

Online identity in the case of the share phenomenon. A glimpse into the on lives of Romanian millennials

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Abstract. *In less than a decade, the World Wide Web has evolved from a predominantly search medium to a predominantly share medium, from holding a functional role to being endowed with a social one. In the context of a reontologisation of the infosphere and of an unprecedented display of mass self-communication, the identity system has gained a legitimate dimension – online identity –, as individuals have become the sum of impressions openly offered online and decoded into a coherent story by the receiver. In the network society, there are consequences to both having and not having an online identity.*

Originating in an interactionist perspective, the present paper looks into Romanian Millennials in trying to find out whether online identity is undergoing a process of intentionalization, in other words whether it becomes a conscious, planned effort of the individual to build himself/herself a legitimate and profitable dimension in the digital space.

Keywords: *online identity; infosphere; mass self-communication; Millennials; Generation Y.*

1. Introduction and theoretical background

This paper examines online identity as part of an individual's identity system, in the specific context of current Internet development, generalized connectivity

and participation through the share web. The discussion centers on Romanian young adults, seeking to uncover their perceptions of online identity as a potentially strategic self-representation process.

It is no longer a debate that society is under profound transformation because of today's multiple possibilities to interact and communicate through the mediation of digital technology.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have irreversibly altered the nature of the informational environment, the informational agents and their interactions (Floridi, 2005: 186). Individuals' observable technology-dependent behavior has spread to become a global social phenomenon, attesting to the fact that society's new habitat is the infosphere.

The infosphere emerged as a concept in the seventies and was popularized by Alvin Toffler a decade later. He employed the term to express the totality of communication channels carrying personal and mass messages and discussed it parallel to the techno-sphere, socio-sphere, power-sphere, bio-sphere and psychosphere (Toffler, 1980). More than three decades later, the original meaning of the term has expanded to encompass all other spheres. Philosopher of technology Luciano Floridi (2006: 59) refers to the infosphere as society's new eco system: "[...] the whole informational environment constituted by all informational entities (thus including informational agents as well), their properties, interactions, processes and mutual relations". Floridi (2005: 188-189) theorizes what he calls a re-ontologisation of the infosphere, attributing it to a growingly digital informational environment, an organic integration of technology (the Internet of things), a new generation of informational agents and the generalized informationalization of interactions. This new infosphere, humanity's new *Umwelt* with infinite expansion possibilities, is associated with three notable tendencies: synchronization (time axis), delocalization (space axis) and correlation (interaction axis) (Floridi, 2006: 60).

These projections are not far from Castells' (1996) idea of a *network society*. Standing at the basis of Castells' theoretical discourse, the network society is humanity's "new form of society [...], made up of specific configurations of global, national, and local networks in a multidimensional space of social interaction" (Castells, 2009: 19). This network of networks social structure precipitated the advent of an entirely new paradigm of communication, labeled mass self-communication: "a new communication realm, and ultimately a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive" (Castells, 2009: 70). Castells introduced the concept of mass self-communication in order to capture a mutation in mass communication, set in motion by the widespread penetration of digital ICTs. Mass self-communication reflects the historically new role of individuals as both empowered senders and selective receivers of information,

accountable – on the one hand – for message generation and target audience selection, on the other hand, for message filtering and appropriation. Individual communication power is thus the foundation of Castells' new theoretical construct; digital ICTs have empowered the individual over traditional multimedia outlets and have consequently strengthened agency over structure, allowing a shift from the vertical one-to-many communication model to the horizontal many-to-many model.

While Castells' focus is on expounding the mechanics of mass self-communication as socio-communicational phenomenon, examining mass self-communication from the perspective of content adds yet a new angle to Castells' original theory and proves to be valuable in the study of online identity. From this viewpoint, it can be argued that, in the network society, communication is not only personally broadcast, targeted and retrieved, but it also becomes more personal in content, as social actors choose to reveal important aspects about their identities online. Beyond mandatory personal information required by various platforms in the process of building profiles, individuals contribute, knowingly or unknowingly, with rich personal narratives in their daily online interactions. In this context, mass-self communication can be attributed a double meaning: mass *auto-communication* (original meaning of the term and actual translation of mass-self communication in French and Spanish, referring to the fact that individuals are becoming mass communication channels) and mass *self-identity communication* (pointing out to the idea that, in the process of online communication, individuals give and give off self-identity signals).

Online Social Networks (OSNs) were the first web-based platforms that rewarded this display of personal information, creating the need for self-exposure online with simple built in options like "check-in" (indicating a person's current location) or "attending" (expressing a person's intention to participate in an event), or with more subtle prompts such as Timeline's reverse chronological order (for Facebook), presenting all published statuses as a digital autobiography. Van Dijck (2013: 200) documents OSNs' change of status from mere information databases to "tools for (personal) *storytelling* and *narrative* self-presentation".

The massive sharing of information that characterizes OSN behavior and Internet's non-erasable character have contributed to the discretionary availability of large quantities of personal data online. Individual contributions online (planned or unplanned) can be accessed with ease by virtually anyone, tracked back to their originator and re-assembled in synchronic and diachronic order, as online identities. Given this context, we can add yet another discussion point to Castells' communication power perspective. Along with power, individual users have also gained great vulnerability. The availability of massive quantities of personal data online implies that, at any given point and for any imaginable

purpose, an interested party is able to establish the identity of a user, piecing together information available online about that user and re-imagining a personal identity narrative.

The idea of a user's identity being defined by and reconstructed from information available online is in line with Floridi's (2005: 195; 2011: 550) theory of information, where the author advances an informational approach to personal identity, conceptualizing the self as being constituted by its information and interpreted as an informational structure. At a practical level, this supports my view that every piece of information available online about an individual carries identity clues. ICTs allow co-authorship of identities, with both the freedom to display an ideal self and the constraints of uncensored social interaction.

2. Online identity as a strategic self-representation process

While, a decade ago, literature referred to online identity mainly as anonymous, multiple and fragmented self-experimentation, with the advent of OSNs, the interpretation of online identity evolved to self-representation and, lately, to intentional and strategic self-branding. Recent research points out that, rather than exploring possible identities, individuals tend to "recreate their offline selves online" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013: 109), managing impressions and being actively involved in the process of identity editing (Van Dijck, 2013; Young, 2013).

Online identity is associated less and less with persona adoption (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) and portrayed instead as an authentic manifestation of the self: "The self uses the digital imaginary concerning itself to construct a virtual identity through which it seeks to grasp its own personal identity (the question "who am I for you?" becomes "who am I online?"), in a potentially feedback loop of adjustments and modifications leading to an equilibrium between the off-line and the online selves." (Floridi, 2011: 563).

Identity is built in interaction, in and through discourse (Beciu, 2011; Grad & Rojo, 2008). During social interactions, individuals adjust their own presentations, so as to match their perceptions of existing expectations and accommodate signals they receive from interlocutors. Their aim is to create and maintain a good impression about themselves (Goffman, 1959). Online, the need of social actors to make convincing presentations about themselves persists; Goffman's conceptual system proves valid in analyzing the construction of online identity (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013).

While, offline, social actors interpret a role for a limited public, within a context with clear temporal and spatial delineations, online, they find themselves exposed to the entire connected world. Boyd (2002: 28) proposes the term *contextual collapse* in order to describe the lack of context online. Simply put, even though an individual builds distinct online profiles depending on the platform of interest

and its anticipated publics (i.e. Facebook – friends, LinkedIn – professionals), any search engine displays all published information on the same page, thus displacing information from the specific context for which it was created. The personal track record revealed at a simple search on the Internet thus becomes the material by which social actors rate an individual in terms of friendship and professional potential, personality traits, skills or creativity and, most importantly, act upon these ratings, choosing to include or exclude that individual from virtual or real communities and relationships.

With the increased relevance of the online environment in the lives of society and individuals, having an online identity pertains to the adherence to new social norms. Literature supports the idea of individuals becoming more aware of the growing importance of their online identity and actively engaged in crafting it through the system of platforms available (Madden, Fox, Smith & Vitak, 2007; Madden & Smith, 2010; Vorvoreanu, Clark & Boisvenue, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013). Two interconnected factors altered the idea of self-representation online in recent years. On the one hand, the attention received by individuals could suddenly be quantified online in the number of “friends”, “likes”, “comments”, “shares” or “followers”. The more social actors understood the importance of online identity in this competition, the more they became interested in building it strategically. As Van Dijck (2013: 202) observes, “roughly after 2009, the self-turned into an object of marketing and promotion now that connectivity could transform online social value to real rewards in the offline world”. On the other hand, offline, a system connecting individuals to their online performances emerged. Using search engines or OSN profiles to establish the identity of an individual has become a routine practice for both private users and companies (Vorvoreanu, Clark & Boisvenue, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013). In the absence of a flesh-and-blood person, personal identity can be equated or even substituted for online identity. As Trottier discerns, “the growing popularity of social and digital media means that users are held accountable to how they appear online.” (Trottier, 2014: xi).

The rise of an entire global generation is attributed to the development of Internet and its associated technology. Digital Natives is a generational label ascribed in antithesis to Digital Immigrants (Prensky, 2001). What supposedly connects the members of this generation is an uncontestable affinity for digital technology. They are also known as the Net Generation (Tapscott, 2009), Millennials (Strauss & Howe, 1991) or Generation Y, term coined by an Advertising Age journalist in 1993 (Horovitz, 2012).

There are many conflicting opinions about the age limits of this generation. While, in their seminal book, “Generations”, Strauss and Howe (1991) set the boundaries of this cohort from 1982 to 2004, other authors place its start as early as

1978 or even 1977 (Tapscott, 2009). With such loose generational confines, the very idea of digital technology as generational discontinuity or “singularity – an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back” (Prensky, 2001: 1) is critiqued by several authors: Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, Jones & Czerniewicz, 2010, Bennett & Maton, 2010.

Irrespective of academic debate, Digital Natives as generation cannot be portrayed in isolation from digital technology, “a key formative characteristic for Gen Y” (Bolton *et al.*, 2013: 247). Nevertheless, opinions on the effects of ICTs on the Millennial cohort are far from congruent, in fact they range vastly from one extreme to the other. On the positive side, this generation is attributed a *cognitive surplus* (Shirky, 2010), potentially leading to influential new means of human expression, such as innovative forms of on-line collaboration towards social good. On the negative side, moderate to dramatic effects are accounted for, such as distraction or loss of ability to focus – *continuous partial attention* (Stone, 1998), memory erosion (Carr, 2010) or even addiction (Chou, Condrón & Belland, 2005).

3. Methodology

Several *Pew Internet and American Life Project* research studies reveal that Millennials share more information about themselves online than any other generation (Madden & Smith, 2010; Anderson & Rainie, 2010), practice that is unlikely to stop as Millennials age (Anderson & Rainie, 2010). Moreover, a large corpus of existing empirical research on online identity is directed at this generation, providing workable data for my own study. These aspects were weighed in when deciding that Generation Y represented my population of choice – a tech savvy generation, biologically mature and thus credible to talk about self-identity on and offline. As information on Romanian Generation Y was found to be scarce and fragmented in focus, mostly compiled for commercial purposes, pre-knowledge into this target group was minimum. To my knowledge, this is the first empirical study addressing Romanian Millennials’ online identity.

Following Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I decided not to determine sample size prior to the beginning of the study, but to establish a final number only as a result of theoretical saturation. My sample was composed of 20 young adults born between 1978 and 1993, part of the global Millennial cohort, frequent and savvy users of multiple digital platforms and spending a minimum time of 3 to 4 hours a day online. Other studies on online identity attest to smaller or similar sample sizes than the one I have reached (20): Bullingham & Vasconcelos (2013) use a sample size of 10 to assess online self-presentation, Davis (2010) conjures a sample of 20 to study the coming of age of adolescent girls through blogging and, finally, Davis (2011) proposes a sample of 24 to explore the risks and rewards of online self-expression. Judgment and snowball sampling methods were both used

to recruit the following composition of informants:

Table 1: Respondent's profiles

Gender	Age	Job/position	Online Interests
M	24	Software support, IT	Facebook, Coldhearted.tk, World of Warcraft
M	32	Consultant, European funds	Facebook, YouTube, Skype
F	25	HP (undisclosed position)	Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Skype
M	28	Hardware repairs, IT	Facebook, Google+, YouTube, personal blog
F	26	Economist	Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube
F	29	Project Manager	Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Yahoo mail, Tumblr, personal blog
M	33	Athlete	Facebook, YouTube, Google+, Hi5, Yahoo mail
F	25	Chef	Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Behance, Pinterest, personal blog
F	29	Nurse	Facebook, YouTube, Badoo, Messenger, Ejobs, Netlog
M	23	Student	Facebook, YouTube, Gmail, Yahoo mail
F	26	Brand Manager, marketing	Facebook, Youtube, Skype, personal blog
F	28	Freelancer, medical field	Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Gmail, Yahoo mail, Gtalk, Bestjobs, Ejobs, personal blog
M	26	Lawyer	Facebook, Lujju.ro
F	34	HR specialist, owner of small business	Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Gmail, Yahoo mail, Bestjobs, Ejobs, www.breslo.ro, personal blog
M	35	Entrepreneur	Facebook, Messenger, Twitter, blog personal
F	21	Student	Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Skype, Gmail, Yahoo mail, personal blog
M	22	Student	Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Gmail, Yahoo mail
M	27	HP (undisclosed position)	Facebook, YouTube
M	24	Programmer	Facebook, LinkedIn, Gmail, Yahoo mail
F	28	Fitness Instructor	Facebook, LinkedIn, Yahoo mail, Imdb, Soundcloud

I conducted 20 in-depth, in-home interviews of approximately two hours each. Prior to the interview, each participant was required to fill in a personal online activity journal over a period of a week. The study took place between March and May 2014.

The interviews used a semi-structured approach, based on a loose, written discussion guide confining the main areas of exploration: a short investigation into the respondent's perceived identity, relationship to the online medium and perception and construction of digital identity. Given the profoundly personal and abstract nature of the subject investigated – self-identity –, projective techniques were also deployed during the interview, along with the question and answer approach. The projective technique is generally insightful, as it overrides communication barriers, avoiding direct questioning and using an indirect approach, as a means to surface information otherwise difficult to verbalize by the respondent (Donoghue, 2000). By placing respondents in a different narrative than their own, they were able to project their own thoughts, feelings and self-concept in order to give the new narrative meaning and structure.

Another key investigative method used during interviews was the think-aloud method, attributed to psychologists Ericsson & Simon (1993). Also known

in literature as think-aloud data, verbal protocol or verbal report, the core of this method is to encourage respondents to verbalize their sequence of thoughts while performing a given task, thus capturing what occurs cognitively during a set activity (Young, 2005). Each of the 20 participants was asked to search for their name and view the results (their online aggregation of identity data) on Google search engine, while verbalizing instant impressions about its contents and meaning. The moderator was able to capture genuine reactions to what respondents were discovering about themselves online.

Online activity journals were intended to offer pre-knowledge into each participant's perceived identity and online usage patterns, setting the ground for the interviews themselves. The journals had a pre-set format, prompting respondents to answer (with text and images) specific points, ranging from personal information, online habits, to actual web pages accessed over the given period of time.

4. Findings and discussion

Frequent exposure to technology was a main sampling criterion from the outset of the research process. Yet, while ICTs were part of the lives of young Romanian adults as a pre-condition, the extent to which they were both perceived and capitalized as tools for building an online identity needed clarification.

As research progressed, it became evident that perception and expression of online identity varied across age groups and individuals. This significant heterogeneity caused by individual level factors discouraged a unitary generational approach, in favor of a typology-type approach within the chosen Generation Y sample. Other authors also document the heterogeneity of the Millennial generation in regard to technology use, noticing a variation in usage patterns as a result of interests, motivations and needs (Bennett & Maton, 2010).

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data set revealed insights that allowed aggregation into three main categories: (1) users' general perceptions of on life; (2) tools used for online identity creation (platforms, content, affiliations, etc.); (3) managing identity and online identity. According to respondents' navigation and positioning within these areas, three main generational clusters could be discerned.

Online Identity as Denialism: the Pre-Millennials

This study was based on the theoretical assumption that online identity exists as a new socio-communicational phenomenon. This does not mean that all individuals acknowledge or accept that the traces they leave online – intentionally or not – are corroborated to form that individual's online identity. A first cluster of individuals from the sample was in fact identified to be unaware of or in

denial of their online identity as consequence of ICT use. Individuals belonging to this cluster were among the older users in the sample, 31-35 years old, with a few exceptions. From a technology perspective, they proved to be atypical of the Millennial generation (as per its global definition). The initially slow adoption of technology in Romania in the mid-nineties positions this age group as Pre-Millennials, Digital Immigrants rather than Digital Natives. The study confirmed that technology is far from being seamlessly integrated into their lives; on the contrary, this segment perceives a clear delineation between on and off life. For example, time spent online, although appreciated for its infotainment value, is viewed as a negative distraction from meaningful activities (time spent with families): "I don't have time to spend on all (platforms). I manage my time so that I can also breathe, I don't spend it all in front of the laptop. I don't think it's ok to spend so much time on websites." (M, 35).

Their rapport to online identity is thus shaped by their general attitude towards the World Wide Web and resulting connectivity technologies: cautiousness and skepticism in evaluating technology's benefits vs. threats: "One can even be targeted because of Facebook, one can find unexpected guests at night. [...] One should not see valuables (online)." (M, 35). They have no holistic vision of the self-online, consequently no history of monitoring their online presence (they have never searched for their name on a search engine). Representing themselves online is not a priority (most often than not their online social network profiles do not display a picture of themselves): "I don't think Facebook should absorb just any type of content so that all of us can be out in the open." (F, 29); or, "Even mystery has disappeared lately, maybe it's because everybody exposes themselves far too much in all kinds of ways." (F, 26).

Online Identity as Followership: the Early Millennials

A second cluster of individuals acknowledge online identity as a natural consequence of ICT use, yet remains unengaged in actively shaping it through the system of platforms available. Early Millennials mostly, 26-30 years of age, they are reactive users of ICTs, responding mainly to peer pressure: "If you're not on Facebook, you don't exist" (B, 26). Although in a better relationship to technology than Pre-Millennials, Early Millennials are still not leading an on life: "I don't like the high degree of transparency and the fact that it became a way of life." (F, 26). As most have created online social network profiles out of peer pressure and not out of personal conviction, these are seen primarily as functional communication channels.

Similarly to Pre-Millennials, they have never reflected upon the implications of having an online identity, further than to label Facebook as a database filing personal information. Online representation is for them neutral and

accommodating to all their potential publics. The think aloud protocol revealed that monitoring their online presence (through searching for their names on a search engine) was not a common practice among the group. While surprised to see their personal data (sometimes dating back years ago) displayed for everyone to see online, they appreciated it as an accurate representation of facts about themselves. One user affirms: "I am who I expected to be (online). The same. No panic." (M, 26). I found the idea of sameness as being a key for this cluster; for them, it is important to be perceived the same as in real life.

Online Identity as Personal Branding: the Late Millennials

Romanian Late Millennials (21-25 years olds mostly) were found to be closest to Millennials' global generational description. Passionate pursuers of multiple interests, they see personal and professional life as interconnected and are early adopters of everything new in their field. They are the true Digital Natives of the generation, having benefited from an early and frequent exposure to digital technology. They equate online identity with online image, which is constructed intentionally and strategically as an ideal self. They post regularly and consistently more out of conviction than of peer pressure: "To me it's very important that a person may be able to say what they think and what their principles are and what they fight for, what they learn, what they struggle for. Blogging is ok for this." (F, 21).

They seek to produce, not to reproduce information in search of a clear positioning. They try to maximize the functions & tools offered by online platforms so as to accurately display each intended identity facet, although clearly promoting a primary one. They exert censorship over posted content, evaluating it from a personal brand perspective: "I wanted to change its name [personal blog] because there are many called the same [...]. It was not original, it did not differentiate me from others, it was not memorable and I wanted something special. It [the new name] created buzz, everyone asks me where it comes from." (F, 25).

They are aware of and adapting to various audiences present online, thus strive for coherence in their representation across platforms, avoiding blunt contradictions. They regularly search for their name on search engines and are aware of tips and tricks to optimize Google search results so as to highlight their assets.

Conclusions

The present study should be regarded merely as a stepping-stone in the investigation of online identity communication of Romanian Millennials. Within the limitations of the present research (of which lack of longitudinal data is most significant), we can articulate a number of relevant conclusions.

While all members of my sample were selected to be knowledgeable about ITCs, the extent to which they use the digital technology available to build a coherent

online identity proved limited. In fact, the very concept of online identity as personal track record in the digital world turned out to be unfamiliar or irrelevant for most. Only the younger segment, few exceptions granted, acknowledges its importance and becomes actively engaged in crafting their ideal self-online. For them, the digital medium is an alternative environment to promote their identity, in anticipation of real life rewards.

This generational discrepancy can be clarified if we acknowledge that Millennials, as global generation, have been defined as Digital Natives. In Romania, within the age confines of the Millennial generation, we can identify both Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants. This explains why younger respondents, the true Digital Natives among Romanian Millennials, have a more organic relationship with digital ITCs, while older respondents, Digital Immigrants, are more conservative and skeptical. Online identity is thus antithetically perceived: irrelevant and incoherent for Romanian Pre-Millennials and Early Millennials), an important means of social affirmation for Late Millennials. To continue the study of online identity as purposeful construction, a productive path to follow for future research would be to focus further on Late Millennials.

Another finding of my research study confirmed the corroborated conclusions of current literature. Online identity is no longer about anonymity and fragmentation but, quite the opposite, about striving for coherence in representing one's true self in the online world (although I acknowledge that this can be sometimes an ideal representation). This puts into perspective the postmodern view of a fragmented, plural and context-dependent individual, advancing the possibility of a unitary online self, in line with the real life self. Future exploratory research could attempt to unveil motivations behind this apparent commitment to coherence.

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