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WPLYW TECHNOLOGII CYFROWYCH NA KSZTAŁTOWANIE SIĘ LUDZKIEJ TOŻSAMOŚCI W CHINACH

IMPACT OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ON SHAPING HUMAN IDENTITY IN CHINA

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość, technologie cyfrowe, Internet, zdrowie psychiczne, media społecznościowe.

Keywords: identity, digital technologies, internet, mental health, social media.

Streszczenie

We wczesnych fazach Internetu był on traktowany jedynie jako narzędzie służące do komunikacji. Dziś tego rodzaju sieć globalna nie tylko kształtuje się w nową formę życia społecznego, ale także powoduje ogromne zmiany w stylu życia, dlatego też Internet niewątpliwie ma i będzie miał wpływ na rozwój jednostek. W świecie wirtualnym ludzie mogą kształtować swoją tożsamość w dowolny sposób, ale nie jest to coś pozbawione niebezpieczeństwa. W artykule skupiono się na obrazie siebie i tożsamości młodych ludzi w dobie współczesnych mediów, a także na trudnościach, jakie napotykać w procesie konstruowania tożsamości.

Abstract

At the early stages of the Internet, it was only considered to be a communication tool. Nowadays, this network not only shaped itself into a new form of social life, but also brought about great changes in lifestyle. This is why, the Internet certainly has an impact on individual's development. In the virtual world, people can shape their identity into whatever they want but it does not come without dangers. This article focuses on the self-image and identity of the youth in the modern media era and dilemmas they face in the process of identity construction.

Introduction

The Internet is an inseparable part of everyday life for younger generations (people who were born approximately after 1990). The widespread usage of social media (and computers in general) makes the youth develop a kind of Internet Addiction Disorder which affects the shaping process of their personal identity. Identity consists of certain unique character qualities of an individual or a group, it also includes the awareness of the social position that people belong to and role they play as a member of the society. Many modern media users depend on the media emotionally, to the extent that it generates a sense of loneliness in the real life and creates confusion between virtual and real roles that they play. The following examples will be focused on how the self-image of the youth in the modern media era is affected by digital technologies and what kind of dilemma the youth face in the process of identity construction.

The self-image on the social media

It is reported that the amount of people who use Sina Weibo, Redbook and Tiktok (social media websites similar to Facebook and YouTube) reached 5.16 million in 2019 and 80% of the active users are teenagers and young adults. When interacting with others online, one can judge whether the person meets one's requirements for being friends by browsing through their posts on the Internet and viewing the comments they made. Users can fill their profile on Weibo with information to introduce themselves. For example, to show off their job, hobbies and so on, which provides others with easily accessible information about them. This, however, creates two particular problems.

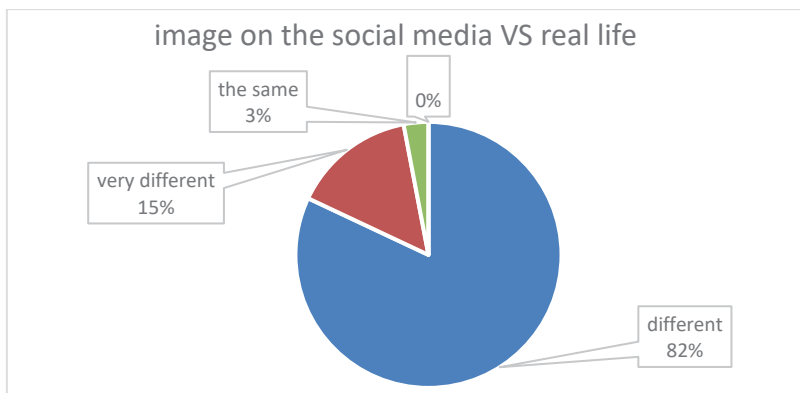
The first problem is that interpersonal communication skills of young people are worsening. Everything is available online so asking questions and making friends in real life becomes more difficult. Cyberspace provides users with means to construct their image through online presentation. Individuals can project their self-image through the content they share and make on the Internet. Thanks to that, individuals can be found by strangers with the same interests or hobbies. It is extremely easy to make friends online and on one hand that is a good thing. However, on the other hand it cripples the real-life communication skills and creates issues with self-image. It is possible that an outgoing and talkative person online would be very shy and quiet in the offline situations. People who were born between 1990 and 2003 stated that they can find people with similar or even the same interests through the production and dissemination of pictures and short videos. When asked about the reasons for this, they said

that people with similar interests will find and watch their videos by their own accord¹. In this way they can build a community of like-minded people really quickly.

The second problem is that with the help of the Internet, the youth can play the role they had always wanted but could not play in real life. Individuals perform selective identity on the social media for two intentions, to depict themselves in a way that is congruent with their ideal-self and to cater the online audience. Some critical remarks and articles are showing that the virtual self of college students is one they do not dare to express offline. To a certain extent, the process of virtual image construction affects the creation of the self-image. It is easy to see how one is perceived online or even assume a completely different personality. From the psychological perspective, the feeling of inadequate and dissatisfaction lead to reverse image². In extreme cases, people who are kind and cultured in real life can act like barbarians using vulgar language in the cyberspace. It is the freedom of the new media that gives users a possibility to perform and express themselves with a simple account login. It removes the limitations that are present in real life such as age, gender and education.

The question of “whether your friends on Weibo are consistent with their image in real life” 82 people chose different, 15 people chose very different and only 3 people chose the same (100 people in total).

Interviewee 1: I seldom share my life on Weibo, I don’t like to show off in real life too.



¹ Yin Jinfeng, Jiang Shuhui, *The Construction of Identity of Rural Youth in the Production of Network Short Video*, China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House 2020, DOI:10.15897.

² K. Stanton, S. Ellickson-Larew, D. Watson, *Development and validation of a measure of online deception and intimacy*, “Personal Individual Differ” 2016, 88, p. 187–196.

Interviewee 2: I want to be seen as perfect on Weibo, I spend some time to polish the short videos that I take. I want to share something different from my real life.

From the research among the youth it is observable that the characters created by users on the social media sites are different from their image in real life.

Interviewee 1: In real life people have to follow the unspoken rules so I can't express some opinions or thoughts. But I don't need to be concerned about it on Weibo because we are strangers on this platform, I can express the real me. So, the image of me in the real life and Weibo are different.

Interviewee 3: There is a big gap between Weibo and real life, for example, my classmate always looks gloomy in real life but he is always cheerful on Weibo.

When asked whether the Weibo username is their real name, 87 people have chosen "No", which shows the desire for remaining anonymous on the Internet. Wang³ once concluded this phenomenon as identity deception. Users are known to be deceptive, for instance about their name, gender or age. Online anonymity provides users with a comfortable atmosphere of expression. Users don't have to worry about making a bad impression on others due to improper words and phrasing.

The differences of online and offline self-image

In the virtual community, apart from similar hobbies and interests, there are also troubles and problems that make individuals gather together. It is considered to be unnatural when one is not married at 30 years old in China. One of the interviewees (interviewee 4) is 30 years old and unmarried yet. She said that in real life, people around her think that it is her fault. The self-image imposed on her by the society is "leftover woman", a derogatory term in China used to refer to unmarried woman who are 30 years old or above. Because of this, she is anxious and thinks that she should devote more time to finding a boyfriend rather than her job. Contrary to the real life, she got comforted and acquired support from strangers on the Internet. From the videos and thoughts shared by others, she realized that it is common and do not need to worry about this problem that much. The identity that she constructed on the Internet is a "new-girl". Always an example for others to focus on the job and self-improvement while suffering the complaints from the relatives about her marriage.

³ G.A. Wang, H. Chen, J. Xu, *Automatically detecting criminal identity deception: an adaptive detection algorithm*, "IEEE Trans Syst Man Cybern Part A: Syst Hum" 2006, 36, p. 988–999.

Interviewee 4: I just keep silent during the family gatherings because they don't understand me, I also can't accept their opinions. But I can express myself on the social media sites and attract people holding the same opinions as me.

There are two trends about the identity construction in the media era. The first one is to extend the lives on the Internet so that other users can understand them better by, for example, sharing some important moments. This is almost the same as in real life. The second and common one is to reconstruct the identity by taking advantage the anonymity feature of social media that allows users to reshape themselves without any concern. For example, an introverted people can be talkative on the internet. Users reconstruct their own identity and want to get the acceptance and confirmation from others.

Group identity on the Internet

Social media is an indispensable part in the youth's social lives. the youth use the social media to build new peer affiliations, manage existing relationships and informed about social activities⁴. Users are often divided into different groups according to their attitudes towards something that happened recently, peers synchronize the perception of shared context in the social media group. In the process of discussion, they can change their stances at any time, thus changing the group they belong to. The users' attitudes towards a certain event always change along with opinions of other members, which is called conformity. This is especially visible in China because people here generally do not like conflict and do not want to stand out. When members of the group share content, the other peers of that group will develop synchronized affinity towards the content⁵. Group identity is a part of individual self-identity. Some participants of my research from less-populated areas are trying to find groups that match their attributes by embracing the equality and anonymity that the virtual space gives them.

Interviewee 1: We have a group chat to talk with each other and share videos. Even though we are far away in real life, we are always connected with each other on the Internet. I belong to this group, friends in this group always have the same opinions as me.

⁴ D. Boyd, *Why Youth Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life*, MacArthur foundation series on digital learning – youth, identity, and digital media, Vol. 7641, MIT Press, 2007, Cambridge, 1–26.

⁵ A.M. French, *Let's meet offline: A mixed-method approach exploring new trends in social networking*, "Information technology & People" 2017, 4, p. 946–968.

From this interview, we can see that this interviewee belongs in this group on an emotional level. The youth from smaller towns project their social roles into video production seeking emotional acceptance. In the cyberspace communities, users tend to join the group that matches their core values and emotions. It is different from real life because in the everyday life people are often unable to choose their surroundings. Classmates and family can be used as an example. While it is possible to dislike them, it is not exactly easy to stay away from them.

Social recluses

There is a progressive phenomenon of social reclusiveness that can be observed especially among young men. Zhainan (宅男) or respectively Zhainü (宅女) for women, are people who are usually socially awkward and prefer to communicate with other people online. Most of the time, they stay at home playing video games and are heavily involved in Internet culture. In recent years it is very easy to develop this kind of addiction because modern smartphones have powerful processors that enable gaming and Internet browsing on the go. It is especially visible in China where mobile games and video streaming apps are becoming more and more popular. In most extreme cases, some of them may completely give up on real social life and use fictional characters from their favourite games or other works of fiction as virtual girlfriends or boyfriends. According to the research of Wang Donghui, social recluses are starved for affection and are using virtual world as means of escapism. His article pointed out that among 14 TV series that scored 9.8 on Douban (a TV series commentary app), half of them are about friendship and romance.

Conclusion

As we can from the examples above, abundance of Digital Technologies and being constantly connected to the World Wide Web have great effect on shaping human identity. There is a great pressure on individuals to appear perfect on the Internet as well as peer pressure to act like a civilised person and a good citizen. Some people crumble under this pressure and become social recluses that reject socially acceptable norms and behaviours. When researching emerging digital technologies, researchers should not forget about the effects on mental health and personality of people.

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