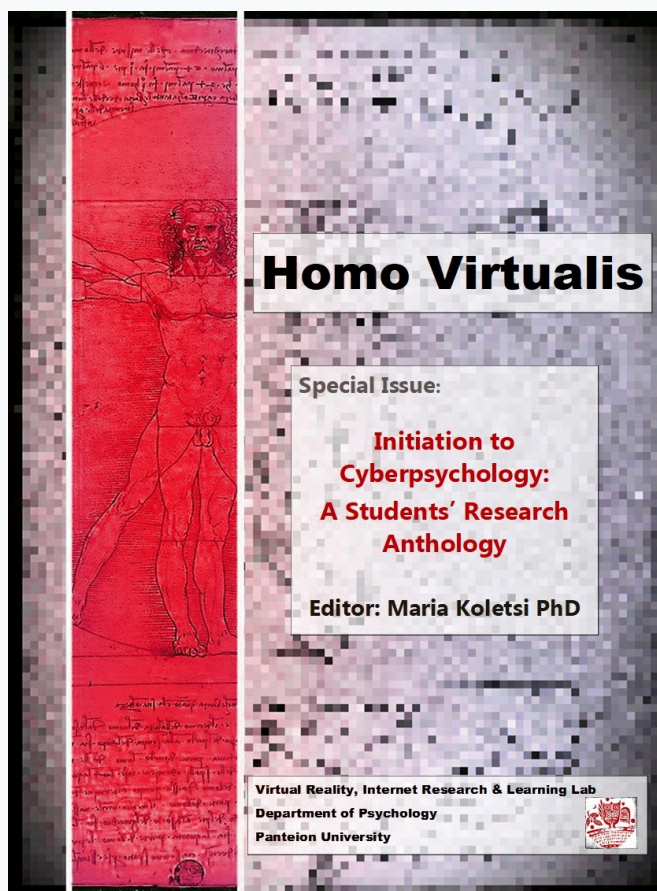


# Homo Virtualis

Vol 5, No 1 (2022)

Special Issue: Initiation to Cyberpsychology: A Students' Research Anthology



**From Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" to "Alice on social media": Approaches of fantasy as a real experience in Cyberspace**

*Marilena Hadjieustathiou, Andreas Ioannou, Aggelikh Karfitsa, Anna Paliari, Maria Skantzouri*

doi: [10.12681/homvir.30318](https://doi.org/10.12681/homvir.30318)

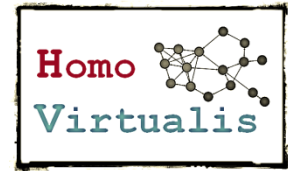
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## To cite this article:

Hadjieustathiou, M., Ioannou, A., Karfitsa, A., Paliari, A., & Skantzouri, M. (2022). From Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" to "Alice on social media": Approaches of fantasy as a real experience in Cyberspace. *Homo Virtualis*, 5(1), 84–110. <https://doi.org/10.12681/homvir.30318>



## **From Lewis Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland” to “Alice on social media”: Approaches of fantasy as a real experience in Cyberspace**

**Hadjieustathiou Marilena<sup>1</sup>, Ioannou Andreas<sup>2</sup>, Karfitsa Aggelikh<sup>3</sup>,  
Paliari Anna<sup>4</sup>, Skantzouri Maria<sup>5</sup>**

**Abstract:** In the present study, we implement the theory of Hermeneutics in order to understand the element of reality in the virtual world experience. We attempted to formulate cases on the user experiences and interpret them, as described in existing research and reflected on social media. Our focus topic consists of the use of imagination and its contribution to the construction of identity, behavior and relationships in the virtual environment of social media. We also make references to the elements of irrationality and time, two variables that are likely to affect the way users perceive reality. The online methodological tools and programs Concept-mapping and Social Network Visualiser were used in order to collect and capture the mentioned and further related concepts as well. The results of the study include possible conceptual correlations in social media, for which we argue that their virtuality depends on the actions of the user, and individual conclusions about the function of the imagination, which we consider to be an integral part of conception, implementation and quality of reality.

**Keywords:** fantasy, virtual environment, reality, social Media, identity

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<sup>1</sup> Undergraduate student, Department of Psychology, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece, mchatzeeustathiou@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Undergraduate student, Department of Psychology, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece, pikaandreas42@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup> Undergraduate student, Department of Psychology, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece, karfitsaaggelikh@gmail.com

<sup>4</sup> Undergraduate student, Department of Psychology, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece, paliarhanna@gmail.com

<sup>5</sup> Undergraduate student, Department of Psychology, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece, maria.skantzouri@hotmail.com

## Introduction

The concept of fantasy has gained a range of interpretations during efforts to understand it, and is encountered in multiple theoretical works of philosophers, scientists and writers. In Descartes' philosophy, fantasy "mediates between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality" (Žižek, 1997, p. 7). It has been associated with memory, interpersonal relationships, as well as escapism: in Vygotsky's psychological work it constitutes a process space for unexpressed feelings (Stoltz et al., 2015), for psychoanalyst Lacan it is related with desire and motive in a subject-object relationship (Ormrod, 2014), and as for Freud it is the reasoning behind "screen memories", the primal recollections that function as a covered memory representation (Magee, 2009) of non-acceptable fantasizing.

Whilst turning our focus on Freud, we realize the diversity of screen memories' usage, since with the fantasy element contribution they can be implemented in art areas (Freeman et al., 2013). In literature, for instance, Lewis Carroll tells the story of Alice through his timeless novel "Alice in Wonderland", whilst she encounters elements of her fantasy. During her interaction with unique characters, she is transcending the natural world's time and space limits, whilst her figure magically changes constantly. According to Carroll's biography, Alice's character is based on an existing girl (Parfitt, 2013) who describes the novel's pleasant or unfortunate stories, as they unfold through the memory and fantasy spaces of the writer.

Walking through this process of making that contains a creator, a product of thought and an environment that obtains life, it reminds us of the current era's virtual experience during navigating through social media. Although they are two different experience states, what they have in common is a divergence from the rules that govern the natural world, concerning space-time, social relations and the orthological element. On one hand, since the novel belongs to the literary nonsense genre (Prados, 2018) meaningful and lighter elements are well balanced; on the other hand, the users in cyberspace face an absurd, existential element. It is in these worlds that limits, logic and relationships possibly gain new dimensions.

It seems like the virtuality of social media has given us access to an endless source of data and information, mostly about other people. Their time frame expands to infinity, since our personal data traces become permanent in cyberspace (Brandtzaeg, 2018). It also expands since it would be difficult for society to abandon interaction with a medium like this, because of our constant desire to observe and develop the virtual content. Social media structure goes constantly through changes as the user interferes with them and as the algorithmic systems produce data while making decisions in their favor (Lundahl, 2020). Therefore, we don't comprehend them as tools, leading to questions about their controlling power and the user's virtual transparency.

In what percentage does this insubstantial experience consist of fantasy material and in what of reality? We mention material and immaterial, tangible and digital qualities

in both ends, because although we have the means to transport our brain content in a computer, we are unable to make use of the rest of our bodily substance (Rheingold, 1993, p.5). At the same time, we can't ignore that the development of smart technologies and software advance cyberspace to "a recreational space for psychological mechanisms, projection of fantasy and psychic income research" (Atsalaki, 2018, p. 194). The addition of the factors mentioned, creates questions about how many more dimensions could text and virtual communication possibly reach, in favor of the user's experience. So, the rising question is: Does humanity wish to abandon its physical substance and incorporate its existence in cyberspace? Is the goal to detach completely from the natural world?

It is concluded that sometimes, cyberspace is presented as a getaway-from-reality area, since we can easily transform according to our will (Myrivili, n.d.). In one of cyberspace's definitions, it is described as "the space where subjects react using their imagination to recreate what they finally accept as reality" (Anastasopoulou, 2018, p. 285). What do these descriptions of cyberspace tell us about human desire and behavior? In the first, reality is understood as two separate spaces and one is being rejected, because of its failure to provide redefining and autonomy properties to the person. In the second, there is an opportunity for each person to reflect their sought reality, while making use of one another at the same time.

Therefore, we distinguish two main variables, environment and people, who keep a balanced relationship only when one benefits from the other, with the contribution of fantasy. The indulgence with the combination of virtual reality, social media, human involvement and fantasy impelled us to select a Hermeneutics approach (Routio, 2007), as a method to conceive the connections and limits between them. In the present study, the elements undergo through a deeper analysis in order to produce possible answers to the following questions: How do we transcend from the natural world into social media's virtual environment, what do we get through this experience, and what meaning do people attribute to concepts like space, time, identity and fantasy?

### **Social media definitions, virtual reality, fantasy, utility & importance in everyday life**

Before attempting to offer interpretations on these wonders, it would be helpful to identify concepts intertwined with social media, such as virtual reality and virtual environment. Virtual reality (VR) has been defined as "the ability provided to humans to interact in real time with three-dimensional mainly computer-generated environments, through the senses of sight, hearing and touch" (Meimaris, 1997, p.1). Despite the inability of participating and displaying the whole human essence, users create representative characters, the so-called *avatars*. Their graphic nature adds complexity to the experience of computer communication (Harley et al., 2018).

Virtual environments are synthetic environments produced by computers and are based on the most advanced technologies of interactive 3D graphics. With the help

of appropriate input-output devices, they support the process of communication between people and computers, while most of the human senses participate in an "intuitive" way (Charitos, 2005).

This interactive ground has been the impetus for virtual communities to develop and thrive. They are "social gatherings that emerge from the Internet when several individuals maintain and renew their public discourse, to form a web of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5). Finally, Cyberspace is the conceptual space where words, human relationships, data, wealth and power are manifested by people using CMC technology, that is, communication through computer mediation (Rheingold, 1993).

Social media maintains its high user ranking within Cyberspace, as an intelligent technological derivative created to achieve connectivity and communication of the modern world. According to Halonen et al. (2008), the term "social media" refers to the means of interaction between people, in which the latter create, share and exchange content in virtual communities and networks. They are used as virtual sites of interaction (Carr & Hayes, 2015) and their impact is due to the continuous development and integration of new features in the virtual environment. Thus, social media environments are not a tool, as they give users the opportunity to transfer their identity to instant processing platforms.

According to statistics on the use of social networks (Statista, 2021), Facebook ranks first in users' preference for connectivity. Facebook, as a communication and self-presentation platform, provides users with the ability to interact with their online friends through the instant messaging service of the Messenger software. If desired, they can post text and photos, as well as digital videos in order to compose their displayed profile to others. It is an extension if not the narration of their life, based on the representations of themselves (Atsalaki, 2018, pp. 207-208).

Instagram is a platform that refers more to the form of a printed photo album, as its use serves the viewing of virtual and interactive material. It could be said that it encourages users to focus on their external appearance by posting and sharing photos, rather than on textual writing as a means of expression. Users can "track" other people's accounts and search for specific content using *hashtags*. Instagram is also one of the most popular social networking sites in the world, with more than 1 billion active users (Statista, 2022).

Twitter belongs to a different list of social interactions, but it competes with the aforementioned virtual media. It is a microblogging technology platform (Murthy, 2018), that is preferable in academic studies due to the quantity of the content, data globality and accessibility (Steinert-Threlkeld, 2018).

YouTube appeared as a digital video player in 2005 (Burgess, 2011). It offers the possibility for the posting of personal material, as well as for direct access to audiovisual material that has been posted on the platforms of other users (Atsalaki,

2018, p. 207). Unlike traditional media, YouTube allows users to interact, engage, monitor, collaborate and most importantly evaluate their communication system (Balakrishnan et al., 2017).

Social media also includes Snapchat and Tik Tok. Snapchat is a platform for sending images, videos and text to users with limited time to view the submitted material (Vaterlaus, 2016) and possibly more personal character. The recent emergence of Tik Tok, an application with software for posting short videos (Yang et al., 2019), enables the users to produce content to cover the psychological needs of their self-presentation (Zuo et al., 2019). It was specifically released in 2016 and was adopted as an activity option mainly by a young population, due to the possibility of gaining a distinct audience but also the special communication strategies of the creators (Yang et al., 2019).

#### *User, browsing and communication*

Social media is a central conduit for information, advice and relationships (Coyne et al., 2013; Davis, 2012). It can expand their range, enrich the quality of their social networks and facilitate social engagement (Ellison et al., 2007) at a time when peers are a powerful source of influence (Borsari & Carey, 2001; Borsari & Carey, 2003). The use of social media is also associated with significant psychological dividends for youth, such as reduced loneliness (Lee et al., 2013), higher self-esteem (Steinfeld et al., 2008) and perceived social support (Best et al., 2014).

Research shows that the internet and social media are alternatives to interpersonal communication, providing other options or acting as a complementary source of communication. Many researchers believe that the increasing popularity and use of social networking sites may affect the form and quality of people's social relationships (Ellison et al., 2011). Even if online relationships, as described by Parks and Floyd (1996), expand to include family and friends and then grow rapidly into social environments, the motivations for approaching other people have changed greatly.

Interpersonal communication through social networking sites is considered important because it serves functions that have to do with people building relationships, fulfilling their social obligations and influencing others (Verderber, 2006). Social media maintains relationships that would otherwise have diminished growth prospects due to a lack of geographical proximity. That is, they allow for an interaction that might have been unthinkable without them (Petersen & Johnston, 2015).

On the contrary, sometimes instead of increasing the closeness between users, their use of social media leads to creating a gap between them. Investing in online interaction has reduced face-to-face communication (Petersen & Johnston, 2015). It is paradoxical that the pursuit of physical interaction has been replaced by the virtual research for confirmation of our identity and, altogether, the coverage of personal

needs. The egocentric style of using internet communication promotes a superficial kind of relationship. Our virtual friends, as described by Tsironis (2018) are consumable and we use them over and over again for the temporary saturation of our desires.

### *Fantasy*

Fantasy is not a psychological or metaphysical function, but a real process of the mind which has the ability to remove and at the same time add correlations between situations and ideas. Whatever the mind produces, imagination can assemble it into a single reality, appearing to be on the one hand as a metaphysical product and on the other as a design model, by using technology to build a virtual environment in which can move (K. Koskinas, personal communication, 2021). It gives, in a few words, dimensions of spatiality and duration in an intangible and timeless context.

One of the definitions given to imagination or daydreaming, is "the shift of attention from a present physical or mental work or a perceptual response to an external stimulus, to a response to an internal stimulus" (Halderman et al., 1985). Therefore, the activity of fantasy is not a phenomenon separated from human reality, nor a product of hallucination (Žižek, 2018). On the contrary, we could say that it is composed of cognitive, mnemonic and conscious elements. Some researchers even believe that awareness and understanding of fantasies can help to understand people's fears and desires (Halderman et al., 1985).

During the day, people daydream and are transferred to a mental state of "non-moments". Daydreaming is essentially a brief fantasy. Within them, they tend to dream and get lost in imaginative landscapes made of wishes, fears, desires, memories and hopes (Cantó-Milà, 2016). These are moments disconnected from space and time, a kind of private universe. One can compare a moment to a sphere, in which although we are in a semi-conscious state, we go beyond the logic of rationalism and calculation. Thus, accessing places and feelings mentally during daydreaming plays a major role in the way we govern our life.

Imagination in conclusion allows us to examine, explore and plan the future. Therefore, any daydreaming can be a cognitive exploration of behavioral choices and their consequences. In deciding which fantasy to pursue, we basically make a decision about what lifestyle we want, what roles we should adapt, and what kind of future we want to shape for ourselves (Shanor, 1977).

But what happens when a world with infinite possibilities of virtually representing and capturing content is added to the process? Because of new communication technologies, "non-moments" have acquired a new dimension: they have become a tunnel from the here and now, to a "somewhere else" with direct transmission (Cantó-Milà, 2016). This process of accelerating the imagination and communication in the non-moments activates emotions even more. They make the users expect that their hopes and dreams can affect the person they are interested in, whatever they

do, wherever they do it. Virtual communication therefore reshapes the relationships between non-moments, emotions, relationships and daydreaming, offering to the imagination a space to process them simultaneously.

### **Fantasy and environments-experiences using fantasy: paradigms through the natural world imported from literature and social media**

Imagination, as we concluded, is a function that allows humans to process their reality. It offers the opportunity to turn future shapes into imaginary realities, on which they can later design their environment and future. Undoubtedly, this design contains the element of subjectivity, since the choice of elements that each person will combine in order to compose their construction, is done according to personal preferences and desires. Thus, the presence of fantasy in the process is understood as an element that leads us to define our own reality in relation to others (K. Koskinas, personal communication, 2021), whether it unfolds in the natural or in the virtual environment.

In a natural environment, a person uses their imagination and senses as they converse with other people and wander among the building constructions. Their daily life include interaction with a variety of material elements, surfaces and textures. It is an experience embedded with a continuous process of exposure to sensory stimuli, both physically and mentally. Essentially, the user depends on this interaction between the environment and their physical matter, mainly using the properties of their body. Using the senses of touch and smell on a personal and interpersonal level, contribute to the formation of an experience that cannot be replaced by virtual means, since these senses have not been acquired virtually, at least not to an equivalent degree.

The internet, however, provides the appropriate means to project our needs digitally and receive the desired feedback, as long as we are connected. Those involved in cyberspace maintenance ensure that these tools are constantly updated. At the same time, technological developments guarantee the upgrading of the human experience in virtual environments, once a cycle of adaptation and requirements has been formed between users and the environment. It is a process whose nature can be characterized as mentally interdependent.

The way social media has been constructed contributes to the utilization of the user's perceptual ability in order to experience sufficient and entertaining virtual moments on a daily basis. It is particularly interesting that only through sight and hearing as sensory pathways of stimuli the user can consume digital content and process it almost as if complementing the experience with their imagination. The amplification of the received stimuli may also contribute to the experience, as well as the recall of stimuli from representations of memory, which disappear from the rest of the senses in that specific time.

However, there is a need to determine whether this is an interaction that leads to the improvement of the human experience. While there are content moderators that monitor social media activity according to appropriation (Gillespie, 2020), it would be useful to evaluate the quality of the content users are exposed to, as well as of their own posts. The typology of behavior in most users is characterized by a two-and-a-half-hour tour on average (Datareportal, 2021), followed by a recurring repetition of social media seconds and visits, but no disconnection from accounts. Unlimited scrolling on social media leads to their automated use (Baym et al., 2020), and therefore to disconnection from the physical world.

Cyber action is not one-dimensional, since when interacting with virtual environments, algorithms make decisions about what content to display and what to hide. For example, the digital content on the social media homepage for each user varies depending on their account browsing, interests, and online friends. However, the displayed content does not fully meet the user's requirements, since during its processing the algorithm, although it exposes the users to news similar to their past preferences, deprives them of the ability to interact with different aspects of the material and make more choices (Lundahl, 2020).

In combination with the above factors, it is necessary to consider whether a person returns to social media because of the satisfaction they feel during their online visit, or because of a sense of incompleteness in the natural environment. The contribution of their own will and identity is crucial for shaping a relationship with the virtual environment. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the identity that humans have formed in physical reality as well as the relationships they have established in it, since their impact on cyberspace is a virtual extension of them, even if they diverge greatly.

A question that arises regarding the conception of the spatial dimensions of reality is: Is the activation of fantasy a method of distinguishing physical space from social media environment or, on the contrary, is a unifying factor of the two?

Oscar Wilde once said, "One's real life is so often the life one does not lead". Such a phrase may characterize most social media users, because many people project different aspects of themselves, "maybe even darker" than they can manifest in their daily lives. We can easily assume that the fluidity of social media, as well as the countless options it offers to users are useful supplies in order for anyone to imagine a new self to display for their online interlocutors.

According to Gergen (1997) the identity refers to the social etiquette in which he takes part, but in the context of social media where such etiquettes do not exist, identity is formed by each user through activating their fantasy. Caroline Humphrey's view (2009, p.46) that "internet chat rooms are spheres where the user's daily identity is erased, thus provoking the imagination of the participants" is interesting. The internet enables us to transform ourselves as many times as we want and to imagine

as much as we want. We can't experience this easily in the natural environment, since the image others hold of us is difficult to alter, and as we sometimes ultimately want to be seen in specific temporal and spatial conditions of our lives.

Focusing on the description of the virtual self-defined by Shanyang Zhao (2005) as "naturally narrative", we are going to support the second end of our previous question. The activation of fantasy could be a dividing factor between the physical world and the world of social media networking, since in the physical world our senses exchange information with the person with whom we are interacting. On the contrary, this is not the case in the social media environment, especially in cases where people have not met in person. The process of forming an opinion for someone on social media begins with virtual stimuli they want us to receive, whereas we fill in their image by deriving some desired characteristics from our imagination.

On the other hand, if we focus on the category of the virtual self-defined as "internally oriented" according to Shanyang Zhao's definition (2005), we will find that the activation of imagination also could act as a unifying factor. When we refer and try to understand the other person's inner world despite their appearance in both physical and virtual environments, subjects activate their imagination for a deeper understanding and/or predicting behavior, emotions and thoughts.

### **Addition of the variables "identity and interpersonal relations" in the natural world and in social media, contribution and implementation of fantasy**

#### *Identity and Behavior*

Through utilizing imagination, possibilities in cyberspace are expanded. Opportunities for communication, interaction, creative activity increase and social and personal narratives multiply. These narratives function as factors of social influence, thus creating new types of identities and communities (Galukhin et al., 2018). Since the structure of social networks presents expanded boundaries, it allows the creation and expression of any desired identity. Therefore, these networks, in combination with the use of imagination, enable users to construct a spectrum of identities, promoting the inner need for integration, multiplicity and idealization.

For some people, social media is a way to escape physical reality and for others is just a virtual reality. However, for many people, social media environments are sometimes more attractive and more important than physical reality (Gündüz, 2017). What makes them so attractive is that social networking services act as virtual platforms for building new forms of identities. We are referring to identity as a perception of the self and the other, based on a social knowledge produced by their membership in social groups and supported by an emotional and value attachment (Tajfel, 1981; see also Owens et. al., 2010).

Furthermore, social networks act as virtual platforms where the users' identity is repeated, while they determine the conditions of their self-presentation, construct multiple identities, combine them, transform them and simulate them. Some people

even present different identities on the internet compared to the ones they adopt in society. While our identities in the physical world are socially structured according to institutional values, cyberspace creates a wider horizontal space that facilitates the personal construction of identities. Therefore, while social identities are generally joined-up, in cyberspace identities are often multiple (Galukhin et al., 2018).

If we used the psychiatric classification for the disorders, the multiplicity of identities could be characterized as a bisection of character (Atsalaki, 2018). Some people tend to believe that social media is a pathogenic factor (Huang, 2017). It should be emphasized that the internet is not in itself harmful, but it does provide opportunities to simulate behaviors found in physical reality. According to Atsalaki, (2018) individuals have a multiplicity of identities instead of having only one and unique.

The various social networking platforms allow people to develop the identity they want based on certain circumstances or according to the social media platform they use. The reason for this condition is the attribute of social media "to remain anonymous, to enable users a gradual acquaintance with others, without the need for physical exposure and they offer to them the opportunity to contact to groups with same interests" (Atsalaki, 2018, p. 206).

However, identity allows individuals to feel that they belong to a group, feel safe and are a part of a community that provides them with solidarity and emotional fulfillment. Thus, individuals seem to construct one-dimensional and rigid identities within the internet. As Gündüz (2017) mentions, users are looking for people who have common feelings, thoughts and opinions with them, creating a community with like-minded users. A common communication code is used as a basis to achieve team identification and integration (Galukhin et al., 2018).

Another use of social media aims at gaining a sense of security, but solely choosing this tactic leads to rejection of opportunities to connect and get to know different communities. Individuals create conditions in which they find fertile ground to reproduce the same identical content hundreds of times. The limited range of interests in exploration leads to the maintenance of identical posts on the home pages and profiles of some users. It is almost restrictive, and the users' tactics seem ideological. This behavior seems to resist and is opposed to the essence of the role of virtuality. Algorithms are a key component of social media, contributing to the shaping of this sterile environment.

Social media has "curation algorithms" (Lundahl, 2020) that make decisions based on the time a user spends on social media and on the content that they are exposed to. For instance, it examines the popularity of the post, the strength of the relationship between the two users, as well as the time the post was made (Bucher, as cited by Lundahl, 2018, pp. 155-156). However, in some ways, curation algorithms have the ability to be even more powerful than traditional media frameworks. For example, as

these algorithms are driven to show the user more of what they have preferred in the past (Bucher, 2018; Yeung, as cited by Lundahl, 2017), they also conceal content that the user has not been interested in. Thus, they limit the experiences, issues and the range of opinions that a person is exposed to.

This type of automatic controlling, as Pariser supports (as cited by Lundahl, 2011), could lead to “filter bubbles”, a case where algorithms constrict external influence so much that users are continuously exposed to the same people, experiences, news and even cultures. Moreover, another factor leading to homogeneity is that people feel the need to strictly control all their online movements, since they have a feeling of being constantly watched.

Hence, users choose to neglect the possibility of expressing their multiple identities. They instead tend to follow a stereotypical pattern of behavior when participating in a team, in order to secure their belonging between other people (Gündüz, 2017). It is important to note that social media don't solely contribute to this adjustment, since it's an innate tendency of individuals to integrate and accept, even if it presupposes the marginalization of their individuality.

The effects of homogeneity show up in various aspects of human every-day life, such as consumer behaviors, social perceptions and the way people present their self-image. There is a tendency of consuming material goods in order to be liked and to impress a target group in which people want to integrate. They formulate ideas and follow opinions, sometimes in an insensitive way, in order to obtain acceptance by a particular group.

User's tendency for homogeneity and integration into specific groups is recognized by social media algorithms. They mimic our behavior as we shop, browse, watch, play and interact on the internet, since we leave traces of data. Thus, algorithms act accordingly to make decisions on our behalf. Once an algorithm has classified the user, the categorization will define and match information or products that will appear on their feed. In addition to integration and acceptance, the need for recognition and reputation are important factors that lead to homogeneity and intense engagement with potential identities.

Specifically, a 2013 Greenwood study found that people who used Twitter and Facebook tended to fantasize about becoming more famous than people who did not use social media. The above condition is the result of innate narcissistic dynamics. Narcissism includes a pathologically positive view of oneself, with particular emphasis on physical characteristics (Alloway et al., 2014). It has been found that some of the functions provided by Facebook, such as uploading photos and self-promotion opportunities in general contribute to an egocentric behavior, as they enable users to place themselves in artificial situations, thus increasing their narcissism (Alloway et al., 2014).

Facebook users, as also reported by Abell et al. (2014), show symptoms of narcissism such as egocentrism, sensitivity to insults and a greater likelihood of boosting self-esteem after receiving intense admiration by others. Furthermore, in the research's results of Zsila et al. (2018) on celebrity worship, it appears that high levels of celebrity worship have been associated with problematic internet use, maladaptive daydreaming and a desire for fame.

For those who will finally make their fantasies come true, a special name is given to the work they will perform in cyberspace: "Influencers". The rise of neoliberalism, as an ideological movement that has been affecting the economy and society in recent years, is also contributing to the rise of more and more micro-celebrities, the so-called influencers. The individualistic spirit as a characteristic element of Western culture is also manifested through the posts and behavior of users on social media. There is a tendency for self-promotion or self-branding, which according to the research of Khamis et al. (2017) is accompanied with fame and online followers to those who adopt it as a practice. Therefore, more and more people want to gain a share of celebrity status in potential social spaces, even if it comes with risks, dangers and an alteration of mentality.

In conclusion, individuals have some inherent characteristics that relate to the need to create multiple identities, which is strongly reflected in social media because it is their structure that allows it. Gradually, however, within the same social network, people tend to search for people who look like them. They constantly seek confirmation that they are part of the whole, but also tend to internalize features of current celebrities, seeking a similar reputation. Thus, in these efforts they sacrifice a large part of themselves, and although their identity remains multiple, it remains equally unexpressed.

There is an additional phenomenon that results from the tendency of homogeneity of users and the emergence of impossible standards with specific characteristics: the marginalization and exclusion of users who do not fall into these categories. The promotion of preferred identities and social media content increases the power of those who already hold it and weakens or silences other individuals and groups. So, only a limited space for expression on the platforms remains, as well as fewer options of similar people to support and content to identify with. From everyday users to celebrities, a large percentage of the population lacks opportunities and space for expression on social media but is also targeted, mainly due to nationality (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021), sexual orientation (Cho, 2018) and in total, their identities.

## **Cases and reflections about our experiences: Correlation with research, criticism, upsides and downsides of social media networking**

Lupinacci (2021, p. 273) mentions, "Social media fuel a sense of unsettledness to encourage uninterrupted connectivity and generate quantifiable engagement". Observing a part of the population and their constant need for connectivity, she explored the naturalization of social media use, as well as the way it is constructed, causing a permanent and compulsive state of waiting for the user. Writer William Gibson had described the experience in cyberspace as "consensual hallucination" (1989), a term that has been broadly used and is steadily gaining a more literal sense according to the latest social media analytics, which is why we keep using this particular characterization.

Social media provide a broad spectrum of opportunities for communication, closeness, social integration and everyday functionalities, such as buying goods and keeping up with social and political news. Within these environments, people share thoughts, desires, weaknesses, fall in love, flirt, satisfy desires, help each other, even securing livelihood. However, this interaction seems to trigger risk factors. What are the boundaries between a pleasant and harmful experience in social media and when does a situation begin to prevail to the detriment of the user?

The external dangers one can face are defined as conditions in which they are deceived or threatened by another user, organization or business. Deception can also happen on an interpersonal level. People form relationships within social media, but they may not unfold as they had imagined or, even worse, escalate in a harmful experience. Such unfortunate examples include cat-fishing, ghosting and cyber-bullying.

Cat-fishing is defined as a deceptive activity where a person creates a fictional person or fake identity on a social networking service, usually targeting a specific victim. The practice can be used for financial gain, to reconcile a victim in some way, to deliberately provoke bad feelings in the victim or to fulfill a desire (Chandler et al., As mentioned in Wikipedia).

Ghosting is defined as the interruption by a person of communication with a friend or acquaintance, after zero warning or following a belated aftermath. Tactics such as neglecting phone calls, not responding on social media or even avoiding the other person publicly are noticed (Urban Dictionary, 2016). This behavior may be due to users' lack of ability to verbally convey a thought or judgment, so they choose to distance themselves.

Also, internet's anonymity offers fertile ground for the manifestation of a contrary behavior called cyber-bullying, defined as an intense engagement with another person in order to cause harm. According to Atsalaki (2018), cyber-bullying is "the manifestation of violence between young peers in the online world, whether perpetrated by one person against another or against a group of people. If the

perpetrator is an adult, then the act is not characterized as intimidation but as harassment or assault" (Atsalaki, 2018, p. 212).

On the other hand, the psychological discomfort caused to the individual by the use of social media is characterized as an internal risk. The increased use of social media can lead people to isolation, as it has been found that Facebook users tend to create relationships mainly on the Internet instead of face- to-face relationships (Alloway et al., 2014). However, the danger is not caused by the internet by itself, but due to the ability to reflect and simulate behaviors of physical reality. In addition, research has shown that the use of social media has not been significantly linked to any psychopathology.

### **Questions and answers about user behavior and psychology and interpretations using theories-research about absurdity, space and time**

User action in cyberspace is not by itself a contributing factor to the quality of the virtual experience. Nor the individual observation of a user's activity on social media can form a cause-and-effect relationship that explains the effects reflected on their behavior. It is useful to include strong variables of users' influence for the interpretation of their experience, whether they relate to the operation of cyberspace or they are located in the life of the user, even before the introduction of virtual environments into it.

#### *Absurd*

In physical and virtual experience, the meaning of the Absurd is present. People struggled to find meaning in life long before the technological possibilities of platforms such as those of social media made an appearance. Their relationship with information and the rest of humanity is portrayed as a conflict of struggle, on the one hand trying to locate and internalize the meaning of life, and on the other adapting to the realization that the universe is too big to be able to capture it.

The "Irrational", according to its etymology, is defined as "the state in which logic or purpose of human existence is removed". The Latin root of the word absurd, "absurdus", derives from "out of tune", meaning something that is out of coordination. It is interesting to observe the interpretations that have been given to the absurd in an attempt to define it within various fields and situations of human life.

In Greek language it is expressed as illogical, the absence of meaning, or the absence of space. It is what remains when one removes the well-known meanings or the familiar situations in life, which help people to structure, recognize and process reality. For example, logic refers to a concept of rational rules and procedures for finding right or wrong, as well as to interpret the world with the already known patterns that exist in mind. Space as a concept can indicate roots, stability, a defined and familiar context, or a concept linked to social and cultural standards.

From the above etymological syllogism, the following questions arise: What are the rules governing the state of the absurd and what is the space in which it can be placed and located? Are there elements of order and demarcation in the absurd? Why did the need to define such a situation arise? Answers can be found in philosophy, literature and modern sciences, specifically that of Cyberspace. Concepts involved are related to meaning, reality, insurrection and technology with the contribution of the imagination being involved.

The philosophical work of Camus on absurdism is undoubtedly a great source to derive information and thought. Arguments around life and death by Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Nietzsche as well provide an existential analysis. Absurdism "comes from a deep-seated unrest" (Querido, 2017, p. 766) to find meaning, whilst the lack of it creates a contradiction. Consequently, the irrationality in absurdism describes the efforts of humanity to absorb all the information and meaning of existence in a lifetime, although it is beyond our ability and therefore, we are doomed to fail.

In literature, the absurd acquires a more optimistic note and a supportive function for humanity. What Lewis Carroll has achieved and continues to achieve with his novel for a number of generations, is to build a healthy relationship between humans, the ability to give interpretations and the use of his imagination. The contribution of incoherent literature as a type of writing is analyzed by Prados (2018), who encourages the imagination of the reader, whether it is a child or an adult, and at the same time motivates their wisdom to improve it even more. As there is no absolute way of interpreting it, the incoherent content allows the reader's imagination to flow as much as they permit it.

As for the environment of social media, a parallel is certainly found in the concerns regarding the perception of reality by humans, whether it is the physical or the virtual world. The depth and extent of knowledge history holds can be now found on the internet and social media. With the advent of cyberspace as a virtual space, people have recognized the ability to digitally transfer everything they have lived and are currently experiencing, in addition to accessing content from the lives of millions of other users. Data in the light of knowledge, beliefs and personal expression can even be presented in a three-dimensional form. In the face of this magnificent amount of information, individuals may feel that they have the most important source of knowledge in front of them, even if they do not provide them the knowledge they really need.

### *Time*

Another variable that affects the user's perceptual experience on social media is the concept of time. According to Ihanainen and Moravec (2011) in their research on the multidimensional aspects of time, a post on social media produces an "experiential time point" and the actions of users as a whole form an individual timeline. When a user shares an item from another's web profile, it becomes part of the schedule.

Therefore, the imprint of time on social media, through virtual actions, is evident. In our attempt to investigate the relationship between imagination and time on social media, as well as its hidden aspects, we made the following hypothesis about user activity:

Internet time does not always flow fast or at the same rhythm, especially during the evolution of communication process. There is, for example, a delay in typing a message in chat rooms. While waiting for a response, people often imagine the content of the message or the activity of the composer behind the keyboard. When the person of interest is finally connected to the chat, the "three dots" that appear during typing cause stress to the recipient, a variable that distorts the perception of time in these moments.

Studies on the use of new social media (SMU) often focus on its frequency, counting the time that users spend on the Internet. In one study, the results revealed that high-frequency social media users tend to be women and have more Facebook friends. Highly engaged users who are more interactive online, tend to be white and more highly educated (Scott et al., 2017).

In a meta-analysis, the relationship between time spent on social networking sites and psychological well-being factors such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, loneliness and depression were examined. The results showed that the mean correlation between time spent on social networking sites and psychological well-being was low at  $r = -0.07$ , the correlations between time spent on social media users and positive indicators (self-esteem and life satisfaction) were close to 0, while the correlations between time spent on social networking sites and negative indicators (depression and loneliness) were weak (Huang, 2017).

However, in one study the relationship between time spent using social media and the symptoms of depression, behavioral problems, and episodic alcohol consumption was examined in a sample of adolescents. From the results it was found that the increased time spent on social media is moderately associated with increased depression, behavioral problems, and the frequency of episodic heavy alcohol consumption among adolescents (Brunborg & Andreas, 2019). Accordingly, based on Cohen and Wills (1985) approach, time spent on social media can replace face-to-face interaction and cause depression due to lack of social support, which can worsen the social media-depression connection.

On the contrary, a study analysis of the relationship between time spent using social media, depression and stress on an intra-individual level over an eight-year period, revealed that increased time spent on social media was not associated with increased mental health issues throughout development (Coyne et al., 2020).

Also, another study compared data from ten self-reported research measures on Facebook usage. It was developed in 15 countries, extracting data from Facebook server logs to describe error-related factors in common research data used in the

literature. It showed that self-reports were moderately correlated with the actual use of Facebook, although the participants significantly overestimated the time they spent on Facebook and underestimated the number of visits.

In the open-ended questions, participants overestimated their time by 112 minutes per day, although this value varies considerably, while the closed-ended questions generally had a lower error than the open-ended questions. Participants also stated that the closed-ended questions were slightly easier to answer. More specifically, in most questions, there was a relationship between the error and the time users spent on Facebook: usually, people who spent more time on the site were less accurate. For subjective questions, the opposite is true: people who spent (very) little time on the site were less accurate (Ernala et al., 2020).

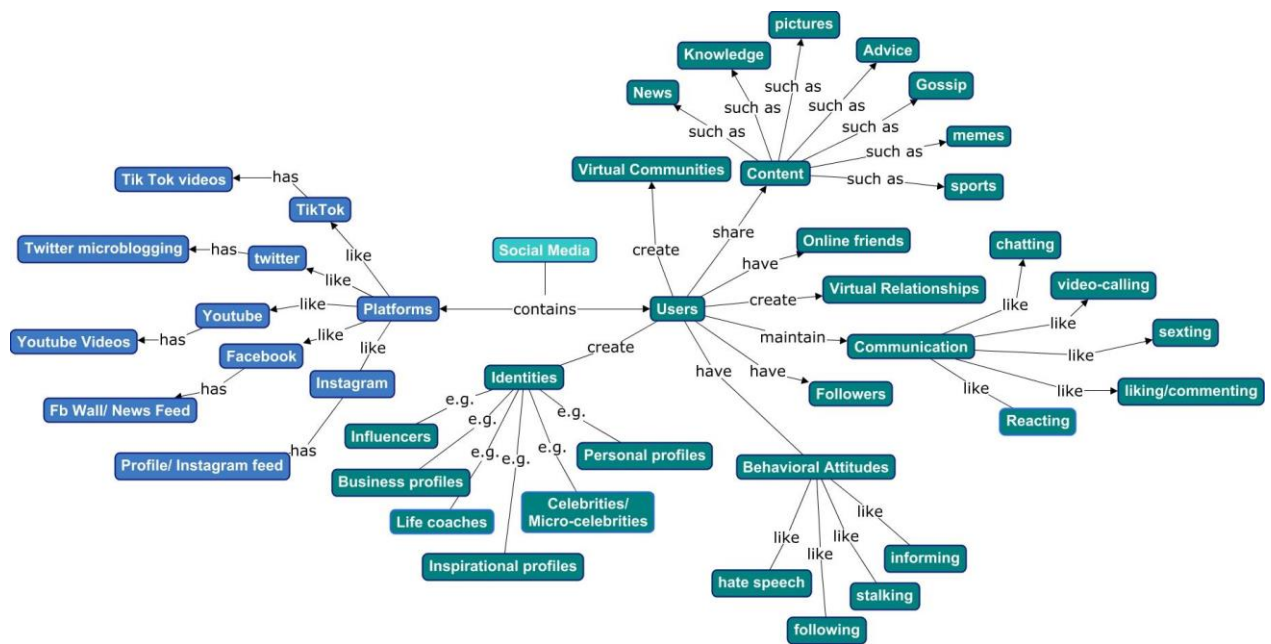
Finally, Hunt et al. (2021) document the hypothesis that less time on social media equates to greater prosperity, while less but more active participation is associated with loneliness, anxiety and depression. However, passive users who spend more time on social media show higher levels of the above. The increase in prosperity, therefore, is a result of a reduction of the passive time wasted in the media and not a reduction of the engagement time but an increase of the active participation.

Active engagement may cause attachment, stress due to pressure of posting enough content, and anxiety for interacting with people without prior communication. As for the posts of people who are active users, it is possible to reject or raise disagreements, situations that are negatively associated with well-being. The above findings are related to the quality of the content that individuals are exposed to. If users are acquainted with their online friends, they choose to keep their presence active for the sake of maintaining communication. In the opposite case, people simply become observers of the seemingly perfect lives of others, a condition that causes them discomfort.

### **Research - Interpretive Methods and Tools**

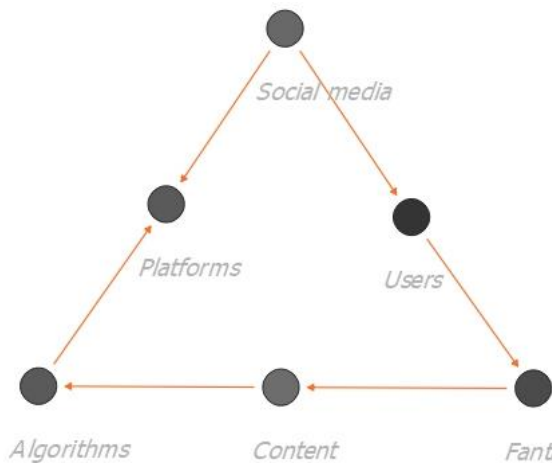
The Interpretive approach provides the ability to delve into the cases of the study (Koppa, 2010). The inquiry process is characterized by a circularity, in which the researcher encounters the concepts concerned, identifies their basic elements and gives them a first interpretation. By exploring their content, additional information and links emerge, inviting the researcher to revisit their original assessment, to add interpretations and redefine the meanings that they gave to them.

The constant renewal and feedback of thought involves difficulties, due to the mental regression movement that a researcher has to make. Thus, the representation of concepts and correlations in schematic diagrams to monitor their interpretive development was deemed necessary before and during the composition of the present study. In the initial stage of data collection, we chose to group the concepts into a tree diagram using the Concept Map tool (CMap):

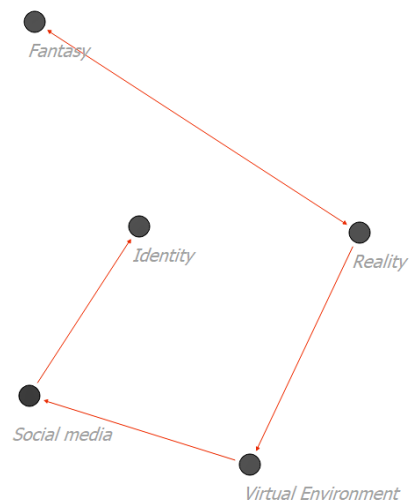


**Figure 1:** Tree Diagram - Concept Map

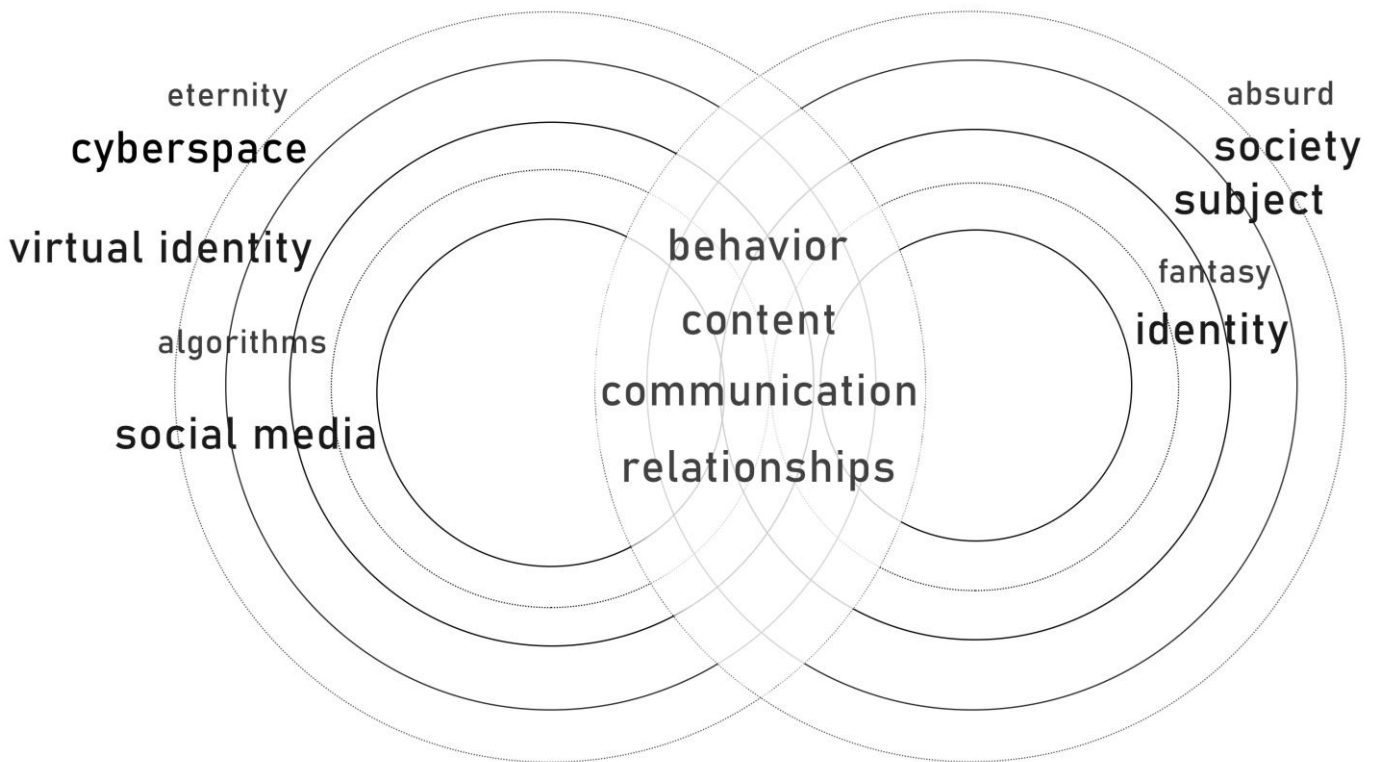
In addition, using the tool *Social Network Visualiser* we attempted to find connections between the concepts related to virtual experience and contribute to user content creation (i) and user identity forming (ii):



**Figure 2(i):** content creation



**Figure 2(ii):** identity forming



**Figure 3:** Connections Representation, *Photoshop*

### **Limits and Possibilities of the Research- Approaches**

#### *Limits*

This research paper is not based on empirically substantiated research. The theories developed in it and the conclusions drawn are material of our personal judgments, which are based on the existing literature and have not been proved empirically using quantitative research methods. However, the purpose of this paper was not to generalize and statistically document the results, but to educate the reading public about the quality of contemporary virtual reality, how it will evolve in the future and its impact on user behavior.

Regarding the modules that have been developed, there is not a sufficient number of reliable research in the modern literature in the field of time and imagination nor their connection with the concept of virtual reality. In addition, during the effort to analyze the identities formed by users, there was conflicting data on the behavior they develop and how they structure their representations in the virtual space. Users appeared on the one hand with a need for diversity on identity level and on the other with rigid identities and standardized behavior.

### *Margins*

The present study could be a good starting point for empirical documentation of the presented results, so that they become more scientific. In addition to that, the field of research is quite wide so that it is possible to use more theories in order to provide interpretations and find further connections to the variables shown in the present study.

As the methodological basis of the research is made with an interpretive approach, a specific framework of thought has not been defined. Thus, it is possible to develop further critical reasoning, views and conclusions on this work.

## **Expected Results and Conclusions**

### *Results*

From the above, we conclude that the structure of social media is such that it inflates the needs for plurality, ideal self-image, integration and confirms the innate narcissism. Contrary results show that there is plurality of expression, as well as rigid and monolithic identities.

Still, what makes cyberspace so wide-ranging is the fact that users create the conditions to express their fantasies. It offers a wider room for expression of thoughts, feelings, ideas and range of personalities. Although imagination contributes to the creation and projection of identities in the physical and virtual space, the way of using these identities depends on the relationships people want to shape on social media. Individuals, however, may be hesitant to use their imagination.

It is also possible for the users to present an identity with features borrowed from a variety of users, so that other users can identify with them and become more accepted. Thus, there is a tendency to utilize imagination which does not benefit the expression of the user's personal identity but aims at a shallow confirmation by other people.

Regarding the dangers of social media, it is worth noting that social media alone is not harmful. The ways we use virtual platforms and the intentions behind our behavior (ghosting, hate speech, narcissism, and self-promotion) play a major role. In addition, the structure of communication on social media, as it is shaped by users according to its embedded capabilities, is related to the formation of psycho-emotional states in users' life such as anxiety, loneliness, isolation, depression and psychopathology. In particular, the analogy of freedom and control changes as users take on source or recipient roles.

## ***Conclusions***

Regarding the virtual status of users, we conclude that using fantasy to create multiple identities affects the content and format of a large part of cyberspace. Realizations occur just by exploring the behavior of users and the dimensions they project for themselves. A need for reassessment and expansion of the possibilities of social media appears, possibly the emergence of a different platform, in order to differentiate the ways identities are presented and interact.

We find that the use of social media depends on the way the user perceives reality. The form, the substance and the dimensions of reality arise from the imagination in each individual in the virtual space. Since imagination is an integral element, inherent in both physical and virtual environments, the content it produces depends directly on the thoughts that the individual makes, the experiences that he lives and seeks to live.

Using imagination, we have seen the creation of multidimensional virtual identities, as well as various kinds of relationships on social media. Failure to use imagination on the other hand results in stagnancy and repeatability in user's activity. Sometimes users rely too much on promoting their identity and aim to gain a reputation, while some are unnoticed and remain in obscurity, whether they want to or not.

Furthermore, daydreaming as a process of imagination allows the user to mentally create an ideal situation between themselves and other people. Additionally, joined by the possibilities provided by social media, daydreaming abets the transition of a desire from the stage of thought to the stage of realization. Attention and flexibility are recommended when trying to reach other users, since viewing their online profile or communicating with them, does not make them more aware of the wishes or familiar with the fantasies of those interested.

Positive and negative effects of social media use are reflected in the behavior and psychological state of the user. Everyone's motives and tactics are different, while everyone has at their disposal a range of verbal and non-verbal means to manifest them. However, this feature does not guarantee that everyone has the skills to manage it properly, or that the way they communicate is different for the better. Thus, there is not always a pleasant result among the people who are active in it, and we observe tactics such as ghosting, catfishing and unfortunately the phenomenon of cyberbullying.

Finally, the research presents the perception of reality's concept by the user as physical, virtual or unified. However, we conclude that reality is one and the same, physically and virtually integrated, interconnected, transferred to the other through its actions. The common denominator man in the two environments of the same reality, constitute their own reality. Virtual reality now, and in our case in social media, is not just part of our daily practices, but it is the only way to maintain relationships and communication and to evolve our identity.

## **Future research**

Last but not least, through the interpretation of the conclusions of the present work, some additional perspectives for the improvement of the current data and the emergence of the forthcoming ones are discussed.

Firstly, it is widely understood that individuals tend to use their imagination with narcissistic motives, regardless of whether the imagination itself is a process that contributes to creative interaction of identities. In other words, individuals seek to gain confirmation from others rather than express or explore their personal identity. A noteworthy suggestion, regarding the need but also the difficulty of individuals to support their various identities in the field of internet, is a practice of investigation regarding social media function and its future development intentions.

A typical example is the three-dimensional worlds of virtual games, which have recently been named as "the new social media". On the one hand, users have the ability to create representation characters (avatars) as an extension of their identity while maintaining their anonymity. On the other hand, integrated communication platforms allow them to interact verbally as communities, while at the same time being active with each other in the virtual game. So, under this condition, it is worthwhile to include them in future research due to their multiple virtual dimensions, as social media.

A possible consequence of the interaction of communities during the game may be the stronger promotion and appreciation of users' identities by other users, due to the creativity they display in the construction of avatars and their skills in the game. Perhaps this condition will increase the ability of users to express themselves through their physical condition.

Something that could equally help understanding social media is to conduct further research in an effort to modify and redesign how they are built. The way they are constructed may be related to enhancing the quality of user experience but is connected to a range of symptoms of pathological disorders such as addiction, depression and personality disorders too. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the reasons why no serious measures have been taken to address their negative aspects, but also the motivations of individuals who determine the evolution of social media.

In addition to that, a deeper examination of our behavior on social media needs to be done, which could give a more substantial meaning to the reasons why users often act narcissistically trying to promote themselves.

At the same time, it is necessary to provide answers as to whether social media ultimately contributes to our adaptation to tangible reality, or alienates us from the world, and what management methods can be applied. Moreover, whether the person in turn is motivated to use imagination due to the existence of social media, or isn't motivated, using it less due to the convenience of virtual interaction.

Lastly, while waiting in chat-rooms for a replying answer to their message, users already imagine the desired content. At this point, we should highlight that this could be the realization of further search for the relationship between time and imagination. In addition, it is important to explore and identify the element of imagination in areas other than the internet, such as literature, science, the arts and technology, which will therefore provide opportunities for the expression of ideas and especially the fantasies of individuals.

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