Identity and Representation in the Virtual Environment of Generation Alpha, Current Theory

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Abstract
The virtual world is, for most young people who are "digitally grown," the space of self-representation. The aim of this article is to provide an overview of how Generation Alpha in Romania navigates the internet, conforms to the self, and constructs its online identity. The way we communicate online allows us to (re)present and (re)interpret ourselves in various forms and by various means, adapted to an endless show of virtual masks. At the beginning of the article, I present the specific aspects of the concept of computer-mediated communication, subsequently relating to the process of identity formation and representation of young people in the online environment, focusing on the particularities of Generation Alpha in using social media tools.
Keywords: Generation Alpha, Virtual Identity, Computer-Mediated Communication, Romania, Representation, Self-Disclosure.

Introduction
        The new (r)evolution of multidimensional communication is changing perceptions of reality, and social interactions are shifting to a virtual world that overlaps with and obscures the real one. This global accessibility and connectivity, for the social media generation through the internet, have opened new opportunities for communication and collaboration in various fields of activity or for entertainment, transforming the way we interact.
        "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog" is the text inserted in Peter Steiner's 1993 cartoon, defining the paradox of online life for several decades. Reality confirms that "the Internet has profoundly changed the human experience" Correa, et al (2010) through new communication channels that facilitate dialogue beyond spatial or temporal limits, "transnationally." Our virtual presence on platforms or in digital environments is marked by the use of a new type of technology-mediated communication: "computer-mediated communication" (CMC). This primarily reflects the capacity and quality of individual communication in the virtual environment, i.e., the intermediation of the communicative act through new technologies. The Internet allows us to recreate our real selves in the digital environment and offers the means to construct an *alter ego*/a virtual self. The redefinition of the self-concept is significantly determined by online interactions and experiences, and the

purpose of this paper is to explore the particularities of self-representation in the virtual environment, based on current empirical scientific research.

Computer-mediated communication involves a series of particularities both at the level of specific elements and at the level of the process of transmitting and receiving digital information. The online sender, whether a real person or an algorithm, posts a message on social networks or a website to a virtual receiver, an individual user, or a virtual community that interprets the message based on the level of involvement and interaction, from simply viewing it to sharing and commenting on it across various digital platforms. The code in computer-mediated communication refers to the language or format used to encode and decode the message transmitted in the digital environment. This can include aspects such as writing style, emojis, hashtags, emoticons etc. The code influences how the message is interpreted and received by the receiver and can contribute to creating an effective and meaningful computer-mediated communication experience. The electronic communication channel, the medium through which the message is transmitted from sender to receiver, is represented by social media through which online communities are created: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. The choice of the channel/media is influenced by the communication objectives, target audience, and the nature of the message. The context influences how the message is perceived and interpreted by the receiver and can affect the effectiveness of communication in the digital environment. The message conveys the information, idea, or content transmitted by the user-sender of a social network to the virtual receiver, synchronously or asynchronously. This can consist of texts, images, videos, links, etc., depending on the nature and purpose of the communication. Understanding and managing these elements are essential for effective and impactful communication, with the communication flow (fig.1) highlighting the interactions and interdependencies of these elements in the digital environment.
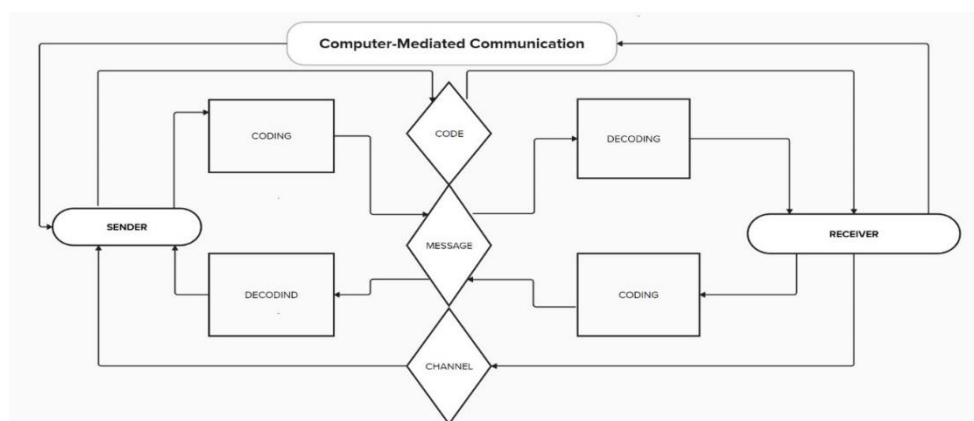

Fig. 1. The Flow of the Computer-Mediated Communication Process, adapted from Willbur Schramm & Charlea E. Osgood (The circular communication model)

Re-presentation of Online Identity. Brief Overview

A concept specific to the research domain of communication, self-disclosure has gained new dimensions in the information society, dominated by technologically mediated communication. In a comparative look at postmodernity in relation to previous cultural paradigms, it is notable that: "In traditional society, individual identity was fixed, solid, and stable. Identity was a matter of preestablished social roles; a traditional system of myths provided the necessary religious orientation and sanctions to define the individual's place in

the world and rigorously delineated the territory of thought and behavior. [...] In pre-modern society, identity was not a problem and was not subject to reflection or debate. [...] In the modern era, identity becomes mobile, multiple, personal, self-reflective, and subject to renewal and modification" (Kellner, 1995). Thus, "identity consists in how we construct, perceive, interpret, and present ourselves to ourselves and others."

The postmodern paradigm (re)defines the notion of identity, correlating it with the concept of communication in terms of interaction and negotiation. Individual identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed through an endless series of communication acts in different environments. The phrase "the era of communication" synthesizes the way of identity construction in and through the act of communication.

The structure of social encounters, where "the self" engages and interacts, is a reference point for Goffman's analogy to theater. On the open stage of life viewed as a theatrical performance and a place for self-presentation, the "interactional conduct and the invisible interpretative conduct of reception, processing, and individual establishment of meanings" intersect (Goffman, 1959). Through the dramaturgical metaphor, Goffman positions the individual as both actor and character, a self-driven by the need for revelation but also a "mask" assumed in the flow of social interactions, aiming to maintain "that definition of the social situation which is favorable to him." "The social actor presents himself and is concerned with generating certain impressions through specific actorly expressiveness. The actor-self presents itself, in a given situation, through that character which interacts with other characters, while the audience or spectator presence is either symbolically represented by a generalized other or is truly present through other characters who have only assumed the role of spectator" (Goffman, 1959). The real-self invents roles and lines, being its own director in situations of social interaction.

The specialized literature addresses aspects related to the modalities of constructing virtual identity in the context of "digitization" of our lives. Given that online interaction is not dependent on the spatial or temporal limitations of reality, allowing and offering diverse opportunities for presenting the personal self, communication becomes a game based on others' perceptions and evaluations regarding the "story" we "tell" through specific means of computer-mediated communication, which bears various nuances.

The dramaturgical approach specifically targets this permanent reinvention of interaction, where the emitting self wants to control the communication relationship. Reinterpreting communication theory from Goffman's comprehensive and dramaturgical perspective places the self at the center of action and interaction with the other, the multiple communication channels, and their effects within the framework of significance exchanges and intersubjective negotiations. Goffman (1959) considers that "Impressions are mental and affective constructs that account for personal conduct and influence others in understanding the events or occurrences they participate in." The focus shifts from activity efficiency centered on the objective, in the "mechanical" granting of communication, to identifying how the individual actor initiates expressive actions to generate and manage favorable impressions, even considering the effects in computer-mediated interactions. Also, Goffman (1959) says "Through 'impression management' techniques, the actor wants to control others' conduct by defining the situation and inducing certain impressions." The difference between the verbally constructed expression and the "displayed" one, from the dramaturgical perspective, lies in the induction of validation effects, by performing behaviors designed to generate the desired impressions. In this way, the actor uses preventive, corrective, defensive

or protective "impression management" techniques and strategies to present his or her self in the most favorable light, avoiding distorted effects.

Studies that have addressed the subject of self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication highlight that young people tend to more easily share personal information in the virtual environment Joinson (2001), regardless of the culture they come from, focusing on the depth and type of information shared, as well as the quality of relationships developed (Yum & Hara, 2006). Understanding social behaviors in the virtual environment is also determined by the shift in analysis paradigms, from methodological nationalism towards transnationalism approaches and methodology, involving the elimination of administrative boundaries and geographical barriers in transnational social fields or spaces (Hâncean, 2018).

From an etymological point of view, the lexeme "virtual" is an adjective, its semantic characteristic targeting the quality "which exists only as a possibility, without (yet) producing itself in fact; likewise, the effect is potential, not actual." Practically, what we see on the screen of the electronic device is a reflection of reality, a mirroring of ourselves online, as we would like or as we want to be perceived in the minds of others and even by ourselves.

Virtually, we create an image of ourselves that more or less reflects everyday reality, which we embellish relying on the expressive relationship between the receiver and the message, the user, and the content, completed by the spectacular effects of reflection projecting a virtual experience of encountering the other, the receiver behind the screen. In the game of mirroring, we transform reality, metamorphosing into a desired virtual version adapted to the circumstances. In the virtual world, on the stage of the online show, nothing is what it seems because... it does not exist but becomes.

Tufekci (2008), in line with Goffman's theory premises, in her study on the functioning mechanisms of virtual social networks, supports that a significant part of the activity conducted within these networks targets the presentation of the self: "Users engage in the process of impression management by adjusting their profiles, contacting their friends, showing what they like and dislike, joining groups, etc." Additionally, Tufekci emphasizes that the central element of these online social networks is the "profile" domain, which for users constitutes a "representation of the self and often, of their own social networks, with the intention of seeing and being seen, contacting others or being contacted by others."

Social networks offer users a variety of functions and tools to express their identity and manage their social relationships in the virtual environment. Users can create personalized profiles, share photos, videos, and other media content, participate in groups and events, and interact with other users through comments and likes. These digital media provide a virtual space for expressing creativity, building communities, and developing interpersonal relationships.

The personal profile on social networks represents the digital presentation of a person and includes a variety of elements and information, offering an image of the user's identity and interests, with a role in interacting and connecting with other people or communities. In a broader sense, the profile can be considered a digital business card, where personal and professional life merge, contributing to user identification and recognition and/or creating an authentic and relevant representation on social platforms.

Within the paradigm of "symbolic interactionism," Goffman (1959) explains the mechanisms of self-presentation, relating to the strategic activities in which an individual engages "to leave others with an impression that serves his own interest," in a reciprocal manifestation process. The online acting game develops dynamically as the individual is offering others personal information, thoughts, and feelings, defined in the specialized

literature as "self-disclosure." Thanks to the characteristics of technologically mediated communication, the presentation of the self in the virtual environment is strategic Walther (1996) and allows information manipulation in interactions that take place in the virtual environment, which are "given," not "left" (Goffman, 1959).

Another relevant aspect in creating a profile on social networks is the interaction and communication mode with other people in the virtual environment. This includes publishing and sharing content, commenting, and liking other users' posts, sending private messages, or participating in online groups and events. Through these interactions, users can expand their social networks, increase their followers, share ideas and experiences, and build relationships in the virtual environment. A well-managed and authentic profile can contribute to creating a representative identity of the self or an ideal projection of what we would like to be beyond the prosaic reality, in a virtual environment. Erving Goffman, using the theater metaphor: "life is a performance," and the dramaturgical model, compares the presentation of the individual self to an actor's "performance" in different "social settings," adopting a suitable role in forming the desired impression in front of others. The virtual world becomes the place where users, on multiple stages and in specific settings, adopt specific masks of performance and assume roles and social behavior.

Media Diet of Generation Alpha and Virtual Identity
In the attempt to uncover the "rhythm of history" by researching the "more suitable and transparent fabric of social processes" and their influence on generational phenomena, as "any biological rhythm must establish itself through social events" Mannheim (1952), we can extend the analysis thread of the current generation by referring to technological changes that shape their perspective and values.

The "postmodern self" is fragmented and situational, adapted to the digital context. At the beginning of the internet era, written communication allowed for the experimentation of a hidden online identity, devoid of the necessity of face-to-face interactions. This "mirroring" in computer-mediated interactions gave rise to the "second self" (Turkle, 2003). Generation Alpha children live in an era of individualization and personalization, imprinting their names on everything, yet "long for acceptance, community, and belonging" (McCrindle & Ashley, 2020).

Reviewing the chronology of 20th-century generations, Tapscott (2011) delineates the Baby Boom Generation (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1976), and Generation Net/Y (Millennials) (1977-1997). The Pew Research Center, observing changes and effects of internet and technology usage, sets 1996 as the endpoint for Millennial births.

In Romania, generational classifications were typically based on demographic factors (e.g., those born in the 1960s, 1980s), revealing that Generation X underwent significant social influences. A study by IRES identifies Generation X in Romania as a "sacrificial generation," marked by major changes due to the 1989 Revolution, experiencing generational dissonance with both the past and subsequent generations Y (Millennials). Regarding technology use, the study shows a slight difference: 74% of Generation X uses the internet compared to over 90% of younger generations. Technological adaptability is more pronounced in Generation Y (Millennials, born 1981-2000) and Generation Z born after (2000), who are more interested in testing technological innovations and new forms of socialization.

Exploring the behavior of Millennials in Romania, based on recent opinion polls by IRES, highlights that new communication technologies have significantly transformed social

interaction methods. Millennials, also called "post-millennials" Oblinger & Oblinger (2005), "Facebook Generation," "zappers" (switchers), "Instant Online" Mutte (2004), "dotcom kids," Net Generation, iGeneration, Generation C (C for "connection"), Generation D (digital), or "Generation R" (responsibility) Heckenberg et al (1991), and "Generation Z," are considered the "first global generation" (Homo Globalis) according to (Törőcsik et al., 2014).

The literature offers a variety of attempts to define or challenge the validity of "generational lenses." McCrindle and Wolfinger (2014), social analysts and demographers from Australia, propose a journey through time, generations, and values, using the Greek alphabet to differentiate generational cohorts: X, Y, Z, and subsequently naming the next cohort "Generation Alpha" in a 2020 study, signifying "a new beginning." The scientific use of nomenclature is generally related to contextual events (e.g., the 2005 hurricane season named after the Greek alphabet), influencing a generation. However, the exhaustion of alphabetical names with Generation Z necessitated a new approach for an entirely new cohort born in the new century. Generational research has shown that generic labels have a greater impact than descriptive ones. Returning to the beginning of the alphabet seemed inappropriate for the new generation. "Names like 'Baby Boomers,' which describe a unique demographic phenomenon at the birth of a generation, based on the peak reaching adulthood, are a deviation from the norm" (McCrindle & Fell, 2021). To understand social trends, it is important to observe how technological changes have influenced interaction and communication methods adopted by those born in the digital era.

McCrindle and Fell, as experts in researching the emerging Generation Alpha, present consumption habits and foresee a differentiation in education manifested both online and offline. At the same time, they are developing higher standards around social networks and smart devices. For the *Net Generation* Junco & Mastrodicasa (2007) teenagers, who are connected, multifunctional, autonomous, and accustomed to thinking in network terms, being "digitally raised" and perceived as "digital natives" Prensky (2001), media diets include both consuming and creating online content. The time spent online defines their identity in relation to others, and gaining private space becomes a condition for personal affirmation: "in virtual spaces, teenagers are increasingly free to create their own identities," and "personal profiles on social networks are public affirmations of identity" (Tapscott, 2009).

Generation Alpha, the children of Millennials, is online before they can speak, and their virtual profile is configured at or before birth by their parents, along with the advent of Instagram, and ... ends in 2024. Their lives are in ON mode, marked by the appearance of the first iPad, and digital is no longer perceived as a pastime or a vice, but as a component of daily life. Often called "The Glass Generation," "Upagers," "Alphas," "Global Multimodal Generation" McCrindle, Ashley (2020), Generation Alpha children create their own identity, devoid of a descriptive label relevant only to a segment of the cohort or specific to a period.

In research conducted in 2013 at Holbrooke School on children's development in technological culture, Sherry Turkle (2023) mentions that they "used the digital world to explore identity issues." Thus, the ability to move from the stance of an ordinary individual to that of an internet user, with an alter-ego, transforms the virtual space into a "starting point for self-exploration." For Goffman (1959), on stage, the actor, in the role of a character, presents themselves in front of characters projected by other actors, and the audience acts as a third-party witness. In the virtual environment, these three entities compress, with the user adapting their role through a set of actions, practices, and strategies appropriate to the assumed role, and the audience becoming the virtual public.

In the USA, children aged 8 to 12 (tweens) spend an average of 4 hours and 44 minutes per day on phones for entertainment purposes. These values increase to an average of 7 hours and 22 minutes for those aged 13 to 18.5 years, so it is expected that these values will rise for Generation Alpha, who were born into the world of iPhone, YouTube, and Instagram (McCrindle & Ashley, 2020).

These studies are complemented by the constant concern, from 2010 to the present (2024), of the organization "Save the Children" regarding the use of the internet by children and young people in Romania in a creative, useful, and safe manner, providing an image of the impact of new technologies on the younger generation. If in 2019, Facebook and Instagram were the most popular social networks, by 2023, Instagram, TikTok, Discord, Snapchat, and BeReal topped the preferences of children and young people, and the impact of online influencers has significantly increased. The proliferation of applications and technological dynamics highlight that "watching video content has the highest incidence among children under 5 years old at approximately 80% and decreases to around 50% for teenagers. The use of social networks increases significantly with age, with a particular emphasis on Instagram and WhatsApp, accessed by 86% of teenagers, followed by TikTok (70%). [...] The time spent online is directly proportional to the age of the children; the older the child, the more parents report that they spend more time online."

Comparatively, the percentages are radically different if we analyze the responses of children from previous studies by "Save the Children." Thus, in the February 2023 study, 3% of children stated that they spend less than an hour a day on the internet, while 33% said they navigate for over 4 hours. The results of the sociological research "The Internet in the Family", conducted in January 2024, show that approximately one-third (34%) of adolescents aged 16-17 in Romania spend between 4-6 hours a day navigating the Internet, and 14% exceed six hours a day. The role of Millennial parents, also shaped in the digital world, is to manage the challenges of screen addiction, cyberbullying, and appropriate content for children in the dynamic online relational environment (McCrindle & Ashley, 2020).

Educationally, the presence of screens and technology in daily life, not just during the pandemic when education shifted to platforms like Zoom, Google Classroom, and others, and the only way to interact was online, has influenced learning methods, opportunities, and access to information. Schools are transitioning from structured and auditory learning to multimodal strategies to educate this emerging generation (McCrindle & Ashley, 2020, p.12). Education is moving from structured classrooms to collaborative means, from textbooks to tablets, and from posters to infographics and video presentations.

Velicu (2003), in her study dedicated to digital technologies during the "digidemia" period Giddens (2021), provides an overview of how Generation Alpha in Romania uses the internet. Referring to computer-mediated communication at the country level, between urban and rural areas, she highlights the existence of a digital divide "digital divide," Colby, (2001), noting the risks and opportunities in various "interpersonal assemblages." Romania's ranking of 11th in the "connectivity" indicator European Commission (2020) and its low position in digital technology integration denote significant differences in the society's readiness for predominantly online operations, data confirmed by the gap between the delay in digitization in Romania and the strategically aligned European political approaches (MSI, 2025). The use of personal devices during learning activities in Romania has increased, placing us above the European average among students: 13% at the middle school level and 16% at the high school level, contrasting with the low level of digital equipment provision ("Bring Your Own Device," Parsons and Adhikari (2016) at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020.

Thus, analyzing quantitative and qualitative data from the KidiCoTi research, we find that the easy access of "digital natives" to a smartphone does not provide the same educational benefits and opportunities as computer-mediated didactic communication, a visible aspect in online practices as well. Frunzaru & Ștefăniță (2021) inițiated a radiography of the education system, noting an artificiality in online learning, sometimes marked by the presence of a simple photo and the lack of direct interaction with students.

According to IRES et al (2020), from the analysis of interviews, choosing appropriate communication channels for checking tasks or student activities addresses an essential aspect of managing mediated interactions. The diversity of computer-mediated interaction methods during the pandemic had a positive impact on usual learning practices and accessing information, as well as on developing digital skills.

Integrating digital technology into the learning environment, combined with the interactive nature of the internet with hyperlinks, sounds, videos, and images, replaces words with icons, images, and emoticons to convey emotion or emphasis. The message is shortened, while the orthographic, orthoepic, and morphological norms of the Romanian language (diacritics, capitals, etc.) and the English language become optional. The casual dress style lends informality to written communication, stripping it of classical formalities.

Generation Alpha children, situated "between" childhood and adolescence, exhibit influence through diversity in marketing and technology choices, as well as in their relationship with Millennial parents and often younger siblings from Generation Z. Understanding the traits of this demographic category is essential, as it shapes the future and offers a lens through which to view the next decade. They now shape their identity on social networks, an integral part of developing the "interpolated identity" McCrindle (2020), and, despite having less social formation, they are already consumers or define a segment capable of influencing brands and setting trends according to their needs, which exceed age-specific limits. Navigating the future in a constantly changing society involves exploring the relatively new world of "tweendown," actively engaging in online interaction or on social networks by uploading their own videos on YouTube, with social consequences.

Personal identity and virtual social relationships become extensions of what defines this generation in the digital age. Thus, virtual identity becomes an extension of physical reality, a well-anchored social tool in professional and personal life, a *modus vivendi*, and an auxiliary interface that can support or constrain our relationship with others.

Future specialized research on the particularities of Generation Alpha, their personality traits, value systems, personal aspirations, and cultural influence, should focus on the elements defining this "generational location" Mannheim (1952) of a cohort defined by technology and marked by the exit from the global financial crisis of 2008, climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic. The vulnerabilities of Generation Alpha are determined by the ecology of the 21st century, the digital reality in which they live, and the impact of technology on psychological, physiological, and cognitive levels, posing both a challenge and an opportunity for future explorations.

The (R)evolution of information has further empowered Generation Alpha, giving them technology as a means of self-exacerbation, or "perhaps the selfie is a self-preservation instinct: a survival reflex – and probably it is a form of representational resistance to the most dehumanizing conditions of late capitalism, capable of reinventing themselves and transcending the often imposed depreciative vision on them" (Murray, 2015).

Continuing the generational nomenclature, we will soon witness the birth of Generation Beta (2025-2039), followed probably by Generation Gamma, the children of Generation Alpha, and Delta, without abusing labels for the future.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we can affirm that regardless of the environment in which people interact, they experience similar pressures and desires. However, the way online interactions and computer-mediated communication are managed determines control over self-presentation methods. The peculiarities of self-expression in the virtual environment reflect the complexity and dynamics of digital interactions, as well as how virtual identity is constructed in relation to the real Self. The contemporary individual, immersed in an endless flow of stimuli and virtually anchored entertainment, relates to the "significant other" through a series of narratives they construct about themselves in configuring an ideal self, at the boundary between the real and the possible Self. The construction of online identity, selective self-presentation, the impact of social interactions, and the evolution of identity over time are essential aspects that influence how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived in virtual space. These aspects constitute starting points for future interdisciplinary research endeavors in the study of computer-mediated self-communication.

By highlighting the characteristics and trends of young people in Romania, the picture of the Alpha generation completes the story that we "present" in the virtual environment. This research contributes, by capitalizing on current theories and practices of representation, to the understanding of the general particularities of the Alpha generation, but also, by capitalizing on the contextual and specific ways of creating online identity, facilitated by computer-mediated communication.

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