new ones, and the tension between offline and virtual identity.

Today, the idea that prolonged use of New Media (especially online games or social media) has an influence on personal identity is common sense. Nevertheless, the important changes that occurred in technology

and in the way that people use it have transformed substantially the context of interpreting the relation between Internet and identity. For instance, the media convergence or the fact that the use of anonymity seems lower than in '90s, because people communicate more with the persons that they know from "real life", using "true" profiles, are some cues of this change. Also, the idea that in online world we develop a multitude of identities, one of them extremely different from the offline identity, has become more nuanced and the dichotomy online – offline was adjusted subsequently.

As example, R. Rodogno re-calls attention to the creation of multiple identities in the frame of the response to the main interrogation: do online contexts generate new forms of personal identity? Thus, Turkle's "radical" view is reconsidered by the analysis of the cases in which online identities are more significant than offline identity (users that spend a lot of time on Second Life, World of Warcraft and so on, that create online selves incompatible with the "real" ones). Rodogno analyses this question applying different meanings of identity – passport identity, numerical identity (the re-identification or persistence question), attribution identity (the characterization question), social function identity (the roles that an individual plays in society) and attachment identity (what matters to one person). From the perspective of numerical identity (biological criterion), it seems impossible that X online to be different from X offline. If the same category of identity is taken into discussion, but with the psychological continuity criterion, it is possible to accept that X exists online. As to the attachment identity, "the online world does not seem to change much to the way we think about personal identity" (Rodogno 2011, 319), and this conclusion is extended to the rest of categories. In the same manner, the analysis of Facebook identity doesn't conduct to a new and original outlook of identity occurred online. Contrariwise, despite the disembodied interaction, the novelty of such platforms of socialization, the specific features such as privacy settings, the freedom to establish the amount of information that users post, the newness of some ways of communication, Rodogno argued that "what we face are not novel forms of personal identity but an uncertainty or indeterminacy of the context within which potentially personal identity-relevant information appears" (Rodogno 2011, 314). Consequently, the online raises an issue related to *context* that cannot display the same degree of accuracy as the offline contexts, even there are queries related to the second one, too (and this uncertainty of context can mixed up with the new, sui generis types of online identities). Computer-mediated communication and social

platforms became so complex so that they are used for many purposes and a misapprehension of significant information that can trace the real image of one person may supervene in this (the difficulties can arise from the incongruence between the presentation of the self and the interpretation of it). Of course, the lack of the nonverbal cues (cues-filtered-out theory) or the greater importance given to social than individual identity (the social identity model of deindividuation effects) can represent some other trammels of the virtual context.

Self-presentation, for instance, depends on the audience and its traits too, but the "context collapse" in online world makes difficult the variation adapted to the audience: "Social media technologies collapse multiple audiences into single contexts, making it difficult for people to use the same techniques online that they do to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversation" (Marwick and boyd 2011, 114). The e-audience of the social network sites is also heterogeneous; the same post or comment is transmitted simultaneously to very different persons (family, friends, bosses, colleagues etc.) and the possibility to adapt the content of self-presentation to the audience's feedback is very limited. Thus, the public becomes an "imagined audience" that "strongly resembles Ong's fictionalized audience. While Facebook or Twitter users don't know exactly who comprises their *audience addressed*, they have a mental picture of who they're writing or speaking to – the *audience invoked*. Much like writers, social media participants imagine an audience and tailor their online writing to match" (Marwick and boyd 2011, 128). The "context collapse" is strongly related to problems of privacy (Papacharissi and Gibson 2011), creative use of social media and the authenticity of online data (Marwick 2013).

2. Online identity and archive

In spite of some necessary deeper nuances that lack in his study, Rodogno reset the problem of online identity in the wide frame of philosophy and his typology is really helpful to guide the understanding of it. The short indication that appears in the end of his article is really useful: „the existence of abundant stored autobiographical narratives may have an impact on our ongoing identity-forming processes of self-interpretation" (Rodogno 2011, 326). In this respect, the relation between identity and *archive* is a very suggestive one. The archive is not just a passive tool (even so, it preserves only a part of what is created, and that part gets privileged), but is, in fact, an active tool, namely it is the

"general system of the formation and transformation of statements" (Foucault 1972, 146). The archive is not necessarily a unifying tool, but a differentiation tool (Moss 2008) and a powerful filter that gives *access* to the past. There is also the perpetual danger that goes together with any form of archiving, including the archiving of autobiographical narratives and of information related to attachment identity, what is usually coined as *selection* and *control*. A paradox is related to the problem of the *exteriority of the archive*: the archive only preserves a small part of the actual communication process, and using criteria that seldom are exterior to the subject in question. The old writing/orality dichotomy – discussed extensively by Derrida – is back in a new form: in the process of archiving we are throwing away a lot of things (labelled as "secondary" or "of lesser importance"). And this appears to be even more dramatic in the case of digital narratives; chat, podcasting, emails, blogging, vlogging, sms, animoto and others are used in the process of creating digital narratives, but the big question is: how much (relevant) material is preserved? What can be even more important are the possible effects that selection, control and exteriority of those online identitary traces that a person leaves behind. Of course, the memory itself works by framing, cutting, selection, and erasure of information. It's also refreshed by photos, diaries, conversations and smells. The difference is the unprecedented amount of autobiographical information that is stored online and the difficulties that can arise from the decipherment of identitary directions or trends. The importance of the self presentation online is here at home. If this is realized in different or contradictory manners in relation to the "real"/offline self, or there are many incongruent self presentations for the same person, then the self-interpretations may suffer and the person may believe that self-narratives cannot unify the layers of time. From the postmodern perspective, this is, anyway, a wrong path – and to search coherence in the evolution of a human being seems absurd. Sometimes, people are changing dramatically and this query for unity is not the best thing to do. The metaphysical voice would say too that this kind of discourse is full of non-assumed metaphysical premises, such as unity, the identity seen as a whole, a round and coherent totality, the idea of progress in human development etc. Anyhow, the challenge to understand and incorporate the online self-presentations in our image about us hold good. In the same line, diverse theories have to rethink the concept of identity, and an example would be the narrative identity theory. More generally, the relation between identity and its mediation (or its expression) is at stake.

3. The presentation of the self

Even if it is hard or impossible to separate the online self from other occurrences of a person's identity, from the didactic point of view the digital self is portrayed as being constructed with the help of Internet tools, through virtual interaction, as being disembodied and anonymous, devoid of nonverbal feedback. In his research on teenagers, Shanyang Zhao (2005) described the digital self as inwardly oriented, narrative in nature, retractable, and multiplied.

Thus, the social penetration theory is limited in its application to the computer-mediated communication, where the main focus is common interests, ideas, feelings or hobbies. The public self layer seems less important in online interaction, whereas the private self layer is more rapidly reached as far as discussions are concerned. People want to reduce uncertainty and increase affinity (Baym 2002, 69) and the theory of "hyperpersonal interaction" (Walther 2007) is still very useful for explaining the fact that computer-mediated communication became more desirable, from a social standpoint, than face-to-face communication. The narrative component of the digital identity is also important in the effort to depict some relevant self-descriptions that will be a valuable fragment of self-presentation. This outline of self needs introspection and reflectivity and forms an integral part of what Thompson calls a "symbolic project" of our online identity. The retractility of the self is as thick as thieves with editability and erasability. A version of our digital self can be easily deleted, sometimes with minimal or zero psychological consequences and the possibility to rebuild another online ego is still valid especially for anonymous profiles or for well covered traces. The editable character of computer-mediated communication, particularly for text based-communication in its asynchronous form, has a specific importance for the carefulness of self-presentation. The multiplicity in self can also be related with self-selection and the creation of an "insulated" self who carefully single out the "friends" that correspond to his expectances. In this context, the lack of diversity can lead to what Fernback named the "narcissism of similarity" as a metaphor for the entire online world (applicable in particular for virtual communities). In the process of development of digital identity, the alterity is constitutive; in symbolic interactionism's terms, it is a "looking glass" for the subject. Thus, if this mirror is made from homogeneous peers, the reflection doesn't bring very much novelties or a true opposition. In this respect, the digital self can be more fragile and more artificial than the offline self (of

course, the other side of the shield is equally true, especially for marginalized humans or for persons with disabilities, who can find in virtual world a better world). The online selves seen as alternative personas, but with the same degree of reality as the offline (non-virtual) identity or the "identity tourism", that occur when a user adopts a different gender or race under the cover of anonymity, are some examples on this line. Baker's concept of "blended identity" can represent a middle ground, because it implies that "the offline self informs the creation of a new, online self, which then re-informs the offline self in further interaction with those the individual first met online" (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013, 102) and the cutting offline – online seems ameliorated.

Expressions such as "intimate strangers", "anonymous friends", "familiar strangers" or "strange familiarity" are typical for the vocabulary of online identity. The research of self has, as main trait, the difference between the presentation of the self in the online environment (directly, through avatars, using anonymity or a fake identity, in a lucid manner or self-praising, etc.) and the way people conceive their self. In other words, two major types of questions arise here: "how people *present* their self to others when they become disembodied and anonymous in the online world?" *versus* "how do people come to *conceive* their self when others become disembodied and anonymous?" (Zhao 2005, 387). Such questions tackle the suppositions on the authenticity and degrees of reality of online identity. The Proteus effect, for instance, shows that more than the fact that the avatars of a user influence the way in which others perceive him or her, the "individual's behaviour conforms to their digital self-representation independent of how others perceive them" (Yee, Bailenson, and Ducheneaut 2009, 285). Thus, the new ways of expressing/repressing the self include a vast repertoire of roles, statuses, and avatars that configure layers of online identity and "for the first time in human history, anonymous and disembodied strangers become important agents of socialization, interacting with youngsters in their homes on a daily basis, and thereby affecting the formation of their self" (Zhao 2005, 395).

The self-presentation in online world deployed in Goffmanian tradition of his seminal book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman puts into play a dramaturgical vocabulary in order to explain the individual's performances and his desire to project a good image. Self-presentation is intentionally made and represents a visible side of identity; it supposes a tension between "cues given" (information strategically

offered) and "cues given off" (information that we involuntarily miss), between "front stage" behaviour and "back stage" behaviour. The concept of "mask" is a fruitful one too, and the same goes for the relationship between avatar and mask (or actor and digital self). The Leary's definition is also a key landmark for self-presentation seen as "the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people" (1995, 2), while for Jian Raymond Rui and Michael A. Stefanone, self-presentation is "self-disclosure and reactions to others' disclosures" (2013, 1). This process is often described being closely related to the concept of "impression management", or even synonymous with it. The idea of controlling the impressions that others form about us and the desire of positively influencing them are commonly studied in the form of impression motivation and impression construction. The work that individuals do on personal brand online is another important area where the management of impression is crucial, and where people use a plethora of strategies in order to negotiate their identity, maintain a certain image, associate themselves with symbols, places, books, other people, etc. as energizers or endorsers of their brand.

4. The meaning of difficulties

Is the online self-presentation made and conceptualized now in the same manner as in the '90s? What has significantly changed in its practice and theory? In this respect, I will point some key problems and I will try to decipher a trend in the creation and interpretation of online identity.

In the '90s, the celebration of the detachment from the body in computer-mediated communication has lead to a perspective of free reinvention of the self irrespective of gender, race, beauty rules, social norms, political or religious views, sexual orientation, etc. In this context, the impression management could be realized in ways never before possible; the Internet was characterized as an "identity laboratory", a "playground" where the identitary construction is constantly made and remade. Thus, the importance of anonymity was also celebrated and a lot of studies analysed this concept and its effects on identity. Older Internet platforms used the textual based-communication as a primary form of communication; the self-presentation was mainly discursive, the personal information was self-provided and the users had the feeling that they have greater control than today. Nowadays, the computer-mediated com-munication tends to be as close as possible to the face-to-face communi-cation, and the platforms that make available the transmission of voice,

pictures, video etc. complicate enough the initial picture. Of course, regardless of time, the online sites, communities, social media and other platforms differ to such an extent that identitary requirements are also very different. The online gaming has a set of social rules dissimilar with the online normativity proper to self-presentation in the professional sites, as the sites belonging to universities or LinkedIn, for example. In spite of utopian ideas that the Internet is not the "place" for hierarchies or norms, the experience has shown the contrary, and this is applicable for the construction of online identity, too.

In social media there are many examples of construction of identity through *customization* (Marwick 2013, Papacharissi 2002); people use a variety of tools to differentiate form others and to express better their self. In this respect, hyperlinks, videos, images, photos, music, colours, font styles are chosen to be representative for someone's identity. Those "indirect expressive elements" become "symbolic markers" and "served the purpose of conveying a certain 'manner' to be associated with the individual. Specifically, the tone and language use of the textual content communicated personality traits like aggressiveness, extroversion, compassion, and other qualities the author may wish to project. Most authors preferred to communicate their social status indirectly, through the use of hyperlinks, while also displaying a tendency to describe personality traits directly, as evidenced in expressive home pages" (Papacharissi 2002, 655). Thus, today's Internet tools are various and impose a greater solicitude and care for the maintenance of the personal image.

The multitude of sources through which we can find out and verify information about one individual has augmented, so that the pressure on the accuracy of self-presentation is higher than in earlier stages of Internet. The digital "traces" that a user leaves behind can be "detected" and, if the information doesn't fit together, his or her reputation and identity can suffer. The "participatory web" and the user-generated content are other sources of risk for an elaborate impression management because not only the user posts what he believes that is the best for him, but the members can communicate with each other and bring into the open diverse data about him. In this respect, other-provided information is very relevant in the present era of Internet, forasmuch it can undermine the sustentation of an idealized image of the self: "As online networks become more expansive, the abundance of other-provided information functionally reduces the level of control users have over information available about themselves, resulting in more unwanted other-provided information" (Rui and Stefanone 2013, 5). For instance, the actions of

tagging photos or posting messages or comments on others' profiles are now common other-provided information (the examples of dismissals or of parents that find "novelties" about their children on Facebook, with the "help" of other-provided information are already best known). Furthermore, warranting theory asserts that this kind of information has a bigger influence than self-provided information because the other-provided information is considered credible as long as it is "less susceptible to manipulation" (Rui and Stefanone 2013, 5). In this respect, the user that wants to defend his image may approach repudiative strategies (he can deny the uncomfortable information, try to vindicate or perform "compensatory" self-presentation) or subtractive strategies (he can delete posts and comments, untag photos or even erase his profile). Rui and Stefanone emphasise that these strategies are adequate for "protective self-presentation", and a long-term strategy can be even the reduction of disclosing self-provided information. Moreover, in their study, the network diversity was associated with a protective self-presentation; the network size may be associated with a greater pressure, with the goal of disclosing larger and deeper about the self (the social exchange theory being here at work).

The conclusion that seems to converge from this overview is the fact that today many users don't create very dissimilar identities in comparison with their offline identities. The self-presentation is a very good example that showed in many actual studies that "although online contexts provide unique opportunities to manage impressions, for the most part these impressions were based on socially desirable aspects of offline personality and a desire to present an authentic impression" (Chester and Bretherton 2007, 233). Even if the traits and the requirements of the platform remain distinctive, this trend in conceiving and presentation of self in online world is valid. Bullingham and Vasconcelos's study (2013) done on very different identities – bloggers and inhabitants on Second Life – came to similar conclusions. They analyzed the presentation of self in the Goffmanian conceptual frame on a few levels (expressions given, embellishment as a minor form of persona adoption, dividing the self, "fitting in" and masking). The participants have shown that they prefer to re-create their offline identity in online platforms rather than adopt a persona (the embellishment of self arisen in the form of exaggerating narratives for bloggers and "going back in time" in presenting the same self but from another age, for Second Life players). Of course, Second Life inhabitants have more opportunities to construct virtual identities that can significantly differ from the offline ones. Thus,

the offline identity seems to be a sort of constant reference on which the online self-presentations are made and this situation is visible "by creating a blogging voice that is true to the offline one, and by publishing personal details about the offline self offline, or designing the avatar to resemble the offline self in SL (Second Life), and in disclosing offline identity in SL. This means that the online self is 'anchored' to the offline one, and that disparity between the two selves is minimized. Reasons for this included wishing to be honest and direct with others, and the belief that identity does not really change online, still being informed by the offline self" (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013, 110). "The myth of cyber-space" detached from everyday life seems something that we should put aside (Baym 2010) and the same treatment befits for the idea that online identity is devoid of reality.

5. Concluding remarks

The Internet is a part of our real daily lives and from the early 1990s up to now we tried to domesticate the technological imaginary that surrounded it: "We are moving from a world of Internet wizards to a world of ordinary people routinely using the Internet as an embedded part of their lives. It has become clear that the Internet is a very important thing, but not a special thing" (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002, 6). The integration of the Internet in the daily routine makes even more difficult the justification of the dichotomy between online identity and offline identity. In this respect, Alice E. Marwick (2013) pointed out that this split is seriously limited by two aspects: the users' propensity for communication with people known from offline and the immediacy of access put at our disposal by mobile devices. Social media was also an important factor in this equation, in its pressure to adopt a unique identity (Facebook regulations are very well known for that and the possibility of signing in with the same account on many platforms induces a similar identitary convergence).

The picture of online world in its theoretical and practical history is diverse and flexible; even if it may seem reductionist and devoid of nuances, it is possible to trace some dominant paths that can be relevant for its understanding. The interpretation of online identity was made in this direction – I tried to highlight some suggestive trends from the beginning of Internet until today and to exemplify them with reference to one major component of the online identity, namely the self-presentation. The facts provided from users, the technological changes, and the lately

theoretical approaches tend to depict a convergence between online and offline identity, that are divided merely for educational purposes. The initial euphoria related to the creation of multiple selves and to playing with a lot of identities seems today tempered; of course, the possibilities of doing so still remain, but the technological domestication transformed the Internet into a functional component of everyday life. The contemporary forms of computer-mediated communication brought, beside the positive things, some difficulties and some constraints of the identitary construction. To these we might add the users' motivations (as authenticity or coherence) as a completion of the present image.

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