

The Problem of Alienation as a Result of Personality Transformation in Cyberspace

Oksana Tur,¹ Viktoriia Shabunina¹ and Viktoriia Dobrovolska²

¹Kremenchuk Mykhailo Ostrohradskyi National University, Pershotravneva str., 20, bldg. 3,
Kremenchuk, 39600, Ukraine

²National Academy of Managerial Staff of Culture and Arts, Lavrska str., 9, bldg. 15, Kyiv,
01015, Ukraine

Abstract

The article examines the problem of personality alienation in the modern information space. The authors note that Internet users face a change in self-identification in cyberspace. This creates and strengthens alienation between people, as well as dramatically changes their basic values, ideals, and assessments. Moreover, this causes the phenomenon of Internet addiction. The sociological survey conducted by the authors has supported the hypothesis that Internet addiction can occur not only in adolescence. Middle-aged people can also undergo a transformation of their personality.

Keywords: *Information society, cyberspace, virtuality, the problem of alienation, personality transformation, Internet addiction.*

1. Introduction

The cultural and information space of a society is changing rapidly and substantially. Due to Internet technologies all the aspects of a social system improve the methods of work to a considerable extent. Variety of communication codes and their number increase right along. The state of affairs shows complication of social life, in which a person assumes new roles and expresses his/her concern about isolation, alienation and psychological dependence on information technology. The expansion of the World Wide Web in various spheres of human life have caused intensification of searching, collecting, processing and exchanging the information. This indicates of the increasing spread of information technology capable of exerting its multi-vector powerful influence on a person and transforming him/her. The information society generates such phenomena as “virtual personality”, “virtual life”, “Internet addiction”, “cyber disorder”, “cyberphilia”, etc. At the same time, the concept of the information society (the “Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society”) is recognized as a

guideline for the development of many countries around the world. Therefore, the aim of the article is a comprehensive analysis of the transformation processes, in particular the problem of a personal alienation in cyberspace of the information society. The methodological tools of the study are conditioned by the global nature of the objects, within which the problem of a personal alienation is singled out. The methodological basis of the research is a set of general, special and specific scientific methods of studying the problem, enabling to achieve the goal. We use historical method as the basic one because it stipulates the phenomenon to be considered in its self-development under the influence of various factors. In addition, the study is based on the principles of objectivity and integrity. Owing to the set of the methods applied we have revealed a logical sequence and a great number of ways of the information society influence on a person, which cause his/her transformation. The historical-structural method is used for elucidating some peculiarities of a personality self-identification in the information society. The historical-system method is aimed at analysing the society as an integrity and the changes caused by transformation processes within it. The chronologic method is applied to establish time intervals with changes engendered by the emergence and development of information processes and technologies.

2. Formulation of the problem

The problem of alienation of an individual in the modern information space is especially acute in the context of the non-stop information technology development, the diversification of communication codes and the expansion of the Internet into various spheres of human life. The phenomenon of Internet addiction, which has a powerful impact on the human psyche and is characterized by a reduced level of individual self-control, the transformation of one's inner world, as well as a person's leaving from reality for virtual reality, is of particular concern now.

3. Analysis of last research and publications

The nature and key features of the information society were the matter of a great number of scientific researches in the modern humanities. In the 1980s – early 1990s, there were lack of the articles on the theoretical and methodological aspects of researching the Internet and its integrated impact on the society. The thing is that the Internet in a modern sense took shape in the early 1990s. At the turn of the XX – XXI centuries D. Bell (Bell, 1999), J. Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 2000), V. Inozemtsev (Inozemtsev, 2000), M. Castells (Castells, 2000), W. Kogan (Kogan, 1991), J. Naisbitt (Naisbitt, 2005), A. Touraine (Touraine, 1996), and many

others devoted their scientific works to the analysis of general principles of information society development.

N. Berdyaev (Berdyaev 1989), H. Blumenberg (Blumenberg, 1993) and the others considered the problems of the global network as a component of the technosphere.

The researches of A. Yeryomenko (Yeryomenko, 2000) and D. Ivanov (Ivanov, 2004) throw light on the peculiarities of computerization of the modern society. When dealing with the problems of information technology genesis and development, the researchers note that the technology penetrate into all spheres of public activities, change the worldview of people and an individual, transform the settled world, thus creating a new information environment for human being – the information society.

4. Formulating the purpose of the article

The purpose of the article is a comprehensive analysis of the problem of individual alienation in cyberspace of the information society to identify such behavioural aspects of the individual that would indicate the presence or probability of occurrence of the traits / qualities / criteria of the Internet addiction.

5. Main material

One of the competent social thinkers and researchers of the present, the Spaniard M. Castells believes that a new type of the social system is networked one. He proves the leading role of the computerized information communication lines, which start penetrating the society in all directions. He surmises that the global society is being formed. Not dominance of information or knowledge, but change in the direction of their use is the most important feature of such a society. As a result, global “network” structures occupy the leading place in people’s lives supplanting the former forms of dependence (Castells, 2000: 93). The researcher concludes that networks are a new social morphology of modern communities, and the spread of “network” thinking is a defining characteristic of everyday life because new information technology, especially computer one, becomes not just important, but basic one.

An American political scientist Zbigniew Brzeziński shares M. Castells’ opinion concerning the role of information technology. He argues that the post-industrial society becomes technetronic one, i.e., it is culturally, psychologically, socially and economically formed under the technology and electronics impact, especially in the computer and communications

branches (Brzeziński, 2001). A. Chugunov notes that the technetronic revolution leaves its mark on the nature of a figurative perception of reality; traditional family and intergenerational ties are broken off; social and cultural life becomes fragmentary despite growing trends towards global integration (Chugunov, 2007).

Most researchers of the modern society point out that a new type of the reality based on computerization is created quite actively today. Virtual reality is a new artificial technological environment that has a powerful impact on the human psyche and can be used like a real one by a person. Today many scientists discuss a prospect of spreading the phenomenon of computer-obsessed individuals and a person's leaving from reality for virtual reality where many pseudo-types of human activity make a person to reject a real social environment.

The term "virtual" derived from Latin was actively used in the middle of the 20th century. It meant the mysterious hidden power and the way of existence of second-order things within more complex and perfect things. Nowadays there are two approaches to understanding the meaning of "virtual". The first one functionates within the traditional natural science in which the meaning of "virtual" is revealed through opposing ephemerality of the infinitesimal object movements or particle existence periods to the standard spatial and temporal indices of reality. In this sense the term "virtuality" is used in quantum physics. The heart of the second approach is in opposing the illusory nature of the objects created by computer graphics ("imaginary world created in the imagination of a user") to the reality of the material ones (Menchikov, 1998: 170).

The theory of virtual society is based on the study of the phenomenon of virtual reality. According to A. Buhl, the author of the virtual society theory, computers have turned from the simple electronic computing machines into universal machines for the mirror worlds creation, owing to development of virtual reality technologies. In every segment of public life there are "parallel" worlds where virtual analogues of real mechanisms of society reproduction functionate. They are economic interactions and political actions on the Internet, communication with the characters of computer games, etc. (Buehl, 1997).

The study of the phenomenon of virtuality is still in progress, but there is no its unambiguous definition because of complexity of the virtuality nature. Despite this, scientists recognize such properties of virtuality as hypertextuality, globality, mosaicism, creativity, and anonymity (Baryshev, 2009: 45).

Cyberspace is formed under the effect of the virtuality properties combination as well as through contrasting the illusory nature of objects created by the Internet with the reality of material objects. Cyberspace is one of many forms of virtual reality. Besides, virtual reality denotes a wide range of phenomena from a film or musical composition to mirror reflection, dreams or fantasies while cyberspace clearly limits virtual reality to human-computer interaction. Speaking about the Internet as a factor of social changes one has to take into consideration its integral part – cyberspace. In the early 90s of last century its emergence caused some public life socio-cultural changes, primarily concerning economic, cultural, social, and spiritual spheres of the society. Certainly, these changes are associated with the developing of the information culture that is the ability of using information, perceiving and processing of large amounts of information, the possession of the modern technical means, methods, and technologies.

Active discussions of a technological environment impact on personal development began since the 40s of the XX century. At one time the German philosopher and sociologist M. Heidegger expressed the views that a person, surrounding himself with technical advances, not only depersonalizes the world around him, but also loses his opportunity to comprehend questionable information because of its easy accessibility (Heidegger, 1991). The researcher pays attention to the fact that “deep-rootedness” which means not only basic cultural values, but also the very human nature and the ability to think meaningfully is under the threat. The scientist recognizes that a personality loses his individuality in the technical space, dissolves somehow in the modern information world. This leads to the numbness of a person’s inner world and the loss of human nature. Later on, a state of a constant search comes; it is unattainable and unrealized in the real world. In a virtual world a person finds a kindred individuality needed at a certain period of time (self-identification can vary depending on the mood, situation, etc.). Surely, a person can perform any role, hiding beyond the mask of virtuality and increasingly destroying his personal identity.

The birth of a new person begins with a name, often it’s a pseudonym, the so-called “nick”. It is necessary to point out that the user’s culture, profession, social status, age, etc. influence the choice of the nickname. However, a person’s ability to think creatively is no less important. After all, a virtual name, unlike a real one, is chosen by the person himself; first of all, it should be original and attract attention as well as represent, characterize the owner and give some information about him. The nature of network communication encourages the most incredible

and unusual names. Besides, the image created on the Internet one can change at any time: today you are Hunter, tomorrow – Michael Jackson, and the day after tomorrow you can become Fog or a person of the opposite sex. The more powerful creative potential and courage a person has, there are the more opportunities to “create” his new individuality and deceive both others and himself. Thus, in spite of the fact that the Internet destroys many social barriers such as standard of education, financial status, and religious views, it neither solve the problem of self-determination and identity search, but on the contrary brings it to a head and makes it to be a necessary condition for existence in the Internet. The appearing of a network personality different from the real one can be explained by the fact that the network interpersonal communication provides an opportunity to show all the aspects of the many-sided “I” safely while a real communication makes it impossible very often.

It is necessary to point out that nowadays the problem of personal self-identification is the most acute in the information society. On the one hand, the information society directly nourishes the self-identification of an individual as the technical environment person, on the other hand, the virtualization generated by the person hampers this process. Thus, the self-identification of the individual is closely connected with his worldview and his social behaviour as well as with the problems of personal development and relationships. Self-identification is a mechanism of psychological protection of “I” from the external unfavourable environment and a centre of forming a person’s ability to self-development. The ties of self-identification with social stereotypes are also obvious. It is a kind of a bridge between personal and social things. Self-identification as one of the most important mechanisms of an individual socialization shows up in identification of an individual with a group or community, favours the active assimilation of behaviour stereotypes or patterns, which are peculiar to members of a certain group, and adoption of the norms, goals, social roles, attitudes, and ideals of the group as his own ones.

Nowadays researchers study the correlation between real and virtual personalities and find out the reasons for their division. These reasons are the most clearly manifested during the virtual “gender reassignment”. The phenomenon, when a person pretends to be a member of the opposite sex, is very common on the Internet now. A virtual sex change is associated with various factors, and not necessarily with homosexuality or transvestism. Pointing to the causes of this phenomenon, J. Suler considers “gender reassignment” just to be a new experience, which is possible due to anonymity of online communication. It can be also explained by a person’s desire to gain any new experience. Cyberspace provides an unprecedented opportunity

to experiment, give up experimentation if necessary, and then start experimenting again. Gender reassignment is a very simple action in it [Suler, 1996: 95]. Such “identity experimentation” provides a new experience that can lead to predominance of a virtual self-presentation over a real one.

As a matter of fact, any aggressive impulses and unacceptable motivations, which are forbidden in reality, are possible to be expressed on the Internet due to a virtual self-presentation. In this case, an individual loses control over them and gets used to impunity in many cases of their manifestation. Adaptation gradually grows into addiction, which can lead to the phenomenon of Internet addiction disorder. This phenomenon can become the “plague of the XXI century”, because the speed of its spread can be compared with the spread of the Internet itself. According to researchers, about 10% of worldwide users are Internet addicts today (Baryshev, 2009: 83). Computer or Internet addiction disorder is said to occur when a person considers life in computer games and the Internet better than in the real world, spending up to 18-20 hours a day in virtual reality. We can define Internet addiction disorder as a constant acute and obsessive desire to access the Internet while offline, and an absolute reluctance or disability to exit the Internet while online.

This phenomenon was firstly mentioned by American researchers in the late 1980s. In 1995 New York psychiatrist and psychopharmacologist Ivan Goldberg put the term “Internet Addiction Disorder” (IAD) into scientific use. He meant no medical disorder like alcohol or drug addiction, but behaviour with a reduced level of self-control that threatened to displace normal life (Federwisch, 1997). Further studies have made it possible to formulate the criteria by which presence of Internet addiction disorder in humans can be confirmed. Among them are the following ones:

1. The purpose of being online (to distract from everyday problems, feelings of social uselessness, helplessness, anxiety or fear of new events.
2. The constant desire to enter the network against the background of a pleasant anticipation of the next session or memories of being on the Internet.
3. Reducing the significance of meeting the physiological needs of eating (up to complete refusal) or sleeping for the sake of staying online longer.
4. The onset of irritability and low mood when logging out, the desire to enter the network.

5. The sharp response to remarks or criticism of other people, including relatives, regarding the time spent in the network.

6. Ignoring family and professional responsibilities, social life etc; unwillingness to change the type of activity.

As we can see, all the criteria presuppose a steady alienation of an individual from other members of society. Although an addicted user can understand the severity of the problems caused by overuse of the Internet (family problems, neglect of professional responsibilities, feeling of uselessness), it is extremely difficult for him to control and change the situation. Therefore, we are often faced with an uncritical attitude to the situation, as well as a complete denial of any problems: an Internet addicted person does not admit the seriousness of his propensity to online communication, rejecting the fact of his alienation.

To achieve the goal of the presented research, namely to analyse the problem of an individual alienation in cyberspace of the information society, a sociological study was conducted. It is aimed at identifying such behavioural aspects of an individual that would indicate the presence or probability of occurrence of the traits / qualities / criteria of Internet addiction. The survey was chosen as the main method.

The survey was conducted at Kremenchuk Mykhailo Ostrohradskyi National University (Ukraine). About 500 full-time and part-time humanities and technical students as well as their family members took part in the survey. The total number of the respondents was 1,000 persons. According to the data of the survey, most of them have direct access to the Internet. The number of people who have regular access to the Internet and are frequent users of social networks is distributed by the age groups as follows:

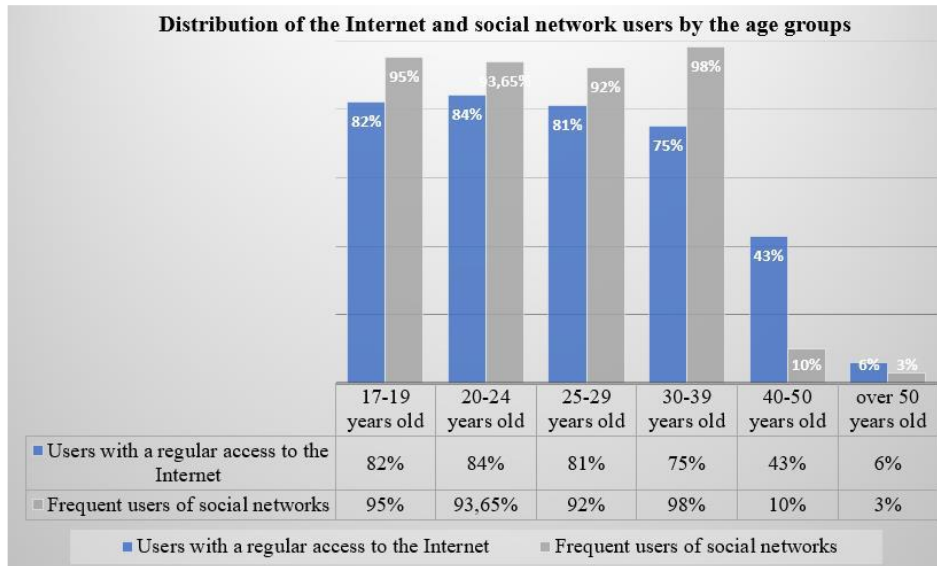


Figure 1: Distribution of the Internet and social network users by the age groups

In accordance with the survey, 17-19-aged young people have a regular access to the Internet and are frequent users of social networks. They are leading in the survey. Interestingly, that the number of 30-39-aged regular Internet users is less than the number of previous groups respondents and amount 75%, while they are the most active users of social networks (98%). This fact allows us to conclude that 17-19-aged young people, having gained access to cyberspace, are maximally involved in online communication, getting pleasure from it and gradually becoming addicted to it by the age of 30-39.

We have also received interesting indicators of the time spent by the respondents online:

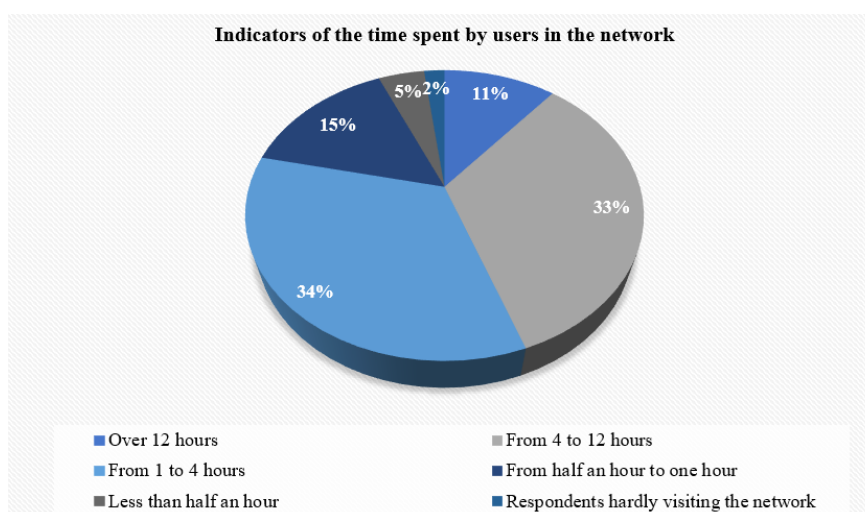


Figure 2: Indicators of the time spent by users in the network

Analysing the survey results, we can state that a large number of respondents (44.5%) spend more than 4 hours a day online. The main purposes of Internet use are presented in the Table 1.

Table 1 The main purposes of using the Internet

The purpose of Internet use	Users with a regular access to the Internet Frequent users of social networks	
	17-24 years old	over 25 years old
To get a necessary information and broaden the horizons	36 %	79 %
To communicate	40 %	12 %
To study	20 %	7 %
To have fun, to relax and spend a leisure time	38 %	45 %
To get news about world political, economic and cultural events, etc.	13 %	10 %
To work and make money	6 %	13 %
To buy online	2 %	8 %
To spend time without any purpose	2 %	10 %

It is curious that among the respondents there are more men than women, 637 and 363 respectively. Besides, the male Internet users are 5 times more likely to rate their online activity highly (15%) than the female users (3%). This fact allows us to suggest that men more often have or can have Internet addiction.

The results of the survey have proved that Internet addiction can occur not only in adolescence. Middle-aged people can get into conditions of their personality transformation too. In addition, such persons have a sufficient level of education. This is confirmed by the fact that 43% of the respondents who spend more than 4 hours a day online have bachelor's degree.

6. Conclusions

Thus, the beginning of the XXI century was marked by emergence of the phenomenon of complex psychosocial relations between an individual and the information environment reality. The extraordinary opportunities that a computer provides to a person, on the one hand, open a boundless field for creativity, and on the other hand, create and strengthen alienation between people, dramatically change basic values and ideals. More than half of the respondents don't imagine their leisure time without access to the Internet, and lack of it causes irritability,

anxiety and panic. Summarizing the above, we can argue that transformation of an individual in the modern information society demonstrates the decline of spirituality, the technicalization of life, the transfer of priorities to a virtual environment.

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