# The increase of the experiences of the self through the practice of multiple virtual identities

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## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes some reflections concerning the process of creation of multiple virtual identities usually verified in several online social platforms of informal interaction based on textual/synchronous modality. With this intention, it discusses characterization, exploratory possibilities (personal and social-communicative) and reasons which lead users to execute such practice. In addition, it intends to identify possible relations between this procedure and the promotion of a dynamics of relationships distinguished in these computer-mediated communication environments. From this point of view, it defends the idea that there is a favourable context to the exercise of simultaneous social roles, decentred and not hierarchical, associated to more flexible identity constructions and more adjusted to contemporary society settings.

## 1. Introduction

With the development and popularization of networks, it is observed that the social-communicative processes and behavioural strategies used by people that navigate the various online platforms based on textual/synchronous communication, had their action scope expanded. One of these actions is the possibility of exploring new existential, cognitive and experiential territories through the virtual world. It allows the users to experience different identities, distant from the commonly adopted references

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of the offline world[1], the ordinary world of everyday life. Although it sounds rather simple, this mechanism of identity formation involves a series of layers and adjustments that are necessary and conditional factors in the transitional process between offline and online world. Rituals of initiation are used every time users convey through these points, visibly because of the presence of ceremonial entrance markers (e.g. login), naming strategies, competence and anonymity (Aranha Filho, 1995).

These measures for admission, far from being considered as a set of strictly technical routines or focused only on the cultural ways and conventions, lead to the "immersion" of people in a different social environments, where the references commonly used in the offline world are usually reshaped according to their relevance and usefulness (Klastrup, 2003). These practices, actually, give the users credentials, turning them into carriers of virtual passports, allowing them to move freely through the selected interactional platforms, to develop a sense of belonging, and the recognizance of the user by their equals as a constitutive part of the same social environment and collective experience.

By overcoming the "entrance", through the admission practices, users have at their disposal, due to the peculiarities of the shared-mediated environment, and the practices commonly adopted (anonymity, use of nicknames etc.), a greatly expanded range of possible combinations of features, for the composition of a "personal front" or "social identity" (Goffman, 1974). In a complementary way, they also have enhanced their possibilities to establish a number of relationships with a diversity of "social identities" built up by the eventual users, partners of the experienced social environment.

It is worthy to note that, according to Goffman (1974), the role playing process through the creation of "personal fronts" or "social identities" is performed by the western societies in a way where it does not interfere in the development of a singularity of the self: regardless of the variety of roles required in the contextual situations, there is a rather basic assumption that the biographic characteristics of a supposed "personal identity" is preserved. Following this line of argument, it seems that the comment approximates to the situations experienced in online relationships established in interactional platforms based on textual/synchronous communication,

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[1] Although controversial in the conceptual point of view, due to the ease of its association with a possible technical view of reality, the use of the terms "online" and "offline" - to characterize and differentiate, respectively, the "experiences" located in the virtual environment and those experienced in the three-dimensional environment of the physical world - is maintained in this paper, since there is a wide use in the academic area.

since the "personal identity" would be reflected and maintained in identity experienced by the users in the offline world, while the various "social identities" would be represented by multiple virtual identities created to navigate these mentioned online environments.

According to what Goffman (1974) points out, in face to face (FTF) situations there is the possibility that people develop a deeper identification, in some circumstances and due to most different reasons, between their "personal identity" and a specifically role played, what could alter the structure of individual personality. Likewise, such fact would also occur in the online world of the platforms based on textual/synchronous communication, where some users may have experiences so vivid that the characteristics of virtual identities would gradually be embedded on one's offline life. In extreme situations, this would cause an equivalence perception concerning the two relational spheres, as pointed by Turkle (1995, p. 13), quoting one of the researcher's interviewee discussing the variety of "windows" of his life: "I split my mind. I'm getting better at it. I can see myself as being two or three or more... I go from window to window... And then I'll get a real-time message and I guess that's Real Life. It's just one more window. Real Life is just one more window and it's usually not my best".

As can be seen in the transcription above, there is clear allusion to an increase of interest on online experiences, as much as a derogation of the importance given to the "window" related to real life.

## 2. The identity formation process in the contemporary world

How can these new social settings be discussed, considering the fact that the very idea of identity shows itself in the process of re-evaluation of its applicability in the contemporary culture, as some researchers points out to highlight a possible "plural structure of the subject" (Turkle, 1995; Jenkins, 2008)? The famous sociologist Max Weber, for example, already foreshadows this issue, stating that the identity, of the point sociological view, it is just a relative and floating state. Mead (1934), through his famous book *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, had already engendered a theory concerning human interaction and the development of personality, which posited the malleable and dynamic natures of the identity, alongside with its tripartite composition (the "I", the "me" and the "generalized other"), as well as the use of different situational roles.

Hence, this paper upholds the idea that it has been experienced a transitive moment characterized by a transformation concerning the idea of identity – deeply rooted in modernity – and its evolution to the idea of identification – typically related to the post-modernity, where it should be regarded the presence of a self in a continuous process of construction – through a succession of temporary interchangeable identifications, adjusted by the diversity of demands and variables present in the lived contextual situations – instead of the notion of a single identity, self-contained, closed, built up on a solid and stable basis. Following this point of view, Maffesoli (1990), French sociologist, points out that it would be better to adopt the concept of a person than the individual to characterize the present moment, given that he falls into a more relational, shifting, as it presents itself in a more permanent and more suited to contemporary social reality.

On a second basis, in analyzing the identity formation process and its relationship to historical paradigm changes affecting our society, Hall and Du Gay (1996) point toward the presence of three different notions of identity: the (1) first one related to the enlightenment, characterized basically by the existence of an autonomous individual, integrated to the core of society, centred both on reason and unity; (2) the second one would be related to the "sociological subject" in which its composition would be formatted from the interactive relationship between the self and the institutions derived from modern society, that, although complex, would allow the identification with stable structures; (3) the third – regarding the "post-modern subject" – would present itself committed to the perception of an essentially dynamic, multiple, malleable and fragmented self where the institutions would show themselves within an unstable configuration. Hall and Du Gay (1996) highlight a gradual transition from the idea of a "centered" model of identity - forged during the Age of Enlightenment - to the one characterized by the "decentered" model of identity, more fit for the idea of contemporary world.

In the process of building this historical route, some authors point out, properly, the relevant role of communication technologies. Meyrowitz (1985), North American professor of communication and sociology, for example, explores the influence of electronic media on the identity references and their relationship to changes in social behaviour. Thus, people, not being anymore limited to the circumstances and social situations located in the geographical nearby spaces, would have their range of experiences expanded through the knowledge and contact with other realities, values and beliefs. Thompson (1996), in a similar point of view, highlights the growing

availability of forms and mediated symbolic models, brought in by the development of the media, as an essential factor in people understanding of the world  beyond the places where they immediately live and – consequently – in the production of necessary situational references to express their various facets of identity.

For the purpose of this paper, the exhaustive discussion about the most appropriate and most accurate terms to portray the presence of the phenomenon of multiple identities in the contemporary scene (no longer focusing on a uniform and final perspective) is dispensable. What interests us is not only the perception of the existence of a set of mutant referential frames that enables the emergence of such events but also, the recognition that advances in the field of communication technologies have become a key part in shaping these frames.

## 3. The practice of multiple virtual identities

Given the set of peculiarities observed in contextual situations promoted by interactional platforms based on textual/synchronous communication, an intriguing aspect comes to light: the occurrence of social exchanges is the main source for promoting the existence of virtual identity. Even though, this situation is observed in a similar way in the offline world, as postulated in social-interactionist theories, the originality resulting from it, is derived primarily from two aspects: (1) the first one is that this process is produced in an essentially permissive environment, where there is great potential for discovering new facets of personality and behavioural practices (Gackenbach & Von Stackelberg, 2007); (2) the second one is shown in socially shared environments, where the emission and reception of information about the identities created and exercised at the time are made largely through the exclusive use of textual language (Wood & Smith, 2001). That is, the interaction, fostered by a succession of repeated statements and answers exchanged between the participants in the written form, is what allows the identities created, to actually come into existence. In fact, they are constructed not only as elements directly derived from the exchange that happen in the communicational environment, but also, from a complex set that contains, besides the interaction process accomplished with the other participants, the interactions made with the machines (computers) and with their softwares (Ribeiro, 2003).

Even with the presence of a greater flexibility and a wider set of experimentation possibilities, the identity built virtually also needs recognition from others so that it does

exist. Thus, the users need that there are cooperation and complicity on the part of the partners, to allow it to become, through the created identity and roles represented, whom they wish to be at that moment and in that environment. It is necessary that the other gets into the "social game" intended by the user, to be able to exercise the characteristics and chosen behavioural practices. However, the issue becomes more complex, when one recognizes that the others are not merely passive complementary being, but active subjects that are probably exercising and exploring new existential, cognitive and behavioural possibilities (either in a ludic way or not).

Without physical referential provided by the tactile contacts, users experience a space of possibilities, breaking the "bonds" derived from the presentification of the actual body. Having a wide range of experimentation options, with other forms of construction of their social contacts, in a "culture of simulation" (Turkle, 1995), they have the opportunity of creating in a fragmented manner, several imaginary subjects, potencializing the expression "decentered" of the identity configuration, becoming more distant from references previously used, such as the sameness, the continuous and evolutive character of the unique identity, and the gradual building of it, based on one's life history from a linear perspective.

As a result, there is the creation of characters who may or may not correspond with parts of the identity created from the offline world, and will act in accordance with the features selected, and will connect with other virtual beings that travel in the same environment. Being protected by the anonymity, the users can design fantasies and desires that will meet their most intimate needs, maintaining ephemeral contacts or even lasting contacts with other subjects. In other words, in the interactional platforms based on textual/synchronous communication the users become one or more of the possible identities, moving freely in accordance with the contingencies and their own will, experiencing new and different situations through a quick and exchanging succession of aspects and features of themselves. So, there is the possibility for the user, without obligations, and in a playful way, to experience a kind of relaxation from vigilance and constant monitoring that comes from the "disciplinary power", pointed out by Michel Foucault (1977), and experience a temporary removal of the representational attributes and characteristics, usually associated with the identity experienced in the offline world.

Interesting to note that this feature set closer to the description of Augé (1995, p. 103) on the experience possible the subject in a "non-place": "Subjected to a gentle form of possession, to which he surrenders himself with more or less talent or conviction, he

tastes for a while - like anyone who is possessed - the passive joys of identity-loss and the more active pleasure of role-playing". Thus, there would be a certain "pleasure", even if temporarily, in the fact of "letting go the chains" of identity references built and supported by biological experiments, historical and social experiences in the offline world.

There would be, in this sense, the experience of a process of "controlled depersonalization", verified in the construction and experience of online identities as the pure expression of ludic and pleasant exploratory experiences, which could prove to be extremely beneficial both in the sociological sense, as claimed by Augé (1995), as in the psychological sense, as recommended by Laing (1969).

> "One should know the social risks if one makes a break with social reality: if one begins deliberately to make a systematic attempt not to be the *self* that everyone takes one to be, to escape from this identity by playing at not being there, by being anonymous, or incognito, adopting pseudonyms, saying one is dead, saying one is nobody because one´s body does not belong to oneself" (Laing, 1969, p. 37).

It is noteworthy, that the words of Laing (1969) mean a prescription, seeking the psychological well-being of the individual.

Another aspect to be highlighted is that a brief excursion into the scientific literature[2] shows that these perspectives seem to reflect the issue of multiple identities as a phenomenon that would have its manifestation mainly caused by something that falls outside the control and the will of the individual. Whether it is a response to traumatic issues deeply rooted in the labyrinths of personality, or for purely social determinants, such visions reinforce the idea that the various facets of possible experiences were being imposed "from outside to the inside", considering the individual, in principle, in a situation of passivity.

So, what is seen is the evidence of circumstances in which the individual "would give" or "would lend", most often unconsciously and unintentionally, his bodily constitution to be inhabited and used, temporarily, by other identities. Conversely, the users of the interactional platforms based on textual/synchronous communication are placed in an

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[2] Let us see what the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th edition DSM-IV) says, about the topic (300.14) - Dissociative Identity Disorder (formerly multiple personality disorder): "[...] Each personality state, may be experienced as if it has a distinct personal history, self-image, and identity, including a separate name. Usually, there is a primary identity that carries the individual's given name, and is passive, dependent, guilty, and depressed. The alternate identities frequently have different names and characteristics that contrast with the primary identity (for example, are hostile, controlling, and self-destructive). Particular identities may emerge in specific circumstances and may differ in reported age and gender, vocabulary, general knowledge, or predominant affect". As we can see, there is clearly the idea of lack of control by individuals in these demonstrations.

extremely active position, as these developments are not only made otherwise through the creation and insertion, in a conscious way, of the various possible identities in the online environment. Thus, it is not their bodies that are occupied by other autonomous identities, but the users overtake and use other bodies (built virtually) to exercise other behavioural possibilities, and this is done in a consciously and controlled way.

In parallel, we can also think that, in the dynamics observed in the real environment, the performance of various roles would be predetermined and closely entwined, where the user is "tied up" and impelled to follow them and represent them in sequence (for example, the role of father, son, uncle, teacher etc.), fitting, in most cases, their behaviours in certain social circumstances and the expectations created by these respective roles. The ideas carried out for Goffman (1969) give support to this specific understanding:

> "When an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it. Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he must do both. Further, if the individual takes on a task that is not only new to him but also unestablished in the society, or if he attempts to change the light in which his task is viewed, he is likely to find that there are already several well-established fronts among which he must choose" (Goffman, 1969, p. 27).

However, in online interactional platforms based on textual/synchronous communication, there wouldn´t be, initially, predetermined roles to be followed, since, conversely, the user would be the one who would determine and format the different roles (linked to the chosen identities), and its insertion sites on the web, constructed within the social virtual spaces. Thus, what emerges is a sort of expansion of opportunities to experience the multiplicity of selves, either by the acceleration of the change of experienced roles, by the simultaneity of the "parallel existences," or by the stronger awareness of their roles representations. Hence, this paper proposes an extension of the concept of "successive identifications", appointed by Maffesoli (1990) to characterize the situation (common in contemporary times) of the frequent change of the faces of the self to the notion of "parallel identifications", which in this paper is regarded as more appropriate to capture the experiential practices outlined.

Another question becomes relevant here: why such users feel stimulated to create multiple and alternative identities that bring characteristics apart from those present in their everyday offline lives? Considering as a most ordinary answer, it happens simply

because they can do it, or because there are a number of social and technical factors (possibility of living the experience anonymously, lessening of social-behaviour demands, relativisation of space-time references, freedom to choose nicknames and representative features) promoted and made available by the communication environment that, to some extent, suggests that practice. At the same time, we can assume that the facility provided by the environment for the representation of multiple roles, according to the will or desire of the users, would, in principle, have the feature of enabling and promoting the learning of the various aspects linked to the attributes of the chosen identity, since the human symbolic ability allows the acquisition of predictive information, without going through the learning processes by direct and real experience. In this sense, those users who, for example, had shy and introverted behaviours and characteristics, could exploit, in an instructive way, characters and a more acceptable way of acting socially.

Thus, the features chosen to compose the virtual identity can provide elements that help the users to deal with difficult situations in the offline world, in which they often encounter. This creation may seek an "improved version of themselves", where certain attributes are emphasized to compensate or complement psychologically existing aspects of their daily lives, especially those related to a weakened sense of self-image, as claimed by the studies of Sherry Turkle (1995), in her famous book "*Life on the screen*".

Through these created identities, and the relationships built from them, users have the opportunity to experience and deal with the events in a less traumatic way, promoting the possibility of an increased self-esteem. It is implied that the expressive nature of the online environment may encourage some people to develop some social skills (for example, experience social dialogue with other people, face anxiety of social situations, practice social rituals of approach, departure, etc) and - in specific situations - to provide even the first experiences of these behaviours in a social arena.

The possibility of exploring new social and behavioural aspects, of "seeing certain situations with new eyes", is another evident reason to create virtual identities, and undergo experiences, that would make it difficult one to have access to. The practice of experiencing fantasies in the most diverse ways, without barriers and social judges routinely present in the social life offline, fosters a unique situation, and at the same time favours learning, as a result of the lens enlargement, and the focus of analysis on the various situations. Thus, the easiness for the expression of transgressive acts may represent, for some users, the unique possibility of experiencing "the opposite" of their

daily behavioural habits, as manifested, for example, moving from a personality structure characterized by a few practices, to a personality structure characterized by the excess of these same practices, as claimed by Maffesoli (1993).

However, the users are not always deliberately, seeking to exercise and uncover repressed aspects of personality, or learning new social skills, or "procedures" of behaviour, necessary for their development and personal growth. There are those situations where the composition of the virtual identity is only intended to give the opportunity to experience the entertaining aspects of the situation, leading, thus, to an indirect form of learning, not reflected, not deliberated.

In general, what is perceived is that the experiences derived from the creation of alternate identities - that travel around online platforms based on textual/synchronous communication - give users an expansion of the emotional and perceptive universe, associated with the offline world, beyond the occasional occurrence of existential concerns and personal transformations. Thanks to the multiple levels and perspectives - made possible by these experiences - the users have the opportunity to understand a little of the psychological and social dynamics, that comes up (1) in the assumption of certain postures, or (2) behavioural procedures practiced and experienced from the adoption of different roles. Of course, this aspect is not exclusive of these interactional online platforms, but can be expressed in a less threatening, and more manageable way, by the users who will experience it in this environment.

Finally, considering another way of analysis, an assumption could be considered: that the different identities would act or behave according to the expectations about them. Thus, for the identity built with aggressive characteristics, for example, one would usually believe that - in virtual relations - gestures or hostile behaviour would be performed; which would show, in a sense, a stability of behavioural tendencies, and consequently a similarity and regularity in the representation of the roles created, using those experienced in FTF relations as comparative benchmarks. Otherwise, we may think that the practice of creating multiple identities (and their representations) would not be limited to a simple appropriation of certain styles of conversation using the network, since they could acquire their own characteristics and borders, close or not to the FTF identity references.

## 4. Final Thoughts

According to the above reflections, this paper verifies that the online environment, somehow, increases the possibilities of expression, of performance and control of the roles played by the users in the "many lives" represented by the variety of built up identities. This situation, indeed, is not displaced from the offline world, since the possibility of experiencing multiple virtual identities is regarded as inserted in the practice of multiple roles in the various aspects of everyday life. However, the point is that the subject plural structure would be characterized and accentuated its expression, not only by the representation of different roles accomplished in a sequential manner - agreeing to the variety of scenarios and lived moments, through a continuously ebb and flow on the attribute characterization process - as commonly found in FTF contacts, but also by the chance to experience different roles (with their respective characterizations) simultaneously, decentralized and not hierarchical, increasing, thus, the exploratory experiences of the self.

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