DIGITAL IDENTITY IN YOUNGER STUDENTS. ETHICAL EDUCATION FOR MANAGING THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SELF

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Abstract

Nowadays, more and more young people are finding in social networks a space of socialization, with ways to express and exchange patterns of behavior and education. Due to digital hyperconnectivity, technology is so immersed in our lives that it is currently a fundamental part of our ways of social interaction. In the case of the youngest generations, this interaction is combined with a stage of adolescence in which they begin to build their identities. The paper explores how does this construction of identity in a virtual exposed world affects the youngers, in terms of autonomy and responsibility. Also, the correspondence of this virtual construction with different ways of thinking, being and/or acting in social networks. And finally, to what extent these ways of being are considered as an identity in transition, as a trend, that could be pass with the up-growing of the personality and evolving of the social and professional roles.

An in depth analysis of recently published studies and reports on this topic (Adults’ media use and attitudes, 2018, from Ofcom; and Life in Likes, 2018, by Children’s Commissioner) is presented, to bring about evidence about how post-millennials young people handle the digital construction of identity and how it could affect them at a socio-educational level, with impacts towards the next generation of classroom students. Paper concludes with some ethical considerations for the education agents, in order to empower youngers in their effective management and construction of a virtual self.

Keywords: Ethical education, digital identity, social networks, social influence.

1 INTRODUCTION

At the time our society is the result of a mixture of different cultures, ideas, thoughts, points of view, experiences, etc., it is unimaginable the level of communication and connectivity. Different cultures are present everywhere and whenever we want them to be. Possibilities of digital devices connect us with whoever we want, at any time and no matter where we are located. From this perspective, this paper questions how this connectivity affects the way we interact nowadays. In the case of younger generations, the influence that they receive from others when they are connected may become an issue in terms of their digital identity building and vulnerability. On the one hand, they struggle to handle the amount of information they receive; on the other, there is a social influence affecting the way they perceive themselves.

To start analyzing this situation, the paper states what processes of globalization are at stake and what it involves, considering that not such as one single definition exists; from this complexity many variables and factors were included. Starting with countries and communities’ politics, economy, territory, transmission of knowledge, exchange of experiences, global issues, etc., in fact, there are as much as variables as their possible mutual influences.

Secondly, the paper presents how young people are finding in social networks a space of socialization and exchanging mediated by the digital hyperconnectivity. The paper explores how does this construction of identity in a virtual exposed world affects the youngers, in terms of autonomy and responsibility.

Finally, an in depth analysis of recently published studies and reports on this topic (Adults’ media use and attitudes, 2018, from Ofcom; and Life in Likes, 2018, by Children’s Commissioner; both with European samples; and the research from Twenge with an American sample) is presented, to bring about evidence about how post-millennials young people handle the digital construction of identity and how it could affect them at a socio-educational level, with impacts towards the next generation of classroom students.
2 GLOBALIZATION AND ITS INFLUENCE IN YOUNGERS

As Stoudmann [1] explains, globalization is “a process that encompasses the causes, course, and consequences of transnational and transcultural integration of human and non-human activities.” In this definition, we can see the implications between societies that drift into a big common society with a worldwide impact. Another definition that will help us to understand better, is that it is the process of intensification of cross-area and cross-border social relations between actors from very distant locations, and of growing transnational interdependence of economic and social activities [11]. Clearly, distances become shorter when referring to a globalized world, however, consequences of this economic and political exchange would affect our way of living, and specially how the youngers live, or perceive their life.

Among the advantages of the globalization are how closeness is extremely dangerous for little communities that do not have enough power to keep their way of living; since the global pressure looks for a homogenous system that responds to an economic and political organization that moves us to a consumerism and capitalism world. This respond to “stablished” values of a homogenous global culture that opens to democracy, freedom, individual rights, tolerance to differences; however, it also opens the door to big cultures influences, competitive markets, individualism and social media pressure. One of the main effects are the trends, generated and moved by the social media and how specific trends could have short or long-term impacts on our habits, behaviors, emotions, and thus, in their identity.

In the case of adolescents, trend flows occur during a stage in which their identity is under development. They are vulnerable to the social influences in different levels; identity formation, or the construction of a self, is changeable in terms of their interpersonal experiences, relations with others, and significant bonding with peers [4]. Considering that this a stage of changes in their emotional and social development, it turns out as necessary to guide and care about what they start doing in a digital platform [2].

2.1 Post- Millennials and our hyperconnected world

According to Twenge [13], post- millennial generation is born from 1995 and on. New generations are born with all this technology that has changed the way they relate to each other, with an immediate timing and fast responses to their desires, in an online way mostly.

Internet, is one of the most influential tools in our modern and globalized world. Having Internet as an important part in our lives have made our personal and private world changed and as a consequence, the personal intimate place is blurring progressively. Cyberspaces are with us at all times and occasionally even without us becoming aware of it through the use of smartphones, tablets, laptops, etc. [10].

Cyberspace is also a tool for learning and entertainment, connection and exchange, however, this connectivity is affecting us even though all of the benefits we receive from it. Be connected is a priority because is the best way to feel included, surrounded by friends and less solitary [1]. The issue here is pointing that the lack of outside experience and personal contacts probably have a cost in the younger generations in terms of the face-to-face social skills. While they pay attention to a screen, to the status updates, wall posts, and pictures on a profile their daily is happenings [3], however they probably are missing what is occur outside their digital networks. The big concern surrounds around how digitalism is replacing social face-to-face interactions, and how this may affect their ways of thinking, being and/or acting in social networks. The actual issue is to what extent these ways of being are considered as an identity in transition, not stable anymore, fluctuating as a trend, that could be pass with the up-growing of the personality and evolving at the same pace of their digital social networks.

2.2 Social Networks and digital identity

Social media has become a very important part in the lives of young people. Nowadays, is very common to have a profile in any of the different available social networks, to name a few: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat or even WhatsApp.

Youngers are experiencing and feeling the common developmental factors that are expectable for the adolescent, nonetheless with a difference, they are in constant public exposure. As educators, our main concern when we refer to young people is that they use social networks without a guide, putting themselves at some risks for their identity or privacy; they are building a self, an online self, from whom they express their thoughts, emotions, ideas and feelings [6]. This public exposition is
significant because it shows their lifestyle, which certainly could be influenced by the social media trends and expectations. What is more, the disclosure of a self that probably is unrealistic, such as the way they pretend to be, but not necessarily the real.

Another difference that young people face nowadays is the way they interact, which does not include social contact anymore. Facing several changes in this period plus the issue of identity versus identity confusion in youngers [5] caused by globalization; even though globalization gives youngers a global perception of the world, it also “push” them to be a part of what is already established in a homogenous society, normalizing some habits or life-styles.

Internet is the tool that contribute to a fast and interactive exchange of ideas, cultures, trends, etc., and when youngers growing start to be interested on social media culture and the extensive spread of ideas across cultures [7]. However, they must be aware of the risks of being in a permanent public disclosure, along with watching or interacting with untrusted or unrealistic people or information that may not be true, such as the popular fake news. Via social networks, teenagers may explore their identity and may find a space to manage with stressors as well as connect with individuals with similar experiences or interests [8].

3 RESULTS

In order to determine the main implications of the social media in the digital identity construction for youngers, an in depth analysis was carried out among the recent literature. According to the size of the samples and the specific treatment of the topic –digital identity building- three different reports and studies were chosen. The three focused on Social Network uses and perceptions of youngers, in United Kingdom (two reports) and United States of America (one report).

In the case of “Life in Likes, 2018” report, by Children’s Commissioner of United Kingdom’s Government, the main topic analyzed was the perception of children between 8 and 12 years about social platforms and their use. According to this report, the most popular social media networks they use are Snapchat, Instagram, Musical.ly and WhatsApp. The feeling of using them makes them to be positive and show a state of “happiness” caused by the sensation of keeping in touch, sharing, playing and creating stuff for their friends. Among the reasons that may influence their identity building are: considered young and having parental supervision, reporting that the last make them aware of how they use social networks. Among the most significant result that this report shows are the relevance that they give to the approval of their mates while they post several things. This continuous seeking for acceptance is characteristic of this adolescent stage but turns them to be more dependent of any social networks inputs, especially likes and dislikes.

In the “Adults’ media use and attitudes” report by Ofcom 2018, 1846 people from 16 years and over interviewed during 2017 in United Kingdom; this will supplement the results from the other report. A relevant finding is that 89% of its population are using smartphones; nowadays, people from 16 and 54 years old are online or using their mobiles in a constant frequency. The report also shows that the most popular social network for this population is WhatsApp, as Facebook showed a decrease on its popularity.

Unexpected results about attitudes, knowledge and behavior about being critical thinkers were found. Approximately 47% of youngers have once seen inappropriate or violent content while navigating on the web however, they also agree that there are more advantages than disadvantages of using the web for searching information. Another interesting fact is that three out of ten of interviewees are not aware of how they share personal information within digital platforms for checking social media, messaging or checking emails. Seven in ten of interviewees use public Wi-Fi to connect their mobiles and are not considering the vulnerability for their data protection. Finding the balance, two thirds of this population are aware that not everything they see online or in social networks are true; three out of five people agreed that not all the information that is shared in social media is real or even close to reality, people tend to make it look better or more interesting than in reality.

Twenge developed a qualitative study entitled “iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Unprepared of Adulthood” (2018). In this research, she interviewed 23 youngers between 12 to 20 years old from the United States, to have a deep discussion about technology and their perception of our reality; as well, there was also an online interview of 250 students at San Diego University to discuss different issues about the generation. She also made an extensive research comparing data from 1970 until 2015 to see the differences within generations.
We are going to focus on her analysis about Internet and online time in J. Twenge found out that youngers (specifically 12th graders) are using a digital device 5 hours and a half per day approximately; among this times, 28% of this use is for texting, while 24% for navigating on Internet, 18% for gaming, 24% for any other type of entertainment and 5% for video chatting; which means that the majority part of their free time out of school is focus in front of a screen. The study also refers that in the spring of 2016, 80% of the teenagers of 14 years old are users of social media networks, such as Instagram or Snapchat rather than Facebook. These results are interesting for this paper because they show how social life is based primary on digitalism, and how nowadays it is almost “replacing” real social interaction with others. Another relevant result is the increase of amount of time that teenagers use internet, showing that in 2015, the percentage of 12th graders who spend ten or more hours a week online was a 30% more than in 2006. This is also striking due to the decrease of time that they use for social activities.

As all these three studies show that it is undeniable that in present times, the majority of young people are users or are used to the interaction with digital devices or a screen. These generations are growing with an approach to technology very different from past generations and this may change the way they perceive social interaction, behaviors and their own self (identity). As analyzed in this paper, kids are entering into the social networks earlier, and they use it especially, for entertainment and social interaction, comparing and being influenced by mainstream trends.

According to the findings, youngers are building and shaping their self in a clear connection to their digital identity construction, via online and through the public eye, all which means new educational implications. With a whole new perspective of how life should be, efforts will need to focus on how can help them to face their reality in the best way possible and keeping away of any risk for their identity construction and development.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Some ethical considerations for the educational agents are arisen, mainly focus to the empowerment of youngers in their effective management and construction of a virtual self. Educational agents should care about not only the use of technology but also their critical thinking and resilience [5]. Critical thinking skills are fundamental in education to promote a clear way of thinking, social decision making and problem, as powerful abilities to apply everyday [7].

Children have less abilities in comparison to adolescents, especially when referring to critical thinking [8]. This is the reason why educational institutions need to start any kind of early program to prevent future risks. Ethical education could be a suitable start, as referring to the reflection on values, virtues, rules and consideration toward others, and it should be integrated in the syllabus and most importantly, applied in daily life [9]. For this aim, a multidisciplinary approach could be relevant for creating a safe atmosphere, that supports and guides them through the most responsible solution; progressively, a space for autonomy gives them the opportunities of solving possible risks that they may face during their online interactions and productions.

As several studies and research suggested, to guide youngers on the use of social networks is key, as the digital area is their absolute open place for them to express, create, share and provide personal information [2]. As educators, our main concern deals with how to help them on the critical reflection about risks, advantages and disadvantages of this open exposure and helping them to be responsible about themselves. Providing a safe space for dialogue is the main step for an ethical education that will help youngsters to minimize possible threats and take advantage to these new opportunities of digital connections for their identity construction.

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