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**SPECIFIC FEATURES OF COMMUNICATION
WITHIN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES****ОСОБЛИВІ РИСИ КОМУНІКАТИВНОЇ
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This article analyzes Virtual communities of gamers, bloggers, and hikikomori in the aspect of communication in cyberspace. The features of their communicative interaction in terms of social, cultural, personal and age factors' influence are examined. Some features of specifics of formation of virtual organizations of users with social interaction and communication issues are noted.

Keywords: communication, community, cyberspace, internet, personality, gamers, bloggers, hikikomori, meme, imageboard.

Стаття присвячена філософському аналізу віртуальних спільнот геймерів, блогерів і хікікоморі в аспекті комунікації в кіберпросторі. Розглянуто особливості їх комунікативної взаємодії з точки зору впливу соціальних, культурних, особистісних та вікових факторів. Визначено особливості специфіки формування віртуальних організацій користувачів з проблемами соціальної взаємодії та комунікації.

Ключові слова: комунікація, спільнота, кіберпростір, інтернет, особистість, геймери, блогери, хікікоморі, мем, imageboard.

(стаття друкується мовою оригіналу)

The subject of analysis of this article is virtual communities in terms of cyberspace communication. The objective is to identify the features of personal and communicative interaction of virtual communities in cyberspace. To achieve this, an analysis of such online communities as gamers, bloggers, and hikikomori has been undertaken. We also examine a virtual community that unites people with autism spectrum disorders.

The given topic is relevant because of rapidly growing interest in virtual communication, which has been reflected by several scientists and philosophers. The research on interpersonal communication (both offline and online) is very diverse. For example, the influence of communication on the personality formation is analyzed in detail by M. I. Lisin, L. I. Bozhovich, A. I. Krupnova, M. Argyle. In their works, these authors highlight main motives that determine the habitual regularities of an individual engaged in communication. In the works of A. B. Mudrik, V. A. Bogdanov, and others, the main concepts reflecting the system of personality traits are the following: communicative qualities of personality, communicative abilities, communicative potential of personality, communicative core of personality. The emergence of new communication facilities in the age of

online information culture is examined in the works of D. S. Avraamova, B. B. Bagirova, I. M. Dzyaloshinsky, Yu. A. Ermakova, B. N. Lozovsky.

In the current digital era, the ways, forms and styles of interpersonal communication undergo the process of modernization. The interaction between individuals is, to a large extent, transferred to cyberspace, which becomes a more and more important part of social life. In social and philosophical studies, the research of internet communication as a factor of socialization is relevant as never before.

The conceptual apparatus of social studies has been enriched through the research of communities. In particular, in 1955 American sociologist J. Guillery, after having analyzed over about 100 definitions of the concept of «community», determined the most often seen characteristics of this phenomenon: commonality of territory, socio-cultural intercommunication, existence of social connections [13, p. 130]. As M. Castells points out, the term «community» aroused ideological disputes between scientists who were used to the old-fashioned, offline, reality-bound community definition and the adherents of the new definition which encompassed alternative sorts communities which has been made possible by means of the internet [8].

Upon examination of a communicative community, we can say that it possesses a globalizing character (i.e. all material communication limits such as time and place are overcome). A community can be considered a communicative community only if its members are truly engaged in the process of communication, if their interests can be freely expressed and are taken into account in the collective discourse. People with similar values, worldviews and ideas usually communicate more intensively. Such characteristics form a total communicative essence of a community. Thus, the process of communication becomes easier. After a while, members of such societies start communicating less and eventually leave it because of losing interest. Because of this, online communities are considered to have age limits, albeit rather vague. Gamers and hikikomori are usually regarded as having younger members as compared to bloggers, but this is a highly debatable statement since, for example, playing computer games has recently become common even among the middle-aged populace. And the notorious hikikomori NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) lifestyle can sustain through older age, not only in teenagers as some might assume.

The question of how Internet communities are formed has been relevant since the very first days of emergence of the World Wide Web. Barry Wellman, the creator of «Net Individualism» conception, claimed that the kinds of interactions that are possible online are motivated by individual interest rather than collective identity (i.e. awareness of being a part of a certain group).

According to Wellman, «Complex social networks have always existed, but recent technological developments in communication have afforded their emergence as a dominant form of social organization. When computer-mediated communication networks link people institutions and knowledge, they are

computer-supported social networks». He defined «community» as «networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity» [16, p. 228]. «Virtual reality starts where a human enters the cyberspace» [4, p. 134]. This dimension connects people with no regard for their social status and geographical location. Thus, the communities of individuals bound only through the internet are created. No matter what country they come from, the internet gives an opportunity to connect cultures through interactive communication and, as a result, to change the reality those people live in both online as well as offline. The change of worldviews and lifestyles under the influence of informational technologies leads to creation of a new type of personality and society in cyberspace. The internet acts as a medium which transforms the socio-cultural value hierarchy and a means through which an individual can access all sorts of informational and human resources.

The term «cyberspace» is recently new. It was introduced by a science-fiction writer, William Gibson. He used it in his 1982 novel «Burning Chrome», which was published in «Omni» magazine. Later on, the term «cyberspace» was popularized in the novel «Neuromancer». The concept of cyberspace has gained a firm foothold in internet-related literature, although it still has no common definition despite the multiple attempts by scholars to create one. The term «cyberspace» is synthesized from the words «cyber» and «space». Cybernetics is the science of common regularities of management and transmission of information in different systems, and «space» means the place where the information is situated; thus, cyberspace is the space of informational objects and events [5, p. 89–90]. Cyberspace as a socio-cultural factor influences social life, changes space-time perception of reality and leads to the creation of network society, which is composed of certain groups of people, bound by common interests [10, p. 20].

In this paper, we will consider virtual communities, with which the cyberspace is populated.

A virtual community is a certain group of people that maintains regular communication through the Internet. According to Barivova [1, p. 25], the term «virtual community» has been popularized by an American writer Howard Reingold in the book of the same title «Virtual community» [Reingold] [8, p. 20]. In such communities, the connections between its members are individualized since each constructs their own network. Also, certain peculiar qualities can be pointed out: the increase in the number of participants (up to several millions), the length of time for which the communication can be maintained, its individualization [6, p. 15].

Such communities can function under the condition of existence of common interests among the participants as well as the dynamic of the topic's discussion. The interests can be unrelated to the main topic of discussion, depending on personal preferences of the interlocutors.

A virtual community is different from the usual sort of community by anonymity and an ability to

change one's social status. A personality can be introduced through a sort of «role play». The ability to change one's own identity in the communication space helps to present a given participant as his own ideal projection of himself.

A community centers around a certain interest, which can unite several groups of people online into a united one.

Did the people in modern society become more insular and less sociable after the arrival of such an instrument of conducting friendship, love and the search for people with common interests? After having analyzed such virtual communities as «gamers» and «bloggers», we concluded that their members form groups because of being dissatisfied with their lives.

Psychotherapist Mark Sandomirsky, in one of his blogs, described online communication as follows: «Internet communication is an unending masked carnival, a constant alteration of these masks when it seems that «everything is possible» [9]. The members of online communities create desired projections of their personalities, thus making themselves feel more confident.

Bloggers' creativity (in this case, its online manifestation) is an attempt to run away from one's own self. Symbolic images created in order to present one's own personality are an attempt to create an ideal that the members of a given community would want to achieve by means of «acting a role» that might even be copied from some real person. Most of the people gravitate towards using finished and tried behavioral stereotypes. This happens because of (a) conformism (pretense as a way to escape responsibility, Fromm's «escape from freedom») as well as (b) the phenomenon of «limited rationality» (G. Simon) – it's easier to use a ready decision rather than to come up with a new one.

The representatives of the virtual communities under study are usually completely immersed in their interests, which virtually become their *raison d'être*. Gamers are the people who spend a considerable amount of time playing computer games [2]. Being obsessed with playing computer games, gamers stop exploring the computer and degrade in the sense of computer knowledge [1, p. 24].

The professor of social pedagogy and psychology department of pedagogy and psychology faculty of Moscow State Pedagogical University A. Mudrik emphasized in one of his works, that «Computer game gives a player an opportunity to feel oneself as one's own ideal» [7, p. 210]. Within the boundaries of a given virtual community, we indeed can observe its members' experiments with various images that can reflect one's latent desires, fears and needs. A game gives a player an opportunity to create a character that could become his alter-ego and act according to his desires of Real-life self-accomplishment. He acts like a subject he admires.

Game addiction arises because the player operates in an ideal world that gives him opportunities to actualize his current needs. Security, a sense of belonging and self-realization, give the player opportunities to make independent decisions, take a risk, take responsibilities and to lead. In the final analysis, game addiction

develops through constant positive stimulation of a player by means of various rewards and achievements, thus giving him a sense meaning.

In fact, gaming does not influence a person's perception of a community. After playing a certain computer game for a long time, he will try to find an interlocutor in accordance with his own character and interests. Offline and online communication are virtually the same. The only difference is the environment within which this communication is conducted. Gamers may believe that they can live a thousand lives in games but only one in the real world. The members of this community are usually the people who, through whatever reasons, lack a real, offline social circle (except for extreme cases, it always has only one reason, that is one's unfulfilled communicative potential). Playing computer games helps people avoid responsibilities of making decisions and acts as a substitute for living the real life. This is another way gaming addiction is established. Such a virtual life damages physical and mental health as well as one's material well-being.

Within computer games, a player accepts a ready scenario with a number of storylines, characters, etc. Through the act of creation, one usually acts according to certain pre-created scripts. In videoblogging, one performs the acts of creation that do not exclude working according to some scripts.

The representatives of these communities spend a lot of time in cyberspace, which has a certain influence on their lives in the real world. In fact, they perform a sort of quasi-socialization and such an attempt of self-affirmation should rather be considered pseudo-self-actualization.

To get involved in cyberspace once means to get involved in it forever. Though this might have positive effect on people with autism spectrum disorders. The problem of unsuccessful and troubled social adaptation is often solved within a comfortable cyberspace environment. The creation of virtual communities of «rain men» is a manifestation of an epoch which gave them an opportunity of self-actualization. Online, they get an opportunity to have a say. Martijn Dekker can be named as one of the successful socialization examples. He, being a person with high functional autism, has created an internet community called «Independent life within autism spectrum» [3].

M. Dekker considers this community of people with autism spectrum disorders as a means of communication, which allows its members to express themselves and provide emotional and practical support to each other.

Cyberspace is a comfortable socialization tool for autists, which allows for a soft protection in case of mistakes. The rules of such communities are simple, and their changes are predictable and controllable.

Within cyberspace, there is also another community with similar attributes. Hikikomori (Japanese: ひきこもり or 引き籠もり, lit. «pulling inward, being confined», i.e., «acute social withdrawal»; colloquially/adaptive translation: shutter) are reclusive adolescents or adults who withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement [12]. In social

media, the tag «hiki» is placed on people who suffer from social phobia. These people have no friends and experience difficulties in communication with others. Often this tag is self-applied by people who just don't want to have a job. They choose reclusion because they have a conflict with the real world. In turn, this conflict arises because they decline to adapt in society and become a complete personality. Being unable to change the circumstances (no matter whether there are objective or subjective reasons standing behind it) and feeling «out of place», such a person creates a fake reality for himself in the form of hikikomori lifestyle. Often hiki's social needs threshold is so low that they don't require communication with people at all.

Hikikomori, as a phenomenon, can be observed in middle-class families rather than in the families of relatively low income. The reasons why such a personality can develop might be parents' inability to detect their child's issue. Because of this, he feels isolated and emotionally dependent on his parents. A lack of a defined life and career goals makes such people vulnerable, leads to self-isolation and becoming a hikikomori.

Having analyzed virtual communities of gamers, bloggers and hikikomoris in the aspect of how they communicate in cyberspace, we came to the conclusion that a kind of virtual communication is created within these groups, which has its own particular peculiarities defined by its membership composition. Virtual communication is an act of verbal interaction with the interlocutors being separated spatially and conducted through the means of computer telecommunication systems.

The bloggers' internet community communicates by means of expressing their thoughts and ideas through creating original content. A blog usually has a circle of regular readers who subscribe to it or visit it regularly with the purpose of reading new information expressed in text or video format, as well as to express their own opinions. In his own blog, an author can use several kinds of images, creating a projection of his imagined «self».

Gamers usually position themselves as video game characters. When playing a game, they isolate themselves from society and immerse into the life online. Compared to the bloggers who act creatively, gamers express themselves only by acting according to pre-programmed scripts.

The specific feature of the hikikomori community is low level of social adaptation. The members of this community communicate on the Internet by means of creating blogs, but only in text format (like bloggers), or in video game chats (like gamers).

Emotions in online communication are expressed through the means of «emoji smiles» and humorous reaction images. As an essential part of online communication, a phenomenon called «memes» should be mentioned. An image, a phrase, or a certain personage can constitute a meme, and, as a broader term, «meme» is characterized as «an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture» [14]. This term was introduced by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book «The Selfish

Gene», in which he draws certain similarities between «memes» and «genes». He considered the former a basic unit of cultural information just as the latter is a basic unit of living cells' information transmission: «We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream'» [11, p. 192]. In this paper we will consider «memes» only in terms of being an information transmission medium in cyberspace. As such, memes can evolve and change across time; they come in and out of fashion. In certain cases, memes can reflect states of mind of certain internet communities from which they emerged, and be later used by other communities, if their moods and intentions converge. Thus, a meme created by a hikikomori community and aimed to express one's own loneliness and social ineptness, can become popular in the gamers' community. This might be due to computer games' quality of isolating the gamer from the outside world. This, in its turn, might lead to experiencing certain social communication issues by a gamer, similar to those of a hiki. Thus, memes act as a sort of language, which can contribute to better understanding among virtual community members, as well as between virtual communities. In this way, Internet memes act as an essential part in online communication, with different communities using different memes. Some memes common in one community can be unacceptable in another. As an example, memes used on Facebook are largely disliked on imageboards (which are usually anonymous forums where each post can have an image attached to it, such as Japanese «2channel», American «4chan» and Russian «dvach»).

Studying memes and their spread can help in understanding how virtual communities interconnect and give insights on what their members' underlying motivation is. Let's consider a meme called «Pepe the frog» which, in one of its most popular incarnations, was nothing but an image of a sad frog. It was quite widespread in the hikikomori community as a reflection of their pessimistic mood and general disappointment in life. A few years past its emergence, it became known as alt-right mascot, icon for racist and anti-Semitic groups and hate symbol [15]. This convergence between the socially inept hiki community and the politically-motivated «alt-right» community manifested through same meme usage shows certain peculiarities of both of these virtual communities. Perhaps this shows that hiki and other people with socialization issues consider modern society as flawed and reach to conservative ideas for an answer. Besides, maybe it shows that the aforementioned groups manifest their hatred accumulated through the years of rejection by the society through racism and anti-Semitism of the notorious «alt-right» movements.

Any Internet community as one of socialization mediums shows a person not as what he really is, but rather as a kind of mask he chooses. As far as the people having real autism symptoms are concerned, some virtual communities are aimed at helping them with their socialization issues.

As a unit of structure of society, given communities are characterized by having a stratified system, with established social norms, roles and statuses of its members with different levels of access to online content. The perception of a personality within a virtual community is conducted by means of the content he creates (texts, music or images). Virtual discourse takes the first place. How one chooses a virtual community can depend upon his social class, age, gender, profession and interests. A virtual community becomes not only a place for leisure time activities, but also a field of professional interest by means of creating a unified informational resource.

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