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The Virtual Environment Influence on the Socialization of Today's Youth

¹Olga Yakovleva, ²Svetlana Kulikova^{1,2} Assot Prof., Department of Informatization of Education, Faculty of Information Technologies,
Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, Saint-Petersburg¹zest-yp@yandex.ru, ²iktss@yandex.ru

ABSTRACT

The problem of socialization of young people in today's information environment needs system approach. The virtual life is the necessary resource and facility to reflect the real environment, and, at the same time, to construct the modern reality. The influence of the virtual environment on the socialization of today's youth is particularly marked in three major ways: in terms of the expansion of activities, in terms of the transformation of communication, in terms of changes in the field of consciousness. The issue reveals the influence of the virtual environment to the various aspects of young people life, for example such phenomena as the social media and online communities. The number of risks related to the virtual environment is characterized: the openness and the redundancy of information, the freedom of speech and action, the unlimited contacts and the distributed communication, virtual addiction.

Keywords: *virtual environment, socialization, youth values, the Internet, mass media, online community*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of the information technologies at the turn of the XX - XXI centuries has led to the number of social, economic and political consequences. The most prominent are the computerization and the globalization of the main areas of human activity. Their discussion has been conducted during the past decades. At the beginning of the information era the main attention was given to the information technologies primarily as the tool of human activities optimization in a broad sense (such as tools for work or leisure). Now the new idea has come to the forefront - the creation and the development of the information environment on the basis of the modern information and communication technologies.

The information environment is generally regarded as the natural environment of people, but the modern understanding of this term includes not only the information sources familiar to the previous generations (print, television, radio), but also the virtual components.

The "virtualization" of modern life leads to the transfer of certain activities in the virtual environment, such as:

- The individual and the collaborative activities in the media and the information-getting services
- The dialog and interaction [1].

Today social, economical and political processes actively proceed in the virtual environment, the prime example of which is the Internet. For example, it is possible to visit other cities or countries with the help of the virtual museums and exhibitions and virtual tours. It is easy to find quick answer to any question through the custom search; to receive the latest news via RSS-feeds or news channels. In everyday life it becomes common to pay for goods and services in on-line banks through the use of electronic

money. From the educational point of view it is interesting to participate in the international meetings on the basis of video conferences; to receive education abroad via e-learning (distance learning); to participate in the creation of articles, books, bills, for example, in Wikipedia - wikipedia.org. From the civil point of view it is useful to set dialogues with the authorities (e.g., governor or president) on the basis of the virtual discussion platforms.

However, the virtual environment has a number of risks, and the most particular risks fall on today's youth. Without hesitation, young people are beginning to bear ways of work and behavior from the virtual environment to their everyday life. They perceive information as a set of hypertext links; they establish relationship by means of telecommunications and online games. Not by chance in social science there is a new type of social individual - Homo virtualis – the virtual-centered human, the creator and the consumer of the virtual media and culture. As youth has the lack of social experience, the virtual environment can interfere in the formation of social and personal values, and, hence, in the socio-cultural landscape of the whole young generation [2].

2. HOW THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT INFLUENCES THE SOCIALIZATION? THE SYSTEM APPROACH

2.1 What is Socialization in the Context of the Virtual Environment?

First let us define what we mean by socialization of today's youth. Socialization is traditionally viewed as the process of becoming a subject of society. It is both the process and the result of learning and active reproduction of individual social experience, and above all, it is the system of social roles. Socialization (from Lat. Socialis - public) is the two-way interaction process between the society and the

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individual, the constant development of the individual's social norms and cultural values and patterns of behavior throughout his life; it allows the individual to function in the society [3].

In terms of the activity approach, socialization is implemented in activities and communication. Social environment of a person is various: family, educational institutions, recreational and professional teams. This is why socialization occurs in conditions of natural exposure to various circumstances of life. In conditions of purposeful influence, education becomes the leading condition of socialization. In the course of socialization takes place the formation of the individual entities, as the personality and identity, assimilation of social norms, skills, stereotypes, attitudes, socially accepted behavior and communication, life-style choices. Thus, the purpose of socialization is the formation of the individual, carrying the signs of the particular community and its own experience.

In connection with the expansion of "virtuality" the boundaries between "real" and "virtual" worlds are being erased. Internet has become the means of reflecting the real environment, and at the same time, the condition of the construction of contemporary reality. Under the influence of the global network the style of life is changing: the structure of leisure, business activities, the usual channels of information, the approach to the work with the information resources, the nature of interpersonal interactions. There are new institutions and agents of socialization, which broadcast new social values, norms, attitudes, and behavioral strategies. They ultimately affect the needs and interests of the system of relationships, the structure of semantic origin of modern young people.

The virtual environment is the macro factor of socialization, therefore, as with any large-scale phenomenon it requires more detailed consideration. In order to predict the future impact of virtualization on the spiritual life and culture of the society, the world of the future generations it is important to study not only positive practice, but also the number of problems affecting the traditionally existing norms, values and patterns of human behavior.

Let us consider the features of the virtual environment impact on the socialization of today's youth in three key areas:

- The increase of youth activity and change of its character;
- The transformation of communication (the expansion of circles of communication, the development of new communication skills, the change of spatial and temporal characteristics of communication);

- The changes in the field of self-awareness (understanding of own social roles).

2.2 The Change of Youth Activity

The distinguishing features of today's youth are the dynamic needs, interests, tastes, and exposure mode. The youth is characterized by such features as the complete independence and autonomy, the emotional and intellectual openness, the full involvement in the proceedings, the freedom to express their views and steady judgment, the desire for independence, innovation, and creativity. Saturated diverse nature of information flows - advertising, slogans, posters, informational messages - contributes to the perception of information as the core value of the modern era. Commercial component of information flow contributes to the development of the cult of consumption and wealth.

One of the important tools to reinforce young people activity is the new means of mass communication [4]. These are not only the familiar information resources which now are developing in the virtual environment – the on-line radio and the television, electronic newspapers and magazines. These are also the new elements of the citizen journalism (social media) – the streaming video, the blogosphere, the wiki-environment. Importantly, in the virtual environment, anyone can become the source of information and create own information resources: blogs (text, audio, and video), websites, and wiki-articles. Obviously, knowledge available in the Internet actively shapes the controversial value-world, moral attitudes and norms of behavior of young generation. Along with the freedom of speech and the stability of opinion, there may be noted the low motivation to abstract knowledge, globalism (which is logically connected with the blurring of cultural and national identity), the rejection of knowledge, not supported by economic gains.

The virtual environment opportunities for expansion of independence and biography design put youngsters to the self-selection of life orientations and the search of ways to implement them. Generally, youth is the subject of growing public relations, so it is characterized by the instability of life strategies and liability of consciousness. Variability of views reflects the incompleteness of social experience. There are also age-related limitations in the structure of opportunities for young people. There are contradictions between the expectations and the ways of their implementation. It is manifested in the extremes of minds and behavior of young people: maximalism in solving the problems of life and the desire at all costs to achieve this goal on the one hand, and passivity and reluctance to exercise independent life choices on the other.

Pragmatic orientation is now increasing among young people. The most important life values are the desire for material wealth, unearned way of enrichment (gaining), housing and household comfort. The general image of a young person is being created: self-sufficient, cruel,

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successful and wealthy. Consumer culture correlates with the inherent desire to follow the fashion of young people and to criticize the world of “adults”. Such values as material well-being, career, and power successfully coexist with creativity and freedom in decision-making, striving for success and knowledge, independence, activity, decisiveness, initiative. The youth of today is focused primarily on material values; often the ways of achieving these goals are not as important.

2.3 The Transformation of Communication

In the virtual environment there are not only communities formed on the basis of joint activities and direct communication (certain groups of students of the university, or a corporate group), but also secondary social groups of strangers to each other in real life. However, the social impact of these online communities may be more significant. In such a situation the status of community member is formed differently: with the help of the foreground quoting, rating, self-presentation. Each community can have a distinctive style of communication [5]. The most notable examples are the youth subculture known for their special language and style. In general, most online communities are characterized by the introduction of computer jargon, slang, and professionalisms.

Communication orientation of modern virtual environment associates with the possibility of free interaction of its members. Along with being in traditional social communities - professional or national groups - young people turn to the variety of online communities. The nature of such communities may not correspond to their actual occupation and way of life. Social networks have the immense popularity among young people today (Facebook, VKontakte, LinkedIn, My World, Classmates). The majority of network communities are formed and developed on the basis of social networks. Each social community is a unity of communication and interactions; therefore, it has its own distinctive characteristics: the specific content between the joint network activities, the hierarchy of relations, and specific language [6].

Social networks are kinds of virtual alternatives to the traditional social communities. Consequently, on the basis of them youth begins the new approach to the problem of self-realization and self-presentation. Today the involvement of young people in communication with representatives of different groups of social networking becomes more important than communication with friends in the immediate reality. Classic institutions of socialization - family, school, groups of friends – often become secondary now. The main reason is the ability of the virtual environment to form social network communication fields acting constantly, twenty-four hours a day, in contrast to the field of direct communication “here and now”. Young people get the illusion of constant involvement in the transaction, the absence of psychological barriers that cannot be avoided in real communication. However, in the virtual environment

there is the new communication problem – “alone in the crowd”, which can be defined as the possibility of endless interactions without a clear purpose. People are involved in the surface, little substance, phatic communication based on the resources of the virtual environments.

Many young people have communicational difficulties in real life, and it is much easier for them to express thoughts in writing. In addition, the youth of today is characterized by the “video clip” thinking, which is the consequence of the media environment: people are beginning to operate mosaic images created for them by the means of mass communication - TV, film, radio, and streaming video. Such thinking generates the appropriate communication techniques, popular in social networks: simplified information exchange, presentation of brief fragments, often in the visual form (pictures, videos, animations). These pieces of information are easily perceived and do not require detailed consideration. The most popular response to them is the rating and emotional characteristics (“likes”, “reposts”). The predominance of “video clip” thinking is the cause of passion for comic strips, as well as the difficulties in perception of complex texts (e.g., classic literature) [7].

2.4 The Changes in Self-Awareness

In connection with situation described above, we can talk about such concept as the virtual computer socialization or cyber socialization [8]. Cyber socialization of a person is socialization of an individual in the cyberspace. During cyber socialization a person has a number of new expectations and interests, motives and goals, needs and attitudes, as well as forms of psychological and social activities that are directly related to the cyberspace - in fact, the new virtual living space. Uncontrolled communicative impact on the end of unformed minds of young people is particularly dangerous. Online communication does not exclude, nor replace or supersede the traditional forms of communication. However, it is specific in form, aims, methods and tools. Despite getting invaluable experience of interpersonal communication with new people, online communication with multiple recipients leads to superficial relations of communicators. Among the negative effects of unlimited availability of contacts there is also information overload and psycho-emotional stress. Negative aspects include the reduction of direct social interactions, loneliness, depression, inadequate social perceptions, reduction of intra-communication, and increase of external pressure. Thus, Internet addiction, including games, results in techno stress, disruption of identity (the identification with the cyber-character), and escapism. This problem threatens the psychological health of young people and has a social character.

3. CONCLUSION

In the evolving and actively developing virtual environment there are series of important changes in the

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process of socialization of young people. First, there is the change of activities: every kind of activity of modern young people is implemented in the virtual environment. Second, communication is transforming. The terms of communication are expanding; the new virtual communication skills are developing; the spatial and temporal characteristics are changing. Third, the identity, the way how young people understand themselves changes. Every person is involved in a variety of virtual communities where he or she plays different social roles, and shows various life strategies. These communities often stimulate the growth of permissiveness, impunity and insecurity, the risk of radical or extremist ideas, the violation of customary norms and behavior. It is therefore necessary to study the specifics of the virtual environment and its impact on the socialization of young people. And to develop measures to prevent its negative impact on the formation of a person.

The design of the virtual reality leads to the transformation of the traditional socialization sense. The problem of the influence of the virtual environment on the socialization of a personality becomes interdisciplinary and must be considered from the multidisciplinary point of view: sociology, psychology, philosophy, pedagogy, and medicine.

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AUTHOR PROFILES

Olga Yakovleva and Svetlana Kulikova received the degree in pedagogy (information technology in education) in 2007. Currently, they are the Associate Professors at Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, Saint-Petersburg.