

# Identity-related: young people, strategies of identity and social networks

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*The social networks are activators of exponential relations and of new formulas of self-representation. For this the social networks may be considered real laboratories in which to experience different possibilities of construction and reconstruction of Self. This construction process is very common among young people, called “digital natives”; they use the social networks to define themselves and their social relationship. Today we have more and more identity-related.*

## Introduction

The concept of identity, individual or collective, nowadays is a concept necessarily fluid and open, as well as the identity itself, subject to strategies particularly articulated of transformation, adaptation and progressive development, as became fluid and open in post modernity. This articulation results from the lack, as in the pre-modern age, of certain and solid focuses with which a person can build a personal identity characterized by coherence and continuity.

The fact that contemporary identities represent a structure constantly planned and subjected to different perspectives, allows to think about the concept in terms of “strategies of identity” that the individual uses in the self-representation of himself and in the imagine that he wants to give of himself within the group or groups in which he takes part.

As Daher points out the post-modern identity is made up of “a mosaic to build and rebuild within fragmentary itineraries, continuous solicitations, alterations of cognitive maps and the continuous necessity to manage unexpected events” (Daher 2013: 127). The paths of identity structuration, that every individual experienced, are marked by uncertainty and necessity to negotiate both the structures and relations of identity repeatedly. The features of these paths, that could be defined unstable and variable, depend on elements

both particular and global, as well illustrates Bauman (1999 and 2003). As is known, according to Bauman's description, post-modern identities build on the basis of elements, images and relations variously perceived, that change in own's instruments and abilities.

In this "fluctuating" scene, the identities of individuals have difficulty to guide themselves and the research to find necessary anchor points seems to achieve in relations and in particular in virtual relations that today are available from information tools, especially for young people.

If adult identities don't represent no more a point of arrival firm and steady, but keep on undergo re-elaborations and redesigns, even more so the young people's identities, that represents by nature more a project than a reality, they should be read on the basis of variable strategies and ways open to definition and re-definition.

This constant scene of variability should be read and interpreted on the basis of the assets that young people have today in order to realize that complex network of relations and necessary experiences to give structure and perspective to relative identities strategies.

The relational and experiential dimension was completely innovated by the presence of information tools in which channels of communication have developed with a structure and reasons unknown. These new opportunities during the time have changed the same ways of relations' exercise and the Self's perception always more the result of an image reflected in the belonging community: both aspects of identity, individual and social, are less and less discernible both in the strategies and in the effects of perceptions and behavior.

The appearance of information tools in the individual and social context, by this time ten-year, gradually has defined at least four generations of young people that use these technologies in a different and intensive way, revolutionizing the perception of "relation" and "experience", and even identity construction.

### *Digital natives: four generations for four development's steps of digital media*

The issue of structural transformation of management's relationships, as the way of self-representation, is strictly linked to the approach that new generations have with technology and to the communicative use of the media they make of. This connection was the discussion topic for several studies and analyses aimed at defining generational features of these transformations.

The expression Net Generation was introduced by the economist Don Tapscot in 1998 commenting on a research, led on three hundred American teenagers. This research underlines a radical difference of behaviours and tasks

relative to previous generations. The distinguishing feature between the generation studied by Tapscot and the previous is that for the first technologies are not a problem but, to the contrary, represent an opportunity (Tapscot 2009).

It was starting with this consideration, that a few years later, the researcher Marc Prensky introduced the concept of digital natives, that in the articulation of his speech are opposed to digital immigrants. Digital natives are the young people that could be defined “mothertongue” of technologies and use them in a massive way, much more than other medium, especially news media and television. Digital immigrants, on the contrary, are those belonging to previous generations, have found technologies in the adulthood and try to exploit the potential, though staying in the “fog” of no-comprehension of mechanisms and technical structures (Prensky 2001).

But what kind of implications the invasive presence of technology in ordinary routine of young people involve? The concept of digital native implies a series of transformations that occur on behaviours, on relationships and on the mind of technology-generation. Members of the new generations are changed by media and this kind of transformation doesn't concern only behaviours and use's habits, but also the cognitive processes and the symbolic dimension. These transformations, especially the cognitive one, happen in early years of life and this is the element that characterizes it radically from previous generations. From the viewpoint of experience the main change stands on the directness of technologies, the use of which is immediate and intuitive (Riva 2014).

Examining the media's history it's obvious that the emergence of new technologies has always involved ten-years processes of change, both in the social sphere and in the cognitive dimension and symbolic of individuals; digital media on the other hand have reduced the time required for the realization of these changes, making them more rapid and radical. Not rarely, digital natives are inclined to keep out more disused media from their habits of use and consumption, because they are replaced in radical way, indeed, from new digitizing opportunities.

Depending on these general features of individual and social change it's possible to distinguish four generations of digital natives, each of which is characterized by the change of interface<sup>1</sup> used (Riva 2012).

The first generation defined text (textual interface) had access to a new low cost and quicker instrument of communication, connected to writing texts

<sup>1</sup> Interface: it means the software that could be develop from the hardware in a dependent way. The hardware is made up of physical features of technical means. For example cell phone (hardware) was subjected to different changes of connected software so with the same technical instrument we can was phone but also surf in the net and interact in the social networks.

(sms, chat, email, forum); this interface allow digital native to test new ways of communication and the creation of virtual communities free from traditional spacetime's links.

The web generation (web interface) is linked, on the other hand, to the capacity to index and assimilate a huge quantity of data, that allow to access and use a big "collective intelligence".

Relative to identity issues, on which we talked over, the social media generation (web interface 2.0) represents the creation's cornerstone of new identity strategies connected to the possibility to create and share contents within the virtual community that allow digital natives to build and control their social identity and their networks.

At last, it's possible to identify a touch generation (touch interface) made up of current children, that thanks to ease of technologies' use are opened to new communicative experiences which effects on the individual and the community are still indefinable.

### *Web 2.0: a new expressive and relational tool*

As is known the expression "web 2.0" was introduced in 2004 from the American editor O'Reilly Media to describe a new generation of internet services based on on-line collaboration and sharing between users: the age of consulting web sites is closing and it starts the age of shared spaces developed and updated from all. From the viewpoint of use and contents' distribution, web 2.0 entails two main consequences: dematerialization of contents and disintermediation. The first consequence is based on the fact that the contents are no more linked to a physical support but are free from distributions' issues; the second one is linked to the possibility to create and share own contents in an independent way compared to the traditional chain of value.

In the contest of web 2.0 several types of new services have developed, each of which makes possible different opportunities for users: expressive sites offer the possibility to create and share own contents ensuring the possibility to express oneself in autonomy and without obligations; collaborative sites create the opportunity to co-work with other users in order to reach a goal; at least, relational sites allow to present oneself and identify other users with whom establish a personal or work relation. This last type of sites has developed and involved users in an exponential way over the last years. From an operational viewpoint social networks represent a revolution based on three features: 1) the presence of a virtual space (forum) in which is possible build and "share" own profile; 2) the possibility to build a net of contacts to interact with; 3) every single knot of the net can spread other contacts and other relations' possibility.

These features make the social networks a collective space able to ensure the elaboration and the implementation of identity and relational strategies, mutually conditioning, linked to strategies of others that “attend” social network and form the net of symbolical and experiential opportunities.

### *Generation 2.0: experience and identity strategies*

What has been said so far brings to an absolutely original definition of the social networks even from a psychosocial point of view (Riva 2010): they are communicative and expressive platforms that allow user to organize both his social net and his social identity. In the first case it's about organization's action, extension and comparison of contacts and relations; in the second one we are in front of the realization of defining strategies and description of own identity.

The spread and the interiorization of opportunities of web 2.0 and social networks brought to three radical changes that, which in turn, are changing digital natives' “practices”, with important consequences upon action's strategies and contextualization of ourselves and our relationship with others.

According to Riva (2014) the first of these changes is linked to the users' role as opposed to means and contents available in it. The spectator moves from this role and from commentator to be a spectauthor and a commentauthor. Thanks to the reduction of complexity of productive process of medial contents, digital natives before being spectators are authors, so they are far from the passive spectator typical of the nine-hundred mass media.

Nowadays has developed the figure of spectator that creates and modifies contents depending on his needs of expression and of communication (Pulcini 2006). Social networks even create virtual spaces of participation, in which the user is even the author of opinions, argument's and sharing's note about information, but also contents shared by other persons that take part to interactions in the social network (Riva, Pettiti and Uggé 2007).

The second change is linked to the role and perception of the body in the communication and relations: the passage from real to virtual and from subject to object marks even, inevitably, the strategies of identity elaboration are enriching by an atonal decontextualization of perception and experiences.

That emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995) based on empathy and physicality creates between two or more subjects that interact in the real dimension subjectively, with the use of opportunities from web 2.0, loses his roots to become a sensations' mosaic, often built *ad hoc*, to share and feel some emotions rather than others, in a changing kaleidoscope of perceive Id and that one transmitted and shared with others. The mediated communication disincarnates the subject that during the interaction gives a multiplicity images of

himself, not rarely de-contestualized and re-contestualized depending on the construction of contents that you want to share.

These processes have several consequences upon digital natives in the perception of individual and social self. First of all, as notes by Riva “the virtual body parts from the identity of subject and becomes a communicative and expressive tool that could be used in a strategic way to spread an exact image of self” (Riva 2014: 56-57). These new opportunities have a central role in the identity’s development of digital native, in fact, this corporeal re-elaboration has a function and a goal both communicative and expressive. It refers to a social need to reflect in the others; this contributes to build a social identity that passes even through the corporal dimension (Confalonieri and Grazzani Gavazzi 2005). The choice of avatar<sup>2</sup> is an integral part of this strategic process of corporeal virtual reconstruction. On the one hand the choice of own avatar is an individual process dialectical that reflects the tension between perceived identity and ideal identity. To the other hand, the possibility to change this image depending on the contests and speakers with whom he relates, allow digital native to adapt his social identity to different worlds in which he interacts (Villani *et al.* 2012).

Secondly, even who receives information and suggestions on single identity, it does in a fragmentary way and especially indirectly; Riva points out: “without objectivity of physical body, the receiving subjects can build the other’s identity only in an indirect way, interpreting the messages and the images that he shares” (Riva 2014: 58).

Thirdly, “the virtual body separates itself from the subject and obtains autonomy and stability” (Ivi: 59). While in the face to face relations the construction of physical image is linked to a context temporally limited, which one that the native posts on his virtual account could be more lasting or even more evanescent depending on whether it becomes the avatar or the object of sharing, on which social networks have poor memory.

Finally, the subject can’t no more use the body and relative expressive and communicative standards to understand others’ emotions; this increases what has been defined emotional illiteracy (Goleman, 1995) that is the incapability to learn and understand own and others’ emotions.

The third change generated by web 2.0 and social networks, in the experiential dimension of digital natives, is linked to the fusion – in terms of meanings and representations – between real world (off-line) and virtual world (on-line). This fusion involves even a new kind of intimacy in public with the

<sup>2</sup> The avatar is the image used by the user of social network for represent himself within the virtual community.

boundaries' erosion between public and private. These elements spring from the particular nature of the space that digital natives live in an ever greater quantity and intensity. This is a virtual space, indeed, in which relations and contests are mixed up and they change in shared practices, and so public, actions and interactions defined private according to the rules of real life.

The progressive intensify of this boundaries' confusion creates an original space "interreality" that appears much more malleable and dynamic than the nets and the traditional social spaces, and it includes all daily experiences: digital and real, public and private.

In the particular environment of social networks, the mutual effects between real and virtual and between public and private are much more radical and evident than in the real world. They are linked to a great level of invasivity in the lives of others – real and virtual – and individuals can control it with difficulty. An example of this invasivity is the practice of tagging<sup>3</sup>, by means of users of social networks can change in public the private sphere of others, without control from them, unless they're medium's experts.

### *Connected identities*

Psychology, from Williams James, distinguished individuality – Self – in two components: Id that indicates the subject who acts and knows – Self seen inside the subject's mind; Me as product of Id's activity, aim of own and others' reflection – the Self seen from outside individuals' mind.

So far the media's influence has been examined upon the features of digital native's Id, acting on perceptions and emotions. At the same time, however, Self obtain an identity through a progressive adaptation of physical and social environment in which it stays. For this reason taking part in social networks has an effect not only on the experience but also on the identity.

Nicholas Carr, expanding McLuhan's considerations, affirms that:

In the long term the content of a medium has much less importance of medium itself in conditioning our way to think and act. As a window on the world, and on ourselves, a popular medium shape what we see and how we see it, and in the course of time, if we use it enough, it changes what we are as individuals and society (Carr 2011: 17).

<sup>3</sup> The practice of *tagging* (labelling) gives the opportunity to associate a "friend", without his will, to an image in which he is or to a text note refers to him.

The features of social networks enhance the implications of reiterate use of these medium during the time: they are at the same time windows on the world and on Self, relations' activators and shapers of collective identities. They ensure that identities of digital natives are increasingly the visible result of their connections and their on line productions.

The individual identity is increasingly connected and conditioned by social identities, which in turn, for digital natives, are the product of virtual relations and processes of multiple aggregations in different communities. The social identity can be described as "the part of self's concept of an individual resulting from the consciousness of belonging to a social group (or to social groups), and also the value and the emotive sense linked to his belonging" (Taifel 1981: 36). It's therefore evident that the social identity will never be defined in an exclusive and definitive way, especially if it's accomplished and continuously renegotiated in the light of relations and "connections" that realize and expand in the net and in the virtual spaces of social networks.

Before the beginning of media, social identities and the relative influences on the individual identities, the dimensions relative to relations and experiences were linked to a temporal and spatial contextualization. The development of Internet and his interface, made possible by web 2.0, allowed digital natives to build individual narrations that could became collective narrations with extreme facility, in witch others take part and built no more with a descriptive nature, but with a reactive and relational nature.

More specifically in digital media the subject can organize his identity in a strategically and typical way in order to give a certain image of himself. In the virtual world the digital native tries different ways of being, choosing his aspect – physical or emotional – to give prominence: the possibility to experiment is simplified by the absence of social and relational consequences in case that the image is not winning.

As Katelyn McKenna (2007) pointed out, young digital natives have familiarity with the explicit enunciation of opinions and emotions, as long as are shared in the virtual dimension: they are more willing to show their Self in the social networks because they're within a net of "friends" without a direct feedback of relations and there's no risk of disappointment or social penalty. Digital media offer the possibility to test different roles and identities: "the various expressions of identity that are online not only reflect the status of identity" as the sublet perceives, "but also give form to that identity, conditioning the perception [...] about what others think" (Palfrey and Gasser 2009: 55).

At the same time, social networks allow to others users of the net to step easily on social identity of the individual. No wonder if Galimberti talks about "enunciative intersubjectivity" to underline how the subjectivity is not free



from interactive experience of the subjects: the others with their narrations and interactions may cause effects on the subjectivity of individuals.

Connected identities are such because they are the result both of voluntary interactions and of non verifiable effects of such interactions. As Galimberti and Cilentio Ibarra underline:

The image that the author gives of himself in the online interactions is not the only result of his individual choices, but it clarifies during the interaction with other/others. It has to be considered the result of a combined action, sensitive to the features of the surrounding in which it verifies (Galimberti and Cilentio Ibarra 2007: 261).

This situation, if on the one hand can represent a resource to build such fluid and plural identities, on the other hand not rarely in the teenager creates insecurity linked to precariousness and to changeability, not always controllable from identity strategies. The risk for digital natives is to replace the future and certainties with an eternal present without relationships and securities. According to Galimberti (2011) the identity building through the virtual experience of social networks can involve, first of all, the incapability to take charge of oneself and own identity: the subjectivity becomes a shared and uncertain object difficult to replace in own identity sphere in a responsible way. But the lack of responsibility can reveal towards the other too: not having a clear vision of himself, the subject is not totally able to answer for his actions and interactions, neither to evaluate the effects on the others.

Finally, digital natives' dependence from technology can't be undervalued: it represents paradoxically a source of certainty, a place in which you have an unimaginable power control in the daily real life. For this reason Sherry Turkle notes:

Teenagers sleep with their cell phones onto [...] Technology is part of them to such an extent that it has become as phantom limb [...] All this make them clever in technology, but it implies a series of new insecurities. They take care of their friendships in the social networks but then they wonder if they're friends. They are connected to each other all day, but they're not sure having communicated (Turkle 2012: 23).

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