



# Virtual Identity: Risk or Resource? A Study about Effects of Using Social Network and Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE) on Processes of Identity Construction Of Emerging Adults

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## Abstract

*Using internet to build own social-relational system is an increasingly widespread phenomenon. It revolves both very young people and emerging adults [2] for which the dimensions of identity exploration often seemed to constitute areas of uncertainty and risk [1]. The motivation factors to use a social network are related to self-presentation and socialization [13],[19]. On the other hand, it was demonstrated [8] that the use of virtual environment and/or social networks for continuous and sustained periods can have directly negative effects on self- definition processes [3], [4].*

*Therefore, the goal of this explorative contribution is to study the effects of using of virtual environment and/or social networks in terms of risks and resources on processes of identity construction of emerging adults.*

*It was used a narrative format of survey (autobiographical narrative interview) [5] [6], considered one of the most suitable instruments to analyze the construction processes of narrative identity. Participants are 25 emerging adults (average age 23 years), balanced by gender. The texts produced were analyzed by lexical content analysis, which identifies semantic worlds of texts, through lexical cluster analysis [17].*

*Results show the presence of 4 lexical clusters (with a stability index of 78%) related to self construction processes (Cluster 1: Curiosity and exploration; Cluster 2: The need for affiliation and masking of emotions; Cluster 3: The "potential self"; Cluster 4: The mask effect) and they highlight the existence of risks associated with the construction of identity, but also benefits linked to the relational and emotional dimensions of the self. That finding underlines the need for a thorough study of the effects of the use of new technologies in order to plan for such use in education.*

## 1. Introduction

Using internet as 'place' in which to build own social relational system is an increasingly widespread phenomenon in the last decade. This involves not only the very young people (pre-adolescents and adolescents), but also young adults (emerging adults) [2] for who the dimensions of identity exploration often seemed to constitute areas of uncertainty and risk [1].

Dunkel [6] theorizes that this exploration period uses the forming of possible selves as a process of cognitive testing of future self-images. Possible selves are that we imagine we will become in the future, the selves we hope to become, the selves we are afraid we may become, and the selves we fully expect we will become [14].

For emerging adults the process of identity building, traditionally regarded as peculiar to adolescence [16], seems not yet concluded, but often is extended into a new stage of moratorium [13] that carries the risk of a not finalized and ruminative exploration, associated with maladjustment and depressive related [13].

In Nardi's opinion [15] people use the social networks as a form of social activity. Profiles, Blogs, Avatar are a medium of communication [8]. In addition, Li [12] and Trammell et al. [19] suggest as motivational factors to use social networks and muve are self-documentation of key life events, cultivating good writing habit and style, articulating one's personality, passing time, socializing with other people, seeking personal entertainment.



On the other hand, It was demonstrated [7] that the use of virtual identities on Internet and / or the use of social networks for continuous and sustained periods can lead to a real Internet Addiction (Internet Addiction Disorder), which directly effects on self-definition processes [3],[4].

## 2. Aims

The goal of this explorative contribution is to study the effects of using of virtual environment and/or social networks in terms of resources and risks on processes of identity construction of emerging adults as well as on possible-selves exploration.

In particular, the study aims to explore identity construction processes and the possible-selves exploration of emerging adults who use significantly often virtual places and identities, and to investigate the characteristics and dimensions of resources and risk also by gender.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Participants

Participants were 25 emerging adults (average age 23 years), balanced by gender. They were characterized by: facebook profiles, blogging, daily utilization of Muve- Multi-User Virtual Environment.

### 3.2 Measure

It was used a narrative format of survey that brings out the processes of meaning construction in relation to the self (autobiographical narrative interview) [5], [18] considered one of the most suitable instruments to analyze the construction processes of narrative identity.

### 3.3 Textual Analysis

The texts produced were analyzed by lexical content analysis, which identifies semantic worlds of texts, through lexical cluster analysis [17]. The T-lab [11] gives a result in the form of a series of lexical fields in which each term is accompanied by statistical elements. The analysis is based on the statistical distribution of words in the text. It is assumed that word association depends on the context in which these words are used. The T-lab software is based on the counting of co-occurrences of words and gives a result in the form of a series of lexical fields in which each term is accompanied by statistical elements.

## 4. Results

The ascendent hierarchical classification singles out a first division of corpus proposition into seven different macro-areas and then into four stable classes. The result is represented by a dendrogram (Figure 1), showing the hierarchical division of the lexical fields. The index of stability – representing the percentage of the circumstances used in the analysis over total circumstances - 78% is good. The results reveal 4 “classes” composed of sentences having minimal dissimilarity degrees

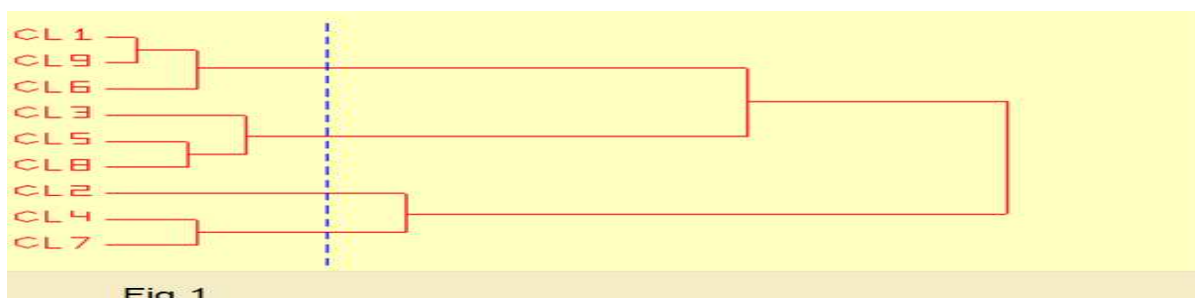


Fig. 1



Results show the presence of 4 lexical clusters related to self-construction processes and they highlight the existence of risks associated with the construction of identity, but also benefits linked to the relational and emotional dimensions of the self.

The “labels” established for different lexical worlds (classes) were assigned according to: 1. the specific vocabulary for each class and 2. the more representative units of contexts.

Cluster 1: *Curiosity and exploration*; Cluster 2: *The need for affiliation and masking of emotions*; Cluster 3: *The “potential self”*; Cluster 4: *The mask effect* (Fig. 2).

	Name	Typical Words	Text
Cluster 1 (21.21%)	Curiosity and exploration	Reflect, curiosity, to understand, identity.	“My avatar reflects me. I'm fine with myself. The need for change is absent in me”
Cluster 2 (14.14%)	The need for affiliation and masking of emotions	I need, time, to write, blogs, free, easy, person, to prefer, to think, reality.	“I think the blog is an easy and straightforward. Especially because you do not have that person in front of you, do not fear confrontation, do not be influenced and you are free writing more frankly”
Cluster 3 (51.52%)	The “potential self”	People, adding, meet, depend, finally to learn, born.	“There are people who are taking so much of their virtual life that ultimately have consequences in real life. Our expectations seem to find relief in the “way of toys” ”
Cluster 4 (13.13%) Fig.2	The mask effect	Character, day, play, interact, form, create, lead.	“My avatar is the opposite of me. Internet creates the mask effect”

(Fig.2. Description of the clusters with typical words and parts of text)

The first cluster refers to the lexical description of the use of the Internet as a means of exploration, play and curiosity. The use of an avatar fully corresponds to the real identity of the young and has a purely exploratory.

The second cluster, however, refers to use of the Internet as a substitute for real relationships. In this cluster the need for relationships is expressed and it is linked to strong psycho-social difficulties which are solved through the creation of virtual social networks.

The third cluster describes a use of the Internet as a continuation of real life. In these narrations a continuous exchange between virtual self and real self is shown, but it results unbalanced in favor of the virtual identity: people hop that the virtual identity may have a role and an impact on real life, changing the real identity.

The fourth cluster describes even greater risk. Although even in these descriptions the theme of the preference of the virtual life returns, in this cluster the distinction between real self and ideal self (avatar) is more emphasized. The virtual identity is described as the opposite of the real one, for which people feel dissatisfaction and shame. The discrepancy between the levels of self in this case is maximum.

#### 4.1 Correspondence Factorial Analysis

In order to identify the explicative links between the elaborated classes as well as identify dimensions of the self that link the different aspects of internet use underlined by the lexical fields with the



illustrative variable, we used a correspondence factorial analysis that analyzes these links and sorts out the most salient ones.

The factorial plan allows to graphically represent the links between the classes, reporting the two extracted explicative factors on the horizontal and vertical axis.

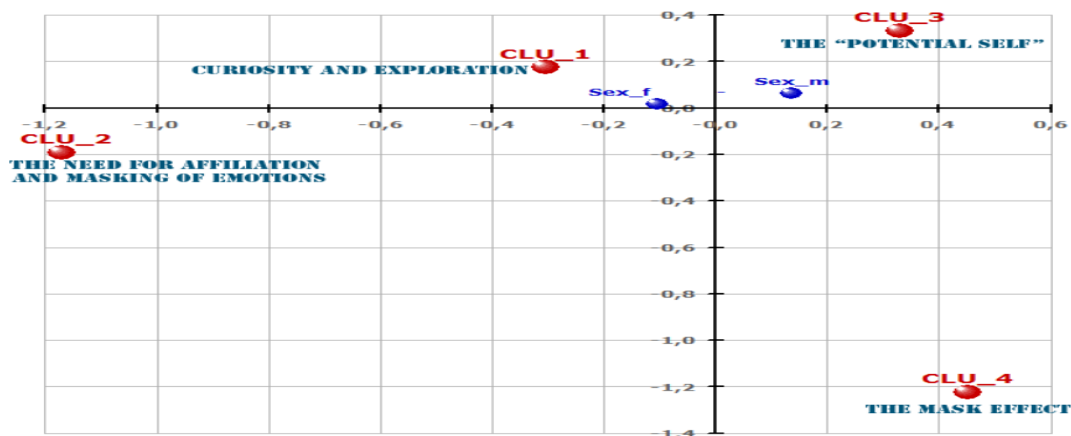


Fig.3

(Fig.3. Horizontal axis: first factor (Levels of the Self): V.P. =.2228 (58.05 % inertia). Vertical axis: second factor (Motivation to internet use): V.P. =.1610 (41.95 % inertia).

The horizontal axis (58.05 % inertia) identifies the levels of the Self, where one side (left side) refers to the actual dimension of the self and on the other side (right side) there is the ideal self (here lies the second class). The vertical axis (41.49% inertia) identifies the Motivation to internet use in which one side (down) refers to a need, (here the fourth classes). On the other side (up), the motivation expressed is a game' dimension (here lies the first and the third classes).

## 5. Discussion

The results confirm that one of underlying motivation factors to use social network and virtual environments is the socialization. Our group of emerging adults uses social networks "to meet" other people, to convey and compare own ideas with other's. Moreover, it seems that emerging adults express and build their identities their facebook profiles, twitter profiles, blogs and so on [20], [10].

About the risk our attention is on the Cluster 3 (The "potential self") that describes a form of Internet Addiction and the definition of a "Potential self" characterized by: 1) disengagement from real self; 2) identification with avatar or virtual self; 3) perception of discrepancy in real life; 4) addiction or 'refuge' in the parallel world offered by networks.

These results seem to be a useful clue to study the dynamics of identity redefinition in emerging adults with particular attention to intersection of different levels of the self (actual self, ideal self and virtual self) and self-discrepancy [9].

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