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The Impact of Digital Technologies on the Formation of New Identity Models and Value Orientations

Vardan Atoyan^{1*}, Nane Movsisyan², Sofya Ohanyan³, Vahram Hovyan⁴

¹Doctor of Sciences (Political Science), Head of Social Sciences Department, Armenian State University of Economics, Yerevan, Armenia

²PhD in Philosophy, Associate Professor of Social Sciences Department, Armenian State University of Economics, Yerevan, Armenia

³PhD in Philosophy, Associate Professor of Social Sciences Department, Armenian State University of Economics, Yerevan, Armenia

⁴Lecturer of Social Sciences Department, Armenian State University of Economics, Yerevan, Armenia

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*Corresponding author: Vardan Atoyan

Doctor of Sciences (Political Science), Head of Social Sciences Department, Armenian State University of Economics, Yerevan, Armenia

Abstract

The research concerns the formation of new identity models and value orientations under the influence of digital technologies. This article distinguishes two fields of digital technology use: organization of everyday life and formation of digital identity. Moreover, the object of the research is the formation of digital identity. Based on the content analysis of social networks, two models of digital identity are differentiated: positive and negative digital “Selves”, which compose a transformable digital identity. A point of view is put forward that under the influence of the above-mentioned analysis, new value orientations are formed, which are not universal, but transformable.

Keywords: Digital Technologies, Self-Identification Mechanisms, Value Orientations, Information Society.

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INTRODUCTION

The Information Age is based on digital technologies that have changed the picture of the world. In light of such technologies, society is experiencing a social revolution that creates “a hybrid dimension between online and offline” (Russo, 2018) with three macro-periods: pre-history, history, and hyper-history (Floridi, 2016) and greatly influences an individual’s identity transformations (Young, 2012). At the same time as the metanarrative crisis, however, digitization serves the human being and expands the latter’s possibilities (Lyotard, 1984). In this context, the computer, the most important tool of digital technology, is regarded not as a mere technical implement, but as a crucial part of our social, psychological, and in-world life (Turkle, 1984). In other words, it forms the basis of a person’s Second “Self”.

The digital revolution gained new impetus during the COVID-19 pandemic’s closure of public spaces. This change in social relations laid the

foundation for the initiation of irreversible processes that created and expanded new identity models while introducing new value orientations.

In this study, in consideration of alternative identity models, we conducted primary research on social media platforms to discuss the issue in a new light. Content analysis was used to make sense of data retrieved from social networks (Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok), as well as observations made during online classes via the Zoom application. By using secondary research, to a lesser extent, we conceptualized identity and being to analyze the impact of digital technologies on the formation of new value orientations.

What is Digital Technology and what is its Role in the Modern World?

Digital technologies play a major role in shaping the modern world. They have permeated every sphere of life and allowed the mass formation of a new digital reality. Mobile phones, computers, the Internet,

and applications are the most important tools of that reality. Digital and telecommunication technologies allow the transfer of information without live contact. A significant part of the world's population uses digital technologies in everyday life, at work, and in educational and scientific environments. In practice, each of us form a part of global telecommunications institutions and realities. Even in the spiritual sphere, digital technologies have their place and role. Today, perhaps only hunter-gatherers are routinely disconnected from digital technologies and instead experience life close to nature or otherwise not alienated from nature.

It should be stated that in April 2023, 5.18 billion internet users exist worldwide, “which amount[s] to 64.6 percent of the global population” and, furthermore, “4.8 billion, or 59.9 percent of the world’s population, were social media users” (Johnson, 2023). Such figures also make clear that the number of Internet users has increased from 40% to 100% from the beginning to the end of the during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of Zoom users has similarly increased nearly tenfold (Pandey & Pal, 2020). The aforementioned research bears witness to changes, particularly since the beginning of the pandemic, wherein the world has entered a new phase of complete digitization with newfound levels of transformed socio-cultural reality.

We should note that in philosophy it is not frequently discussed what digital technology is, as compared to what effect it has in the formation of socio-cultural reality. Heidegger, for example, viewed technology as a way to achieve a set goal and as one of the general forms of human activity (Heidegger, 1977). Digital technologies appear to us as a deceptively simple trickster: “At the level of programming they are text files; further the operating system they are binary codes; finally, at the level of circuit boards, they are nothing but signals generated by the values of voltage in the operation of logic gates” (Hui, 2012, p. 387).

Since ancient Greece, the term “*techne*” has received various interpretations. Aristotle, for instance, understands “*techne*” as something that nature cannot complete or that in some cases imitates nature (Barnes, 1984). This definition of Aristotle is a starting point because technology is the man-made factor that becomes an important indicator of man's alienation from nature. Needless to say, in previous centuries, *techne* did not have the power and possibilities that it has today, but we must admit that the current technological development is in line with prior human history. Some researchers propose to distinguish the stages of human civilization according to the technologies used, such as the Stone Age, Digital Age, etc. (Arendt, 1998). And indeed, basing the stages of human civilization on the tools used, we can get a

complete picture of what is not natural, but human, or the result of the latter’s activity. By combining the definitions of Aristotle and Hannah Arendt, *techne* may be regarded as that what nature could not produce, and as a result, human civilization in all its phases was formed. If we regard digital technologies as a part of a natural progression within human civilization, let’s consider some of its socio-cultural features.

Digital technologies have a high impact factor thanks to the forms of media and communication made possible. To classify the digital technologies’ influence, we propose two groupings. The first group concerns those tools used for organizing daily life and reflect the routinizing influence and powers of computer systems. The second group concerns those domains which interact with intrapersonal principles, especially the moral and physical, where the digital technologies’ permeation of life is more difficult to measure and the observation of the induced changes still more troubling. In observing these groups of features, it is also necessary to emphasize the change in human behavior under the influence of digital technologies. Regardless, digital technologies provide another circumstance requiring sets of rules for human behavior that the mselves provide to orient certainties.

We should consider that changes in digital technologies give rise to algorithms with wide social impact, and they to social changes, which increasingly affect both the definition of both personal and collective identities. That is, a new, digital mooring for identity is being established (Wyatt, 2008, p. 168).

Models of Individual’s Identity in the Digital Age: The Digital “Self”

At different stages of human history, the individual self has been defined in numerous ways. During classical antiquity, the “Self” was largely considered monistically, or to be one with the body, and the problem of who one was, or an individual’s being, did not arise. Already by the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the dualistic problem of the “Self” within the body had become the core of philosophical reinterpretations and the kernel of individualism. If the “Self”, for example, was perceived by the ancient Greeks as a unitary atom, and the proclamation “know thyself” was not aimed at the individual, then in the Middle Ages the “Self” was dissolved within God, while for Descartes, “Self” became equal to contemplation itself: “*Gogito, ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am). Already in personalism, we are dealing with a conception of the individual “Self” where the latter acts as the absolute manifestation of human existence.

This small overview allows us to follow some evolutions of the “Self”, which preface social being at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st

centuries, i.e., the study and definition of the emergent digital “Self”. In the study of multiple “Selves”, online games offer an opportunity to weigh social changes in the Internet domain, where an individual can create and adopt more than one game persona and give them all an identity, from gender to a profession (Turkle, 1995). Researchers often derive digital identity from personal data included in databases that enable individuals to use many services that ultimately legitimize his/her existence (Holloway *et al.*, 2021). Our research, however, views the digital “Self” from a more anthropological perspective.

Unlike the conventionally classical definition of the “Self”, where the individual “Self” is not the product of human activity but is defined by and through itself, the digital “Self” by contrast is defined within and by the structure of digital tools, mediums, and technologies. We make this possible by constant practical engagement with the virtual in our daily lives: its surrealism makes it necessary to suggest that physical reality and virtual realities concern different individual domains. Our “Selves”, composed of many individuals’ digital “Selves”, not the real “Self”, is formed inside this *sur-reality*.

To proceed, the influence of social networks on the formation of the digital “Self” must be analyzed, whereupon it will be possible to distinguish two models of the digital “Self”. Within social networks, moral “digital” norms pervade which indicate what is good, what is beautiful, and what is bad. Accordingly, these norms affect the formation of self-identification mechanisms. This matrix of meaning and valuation, according to our observations, form two models of the digital “Self”: respectively, positive and negative models. These circumstances structure and generate transformative mechanisms of self-identification. Value-forming processes and conclusions, meanwhile, are in a constant cycle of transformation in the digital field.

First, what is valued negatively in digital spaces impacts how the “Self” is created. Our observations indicate that the negative model is mainly structured and formed through archetypes used for hate and bullying. The one subjected to the “attack” of other virtual “Selves” creates, a so-called, negative digital “Self”, often of their own choice or sometimes as a means of self-defense.

A simple hypothetical can illustrate this claim. Imagine, for example, someone on a social network who is a vegetarian and calls all meat-eaters predators. Meat-eaters begin to perceive that person negatively and automatically the vegetarian chooses and builds a negative digital “Self” at a given moment, in a given digital domain. Of course, at some point, the negative model of “Self” has every chance to grow into a

positive model if the “Selves” inhabiting the virtual community and reality define it positively. At first glance, this all resembles a game that takes place in a digital space, where individuals are both real and virtual at the same time. Such examples are multitudinous. And the basis for forming a negative digital “Self” is not only disagreement or discontent, but also widespread, idealized in so-called avatars. While some avatars may be digital negative “Selves” for an in-group, they are not for others. Likewise, the digital negative “Self”, in this case, may easily be transformed into a positive one and vice versa.

If we consider the conditionally positive digital “Self”, an ideal greatly sought after by young people, communities form this “Self” virtually to individuals representing content free of hate. Let’s remember again the conditional vegetarian who called meat-eaters predators. That same vegetarian, on the way to building a digital positive “Self”, does not call all meat-eaters predators, but considers that each one has to choose what to eat and avoid judging the other’s choices. The vegetarian already chooses the model of building a positive digital “Self” since he/she is guided by empathy and not hatred.

Next to the positive and negative “Selves”, the collective “We” also forms, when, for example, the same vegetarians or meat-eaters identify collectively unite in one group and turn into a group of vegetarians or meat-eaters in the social network (Davis *et al.*, 2019). In the future, we can already predict that a person will be forced to have multiple forms of digital self-expressions, as necessary, besides his/her real identity, which will complement his/her identity in the physical world (Chan, 2022). We may add transformative identities.

By breaking down these two models of virtual and digital reality, we can perceive distinctions between the digital and real “Selves”, and therefore make comparisons based upon the observation of students’ behavior in the classroom and digital spaces. During the COVID-19 pandemic procedures, we witnessed and experienced teaching in a virtual classroom. As we made observations, it was obvious to us that students’ behavior changed after moving from virtual to physical reality. Our observations showed that in the virtual environments, students were much more relaxed in both positive and negative ways. As, for example, during non-classroom ethical discussions, students often presented themselves through positive and negative digital “Selves”, masking their routine identity with memes, emojis, stickers, and avatars. Here, the same students displayed different behaviors in physical classrooms, which, in a manner, was dictated by the immediate observance of direct norms regulating interpersonal interaction: online etiquette observed separate standards.

By analyzing the impact of digital technologies upon vital factors in the formation of an individual's identity, we can comfortably state that in digital spaces, we interacted with divergent, malleable digital identities that are capable of transformation. The digitally transformed identity, in its turn, induces new value orientations.

The Influence of Digital “Self” On the Formation of Value Orientations

The digital “Self” has an important influence on the formation of moral norms and value orientations. Let's try to explain how by going back to our example of vegetarians and meat-eaters. The conventional digital “Self”, whose physical “Self” system had never considered vegetarianism and meat-eating, suddenly follows the discussion about vegetarianism in the digital world and realizes that from now on he/she is a vegetarian because a positive valuation has formed around vegetarians in the digital world, and it is also increasingly popular. Likewise, the inverse valuations can transpire. It turns out that as a result of social change, old value orientations are reinterpreted and transformed into new ones. In the digital field, only a limited number of pressing social campaigns can predominate the information cycle and help generate new value orientations that displace old ones. The paradox, then, is that these new temporal orientations do not set and become established ethical norms but are rapidly transfigured according to the ongoing churn of the information cycle and its impact across the digital field.

Many such instances abound. This thought example and our observations of social media and its audience suggest that value orientations lie between the interaction of the real “Self” and the digital “Self” that necessarily involve mutual interaction. Notably, the digital “Self” is pervasive aspect within young people's lives. Interestingly, different challenges function as value orientations, and it seems that the formerly solid ordering of value orientations is finally transformed into air. For example, “among core humanistic values are inquiry, critical thinking, debate, pluralism, balancing innovation and tradition, and exploration and critique (Levine et al.)” meanwhile “contemporary humanities scholarship also recognizes that values are not universal or fixed but rather reflect particular contexts and ideologies” (Spiro, 2012, p. 19). If the triad of goodness, truth, and value prevailed in classical ethics, the latter has long been forgotten in digital reality. Or maybe something was wrong from the beginning? What if a person's “Self” does not quite match the “demands” that were placed before him/her by their media consumption from the beginning? (Taylor, 1989).

Nevertheless, it is obvious that there are no longer universal values, but there are relative values that have gained legitimacy on the Internet in a given

period, which have become a value orientation, especially for Internet “Selves”. However, they do not have Kant's concept of “duty” and are free from moral imperatives.

CONCLUSION

Digital technologies, especially during and after COVID-19, gained an immense impact that permeated almost every sphere of life. Having both a positive and negative roles in a people's lives, digital technologies saturated cultural life and transformed self-perception, being, and self-identification the field of identification and became the basis for the creation of virtual identities. Digital identity, in contrast to physical identity, has some features. The digital “Self” is composed of not one but several “Selves”, with both positive and negative models. The latter is due to the digital moral content of social networks. Unlike classic definitions of identity, where identity contains both static and dynamic components, digital identity is almost entirely fluid, transient. It is dynamic and transformable.

Digital content creates not universal, but plastic codes of conduct, which often become value orientations specifically for modern youth. Consequently, digital technological development obviously cannot be stopped or reversed. Therefore, it is only through education that it is possible to develop critical thinking surrounding the effective use(s) and perceptions of digital technologies.

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