Humanization of Virtual Communication: from Digit to Image

Inna Khmel

Ph.D., Associate Professor, South University (IUBiP) (Rostov-on-Don, Russia)
E-mail: willhunter@yandex.ru
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8430-7744

The study aims to identify the mechanisms of communication humanization in the virtual environment with the help of new signs as the means of communication. The factors which limit emotional connections while using written signs in digital communication as a form of alienation are provided in the article. The scientific novelty is shown through the essential role of nonverbal signs and symbols used to overcome alienation under conditions of limited communication. The widespread use and evolution of nonverbal signs and symbols in the process of digital communication is becoming a new frame that promotes communication to expand in the interactive sphere and make it more human. Understanding new signs and symbols go with socio-cultural issues of the current age and provides integrity and unique character of the individual.

Keywords: human, alienation, humanization, transformed form, simulacrum, digital communication, emotions, sign, meme, emoji

Introduction

The modern information environment is actively pervading the life space of the human, addressing the issue of its place in his digital future. Communication in its various forms has always been the condition for the development of a person as the one who has reasoning power. Moreover, it was not just a tool to develop the brain but a reason and way of human existence.

Modern communication tools, generated by technical progress, have a strong impact on our social and psychological condition. They determine not only the relationships between subjects and objects but also between subjects, as it was noticed by Luciano Floridi (Floridi, 2017).

The information and the technical world are becoming virtual and developing quickly, which is difficult to control and can be regarded as anonymously threatening to a person

and his psychological health. Once Edmund Husserl, while thinking over the crisis of European science, came to an ambiguous conclusion: the crisis of science was not related to human brains but was caused by the domination of technical tools, which led to human dehumanization (Husserl, 2004). The German philosopher found this controversy as early as in the first half of the previous century. Still, its understanding took many decades in order to prove itself in the current virtual communication. The case is the threat from the sign reality generated by the human towards him since the variety of forms of socio-psychological and cognitive behavior are reduced to a number of technical procedures and protocols. Furthermore, the digital communication environment is becoming a dominating form of social relations, which blocks the abundance of human existence.

This tendency has exacerbated in conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the self-isolation of millions of people, communication restrictions, shifts to new types of activity, and focus on personal feelings – everything that can intensify the alienated nature of existence (Furedi, 2019).

In the climate of pandemic and compulsory isolation, the idea of human social nature can be proved through the permanent condition of psychological discomfort. The most important instrument to overcome it is communication, which is gaining its own reality and existence in the digital age. Communication has always been the tool to retain and share information and mostly a condition to reproduce the system as a whole and its levels – natural, socio-psychological, cultural. Consequently, changes in the communication system will influence these levels and alienate the individual from them. It means that the person involved in communication, responding to reality, is actively looking for other interaction forms in the virtual space – verbal, visual, and sigh-oriented. They are the ways to show him as a subject of information exchange as well as a physical and emotional being. Proper communication assumes its informational content, whereas its personal emotional and psychological component brings informational sense. According to Tatyana Khraban "it is necessary to pay close attention to the nature and essence of visual forms, their functioning peculiarities in communication, changes in relationship and interaction of visual and verbal codes of culture" (Khraban, 2019: 342). It is also noticed that the codes of culture in digital communication contribute to the alienation in the information age.

Alienation is a phenomenon that was first conceived by Georg Hegel and later was reflected in the works of Martin Heidegger, Merab Mamardashvilli, Michel Foucault, etc., who analyzed the reasons for irrational human nature in different forms of activity. The alienation process is focused on an economic basis through the attitude to property, and it does not touch (which is obvious) alienation in the information and technical space. The idea of human alienation was continued in existential tradition by Martin Heidegger. He studied the processes of depersonalization and the ways of human transformation into a functional member of society. This process is taking place under the influence of alienated behavior standards, imposed by the state and other organizations of transpersonal existence (Heidegger, 2002: 178). The way of human presence in the world is limited to "imaginary existence" where a person "becomes entangled in himself," but his potential is concealed from him. The situation described by Heidegger is still relevant: people are voluntarily locked in the technological and informational sphere, which is an "imaginary existence." The majority of individuals consume the information from algorithmic content, which predicts their desires and interests. Nowadays, these technologies are used by such information and communication giants as Facebook, Youtube, Yandex, Vkontakte, etc. Virtually, they deprive users of any choice and make them hostages, i.e., passive users of the information

environment. In fact, it is the artificial intelligence that makes choices but not the users: what to watch, listen or read programming the person to solve standard situations.

The concept of alienation reflects the ambiguity of activity, which turns into a dominant and often hostile force for the person. Theoretical methods used in Internet communication are closely connected with philosophical approaches and socio-psychological ones as evidence of digital communication in languages, which is connected with the ways to overcome alienation.

Purpose of the research

The study aims to research the evolution of signs and symbols as the tools of digital communication humanization and, consequently, the ways to overcome alienation in the information age. On the one hand, the formalism of digital communication intensifies the effect of repression on the person, making him depersonalized. On the other hand, there is a motive to expand freedom and resist the abstract world of signs. It could be possible to get over it only if the process and mechanisms of psychological alienation are understood.

Statement of the basic material

Nowadays, the spatial separation of people is not a reason for social communication breakdown since it leads to various forms of social bonds. However, it became difficult to maintain them during a pandemic and compulsory isolation of millions of people. The absence of "embodiment," psychological discomfort, and various phobias forms alienation as a social deviant (Blikhar & Zharovska, 2020). Thus, different forms of indirect communication can be a way to emotional and psychological balance. It is difficult to realize the development of indirect communication without any written sign transformation, which influences the ways and adequate delivery of emotions among people. Studying the problems of the written sign evolution, most authors (Istrin, 1961; Kondratov, 1990), as a rule, focus on the analysis of historical context, investigating specifically the appearance of signs, their alterations, or the transformations of sign record methods. The issue about the current state of the written sign and its future transformations related to widespread virtual communication is insufficiently explored. It is worth pointing out that there are some works where the problems of signs from the pragmatic point of view along with the use of the elements of emotional intellect and perception of the new written forms, were studied (Goulmen, 1995). There are also some ideas of the western scientists, for instance, Richard Dawkins and Jean Baudrillard, which are relevant for our study.

A study by Luciano Floridi could not be overlooked because it is devoted to the role of informational assets not only in terms of the reality reconstruction but also psychological comfort of individuals as "a condition for the maintenance and further development of prosperity, personal and general wellbeing" (Floridi, 2014: 4). In my opinion, the way to overcome alienation is much more difficult than it seems to the author. In fact, redesigning social reality through information technology directly affects digital communication systems, which leads to the transformation of psychological space with inevitable alienation of the person. The technological environment imposes the person what he should be, but not the person who determines what the environment should become. With such an approach, Floridi underscores the problem but does not solve it. Thus, the person is locked in his self-reproduced reality, increasing his anxiety level and alienation. I consider that it is necessary to agree with the idea of the authors of "computational turn" (Moor & Bynum, 2002) not

only in terms to understand the scientific world picture, but with reality conceptualization in individual and public perception, which is becoming a significant factor of understanding the phenomenon of alienation.

We have to get over the psychological discomfort of this limited digitized world, perhaps only by means of some emotional component in communication that could alter the conceptualization of reality.

Over the whole history of mankind, the development of the written sign has been becoming more and more abstract. Even in the first picture (pictographic) drawings of Sumerians (3000 BC), signs meant the depicted object directly. The Phoenicians (1000 BC) signs meant sound elements of the word. Later ancient Greeks added vowels to the alphabet of the Phoenicians, which led to the advent of ideographic writing. The higher transfer rate goes along with the attempts to simplify communication tools and make them more "human" and accessible. The changing needs explain this process in writing, which was firstly mentioned by Viktor Istrin (Istrin, 1961).

Nowadays, the participants of the Internet communities, experiencing the pressure of the technosphere, are trying to 'alter' the rules of language use, mixing various verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. For instance, in Ukrainian and Russian, more and more words are replaced by widespread English ones. When texting messages and tweeting, '2' is used instead of 'to,' and the user is not surprised when he gets '2U' (read as 'to you'). More recently, younger users of the Ukrainian Internet community tend to use '4' instead of the letter 'Ч.' To some extent, and such substitution is a borrowing from English-speaking users to text figure 4 (four) instead of the preposition 'for,' etc.

Last century one of the ways to express emotions and make a conversation more expressive, authors used fonts. The current age has given us a great variety of fonts that can be used to attract attention and meet technical and publishing needs. The use of capital letters in messages in modern Internet communication is perceived as a 'call' (to attract attention). Pictograms represented by emojis are one more possible way to make communication more alive. They are considered to be more emotionally expressive and polysemantic. From the very beginning, such forms were created as ways to communicate the person's emotional state but not verbatim information. That is why they make more sense than a classic pictograph.

The first pictographs on the Internet are smiles, which were intensively used in advertising from the beginning of the 60s of the last century. Later, definite standard ideographic symbols 'emoji' appeared. They are represented by small pictures and were firstly created in Japan for message exchange. The advent of the Internet has given new opportunities for communication, which led to high demand for smiles, emojis, and emoticons as the ways to express emotions graphically and visually. The popularity of such signs turned out to be so high that they have become recognized in search engines. As a result, they developed and were made standard.

In this respect, the advent of the 16-bit encoding Unicode deserves consideration. This development is about identifying a whole set of international symbols comprising all possible written signs used by humanity. As early as 2010, emojis were officially included in the Unicode Standard, which shows that they have become a part of the "standard" writing system (Swan, 2017). The demand and widespread use of these signs demonstrate that people need simplified communication and look for new ways to express emotions. GIF animation is one more way – the file keeps a few connected snaps that make a short video clip without sound. Nowadays, so-called 'stickers' have also gained some popularity. Unlike emojis, they are less standard and more convenient to use in messengers. The fact that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus created a brand sticker in Viber dedicated to the day of the native language can prove

the popularity of emojis. Therefore, our task is to understand the popularity of the pictographic writing system and to take a look at it as a cultural phenomenon. It means that this phenomenon should be studied in the context of holistic cultural development, which will make it possible to consider and differentiate socio-cultural and pragmatic aspects (Kemal & Simsek, 2018).

Taking into account the above-mentioned, there is a question why emojis and pictographs are so popular if modern languages are quite efficient in conveying the meanings. There are almost no articles that deal with these issues in terms of philosophy. However, Aleksandr Kondratov was likely to give an answer. He claimed that pictographic writing was very close to nonverbal forms of communication and its peculiarities, which could not be conveyed through the standard letter-sound system. It is a nonverbal element that performs an important function and takes the person out from the rationality of logocentrism (Kondratov, 1990). I suppose the author was inclined to guess: nonverbal tools take the person to his metaphysics of body, which helps overcome the alienation of people engaged in monotonous activity generated by the information and communication environment. The phenomenon of alienation is demonstrated in the rational virtual reality limited by the functionality of programmed languages, which are formal and plain. To participate in a lively conversation means to give understatements, be ambiguous, and open slightly metaphysical and transcendental levels of thinking that show human nature. The situation described was deeply understood by Ukrainian authors (Kalmykova et al., 2019: 179), who are writing that "it is possible to understand the message if the structure of knowledge meets the structure of the situation, reproduced in the message." The emotional constituent, introduced into the Internet community, is a harmonization factor of the communicative environment that approaches to a created technological world to human freedom.

It is necessary to state that nothing critically new has happened to the forms of transferring information since the ideographic writing system was invented. However, Nick Bostrom (Bostrom, 2003) and Alvin Toffler (Toffler, 2002) used the term "future shock" generated by the "snowballing" amount of information around people. A great interest in pictograms is an attempt to return to an ordinary human life full of emotions. Moreover, digital communication is a powerful factor of alienation since it eliminates and narrows all nonverbal elements that cannot be made formal.

Erich Fromm, who was searching for possible ways how to harmonize the technological space, offered to use the means of language as much as possible because language is a precious treasure of humanity. Still, the most important was that "alienation in the language shows the complexity of the alienation problem on the whole" (Fromm, 1992: 398). He mentions that alienation is not based on economic issues, but it concerns only the sphere of social and psychological communication. It means the information and communication environment, sign and symbol forms, which are the key communication tools among people.

The concept of "alienation" was given special attention when the person lost his emotional intelligence during the reproduction and transmission of texts in the information and communication environment (Kolesnykova & Matveyeva, 2019). Various mimic images, which complement some understatement, are a way to add nonverbal tools to this environment. In case of limited or poor lexical word stock, it is hard to express compassion, interest, love, and attention to the other person in digital communication without any nonverbal symbols. This addition to modern written signs is a natural response to standard sign tools of communication and, at the same time, rehabilitation of one of the most important components of human existence - emotions. Widespread use of emojis and emoticons is evidence of this process, which shows a person's emotional state.

Memes play a crucial role in this process. The concept of "meme" was firstly introduced by Richard Dawkins (Dawkins, 1993). It meant that it could be an idea, symbol, or manner sent consciously or unconsciously from one person to another through speech, writing, gestures, etc. Later, a whole approach called 'memetics' emerged, which is currently qualified as quite a problematic one in terms of science (Edmonds, 2005). The misconception is that various human emotions are not regarded as memes since they could not be exactly copied and understood by the person as expected. However, these emotions can be 'catching,' which means that a personal emotional state could be shared. It is understood that memes without any emotional constituent won't be successfully replicated. A meme can become a meme only when it 'becomes clean from context' and creates a certain emotional state. Thus, the meme, being richer and more complicated than emoji, performs the same function – conveys emotions to the other person, gives embodiment and destroys binary oppositions in the information and technology space. The difference between memes and emojis is that the latter is standard and more simple in use. At the same time, memes can be presented in the way of forms that help overcome discomfort and make people closer through irrational oxymorons. Humour, irony, laughter, sarcasm help convey emotions to imagine the 'alive' human body, which is the main reason for the popularity of memes, sending us to the "physical bottom." Also, memes covey very difficult and different emotions which cannot be described with one or two words.

The users often perceive emoji as a means to enrich the text with emotions. For the specialists in the field of SMM (social media marketing), emojis are an additional way to attract the audience and tune up a synchronically emotional wave of gestures, intonation, and mood. Developers intend to extend the list of emojis, and as a result, the pictures are updated each time the operating system is upgraded. Needless to say that among all the icons, there are some that are very debatable and instinctively non-understandable, which leads to the creation of emoji reference books. In 2017 Yandex created a translator of emoji. The developers are sure that this service is in high demand. Nowadays, emojis are not in abundance – only thousands are counted, a lot of words do not have a direct correlation; therefore, the translation into emoji language can be very creative. Initially, emojis were supposed to simplify communication, but their increasing number and specifics make it more complex due to many meaningless details. These details are just funny and amusing rather than convey additional senses.

It may be assumed that the form transformed into symbols is a substantial phenomenon and will be saved as necessary implemented relations, according to social demands. Taking this idea further, it can be said that the emotional content of written signs is the reason for various interpretations, which can both facilitate communication and complicate it, being a source of creativity. People can understand pictograms in different ways, which makes the message less clear. Firstly, it concerns emojis that are used for complex and ambivalent feelings like perplexity. Ideas and feelings shown through emojis and memes are beyond the traditional and common written sign, rooted in the previous ages. Companies create memes and emojis according to certain social demands. For instance, there are emojis depicting people from different races, even the disabled – all these pictures are nice, attractive, and positive. Emotions in various activity types are used to facilitate human interaction: if it is difficult or psychologically uncomfortable to use words – there is always an appropriate positive picture. Therefore, modern emojis are new pictograms that aim at focusing on details and emotions, making communication more pleasant and desirable rather than just conveying the meanings (words can cope with it).

Initially, emotions were secondary for signs, but with the development of Internet communication, they enable overcoming psychological discomfort and getting back to complete human existence. In this respect, it is hard to agree with Jean Baudrillard, who insists that "simulacra, created by people, from the world of natural laws go over into the world of power and force stress, but nowadays – into the world of structures and binary oppositions" (Baudrillard, 2000: 126-130). The French scientist states that simulacra are only formal codes that endlessly generate models where "transcendence died giving place to immanence." In contrast, communication techniques in the virtual space find an unbelievable variety of forms of 'low creativity' at the level of separate non-institutional subjects represented by emoticons, memes, gif pictures, etc.

Jean Baudrillard makes a suggestion, which is also debatable, that "the whole communication system has changed from complex syntax language structure to binary and identifying system of question-answer" (Baudrillard, 2000: 135). Such imperative is opposed: whatever the complexity of the language system is, there is always some nonverbal constituent, which evades rigorization, is not formal, and exists in face-to-face communication. This nonverbal, divine constituent gets into the virtual communication through memes, emojis, blurring binarity with its complexity and verbal inexpressibleness. Moreover, virtual communication, by contrast with watching a TV program, gives feedback very quickly. Interlocutors change their interactions depending on the reactions of each other. That makes telecommunication more vivid, where simulacra are just a basis for personal creativity. These facts show a new space of freedom, which is opening in front of the person the moment he is trying to humanize the world of simulacra. The issue of language transformation in virtual communication needs in-depth investigation. If the language is still a 'house of being' (according to Martin Heidegger), or can it be changed so dramatically that the substance of being is gaining new forms, and how can they be transformed further? The use of emotional pictures and images can simplify communication and affect the users' word stock. Does digital communication damage the transcendental basis of human existence, restricting it to "here and now" or, on the contrary, expand it? The teleological view of the world is aimed at the eternal future, the unique world the person can create.

To some extent, any creative approach to the language is like a movement between Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand, we should convey the meanings and make them as clear as possible, using universal signs and symbols. On the other hand, each sign and symbol should save our human self. As mentioned by Edmund Husserl, "True, significant battles in our current age are the ones between the crushed human race and the humanity that is still supported by the firm ground but struggling for it or the new one" (Husserl, 2004: 31). Saving human nature is our struggle for the fulfillment of our existence in all possible manifestations – material and supersubstantial, rational and emotional ways to overcome alienation.

Findings and conclusions

Alienation as a basic principle of existence is evident in all spheres of life. It is revealed in corresponding socio-cultural settings and forms.

The research into communication tools in digital communication makes possible to claim its ambivalent nature: on the one hand, digital communication allows absolutely expand the system of social network but, on the other hand, makes the communication process simplified and depersonalized, which leads to poor cognitive, emotional and psychological human abilities. Moreover, the evolution of signs demonstrates that digital communication

is becoming intensively standard and formal, which is one of the specific forms of human alienation in the information age.

To overcome the formalization of digital communication, some images of nonverbal communication tools such as memes, emojis, and emoticons spontaneously appear to oppose this digital environment. The investigation conducted shows that nonverbal means of communication can be considered as compensatory and balancing mechanisms that save emotional communication, i.e., humanization. Slang, intentional language deformation, and other linguistic techniques simultaneously enrich the variety of language forms and protect against imposed depersonalized signs and symbols as alienated forms of activity. Thus, the use of various nonverbal symbols in the digital environment aims to humanize communication and overcome alienation.

📖 **References**

Baudrillard, Jean (2000) *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Moscow: Dobrosvet.

Bostrom, Nick (2003) Are We Living in a Computer Simulation? *The Philosophical Quarterly,* Vol. 53, Iss. 211, 243–255. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.00309

Blikhar, Viacheslav and Iryna Zharovska (2020) Anthropological Sphere of Human Existence: Restrictions on Human Rights During Pandemic Threats. *Anthropological Measurements of Philosophical Research*, 18, 49-61. https://doi.org/10.15802/ampr.v0i18.221295

Dawkins, Richard (1993) *The Selfish Gene*. Moscow: Mir.

Edmonds, Bruce (2005). The revealed poverty of the gene-meme analogy – why memetics per se has failed to produce substantive results. *Journal of Memetics - Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission*, 9. Available online: http://cfpm.org/jom-emit/2005/vol9/edmonds_b.html

Floridi, Luciano (2014) *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*. Oxford University Press.

Floridi, Luciano (2017) Why Information Matters. *The New Atlantis,* No 51, 7-16.

Furedi, Frank (2019) New forms of alienation. In: Kennedy A., Panton J. (Ed.) *From self to selfie*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19194-8_11

Fromm, Erich (1992) *Marx's Concept of Man*. Moscow.

Goulmen, Daniel (1995) *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

Istrin, Viktor (1961) *Development of Writing*. Moscow: Academy of Sciences of the USSR.

Heidegger, Martin (2002) *Being and Time*. Saint Petersburg.

Husserl, Edmund (2004) *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Saint Petersburg.

Kalmykova, Larisa, Nataliia Kharchenko, and Inna Misan (2019) Problems of modeling listening processes in world psycholinguistics. *Psycholinguistics*, 26 (1), 160-198. https://doi.org/10.31470/2309-1797-2019-26-1-160-198

Kemal, Akay and Cansu Nur Simsek (2018) Design of alienation in video games. In: Lee N. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Computer Graphics and Games*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08234-9_150-1

Khraban, Tatayna (2019) Psycholinguistic Aspects of the Internet Memes' Visual Components. *Psycholinguistics,* 26(2), 341-357. https://doi.org/10.31470/2309-1797-2019-26-2-341-357

Kondratov, Alexander (1990) *Pictography*. Moscow: Sovetskaya entsiklopediya, 1990.

Kolesnykova, Tetiana and Olena Matveyeva (2019) An Analysis of Digital Library Publishing Services in Ukrainian Universities. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice,* No 14(4), 52-71. https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29510

Moor, James and Terell Ward Bynum (2002) Introduction to Cyberphilosophy. *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 33, Iss. 1-2, 4-10. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9973.00213

Swan, Marcus (2017) *Emoji: The World's First Global Language.* Available online: https://medium.com/@mrcs1/meaning-without-words-an-emoji-revolution-aadb4bc0266c

Toffler, Elvin (2002) *Future Shock.* Moscow.