

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

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Summary: The article deals with the main regularities of people's perception of each other on the Internet. The basic issue under consideration focuses on the way the image of the Other is created on the Internet and how this image of the Other on the Internet influences the person's behavior in virtual communication.

Key words: virtual communication, perception on the Internet, the Other, anonymity.

Анотація: Стаття посвящена основним закономірностям восприятия людьми друг друга в Інтернеті. Основная проблема, которая рассматривается в статье, касается формирования образа Другого в Інтернеті, а также того, как образ Другого в Інтернеті влияет на поведение человека в виртуальной коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: виртуальная коммуникация, восприятие в Інтернеті, Другой, анонимность.

Анотация: Стаття присвячена головним закономірностям сприйняття людьми один одного в Інтернеті. Голосне питання, що розглянуто в статті, стосується формування образу Іншого в Інтернеті, а також того, як образ Іншого в Інтернеті впливає на поведінку людини у віртуальній комунікації.

Ключові слова: віртуальна комунікація, сприйняття в Інтернеті, Інший, анонімність.

What has made us consider this issue? The conditions of virtual communication have changed greatly as compared with those of real communication. It is logical to suppose that these changed conditions are reflected in the way people perceive each other.

We identify *limited sensory experience* and *anonymity* as the basic features of virtual communication, which are essential for considering the given issue. By *limited sensory experience* we mean that text messages make up the main source of information about our virtual interlocutor. When people communicate through the Internet, the indicators of a personal social position and nonverbal aspects of behavior are completely hidden. *Anonymity* implies that other users know only your net address. As for the remaining information, each user provides it exclusively according to his or her choice [4; 5].

These features of virtual communication enable us to pose two questions:

1. How is the image of the Other formed when the information which can be expressed through the other person's appearance is not available?
2. How is the person's behavior influenced by the fact that he or she is perceived under conditions of the interlocutor's anonymity and invisibility?

Under such conditions social perception on the Internet can be defined as perception of an anonymous interlocutor. Categorization of a person, i.e. subsuming a person to a certain social group, is what takes place first of all when we try to perceive a stranger. It is known that categorization based on appearance is a process which dominates when our impression about a person is formed. When

people meet each other for the first time, they are inclined to find out who they are, what social groups they belong to: nationality, sex, age, status, occupation, aesthetic attractiveness, etc [1].

That is why influence of invisibility of Internet-users on their mutual social perception is obvious. First of all, it is difficult to find out one's social status, because the indicators of the social roles, which are reflected in appearance in real communication, are absent in virtual communication. It means that there are no signs of belonging to a certain social group on the Internet. What happens as a result of the fact that the Other cannot be assigned to a social group?

Firstly, when a social status of the Other is not known, it can cause discomfort, because people are not aware of who they are communicating with. The more important the social status is for the people, the more discomfort they can feel. If people do not feel discomfort, it means that social status is not so important for them.

Secondly, it is known that the image of the Other consists of two components: experience of the person who perceives and information about the person who is perceived. As information about a person being perceived is reduced on the Internet to a minimum, the person's experience plays the most important role in forming the image of the other person. So, the image of the Other is formed on the basis of the experience of a perceiving person.

The image of the Other can be endowed with the features of the ideal Me. Moreover, the features of the object of perception can be attributed to the other person. It leads to distinctive consequences. As an experienced Internet-user once said, "Whenever I go in the cyberspace, I meet the same people". Having slightly opened his screwed-up eyes, the other added, "Whenever I go, I find myself" [4].

Hence, under condition of anonymity on the Internet the image of the Other is formed by attribution of some features to the person, rather than by information about the person. Idealization of the interlocutor or attribution of one's own personal traits to him or her can lead to appearance of a liking for the interlocutor. That is why many people who know each other by the Internet are disappointed when they meet in real life. This disappointment is caused by the collision between the image formed by virtual communication and a much more realistic image of a real person, which is often worse.

The features above constitute the basic regularities of personal perception on the Internet from the point of view of a subject of social cognition. However, perception of a person by person, unlike perception of inanimate objects, implies dual interaction – a person is influenced by the very presence of the Other.

The influence of the other people's presence on one's behavior was one of the first phenomena studied by social psychology. A series of researches testified that one's activity aimed at the solution of the problems intensifies when a person is at the centre of attention. This phenomenon is called social facilitation. According to the further experiments by F.G. Olport, one's personal activity intensifies in the proximity of other people, accompanied by the poorer quality of decision making. In the presence of others, participants of the experiment are inclined to make more general, standard, and banal decisions. Individual activity is

averaged and subsumed under a general pattern. This phenomenon is called social inhibition [2].

These two phenomena occur because people try to be comprehensible for each other. The other person who does not participate in communication is regarded as an averaged person devoid of individuality. Lower quality of solution of difficult tasks is connected with the fact that a person tries to be understood by an averaged observer and tries to solve the problem by the averaged means that are clear for him or her, but are not consistent with the related complex problem.

The observer's anonymity, i.e. invisibility, reinforces these trends. A person makes more efforts to be understood by an observer under conditions of anonymity, than under conditions of real communication when the observer is visible [3].

Anonymity reinforces the orientation of a person being perceived to "the other averaged person", trying to be clear from a conventional universal point of view. It is an aspiration for sticking to social norms, behaving strongly within the frameworks of these social norms. Thus anonymity reinforces one's aspiration to behave in accordance with social norms. Anonymity being a main feature of the most of virtual communication environments, the issues stated explain some behavior peculiarities of virtual communication.

According to the traditional opinion, anonymity reduces attention and self-consciousness. As a result, self-control is reduced, too. Consequently people become more impulsive and more sensitive. But there is another pattern of influence of anonymity, according to which a person does not lose self-control under conditions of anonymity, but on the contrary tries to behave within social norms.

Here, it is necessary to elucidate that there can be at least two kinds of social norms. The norms of the first kind include universal human norms (norms of beauty, common good manners). The norms of the second kind contain the norms of a certain social group (the rules of a conference, forum, chat on the Internet, etc.)

Anonymity encourages finding general norms for the situation and trying to follow the norms of behavior, which a person finds necessary for a particular situation. If certain social norms are represented, either explicitly or implicitly, in the situation, a person tries to stick to them. If these norms are absent, a person strives to follow common social norms.

It can be manifested in two ways on the Internet. A person can find certain social norms in the situation (it can be the rules of a conference, a chat) and behave either strictly following them or completely contradicting them.

If social norms are not evident in the situation, a person tries to follow the most common ones. Anonymity in virtual communication can also cause the corresponding changes in behavior, making a person become more reserved and conventional. There is a choice — either to follow the norms or to ignore them. It is clear that one's intention to break the rules, whether the norms of a social group or universal norms, is not connected with the freedom from any social norms at all.

A deliberate conflict behavior, i.e. negativism, results from social standards, just like regular behavior. A person breaks the norms, orienting to them [2].

This explains the main patterns of behavior in virtual communication, particularly a wide-spread conflict behavior on the Internet or, to put it in simpler words, a diverse flame. According to the traditional point of view on such kind of behavior, people express aggression in virtual reality, because this aggression is characteristic for them, and the conditions of virtual reality (anonymity and physical unavailability) help to manifest it.

On the other hand, according to the statements discussed, abnormal behavior can be caused by people's trying to ignore the social norms. This means that conflict behavior is determined by the fact that the person intends to ignore the social standards and take them into consideration at the same time.

Besides, orientation to common social norms accounts for the fact that virtual characters have exaggerated and significant attributes of force, power, beauty, etc [5]. So, the desire to conform to universal social norms leads to the use of universal norms of culture in virtual communication.

In conclusion, we emphasize that invisibility of an interlocutor in virtual communication can result in that the other person's image comes to be formed mostly by the features of the subject of perception, rather than by those of the other person. The other person's image is created on the analogy with a subject of perception. So the other person's image is completed on the analogy with perception of oneself. It means that the image of the Other is constructed on the basis of the experience of a person who perceives. This image either gains the features of the subject of perception or is idealized. That is why many people might seem so appealing to each other when meeting in virtual world and experience disappointment when they meet in real life.

Besides, a person becomes an object of perception of an anonymous stranger. It leads to the search of social norms for the situation and to the desire either to follow or ignore them. It explains the use of universal norms of culture in the process of Internet communication, as well as conflict behavior on the Internet.

It is also worth noting that these peculiarities are typical mostly for people who are not acquainted either in reality or in virtual world. Hence, these features are manifested in communication with both strangers and the people one knows very little. In the process of virtual communication, these trends should go down just in the way they do in real communication.

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