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Individuation in the era of social media

Abstract

How has the virtual reality of social media impacted our self-image? Has increased communication and possibilities for public self-expression brought us closer to ourselves and others? This paper proposes to examine the negotiation of intersectional postmodern social identity via a brief examination of the functions of social media, in the framework of individuation and personality integration. The historical role of tradition and modernity / postmodernity / metamodernity is explored; suggestions are offered for the creative use of social media as an instrument of self-expression, and the future of individuation in the era of social media is discussed from a depth psychological perspective.

Keywords

#social media #self-image #postmodern #individuation #personality integration #depth psychology #internet #FOMO #echo chamber #Facebook #Twitter

Indywiduacja w dobie mediów społecznościowych

Abstrakt

Jak rzeczywistość wirtualna mediów społecznościowych wpłynęła na nasz obraz siebie? Czy zmieniona komunikacja, i możliwość publicznego wyrażania siebie, zbliżyła nas do siebie i innych? W niniejszym artykule została podjęta próba analizy skomplikowanej, ponowoczesnej tożsamości społecznej. Próby tej dokonano za pomocą krótkiej analizy funkcji, jakie pełnią media społecznościowe w kontekście indywiduacji i integracji osobowości. Eksplorowano historyczną rolę tradycji i modernizmu, postmodernizmu i metamodernizmu. Przedstawiono także propozycje kreatywnego używania mediów społecznościowych jako instrumentu ekspresji siebie. Indywiduacja w erze mediów społecznościowych została przedstawiona z perspektywy psychologii głębi.

Słowa kluczowe

#media społecznościowe #obraz siebie #ponowoczesność #indywiduacja #integracja osobowości #psychologia głębi #Internet #FOMO #komora pogłosowa #Facebook #Twitter

Introduction. The birth of social media

Funded initially by the US Department of Defence investigating the time-sharing of computers in the 1960s, technological advances which led to the internet we know

today mushroomed in the six ensuing decades. The internet has grown from its initially specialized and localized academic and technical uses to a global, popular phenomenon, ultimately becoming an almost essential modern home accessory it is today.

Beginning in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic with its requirements of physical isolation, social distancing and lockups has reinforced the importance of public internet access, and changed the character of work/home boundaries. Ironically perhaps, the further apart we have had to get from each other physically, the greater the electronic access we have had to provide in our personal and professional space.

At the beginning of the 21st century, online communication also witnessed the birth of social media: Facebook was founded in 2004, and Instagram in 2010. Today, generations of young people are growing up in a world which is so digitally connected that it is difficult for them to imagine a time when communication was slow, expensive, and rare, and information had to be accessed via physical visits to libraries and even to other countries.

Social media today is everywhere. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Tik Tok, Snapchat, Reddit, LinkedIn: the list of available platforms has mushroomed, facilitated by—and, at the same time, facilitating—the development of new communications technology. Worldwide, 6.4 billion people, i.e. 83% of the world's population, own a smartphone (Bankmycell.com, 2022) on which they can download these applications and upload their pictures, videos, comments, personal stories, creative work, business advertisements and promotions, private and public information. This is known as "user-generated content", and it is the fuel of social media, its driving force; in fact, the term "Web 2.0", which implies the direction in which the internet has grown since its inception, refers to the participatory and social character of user-generated content.

Whereas a few decades ago we hardly knew what was happening elsewhere in the world, unless it was on the news on one of a limited number of TV channels, or broadcast on public radio and published in newspapers (which were actually made of paper), today we are all busy watching one another's lives in real time, on rectangular screens we can hold in our palm. There is nothing strange anymore about being in Nicosia, Cyprus and watching the goings-on of a local neighbourhood in Reykjavik, Iceland while commenting on the action. Our social media has become a part of our personal way of being in the world, our daily consciousness. In fact, subjectively we often do not even feel we have truly been somewhere or done something until we have shared the experience online. People walking in the street talk to invisible ghostly friends through their wireless microphones, and suddenly stop on uneventful street corners to take a 'selfie'. We may even interact with virtual technological beings in the street, mixing fantasy and reality as the 2016 popular *Pokémon Go* 'augmented' reality game demonstrated – sometimes with adverse real-world consequences such as accidents and injuries. All these are behaviours

that a few decades ago, without the accompanying technology to account for them, might have implied the need for a psychiatric diagnosis of the individuals performing them.

These developments point perhaps to the creation of nothing less than a new social reality, particularly in the last two decades; but as we shall see, it is a reality with roots in the last century and ultimately as far back as the roots of modernity in the Enlightenment period and before.

Discussion. The self in the mirror

Writing prophetically during his journey to the USA in the 1980s, French sociologist and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard referred to America, the world's most technologically advanced country at the time, as a "hyperreality", in the sense that it is neither dream nor reality, a "utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved", a "perfect simulacrum – that of the immanence and material transcription of all values" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 28), as interesting to a European intellectual for its living mythical aspects as primitive societies have always been to anthropologists.

Hyperreality, in other words, refers to the inability of consciousness in technologically advanced postmodern societies to distinguish between reality and a simulation of reality. Baudrillard suggested that our current, postmodern society has replaced all reality and meaning with a self-referring vacuum of symbols and signs, thereby turning human experience into a simulation of reality. What he wrote of America in the 1980s appears to have spread to the entire global civilization today. We no longer *are*, we only *signify* endlessly to each other and to ourselves – we exist, in other words, in a narcissistic hall of mirrors, a matrix reality much like the one portrayed in films like *The Truman Show* (1998) and *The Matrix* (1999). C. H. Cooley's (1902) symbolic interactionist concept of the "looking-glass self" (The Mead Project, 2022) has been resoundingly confirmed: we are the sum of the images others have of us, and social media simply promote and recycle our egocentric perspective on existence.

It is interesting too that even before Baudrillard's visit to the USA and his conclusions about hyperreality, American intellectuals themselves had observed the refractory historical course of their self-involved and self-obsessed society, in which conversations between people had increasingly shifted their focus from the outside world to the self, making every conversation ultimately about 'me', as suggested by Christopher Lasch in his book *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979).

The emergence of social media appears to have magnified those historical trends identified by Lasch, Baudrillard and others on an individual and societal level. Indeed, Mary Aiken (2016) has commented on how social media act as mirrors for the creation of

a "cyber self" which we present to others and modify according to the feedback we receive. 'Selfies', according to Aiken, are ultimately a question to our audience: "do you like me like this?". In contrast to what used to happen in real-life interactions, however, the social media "cyber self" is a lot more potent in its narcissistic force: it is accessible and public 24 hours per day, seven days a week, and it receives constant judgments and evaluations from others; accordingly, we change the image we present as easily and as quickly as we upload a new picture, video or story. We may, moreover, present different "selves" on diverse platforms, customised out of our inner kaleidoscope of self-images according to what we feel is being demanded of us on each platform. While we all do this to some extent, Aiken notes that adolescents are particularly susceptible to damaging the real-world healthy development of a clear self-image, through the constant updating of their social media profiles (Aiken, M., 2016, p.156); other studies have also linked the use of social media by adolescents to the issues of shame and self-worth (e.g. Harter, 1996; Unoka, Vizin, 2017).

The vicious cycle of self-image creation and recreation is kept in flow by phenomena such as FOMO, or Fear Of Missing Out, characterised by compulsive checking for status updates and new messages in case some social interaction, event, information or experience is missed. We are in an alert state, looking out for whatever is the next thing that could improve our life, fearing the regret of being passed by. From FOMO, the path to pathological internet use and even internet addiction disorder is not very long. Although internet addiction disorder has not yet been classified in the diagnostic manuals as a disease category, internet gaming disorder has officially entered the WHO's ICD-11 since 2019, and other compulsive uses of the internet, such as problematic internet pornography use and communication addiction disorder (compulsive talking), are receiving serious scientific attention.

Another phenomenon which enhances the narcissistic effects of the internet is the "echo chamber": in a world where most people are getting their news from social media such as Facebook and Twitter, ideologies and worldviews are reinforced by the algorithmic filters of search engines so that the more we 'like' certain topics, the more of them we receive in our feeds, our adverts and our online search suggestions. Soon, we find ourselves caught in a bubble of our own interests and people with similar views to ourselves, essentially filtering out the aspects of reality we do not identify with – which are just as real as our echo chamber (Cinelli *et al.*, 2021).

Nevertheless, for the sake of balance, we must also mention the positive uses and effects of the internet and social media engagement. As with every tool, the internet can be put to good or bad use. For example, one social media study also uncovered a host of positive effects of the use of social media in developing oneself: dozens of creators cited that producing content gave them a sense of self-confidence and self-worth, enhanced

their creativity, increased their sense of professionality, and their platforms offered a positive space to interact with others (Jones, 2015).

The emerging questions

We have seen that the use of the internet and social media has an individual and cultural effect through reinforcing certain individual characteristics and cultural trends. There emerge two related questions:

1) What is it that leads one set of social media users to low self-esteem and even addiction, and another to increased self-confidence and creativity?
2) In which psychological direction is our technological culture heading?

While it is beyond the scope of a single paper to answer such broad questions, we can contribute towards the answer, perhaps, by applying a concept from depth psychology: that of Jungian individuation.

Individuation, according to Jung, "is the process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated; in particular, it is the development of the individual as distinct from the general, collective psychology" (Jung, 1953-1979, CW6: par. 757). For everyone, this process is unique and unrepeatable; no two people will individuate in the same way. It depends on such factors as family history, personal experiences, the cultural and historical setting of our lives, the social and cultural influences and patterns which prevail in our environment, but also the accidents and synchronicities [*note: meaningful coincidences*] which shape our life path (Stein, 2006, p. 103).

Importantly, Jung suggests that through individuation, we can "divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona on the one hand, and of the suggestive power of primordial images on the other" (AACAP, 2022[1]). In other words, we learn who we are behind the social mask (persona) we present to others so as not to identify with our public image, but we also learn how to dissociate our self-understanding from the inner "primordial images", which Jung identifies as the archetypes of the collective unconscious. The aim of individuation is not to arrive at a once-for-all permanent resolution concerning our identity and place in the world; there will be internal conflicts and contradictions until the day we die. Nevertheless, through this continuous process of becoming more conscious of the external and internal image-inducing forces, we acknowledge our inner complexity and multiplicity, gradually acquiring familiarity with our own psychology and an emerging sense of wholeness. We recognize our personal strengths and limitations,

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[1] American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2022) "Screen Time and Children" (CW7: par. 269); https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Watching-TV-054.aspx (accessed 18.10.2022).

and at the same time, we also come to appreciate the rest of humanity, because we become capable of healthy, objective, conscious relationships. Ironically, although individuation is often confused with individualism, it is in fact its opposite: by individuating, we become more authentically ourselves and more authentically members of our community. To do this consciously, we initially have to step away from collective values; first, we have to abandon our unconscious identification with the collectivity, so as to return to it bearing the gift of our true selves and creating something of value to society. Therefore, Jung saw individuation as the process of incarnating the Self—the central archetype of wholeness in the collective unconscious which is the regulating centre of the psyche—into the world. This is a never-ending process since, as Jung explains, "in so far as the total personality, on account of its unconscious component, can be only in part conscious, the concept of the self is, in part, only *potentially* empirical and is to that extent a *postulate*. In other words, it encompasses both the experiencable and the inexperiencable (or the not yet experienced)" (Jung, 1953-1979; CW6: par.789).

The ego often experiences the manifestation of the Self as a defeat of its own egoic aims and purposes. In the words of the Book of Proverbs, "a man's heart plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps" (The Orthodox Study, 2008,The Book of Proverbs 16:9). Therefore, the process of individuation is the opposite of the negative cultural tendency we have discussed, through which our use of the internet reinforces our sense of isolation within our own informational echo chamber. Individuation implies finding a higher sense of meaning, calling, purpose and wholeness, which are the opposite of the postmodern meaningless vacuum of endless signs referring to one another with no central referent, and the opposite of the narcissism of the "looking-glass self". Where social media invite us to idolize and emulate celebrities for example, the process of individuation invites us to consciously recognize both the way in which this celebrity represents an unconscious aspect of our persona, and the archetype it could be eliciting for us from the collective unconscious. In this way, we become aware of our separateness and distinctness from the image on the screen.

It could be useful to offer a theoretical example here. Let us say that a teenage boy sees a picture of a male film star on Instagram, and it has millions of 'likes', including dozens from the boy's own social circle. If the adolescent does not apply conscious effort to discern the meaning of this experience for himself, he is likely to fall into a double error: firstly, he will compare his own looks and abilities to those of the celebrity, perhaps feeling inferior or superior as a result; secondly, he will be affected by an activated archetype in his unconscious, such as the hero or the saviour, the king, the warrior, the magician – but without becoming aware of what this triggering process is doing within his psyche. As a result, he may suffer from an inferiority complex (or a superiority

complex, which is very similar), and his resulting behaviour will be mimetic, derivative and inauthentic. Our fictional adolescent will be distanced from his true self through the experience. If we consider that on average, children aged 8-12 in the United States spend 4-6 hours a day watching or using screens, and teens spend up to 9 hours (AACAP, 2022) we can surmise the overall effect that exposure to all these images has on the fragile self-awareness of a developing person. It is therefore imperative that children and young people are taught from an early age ways of distancing themselves from and commenting intelligently on the images they are exposed to, as well as the psychological meanings and implications of the ways they present themselves on social media.

However, as has already been discussed, it is not only the individual but also the culture as a whole which can be said to individuate. Murray Stein describes how in the 1930s, Jung critiqued the politics of his time, offering an analysis of how "the distorting power of numinous images in the churned-up political and social dynamics tearing apart the cultural fabric of Germany and central Europe" had been evoked by the ascendance of the archetype of the Germanic god, Wotan, which "had mesmerized an entire nation and was driving Germany toward an unknown and irrationally determined goal" (Stein, 2006, pp. 46-47). Stein explains that

> archetypal possession in a community or culture invests certain ideas and policies with defensive certainty and denies the legitimacy of doubt. Contrary images are savagely attacked and repressed. (…) Conviction based on archetypal backing and projection seemingly cuts off circulation to the neocortex and fires the emotions. The old reptilian and limbic brains take over and rule (Stein, 2006, p. 47).

Today we have witnessed these phenomena as much in Trump's MAGA campaign, as in Putin's invasion of Ukraine; other examples around the world abound, independent of the cultures involved and the political orientation of their leaders.

Therefore, a more individuated culture will allow space for the inner complexity and multiplicity of voices, in a similar way to the individual. Thomas Singer (2006) has suggested the concept of the "cultural complex", whereby unconscious but emotionally-charged ideas and images capture the imagination of entire societies and function autonomously and repetitively in the collective consciousness. These cultural complexes are often passed on across generations with a tendency to accumulate historical experiences and a collective memory, which validates its own point of view – the sort of confirmation bias that individuals experience when surfing within their internet echo chamber, but on a societal level.

The Jungian vision of psychological and cultural health is, therefore, a vision of conscious awareness: individually, the person grows and acquires inner freedom by becoming aware of the archetypal influences upon the ego, and aligning themselves with

their higher Self; culturally, a society grows by learning to hold the tension of its conflicting cultural complexes, in an atmosphere of democratic freedom of speech, expression and lifestyle choices. Being a descendant of the German idealist philosophical tradition, Jung embraces the Hegelian formula of thesis + antithesis = synthesis; the synthesis or integration of the personality and the synthesis of the culture towards a more advanced consciousness. Modern thinkers such as Teilhard De Chardin (1959) and, more recently, Ken Wilber (2007) have presented integral models of the evolution of human consciousness, which profess hope in the developing ability of society to overcome and transcend the crises it experiences.

Conclusion

Following the events in Germany in WWII, Jung became disaffected with the cultural level of the individuation process, as he foresaw how wrong it could go, and it did. Today, the idea of "technological singularity" as a point in time when the exponential growth in technology will become irreversible, and human civilization will undergo unforeseeable changes as it is overtaken by artificial superintelligence is beginning to seem a distinct possibility. Even top scientists such as the late Stephen Hawking have called for caution towards the growth of artificial intelligence (Sparkes, 2015). Taken together with transhumanist ideas of overcoming the limitations of the human mind and sensory abilities, even of overcoming death itself by technological means, the idea of being replaced by machines no longer seems outlandish and strange. Asimov's "three laws of robotics" (Asimov, 1950), set up in order to protect humanity from its own technology, are beginning to make a lot of sense.

As mentioned in the introduction, our new "Web 2.0" reality has roots reaching back to the origins of modernity and all the way to the distant past. Historically, a progression has been observed from the pre-industrial agrarian world of antiquity, through the "dark ages" and the medieval social arrangements of the *ancien régime*, to the Enlightenment period in the 17th and 18th centuries and the era following the French Revolution of 1789, which led to the modern industrial era and then the postmodern information age. Since the turn of the 21st century, we are speaking of metamodernity, an even higher level of synthesis; a term that refers to a range of developments observed in many areas of art, culture and philosophy which have emerged in the aftermath of postmodernism. Metamodernity can be viewed as mediations between aspects of modernism and postmodernism, but the term also suggests an integration of those sensibilities with premodern (indigenous and traditional) cultural codes as well.

On both the individual and the collective levels, however, the question of outcome remains the same as always: will we use our knowledge for the benefit of self and others, or for harm? The author professes his doubts about excessively optimistic views of historical progress and the evolution of consciousness. Are we really all that different to the *homo sapiens* emerging out of the African plains 300,000 years ago? Even if our cultures have evolved, how much has our basic biology changed? Was the Enlightenment era truly an era of enlightenment, or did society lose its spiritual bearings so that today the verses of W. B. Yeats (2022) ring truer than ever:

> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned*;*

A cursory reading of classical and ancient authors strongly suggests that human intelligence today is not superior to what it was then. While our societies have become larger and more complex, our moral and philosophical dilemmas have arguably not changed. Human beings still exploit and help one another; we are still both compassionate and cruel.

In a society plagued by cybercrime and continuing warfare, it seems doubtful that human consciousness truly evolves with technology, if it evolves at all. However, what we can be sure of is that today's children and adolescents will use their human creativity as humanity always has done, to express themselves and to solve their generations' problems. Finding ways of making technology work for humanity, instead of the reverse, seems more important than ever.

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