

## Virtual social networks: Spaces of socialization and definition of identity

### Las redes sociales on-line: Espacios de socialización y definición de identidad

**Annachiara Del Prete<sup>1\*</sup>, Silvia Redon Pantoja<sup>2</sup>**

Centro de Investigación para la Educación Inclusiva (EduInclusiva), Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Valparaíso, Chile

\* [annachiara.delprete@gmail.com](mailto:annachiara.delprete@gmail.com)

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#### Background

The real world is not exempt from the virtual, the real and the virtual represent overlapping planes; the virtual is what is not so tangible or presential (Calvillo Ríos, & Jasso Velázquez, 2018), what is opposed to the here and now and lends itself to fluidity and change, characteristics that, in today's society, seem to take precedence over stability (García, 2012). Thus, if we analyze the complex nature of human relations through virtual environments and social networks, in particular, we discover two planes of reality between which relations of participation or projection are established (Portillo Fernández, 2016), in such a way that the use of the virtual and specifically of the Internet and its environments, always moves away from a utilitarianism of tools and becomes an experiential act, where the subject inhabits, defines himself, relates to, and becomes one or more identities that inhabit the network.

Nevertheless, far from representing a free space, of deconstruction of the corporal ballasts (Haraway, 1984), of the roles and mandates of the culture and the prevailing ideology, the cyberspace can become a place of reproduction of fashions, tendencies, ideals and beliefs, that gets to limit, inhibit and censor positions and thoughts, with the only purpose of obtaining social acceptance or validation (Guedes, et al., 2016; Perez, Rumoroso, & Brenes, 2009). The price of this eagerness to seek consensus on the part of the other, may consist in an excessive vulnerability of the self, in an escalation of competitiveness with others, in a logic stimulated by the overlapping of new environments and technologies, subject to cycles of increasingly voracious over-expectation (Borges, & García, 2017).

#### Aims

In order to help clarify the complex dynamics generated in social networks and their influence on the construction of the subject, this study aims to identify the mechanisms that influence the construction of adolescents' online identities, their ways of relating to and recognizing themselves in others, in order to recognize the attitudes and behaviors that regulate them.

#### Method & Procedures

In this article we report the analysis of the speeches from 32 interviews and two focus groups conducted with high school students (between 12 and 16 years old) that respond to a qualitative methodology from a hermeneutic epistemology. Both techniques, anchored in the conversation, followed a thematic protocol articulated in the following categories: identification and situated speech, initiation, frequency and permanence in the OLSN, most used platforms, stories linked to conflict and exclusion, stories linked to gender discrimination, sense of belonging, and configuration of profiles. The selection criteria of the informants integrated variables of homogeneity: age; region, students and of heterogeneity: gender, social class, academic performance, to identify the mechanisms that influence the construction of on-line identities of the adolescents and in the form of relating to the other.

The large quantity of texts resulting from the interviews and focus groups were organized with the assistance of the Atlas T software. In the analysis phases, at first an open codification was made, seeking to synthesize and express the mechanisms that influence the construction of the on-line identities of adolescents, through the concept form. In a second phase, through reflection and review of the literature, these codes were categorized into five matrix categories.

#### Results & discussion

From the discourses analysed, it can be seen how the acceptance and recognition of others represent the mechanisms that most condition adolescents when it comes to relating in the network and how these influence in a significant way the

(re)definition of their subjectivity. This subjectivity is shaped by the demands of an ever more demanding audience, which can limit the freedom of gestures, opinions and specifically the autonomy of an autonomous morality. Together with acceptance and recognition, what most conditions adolescents in their subjective construction and in their relationships is the need to belong and to be accepted, a need that is lived under pressure from the prevailing value mandates, which impose a high value on the audience and on consensus.

The contribution of our study has been to observe how social networks can leave their utopian promise of deconstructed and neutral space, and act as a continuation of any other social context, becoming a place in which one must try to assert oneself as an individual and dare to go against the current. For a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms that influence the construction of online identities and the way of relating to others, it would be necessary to observe, through virtual ethnography, the personal profiles that adolescents create on social network platforms. For future research it would be important to reveal the dynamics.

### Conclusion

Among the most outstanding conclusions of our work we find that virtual social networks represent for adolescents, a fundamental element to define themselves and identify themselves as subjects; however, the construction and definition of network identity depends on and requires the acceptance and recognition of others, often inducing a subjectivity molded to the demands of an ever more demanding audience, which can limit the freedom of gestures and opinions.

**Keywords:** adolescence, identity, internet qualitative analysis, on-line social networks

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