

Quaderni di Comunità
Persone, Educazione e Welfare
nella società 5.0

Community Notebook
People, Education, and Welfare
in society 5.0

n. 3/2023

REINVENTING UNIVERSITY.

THE DIGITAL CHALLENGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Edited by

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Iscrizione presso il Registro Stampa del Tribunale di Roma
al n. 172/2021 del 20 ottobre 2021

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Eurilink University Press Srl
Via Gregorio VII, 601 - 00165 Roma
www.eurilink.it - ufficiostampa@eurilink.it
ISBN: 979 12 80164 71 1
ISSN: 2785-7697

Prima edizione, febbraio 2024
Progetto grafico di Eurilink

È vietata la riproduzione di questo libro, anche parziale,
effettuata con qualsiasi mezzo, compresa la fotocopia

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1. MODERNITY AND IDENTITY PROCESSES ON THE LIGHT OF THE DIFFUSION OF NEW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES¹

by Giuliana Parente*

Abstract: *This paper delves into the complex interplay among identity processes, modern society, and new media. Drawing from sociological theories, it commences with an examination of identity evolution in modern industrial societies, accentuating the proliferation of roles and statuses. The advent of digital technologies introduces complexity to individual choices, nurturing a malleable identity. The narrative then pivots to the transformative influence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), ushering in a global village. The emergence of Web 2.0 and 3.0 signifies pivotal updates, fostering user-generated content and reshaping societal interactions. The ongoing shifts in socialization processes due to economic, political, and cultural changes are scrutinized, with a spotlight on the instrumental role of digital media. The intricate process of identity formation amidst evolving socialization is explored, underscoring the morphostatic and morphogenetic functions of media. The interconnected nature of online and offline identity processes is dissected, emphasizing their symbiotic communication and coexistence. In conclusion, the paper underscores the seamless exchange between online and offline identities facilitated by the portability of devices. The overarching goal of this contribution is to provide a nuanced understanding of identity dynamics, weaving together insights from sociological theories and technological developments.*

¹ Accepted October 2023 - Published December 2023.

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Keywords: identity processes, modern society, new media, online and offline.

Abstract: *Questo articolo analizza la complessa interazione tra i processi identitari, la società moderna e i nuovi media. Attingendo alle teorie sociologiche, inizia con un esame dell'evoluzione dell'identità nelle moderne società industriali, accentuando la proliferazione di ruoli e status. L'avvento delle tecnologie digitali introduce la complessità delle scelte individuali, alimentando un'identità malleabile. La narrazione fa poi perno sull'influenza trasformativa delle tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione (TIC), che inaugurano un villaggio globale. L'emergere del Web 2.0 e 3.0 rappresenta un aggiornamento cruciale, che favorisce i contenuti generati dagli utenti e rimodella le interazioni sociali. Vengono analizzati i cambiamenti in corso nei processi di socializzazione dovuti ai cambiamenti economici, politici e culturali, con particolare attenzione al ruolo strumentale dei media digitali. Viene esplorato l'intricato processo di formazione dell'identità in un contesto di socializzazione in evoluzione, sottolineando le funzioni morfostatiche e morfogenetiche dei media. Viene analizzata la natura interconnessa dei processi identitari online e offline, sottolineando la loro comunicazione e coesistenza simbiotica. In conclusione, l'articolo sottolinea lo scambio continuo tra identità online e offline facilitato dalla portabilità dei dispositivi. L'obiettivo generale di questo contributo è quello di fornire una comprensione sfumata delle dinamiche identitarie, intrecciando le intuizioni delle teorie sociologiche e degli sviluppi tecnologici.*

Parole chiave: processi identitari, società moderna, nuovi media, online e offline.

Introduction

This paper deals, from a theoretical perspective, with the problems related to the construction of social identity in the light of Computer-Mediated Communication processes.

The first section supports the thesis of Lyotard (1979) that the end of the grand narratives was able to give a unitary sense to the human experience that led to a new era characterized by the pluralism of values in the cultural and political field; as well as confrontations for the supremacy of one or the other (Eisenstadt, 2000). The second part analyses the identity processes in the postmodern era in light of the increasing social complexity and, therefore, identity fragmentation (Bauman, 2009) consequent to the increase of the social groups to which the individual can belong. In the third, we illustrate the innovations of technologies and new media in communication and belonging processes (Meyrowitz, 1985; Siemens, 2004; Jenkins; 2008). The fourth and last paragraph, examines the new socialization processes and the relationship between online and offline identity, supporting the thesis of the interoperability of identity formation systems along a continuum between real and digital.

1. Modern and post-modern society: the end of the great narratives and the birth of pluralism

One of the main characteristics of postmodern society is the weakening of the metaphysical “great narratives” (enlightenment, idealism and Marxism) that have given a unitary and global sense to reality and experience, justifying social cohesion. These narratives, which Lyotard also calls “metanarrative” or “grand narrative”, go beyond particular narratives, take on a universal character and provide legitimacy to thinking in terms of progress, or towards a path, of a positivist kind, of emancipation and development. According to Lyotard, the great narratives have the power to legitimate institutions, social practices, policies, legislation, ethics, and ways of thinking; in

other words, provide an idea to be implemented, a project. At a certain point, however, these metanarratives have lost their strength; they have shattered and left room for the emergence of plurality and differences that have multiplied the forms of knowledge (Lyotard, 1979).

Modernity, therefore, rests on the idea of progress as the emancipation of man able to exercise reason to perfect himself, the community and, in general, humanity. The postmodern condition, on the other hand, according to a definition that different authors give, is configured as the negation of this capacity of reason to clarify and believe in ultimate values that legitimize social order and make human life intelligible. The consequence of this new vision is a pluralism of values that has effects in different fields of social and political life. In this regard, already Weber in the early twentieth century formulates the idea of polytheism of values to indicate many incomparable² structures of values. With the failure of the last values, the problem of ordering different values emerges. This led to ideological clashes resulting in political, military and economic struggles characterized by cultural priorities (Eisenstadt, 2000). The pluralism of values, however, requires their continuous reinterpretation and coexistence that can only be assured by the affirmation of a democratic ethic, the basis for multicultural coexistence³.

The thought of Lyotard is opposed to that of Habermas, for which modernity is not finished but remains an “unfinished project” (Habermas, 1992). Habermas generally defends critical reason and modernity, understood as an emancipatory project. He accuses the theorists of postmodernism, first of all Lyotard, of identifying modernity with capitalist rationality and of having linked its survival to the latter. Habermas maintains that modern

² For a more in-depth look at the concept, see Kuhn (1962).

³ The concept would require a study that goes beyond the intent of this paper.

society is based on communicative rationality. In fact, the author moves away from the critical theory of Marxism to get closer to Wittgenstein's linguistics, so if the life of men is characterized by a language that allows us to communicate, work can no longer be the only category to analyse society. From here, two forms of rationality have been developed that govern and are opposed in modern society: instrumental and communicative rationality. The first introduced by Weber concerns the transformations of labour introduced by capitalism and Protestant ethics, while the latter is characteristic of modern society and allows people mutual understanding.

Returning to the pessimistic view, Lyotard considers the great theoretical systems ended and observes the affirmation of a multiplicity of languages, which are incommensurable in the Kuhnian sense of the term. This process has resulted not only in the pluralism of values but also involves an increase in atomization processes that affect social and state organization and, above all, the subject. For example, the American Marxist writer Frederic Jameson points out that contemporary Western societies are affected by the "pathology of the personality", which manifests itself in the disintegration of biographical time and the fragmentation of identity (Jameson, 1991). These reflections lead many authors to talk about the subject's disappearance to understand the state of anguish, disorientation and, in general, the malaise of man that the usual categorizations of psychology are no longer able to interpret and cure.

Following the reflections of Simmel (1890), Mead (1934), Parsons (1951) and Goffman (1956), some authors speak of "multiple identities" (Sciolla, 2010) and of "multiple affiliations" (Sen, 1999) for to underline the continuous process of social differentiation. Differentiation has been created through the birth of different communities of norms and values within the society

itself leads some authors to talk about multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000) or formulate theories of complexity (Morin, 1999) to explain society in which we live. However, as Sen reminds us, this plurality of worlds should make us understand “the relative importance of our opinions, our memberships, our beliefs, and our affiliations in a given context” (Sen, 2005, p. 274) and thus allow coexistence of different ideas, opinions and values.

In summary, the post-modern era was born as a result of a fracture between totalizing, global, and universal knowledge and partial, relative, particular, and reversible knowledge (Morin, 2014). This knowledge manifests itself, once again taking the words of Wittgenstein, in a multiplicity of linguistic games and susceptible to temporary and local consent, obtained moment by moment and susceptible to possible revisions (Wittgenstein, 1922).

On the other hand, Bauman takes up Lyotard’s ideas by stating that the end of the meta-narratives has led to an ambiguous and contradictory world or, as defined by the author himself, to a liquid modernity. A world in which technological progress is advancing and the great values and security that society back in the day had secured are lost, while a sense of insecurity, powerlessness and frustration is making its way (Bauman, 2000). In fact, the distinctive trait of the society theorized by Bauman is the incessant change. This process of continuous transformation condemns society to a permanent liquidity in which what yesterday was current today is already obsolete. This liquidity is encouraged by the technological and media development that creates instant and transient fashions, transforming, as the author said, man into a vagabond, a flaneur without ties and history who maintains superficial and occasional relationships escaping from responsibilities (Bauman, 2000).

2. Identity processes in the modern and postmodern era

The theme of identity invests, based on the reflections of various authors such as Weber, Simmel and Durkheim, the relationship between individual and society, or rather the relationship between the micro dimension (behaviour of individuals) and the macro dimension concerning the social system within the actors themselves are inserted (roles and status). The development of identity cannot be separated from a picture of the increasing complexity of society or the crisis of the observational system by an external and univocal observer in identifying and grasping latent structures for structuring human action.

Already Durkheim had observed in “The Division of Labor in Society” that modern industrial societies not only increase the number of individual units but also “dynamic density”, in other words, the growing number of interdependent relations between people that make up society. Thus, the concept of social differentiation was born to indicate the proliferation of different roles and statuses the subject can assume, also understood as a condition through which the individual can choose between multiple and alternative lines of actions that condition both a belonging to one’s community and structuring of one’s individuality. In this regard, Parsons (1968) underlined the link between the structural differentiation of society and the pluralisation of roles that social actors find themselves “interpreting”, not always without encountering clashes between different and sometimes incompatible roles and inconsistencies between expectations and behaviours. The inability of the individual to focus on a selective criterion in the multiplicity of choices and roles to which it is called to respond entails, in its extreme consequences, the birth of pathological and dissociative forms. The problem of choice and order of preferences, however,

takes place not only between the different opportunities (and constraints) provided by the social environment in which the individual is inserted but also by the perceived possibilities of belonging to many, multiple and endless social circles enhanced by the development of digital technologies able to expand, and fragment, our self beyond the physical boundaries of action. The subject's identity is no longer a stable and coherent but flexible structure. This flexibility is not necessarily conceived as a "crisis of the subject" but, as Goffman (1956) and subsequently Schutz (1970) have emphasized, it is a new definition of the self that is based on processes of simultaneity of the self that allows the subject to interpret his biography as temporary but not for this unfinished. As we will see in the following and last paragraph, the innovations brought by the Internet and portable technologies have not altered this identification mechanism, thus allowing the online and offline world the interoperability of the systems of personality and social identity.

3. The technological dimension of modern society and new media

The development of new technologies has initially allowed the movement of goods and people, reducing times and, with the birth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), has called into question the concept of space-time distance and created a new dimension called cyberspace (Barak, 2008). The removal of the barriers that led to the free circulation of goods, people and information has made possible the interconnection between fragmented and distant parts of the world. McLuhan (1962) spoke of a "global village" to trace the portrait of a new era governed by mass communication and new technologies. Thanks to these tools,

everything that happens anywhere on the planet affects the daily lives of people who live far from the event itself. For the author, we are faced with an unprecedented “electronic explosion” in which each new technology creates a new environment but at the same time, wraps the previous one (McLuhan, 1998, p. 30).

So, ICT, thanks to its reticular structure, make everything available everywhere and at any time. Unlike traditional media, the Internet does not have a centre and a periphery but is based on a network logic that allows each node to intertwine in a dynamic and transversal way with the rest of the network⁴. Even Zygmunt Bauman places his reflection on the dual dimension in which modern, local and global man lives. The global dimension incorporates the needs of the individual — its local and near dimensions — with those of all the earth’s inhabitants. The network allows a two-way relationship between locality and globality, that is, resting on a ‘glocal’ system⁵, global and local simultaneously (Bauman, 1998).

Another scholar, Anthony Giddens, emphasizes the close relationship between globalization and communication systems. He focuses on the impact that communication technologies have on everyone’s personal life and states that “instant electronic communication is not just a way to transmit news and information faster; its existence alters the very texture of our lives, rich and poor alike” (Giddens, 1999, p.11) and influences the “intimate and

⁴ Recall Castells (2002) in this regard has suggested the concept of online society to underline how the new information and communication technologies have created a reticular organization in society, that differently to the hierarchical one that characterized the previous society information, has the advantage of being plastic and flexible, although it poses the problem of regulation and control.

⁵ Graham and Marvin (2001) call "glocal nodes" areas of the world considered strategic by companies because they linked areas of the country while not being integrated with them. However, it is not true that the geography of the nodes does not create inequality because of the lack of connectivity in some areas produces a new form of social exclusion: the digital divide (global digital divide).

personal aspects of our life “(ibid.). The individual is found to belong to broad processes and networks of different interactions. Membership of one or more networks is no longer dictated by geographic and/or historical coexistence but rather by communication. This means that modern or postmodern society is also called an information and communication society or even a “knowledge society”. What distinguishes the new media is that they are no longer a one-way communication system; the communication process depends on the interaction between the issuer and the receiver’s interpretation of the message. Specifically, the new media determine a segmented and differentiated audience thanks to the multiplicity of messages they can transmit. The media have activated a process of competition and concentration and are starting a process of proliferation of proposals that involve diversification of messages and expressions. The result of this process is the public’s segmentation and diversification, which becomes increasingly selective in its choice. In short, the McLuhan galaxy, which provided one-way communication, disappeared with the advent of CMC⁶ (Computer-Mediated Communication). The Internet is the backbone of computer-mediated global communication (Castells, 2001). As Riva explains, “the interface is relatively independent of the physical component of the medium itself and makes it possible to interact with the same content in different ways” (2008, p.53). Wright also underlines the transition to the Web 2.0 interface by calling the new technologies ‘meta-technologies’ because they define new methods of use of technologies, created by coagulation of economic, technical, cultural and institutional opportunities (Wright, 2000). According to some, the effect of these technologies and their applications

⁶ The CMC refers to all those forms of interaction between individuals not directed but mediated by a computer and that exploits all the possibilities offered by the network (instant messaging services, e-mail, chat, forums, etc.).

involves hyper-stimulation of the cognitive apparatus (Carr, 2010) and a disequilibrium that can lead to different forms of dependency (Tonioni, 2011).

With the creation of Web 2.0, and successively 3.0, we have entered what has been renamed an information and communication society. Technically, Web 2.0⁷ and 3.0 are expressions to indicate the update of the web compared to its previous versions (1.0 and 1.1), but more important these updates involve a delocalization of content and applications that are no longer downloaded to your computer but remain on the web, and version 3.0 is characterized by greater control by users who control which contents to see and when to see them. On the other hand, from a cultural point of view, these updates indicate the formation of a new culture. The distinctive character of this new culture is the ability to produce personal content through the media (User Generated Content), the ability to share it and deposit their personal information and revoke it whenever they like. Consider the possibility of publishing texts, photographs and videos and making them available to the virtual community⁸. In this new world, the recipient/consumer of cultural products also becomes a producer of content⁹ and, as happens in Wikipedia, it is the users/authors who decide what knowledge and what knowledge can be accepted or not. In this way, we witness a *processus de démédition* (Missika, 2006) for which many non-professionals speak in public despite not having necessarily adequate skills. The new technologies applied to the media give space to reciprocity,

⁷ To this "new world" belongs Google and all social applications, like Facebook, blogs, wikis, etc. For further details see O'Reilly (2005).

⁸ Remember that the concept of sharing is a concept that derives from hacker ethics (Himanen, 2001).

⁹ According to the term coined by the American sociologist A Toffler in 1980, the subject becomes a prosumer, meaning both consumer and producer of cultural contents. (Toffler, in Riva, 2014, p.54).

circularity, heterogeneity and communicative dynamism through new subjects – e.g. a new type of author appears, author and reader simultaneously (Tursi, 2007). The media, especially digital ones, make the subject active: search, select and sometimes even create information. It, therefore, becomes a protagonist and interpreter of reality and of itself. With the new technologies, we are witnessing a revolution in communication exchanges and the socialization processes of young people. This phenomenon, enhanced by cross-medial processes (Giovagnoli, 2005; Jenkins, 2007; Livingstone, 2010; Boccia Artieri, 2012), allows the participation of a large number of actors who would remain excluded from the training processes of public opinion but also creates some problems. Consider, for example, online forums where medical advice is requested; most often, it is offered by non-expert subjects, people vaguely informed, which, on the other hand, have no bond of adhesion, in this specific case, to a code of ethics. More generally, digital media allows us to publish texts without the mediation of authorities or institutions that control and decide the opportunity or value. This can have implications that are not necessarily negative. Think about the possibility of publishing a book: without the mediation of a publishing house but making it circulate on the web thanks to blogs and promoting it through social networks without going through the bookshop chain. In this regard, the reflections of Giovanni Boccia Artieri are interesting, taking in the ranks of the analysis of Colin Campbell about the craft consumer (2005, p.27), questioning the ability of the new user/consumer to share a product “through systems of distribution alternative to the official ones [...] thanks to the possibilities of communicative connection allowed by the Internet “(Boccia Artieri, 2012, p.134). These new distribution systems allow the consumer — or better, what we have previously defined

as a prosumer¹⁰ — to “be connected to the centre and not to the periphery of the process” (Ibidem., p.136). In addition, the new media expanded the ‘public space’ and incorporated aspects of what was, until recently, considered ‘private space’ (Ito, 2010). The increase in the possibility of access to the public arena which allows greater participation, also increases the space of appearance and popularity. In short, the pages of social networks become public diaries that offer “the opportunity to build one’s self” (Caron & Caronia, 2006). Some scholars attribute the popularity of social networks to the loss of aggregation in urban spaces. In a world that loses security, new media are reputed socialization environments safer because they are confined to one’s home. The world of the web, however, is no longer as safe as that of the urban street in which we had met once. The processes and changes brought about by new technologies and media have made it possible to start talking about a digital society. The term indicates the transformation of the technological infrastructure of the web and its applications to a new environment, partially assimilable to a society in its own right and, therefore, of significant sociological interest.

Digital technologies by themselves are not new inventions. Digital television is still television, but it has amplified the range of its functions and its potential. Today, we are witnessing a digital convergence of all devices. The phone is no longer just a tool for receiving and sending calls but also allows us to “check appointments on the agenda, browse the internet, read and send e-mails, update the Facebook profile, take pictures and shoot videos” (Rivoltella, 2010). In other words, the new media are intermedial, allowing everyone to do more things, sometimes even simultaneously. Moreover, all technologies are becoming portable thanks to the miniaturization process of electronic components. Portability, together with the ability to connect everywhere, is

¹⁰ For an explanation of the concept see note eight.

transforming our everyday lives so that these tools become body extensions (Oksman & Rautiainen, 2003).

The new media take the form of a “connective tissue” (Siemens, 2004), a sort of nervous system in society. But they are also perfectly integrated into the daily lives of many people to communicate, produce cultural content and, as we will see in the next paragraph, tools around which frequent visitors contribute to creating their identity¹¹. Many studies show that there is now an overlap between offline and online identities, so it makes no sense to separate them. These studies underline that these tools are so pervasive in many people’s lives that offline life is now closely intertwined with online life. For example, Facebook allows us to tighten relationships with other people through a virtual network, no longer consider space-time limits. Or think of the implications that applications like WhatsApp have on our lives. In conclusion, the new media that characterize the digital society are no longer simply means (McLuhan, 1967), but they create new environments (Meyrowitz, 1985) that can influence social behaviour¹².

4. The process of identity formation considering the renewed socialization processes

In 21st-century society, we are witnessing a series of economic, political and cultural changes that have profoundly

¹¹ For example, for some scholars, "the internet is just a space for the construction of identity, regardless of the line-off and off-line" Hine (2000) and allows anonymity to manage different roles and identity (identity play) disconnected from weight of social variables that instead influence verbal communication, face to face.

¹² Meyrowitz (1985) did not study the effects of the media so much, but the change in the social behaviours they involved. Through the circumstantial method, that is, the study of the boundaries of situations; he tried to fill the gaps in Goffman's and McLuhan's perspective.

changed the socialization process of individuals. According to a consolidated scientific debate, traditional socialization agencies gradually lose their function and, thanks to communication technologies, new forms of socialization emerge. Corradini (1995), to emphasize the transition from a small number of socialization agencies to an ever-growing number of institutions that accompany the subject throughout life, defines the process of socialization as an 'open construction site'. In fact, in the post-modern age, we are witnessing new socialization processes by virtue of the fact that, slowly, new media and new technologies are taking control and monopoly away from the usual socialization agencies as instruments of social consensus.

For Donati, the media are socialization agencies because they act as cognitive tools of reality, they have the ability to spread shared values and beliefs, and, finally, they are means of expression because they foster communication through the sharing of codes (Donati, 1998). Specifically, media technologies can perform a morphostatic or morphogenetic function, in other words, they define the socio-cultural context and favour processes of innovation and change (Gallino, 1996). They set themselves as accelerators of social change (Cortoni, 2011, p. 24) because they contributed to the dissemination of multicultural principles that guide the processes of individual identity construction and social behaviour.

Today we are witnessing what Morcellini (1992) has called 'immediate socialization', to be direct and cultural. Digital media activate 'disembedding mechanisms' (Giddens, 1992, p. 19), or abstract systems that allow the self to express itself, forming the identity. In this new context, the media become environments of identification and symbolic recognition of the self (Besozzi 2006; Martelli 2001) and often fill the voids of socialization left by traditional agencies. The digital also creates its physicality allowing you to see, hear, and process images even outside of us, which

before could only occur inside one's mind: think of the possibilities opened up by new technologies through simulation. With the opportunities offered by new technologies, it is affirmed what Besozzi (2006) has defined as the model of *discasic* socialization¹³, whereby contact with the outside takes place even before having adequate meta-cognitive tools. However, this causes socialisation problems because the subject does not seem to possess adequate cognitive tools to face and control the multimedia stimulation. Moreover, socialization processes, in the absence of a family with a high socio-economic profile¹⁴, are based on the responsibility of the individuals and their ability to activate life chances (Dahrendorf, 1980). Today, parents and educators are struggling to offer the new generations an orientation and a value system in which to identify themselves. Nowadays adults and youth speak different languages so much to make the crisis of adequate socialization falls on the generational split between young people and adults. The generational gap, of which Prensky (2001) has spoken, is due to multiple fractures concerning the value system, linguistic and, finally, behavioural. Finally, the technologies, according to the

¹³ The term is *discasic* derives from Hippocrates to define a state of the disease characterized by "bad mix" of the four basic humours (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood). In sociology it is used to understand the "pathology that afflicts social systems invested by profound and rapid changes" (Lazzarini, 2008). Besozzi (2006), on the other hand, uses it to indicate a model of 'weak' socialization devoid of strong adult references, de-institutionalized and linked to an informative and communicative redundancy that creates subjects with weak identities and no reference criteria and, therefore, characterized by lack of planning.

¹⁴ To underline the weight of socio-economic variables in the inequality of opportunities in the educational field, for example, consider the relevance of the concept of habitus elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu defined as "A system of durable and transposable provisions that, integrating all the experiences past, it works at all times as a matrix of perceptions, evaluations and actions, and makes it possible to perform infinitely differentiated tasks, thanks to the analogical transfer of schemes, to solve similar problems, which self-corrects thanks to the results obtained." (Bourdieu, 1972, pp. 261-262).

theses of McLuhan (1964), Innis (1951, 1950) and Ong (1982), have not only changed the processes of socialization but have also had implications on the neurological, linguistic and interpretive processes of reality. Within this new framework emerges the importance of the school understood as a formal institution intended specifically and intentionally for the transmission of culture. Without a proper socialization process by formal agencies, there is a risk, underlined by studies in the media education field, of being unprepared for receiving messages and information from the internet and digital media.

Socialization must ensure the construction of the subjective identity (the self) and promote forms of integration into society and its values through processes of relationships with others. As we have already observed (see above, paragraph 1), with the end of the great narrative and the emergence of consumer society, the self-disintegrates into fragmented and unstable identities — up to forms of narcissism (Prandstraller, 2008). Within this context, new media are means of receiving and creating symbolic content, through which to base identity and relationships with ever more complex alterities. Multiple selves emerge, and the range of roles that the social actor can interpret extends. Specifically, with the new technologies, there is a renewed need for socialization that the traditional socialization agencies are no longer able to satisfy. Traditional institutions can now not provide adequate means to achieve culturally defined goals. The increasing influence of new technologies and media on the perception of available means for success and personal fulfilment has led to the definition of new ways to express deviance, as discussed by Merton in his 1957 work on the theory of anomie. The deterministic model of socialization, which sees the subject as a tabula rasa on which to influence knowledge, opposes the constructivist model that affirms an active and eager to learn, able to incorporate the information of the

environment and to use it to organize and construct its interpretation of reality (Corsaro, 2003, pp. 31-34).

5. Final thoughts: identity and digital media

Identity processes are realized online through dynamics not distant from the offline world or, if preferred, from reality. Indeed, digital media have extended the possibilities between being and being. Thanks to the multiplication of the possibilities of social and collective identification, the subjects can autonomously choose who they are (Beck, 1992). If, on the one hand, this leads to the identity fragmentation of which Bauman already spoke (2009); on the other hand, these forms of fluid identity and changing boundaries do not cease to provide criteria of morality, excellence, correctness, authenticity (Barth, 1981, p. 204) by placing the ascribed characteristics on the background, thanks to the variety and proliferation of micro-memberships, mostly related to status. In post-modernity, the sense of belonging has progressively become detached from face-to-face interaction (Meyrowitz, 1985), but to belong to a community, an indirect, computer-mediated relationship between the members is sufficient. Obviously, this can produce extreme consequences such as those reported by Turkle (2011) in his book "Alone Together", but often online communities meet in reality. Think about all those cases of online players who create a real event (cosplay fairs and gaming conventions), or relationships born online and carried forward in everyday life. In these cases, through the transition between online and offline, what is achieved is what Jenkins (2000; 2008) has effectively defined as internal categorization (identification in a social group) and external categorization (identification by someone else), i.e., the identification process is always mutual recognition. Processes

of recognition and membership are also present online; for example, to become part of a Facebook or LinkedIn group, not only is it necessary for users to request to join the group but also for one or more members to approve. The approval is sometimes controlled by a community manager who ascertains the veracity and congruence of the profile with the intrinsic and extrinsic aims of the group. The network structure of the internet therefore allows us to easily fit into social circles, but it allows us just as easily to get out of them because there are no more geographical, social or economic constraints; instead, membership is the result of temporary and reversible choices (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). On the other hand, Turkle (1995), in the wake of Goffman's reflections, described the network as a liberating and therapeutic environment where people can wear many masks, giving life to the experimentation of different aspects of their self. The network is often seen as being able to free ourselves from the physical conditioning of the body (gender, ethnicity, etc.) but, together with anonymity, it is one of most common internet convictions. However, very often in the messages published on social networks emerge descriptions of the self that contain references to the gender, the age or the profession of the person that serve to give credibility to the information shared (Donath, 1999). The use of shared iconographic and textual imagery also serves to affirm its belonging to a group through the specification of cultural tastes and consumption. Thus, the myth of cyberspace as other place falls, free from the bonds of the body (Boyd, 2014). The online presence is therefore determined by a system of micro-memberships, online groups in which rules and social norms are in force which, in case of violation, lead to expelling the member. However, they are placed in a context where potential audiences are multiple and heterogeneous, making it much more difficult to understand who will attend "online performance". For instance,

viral videos spread on a large scale and are seen by audiences very different from the intended recipients of those who produced them. It should be noted, however, that the network individualism created by the internet (Wellman, 2001) makes it possible to belong to a multitude of social networks, but with less sense of identification and therefore with greater individual autonomy without any predominant or hegemonic membership. In some cases, it would be more correct to talk about connected audiences rather than groups because, while basing their belonging on common interests or lifestyles, communication is ephemeral and, as we have already seen, exit processes are much easier. Digital identity, unlike virtual identity identified with an avatar/character, is closely linked to the real one. Facebook was the first social network to replace virtual identity (represented through nicknames) with digital identity (name and surname online), favouring and accentuating processes of admixture between online and offline life. Identity is what makes us recognizable and identifiable on the basis of characteristics (gender, nationality, etc.) and potentially unique qualities that make us attractive in the eyes of others and which, at the same time, define our belonging to a group. Online profiles have initiated a form of identity based on the convergence of roles that are potentially unlinked. For example, professional and social roles are separated offline but converge on the public profile of a subject. Furthermore, everything we do online also has consequences in offline life. Think of the cases of people fired by their company for a photo deemed inappropriate or for having published beach photos during sick days. All this makes it essential to take care of our online reputation because that is how others see us in real life. On the contrary, over the years have been born lines of study on self-branding, or the ability to emphasize, but above all communicate aspects of online identity to promote oneself. Also, the line of studies that refers to media

education, recognizing the importance of the conscious use of digital media, focuses on the development of new digital knowledge, to live and move consciously within communication and information society.

In conclusion, online and offline identity processes are not disconnected but in communication. By borrowing the concept of interoperability of information systems and translating it to the communicative and “realistic” dimension, with the advent of new media, but especially thanks to the features made possible by social networks, an exchange of highly reliable information has been achieved that converts online identity with offline identity and vice versa. The portability of devices has linked the offline and online world even more and made this process continuous without intermediation spaces unless one voluntarily decides to interrupt the flow of information and communication between the two systems.

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