DIGITAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: CHALLENGES AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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ФОРМУВАННЯ ЦИФРОВОЇ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ: ВИКЛИКИ ТА ПЕДАГОГІЧНІ ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ

Друга декада XXI ст. пережила сплеск у створенні та використанні інтерактивних цифрових носіїв інформації. Об'єднуючи традиційні засоби масової інформації (фотографії та рухомі зображення, музику та текст) і комп'ютерні й комунікаційні технології, цифрові медіа викликають певне розмивання меж між реальною й віртуальною реальністю, творцями та споживачами, запроваджуючи динамічне інтерактивне цифрове середовище, яке потребує нових теоретичних підходів, а також практичних методів розвитку і відповідного впровадження у повсякденне життя "цифрових тубільців". За таких обставин розвитку суспільства питання про ідентичність особи

(або її ідентичності) сприяє появі абсолютно нових понять, сприйнять та міркувань, які стають особливо актуальними стосовно навчального процесу молоді на перехідному етапі життя.

Прагнучи кращого розуміння цифрової ідентичності, що нещодавно стала предметом численних досліджень у різних галузях, стаття має на меті визначити досліджуване явище й окреслити його ключові особливості стосовно теорії ідентичності. Спираючись на міждисциплінарне дослідження цифрової ідентичності та медійного дискурсу, аналіз починається з огляду визначень досліджуваного поняття. Крім того, у статті простежено способи перевірки та прояву такої ідентичності, розглядаючи можливості, що надаються платформами онлайн-комунікацій. Нарешті, спираючись на сучасний аналіз літератури, автор обговорює модель побудови цифрової ідентичності (створену Петер Бурке і Ян Стець, що складається з таких складових елементів: вхідна інформація, стандарт ідентичності, компаратор та вихідна поведінка), її подальший вплив на педагогічний контекст з метою створення відповідних платформ для "здорового" (позитивного) процесу побудови ідентичності. У статті проаналізовано можливості, що надаються Інтернет-взаємодією для просування спорідненості та самовизначення як найбільш релевантних явищ, які слід стимулювати в молодих людей для цілісного формування їхньої ідентичності.

Ключові слова: цифрова ідентичність; теорія ідентичності; модель формування ідентичності; спорідненість; самовизначення; самооцінка.

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The second decade of the 21st century has experienced a burst in the creation and use of interactive digital media. Bringing together the traditional media forms (photographs and moving images, music, and text) and computer and communication technologies, digital media causes certain blurring of the boundaries between real and virtual reality, creators and consumers, introducing a dynamic interactive computing environment that requires new theoretical approaches as well as practical methods for development and appropriate implementation in daily life of "digital natives". Under such circumstances of society development, the issue of person's identity (or identities) brings about totally new concepts, perceptions, and reasoning, which become especially up-to-date in relation to the education process of young people at the transition stage in their life.

In pursuit of better understanding of digital identity that has recently become the subject matter of numerous studies in various domains, this paper aims to define the phenomenon under study and outline its key features in relation to Identity Theory. Drawing upon interdisciplinary research on digital identity and media discourse, this analysis begins with an overview of definitions of digital identity. Furthermore, the article traces the ways such identity is verified and performed, looking at possibilities provided by online communication platforms. Finally, based on the current literature analysis, the paper discusses the model of digital identity construction (created by Peter Burke and Jan Stets and consisting of four constituent elements:

input, identity standard, comparator and output), its further implications for peda-gogical contexts, with the purpose of establishing appropriate platforms for "healthy" (positive) identity construction process. The opportunities provided by online interac-tion for promotion of relatedness and self-determination as the most relevant phe-nomena to be forced in young adults for the coherent construction of their identity have been discussed in the article.

Key words: digital identity; Identity Theory; identity construction model; relatedness; self-determination; self-esteem.

Introduction

The digital age driven by information and communication technologies has already influenced the fundamental patterns of human culture and development by bringing about changes into social life. Living in the "global village" means having access to the closest and the most distant community within a second, by simple click of a computer mouse, pressing/swiping motion with your finger on your smartphone, or any other smart device (McLuhan, 1962).

People consume information "on the move"; but more importantly, with the spread of social media, online users have become active producers of the content circulating in the World Wide Web. Novel concepts have been coined like "digital natives", "digital immigrants", "social grooming", "glocalization" in contrast to "globalization", "network individualism", "customized sociality", "context collapse", "audience management", "personal branding" and others, which cannot be properly perceived outside digital online contexts. All of these, at the same time, have changed the way people see themselves in society, their goals in life and everyday social and professional activities. The mentioned changes have altered the way people construct their multiple identities, especially when given the possibility to interact in digital environments.

Whether the said transformations have a positive or negative impact on people depends much on a person's understanding of the mechanisms of his/her identity construction and development. **This article aims** at relating the funda-mental issues of the Identity Theory to new digital communities, speculating on the specificity of the mechanisms of identity construction and performance (and there are possible positive and negative outcomes) in online contexts, thus attempting to show/suggest ideas of how to use the advantages of digital social services for healthy identity formation and performance, leading to personal fulfillment and overall well-being.

Fundamental principles in identity development

According to the authors of the Identity Theory, Peter Burke and Jan Stets, identity is "a set of meanings that define how one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular

characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). Although current scientific discourse on identity issues is plentiful, there seems to be no consensus on its definition. This can partly be explained by a variety of approaches which are placed at the basis of explanation of identity. For example, in many behavior-based studies (but not those related to behaviorism), identity is treated as "an essential cognitive, socialized, phenomenological or psychic pheno-menon that governs human action" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 3). As a result of such understanding of identity, it is assumed "that although people may present themselves differently in different contexts, underneath that presentation lurks a private, pre-discursive and stable identity" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 3). At the same time, in such research realm, there is little mention of how people should find out who they "really" are, independent of a variety of context performances, thus advising them to seek help from experts, therapists who might assist them in revealing their "true" identities.

A discursive perspective presents the identity as a public phenomenon which is constructed through interpretation by other people with whom the person interacts in the course of communication, which means that the identity is both reflected in discourse, as well as actively constructed in it (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Close to the above-mentioned viewpoint is the social interactionist approach, premised on the impossibility of understanding the personal development, including the issue of identity development, without analysing social interaction processes (which may take place in a number of settings, like institutional environments (Lecourt, 2004), spatial locations (for example, neighbourhoods (Scollon & Scollon, 2003)), or digital contexts (social media services, SNSs (social networking sites) (Manago, 2015)).

In our current study, we are more prone to follow the above-mentioned social interactionist perspective, since it seems to be in tune with the fundamental issues of the Identity Theory, widely accepted and analyzed in numerous papers of the recent years (2012–2020), and which corresponds well with the digital environment we have adopted as a background for our discussion of the identity matters. Within this interactionist viewpoint, we are going to look deeply into the specificity of relationship between the individual and digital society. But first, we need to outline basic principles of identity construction as suggested by the Identity Theory pro-ponents.

Symbolic interaction

Identity construction is based on the principles of symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969), claiming that symbols are used "to represent objects and events in the situation even when the objects and events are not physically present" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 19). These symbols could include words, photos emotions, etc; they are used to communicate meanings. At the same time, the symbols are learnt to express meanings in interaction with others, thus calling forth the process of meaning verification. In this respect, as Burke and Stets claim, "what is important in the interaction is not the behaviours themselves, but the meanings of the behaviours

(Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 16). Verification of meanings goes smoothly in interaction settings where there is consensus in symbolic understanding of meanings.

In order to better explain their theory, Burke and Stets use the ideas of George Herbert Mead, which can be placed well in the vein of symbolic interaction approach. In particular, they emphasize a double-sided nature of the self-concept, which in some papers appears as synonymous to identity, that is, an "I" and a "me", where the "I" is "the agent-actor aspect of the self that initiates action in order to bring about desired consequences or intentions; the "me" is the perceptive observer aspect of the self that looks at the action, …the environment, …the relation between the two (I and me), and guides the activity of the "I"…; …the "me" is (both) social, embodying the meanings, understandings, and experiences of the community, ... and individual, knowing the needs of the self as well as the place (and role) of the self within the community" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 20). In this respect, the "me" is entitled with a reflexive ability to distinguish the self from "others", assigning the "I" certain personal qualities which constitute the identity of a person, ascribing him/her uniqueness among "others", and similarly categorizing the "I" into certain groups of similar or comparable (but not the same) interests or essential characteristics (social or individual identities, such as professional/ occupational, gender, sexual, emotional and other identities).

An important principle that lays the foundation of the Identity Theory is that of the idea of self-esteem and emotions, which are the consequences of a person's interaction with the environment, and which instigate and guide further action of the person (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 32), thus making him/her reach the goals in interaction or change things based on the results of confirmation of the person's behaviour by others. Self-esteem in the Identity Theory is understood as a correlation between our achievements and aspirations (which means that the level of self-esteem will be high if a success or achievement is bigger than what we planned to reach at the start; even if the success is small, but the aspiration was not great as well, the level of self-esteem will still remain high; on the contrary, if our achievement is huge, but our ambitions even greater, the level of self-esteem will be low, since we will not be satisfied with what we have achieved, no matter how high we have reached, since our expectations were much greater, and probably unreachable). At the same time, the level of self-esteem is directly connected to our emotions we feel in the course of human interaction: if we are satisfied with what we have achieved because it matches or even outweighs our expectations, we are more likely to feel positive emotions, which will drive us further in action; on the contrary, if our aspirations have not met our achievements (which may be represented by poor verification of person's identity performance by others), we might feel upset, bitter and thus change our behaviour. One more essential principle of the Identity Theory, related to self-esteem and emotions, was taken from William Powers perceptual control model, which pointed out that "it is not the control of output or behaviour that matters for persons … but the control of their perceptions" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 29).

Identity construction model

Based on the outlined above key principles, an identity construction model has been suggested by Burke and Stets, again basing their model on prior research and suggestions within the vein of structural symbolic interaction approach. The main constituents of the model are presented in figure 1, thus being: an input, an identity standard, a comparator, and an output, which are organized in "a control system" that operates to control the input to the system" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 62).
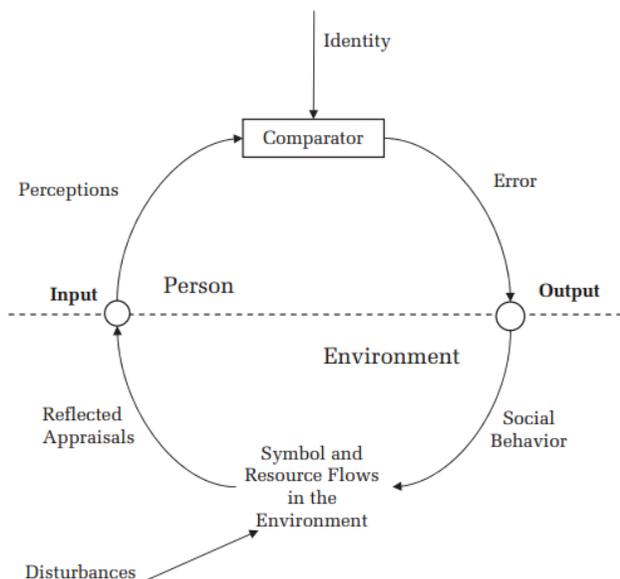
Figure 1. Identity construction model (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 62)

The input is represented by perceptions, which are assigned a central role in the identity construction model, since they are the ones that a person controls; they tell a person about his/her environment, being the key source of information as to what is happening in the world around the person. Being expressed by perceptions (information based on how a person feels it, sees it, using sense perceptions related to certain knowledge and meaning of symbols discussed earlier in this paper), the input may be perceived properly or improperly (or fooled, perceived mistakenly), since the information about the world around us may be presented in "the best light", hiding some significant aspects, thus distorting the true picture of the environment (like photos uploaded by social networking site users, which will be discussed later).

Further, the input (or perceptions) is compared with the identity standard, which can be best explained in relation to the concept of "role identity" as suggested by McCall and Simmons, who treated it as an "imaginative view of a person as he/she would like to think of himself/herself being and acting (McCall & Simmons, 1978, p. 65). Thus, identity standard seems to serve as "a role model" containing a

set of meanings, which in a person's view, define his/her idea of identity, the so-called "ideal identity", and serves as "a point of reference" in identity construction process.

The comparator has the function "to compare (or verify) the input perceptions of meanings relevant to the identity with the memory meanings" stored in the image of identity standard, and produce "an error signal" if the inconsistency between input perceptions and identities standard have been traced in the course of comparison. This is followed by the output, which is usually some pattern of behaviour of a person based on consistency or inconsistency of comparative job (identity verification, in our case done by the comparator), thus which can be seen as the one which continues to comply with the input and identity standard and as such receives approval in the environment and certain level of self-esteem (positive verification of identity construction process), or alters the meanings and further behaviour patents in the situation (negative verification of identity construction process) which causes disturbances in identity construction (Burke & Stets, 2009, pp. 66–67).

Identity construction process can be complicated when assumed that a person claims multiple identities (and thus identity standards), arranged in certain hierarchy depending on, as McCall and Simmons (1978) suggest, support, commitment and rewards he/she receives in the process of identity performance-verification process. The more an individual "generates self-support and experiences support from others for an identity he/she is claiming", the higher is the position of this type of identity in his/her hierarchy (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 40), which, in its turn, leads to stronger commitment invested in the identity, which again raises the level of self-esteem and positive emotions (as intrinsic gratification for such identity performance), and then often to extrinsic rewards in the form of money, job promotions, popularity among peers, etc.

Identity construction in digital contexts

Although the army of online users comprises people of different age groups, our research will focus on young adults and adolescents who experience the critical period of identity construction, as claimed in most studies on developmental psychology and sociology (Margalit, 2010; Amett, 2004; Manago, 2015), thus experiencing difficulties and often disturbances in the construction of "a unique, coherent, and stable sense of self that is continuous over time" (Erikson, 1963). At the same time, being referred to as "digital natives" (Teo, 2013), young adults make intensive use of totally new and unknown social phenomena, in particular social networking sites (SNSs), which, as Manago mentions, "beg for more research in the field of identity development" (Manago, 2014, p. 2) not only among adolescents, but other age groups as well. Bearing in mind the identity construction model described earlier in this paper, let's take a closer look at the digital setting of social networking sites being an extremely favourable platform for online interaction, and what they offer for young adults in their identity construction process.

It's worth mentioning that the current research on the issues of identity construction in an online environment is mainly preoccupied by singling out positive

aspects and possible challenges or constraints (Allen et al., 2014). We are not going to follow the stategy mentioned above, but rather direct our scientific attention to the most significant characteristics of online interaction for identity construction, and then speculate on the ways they could be put to good use in pedagogical settings, since we are convinced that schooling institutions should not behave as passive by-standers or observers of young adults' blind navigation in the digital ocean, facing the hazards and being left alone in overcoming possible pitfalls such navigation may trigger.

Adriana Manago identifies "relatedness and autonomy" as significant support in identity development in the awkward age, suggesting that "a balance between the social connection and self-determination constitutes the fulcrum on which a coherent identity is consolidated" (Manago, 2014; McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 510). The sense of the social connection as related to the identity construction can be based on the assumption that people possess an innate psychological need to belong to certain groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which is also clearly reflected in the theory of attachment (Cohen, 1985). "Relatedness is the need to establish close bonds and secure attachment with others, and reflects the desire to be emotionally connected to and interpersonally involved in warm, caring relationships" (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004, p. 35). During transition period, young adults are more prone to seek advice on questions related to who they are, what their place in the world is (thus related to identity construction) from peers, rather than that the immediate social environment of family members (Allen et al., 2014), because the stage of coming of age requires "exploration and then commitment from young adults, a process that is propelled by decreasing dependence on parents and increasing navigation of relationships in wider social circles (Manago, 2015, p. 2), in particular, those of peers. The use of social networking sites gives adolescents a plentiful opportunity to receive hundreds of "identity verifiers" called "friends" on SNS profiles (like Facebook, for example), who perfectly serve as a group giving a sense of belonging and relatedness.

Similarly, in terms of autonomy (or self-determination) social networking sites (and other social media) are seen to serve as a platform for constructing, main-taining, and accentuating identities by young adults (Manago, 2015, p. 25), providing opportunities for self-branding (Gajaria et al., 2011), and maintaining current or desired conceptualization of the self (Barker, 2012), by "broadcasting a polished self-image (by profile updates, photos) to those large audiences of "friends" (Manago, 2015, p. 3), and receiving immediate verification of their identity performances in the form of "liking/disliking" feedback, comments and other responses.

Discussion and pedagogical implications

As mentioned earlier, we are not going to dwell on the issue of positive and negative opportunities and challenges that are engendered by digital environments in identity construction – in this respect we are more inclined to call it digital identity (or online identity), but rather would like to heighten the attention of edu-cational professionals and warn them against regulating the manner and strategies

applied by young adults in interacting in social networking sites or other online services, threatening them with punishment for misconduct – in this way, the natural need for adolescents to connect with peers will be violated and jeopardized, which may bring about more negative than positive outcomes. On the contrary, we would encourage educators to embolden young adults for exploration of new experiences, so generously offered by online communications, but teach their students to analytically and critically evaluate the pros and cons, drawing positive experiences and blocking possible disturbances. By implementing such supportive and facilitative rather than directive and commanding educational position, we – educators – will succeed in getting advantage from the overwhelming preoccupation with digital media among adolescents, and still performing our primary educational function – that of helping young people enter the world of adulthood with the best positive possible cognitive achievements in identity development.

Conclusions

In the current paper, we have tried to briefly outline the basic concepts of identity construction, having substantiated the model of such process suggested by the Identity Theory proponents. We have also attempted to negotiate this model in projection on digital setting application, as well as discussed the opportunities provided by online interaction for promotion of relatedness and self-determination as the most relevant phenomena to be forced in young adults for the coherent construction of their identity. Pedagogical implications of identity construction process in adolescents with relation to digital settings have been analyzed here.

We see further perspectives of the research topic in viewing the chances of deliberate use of online environments for identity construction of the target as well as other age groups in relation to discursive approach, which means studying the key issues of language representation of identity development in digital settings.

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