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УДК 316.6

## VIRTUAL SELF-PRESENTATION: PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

### ВИРТУАЛЬНАЯ САМОПРЕЗЕНТАЦИЯ: ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ АСПЕКТЫ

©Kozlova N.

PhD

Ivanovo State University

Ivanovo, Russia

[nat-tycuk@yandex.ru](mailto:nat-tycuk@yandex.ru)

©Козлова Н. С.

канд. психол. наук

Ивановский государственный университет

г. Иваново, Россия

[nat-tycuk@yandex.ru](mailto:nat-tycuk@yandex.ru)

*Abstract.* The problem of self-presentation has been studied in psychology for a long time. Recently a new concept has appeared. It is called as virtual self-presentation. Both Russian and foreign psychology pays much attention to this phenomenon. Most scientists are wary of the replacement of various social processes with their analogues which arise in virtual space. As a result it is necessary to do research the subject of which is specifically virtual self-presentation. Objective: in this connection the purpose of this work is personality research with the expressed virtual self-presentation. Thus, it is important to analyze its social and psychological qualities defining such aspiration and the leading type of its Internet activity. It is also necessary to give an assessment of the Internet influence on the activity of such users. Design: empirical research was conducted into two stages (in connection with large volume of test material: 14 test techniques and author's questionnaire). Total number of respondents is 208 (102 persons took part in the first stage and 106 took part in the second stage). Within the author's questionnaire we considered both the general aspiration for the virtual self-presentation which is subjectively estimated by respondents themselves and the concrete indicators (allocated on the basis of the theoretical analysis and studying various Internet resources). They are pseudonyms which are called nicknames in the virtual space terminology; the placed information from the social and demographic point of view; visual expressions of the personality image (photo and video); resource of "statuses"; the placed products of their activity; participation and belonging to various groups and communities; the placement of quotes or pieces from the correspondence with other persons; a quantitative index which includes a number of own pages, sites, social networks which the user is registered in. As a result we come to the conclusion about the personality aspiration for the virtual self-presentation. Besides, we reveal the leading type of activity of network users, motives and requirements realized in the virtual world and also an assessment of influence and concrete consequences of a network involvement. Results: our analysis showed that the personality with the expressed virtual self-presentation in the real life is in crisis state which is characterized by wide range of negative manifestations. There are also difficulties in communicative and emotional spheres. Social motives which aren't realized in the real world are transferred into the virtual world. Such users have no critical evaluation of possible negative consequences of a strong network involvement. Conclusion: high aspiration for the virtual self-presentation is a sign and an indicator of the extremely negative mental state and leaving the real world for virtual one. This indicates the necessity of the psychological or psychotherapeutic assistance for such persons. We come

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to the conclusion that it is necessary to limit children and teenagers from Internet access especially it concerns social networks.

*Аннотация.* Проблема самопрезентации изучается в психологической науке достаточно долгое время. В последние годы возникло новое понятие — виртуальная самопрезентация. Интерес к данному феномену присутствует как в российской, так и зарубежной психологии. Большинство ученых настороженно относится к замещению различных социальных процессов их аналогами, которые возникают в виртуальном пространстве. Именно поэтому необходимо исследование, предметом которого является конкретно виртуальная самопрезентация. Соответственно, цель данной работы — исследование личности с выраженной виртуальной самопрезентацией. При этом должны изучаться и ее социально–психологические качества, определяющие подобную склонность, и ведущий тип ее интернет–активности. Также необходимо дать оценку влияния Интернета на жизнедеятельность таких пользователей. Эмпирическое исследование было проведено в два этапа (в связи с большим объемом тестового материала: 14 тестовых методик и авторская анкета). Общее число респондентов — 208 (102 человека приняло участие на первом этапе и 106 — на втором). В рамках авторской анкеты мы учитывали как общую склонность к виртуальной самопрезентации, субъективно оцениваемой собственно респондентами, так и конкретные показатели (выделенные на основе теоретического анализа и изучения различных интернет–ресурсов): псевдонимы, в терминологии виртуального пространства — никнеймы; размещаемая информация социально–демографического плана; визуальные выражения образа личности (фотографии и видеозаписи); ресурс «статусов»; размещенные продукты своей деятельности; участие и принадлежность к различным группам и сообществам; размещение цитат или отрезков из своей переписки с другими лицами; количественный показатель — число собственных страниц, сайтов, социальных сетей, в которых зарегистрирован пользователь. На основе всего этого и делался вывод о склонности личности к ВС. Кроме этого также выявлялся ведущий тип активности пользователей сети, мотивы и потребности, реализуемые в виртуальном мире, а также оценка влияния и конкретные последствия вовлеченности в сеть. Результаты: нами было выявлено, что личность с выраженной виртуальной самопрезентацией в реальной жизни находится в кризисном состоянии, характеризующимся широким спектром негативных проявлений. Выявлено также наличие затруднений в коммуникативной и эмоциональной сферах. Социальные мотивы, которые не реализуются в реальном мире, переносятся в виртуальный мир. У таких пользователей отсутствует критическая оценка возможных негативных последствий сильной вовлеченности в сеть. Высокая склонность к виртуальной самопрезентации является признаком и показателем крайне негативного психического состояния и ухода из реального мира в виртуальный. Это свидетельствует о необходимости психологической или психотерапевтической помощи таким лицам. Также мы пришли к постановке вопроса об ограничении доступа в Интернет, особенно в социальные сети, детей и подростков, составляющих потенциальную группу риска.

*Keywords:* Internet environment, virtual self–presentation, emotional sphere, communicative sphere, crisis state of the personality.

*Ключевые слова:* интернет–среда, виртуальная самопрезентация, эмоциональная сфера, коммуникативная сфера, кризисное состояние личности.

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*Abbreviations:* VSP — virtual self–presentation.

*Аббревиатура:* ВС — виртуальная самопрезентация.

### *Introduction*

Interest in self–presentation of the personality has been present in psychological and interdisciplinary sciences for a long time. D. Myers is one of the most famous foreign scientists who works at this problem in details [1]. In his works self–presentation is considered as specific action directed on self–expression. The purpose of it is to make an impression about yourself. In the domestic psychology [2] the problem is to create and manage images (symbolical aspect). In our opinion, it is also necessary to underline that these images contain the certain ideas based on self–perception which the personality tries to inform others.

If we try to analyze definition of the virtual self–presentation (VSP), we will also find the distinctions between domestic and foreign approach. In the works of B. Becker and E. Reid and K. Deaux the given phenomenon is defined as possibility of almost absolute management of impression about yourself [3–4]. While some outstanding Russian researchers of the Internet (except A. E. Voyskunskiy who began studying the Internet in the 1990s and continuing his researches) A. E. Zhichkina and E. P. Belinskaya identify virtual self–presentation with ego ideal reflection [5]. More detailed analysis of the available concepts let us have a number of main approaches to this phenomenon research.

1. VSP is considered as possibility of almost absolute management of impression about yourself in an Internet network [3].

2. VSP is considered as updating of one or several sub personalities. Thus sub personalities act as instruments of personality self–expression [6].

3. VSP is considered as a way of satisfaction of requirements [7].

4. VSP is considered as opportunity to replace ego real into ego ideal [8].

5. VSP is considered as “the displaced identity” [9].

In our opinion the components presented in these approaches are really included in the process of formation of the virtual image corresponding to self–presentation. There is one more aspect which is necessary to consider while studying this phenomenon. The question is on the basis of VSP “the virtual personality” arises. Its life can significantly differ from the real one which purpose is to compensate the existing difficulties.

It is also necessary to give the additional review of the works devoted to one of the most important questions in this field. It is a problem of personal properties of the user inclined to virtual self–presentation.

The most general indicator is allocated by J. Suler [10]. He speaks about a type of the personality in general. A. Myshenkova is far from a specification, she pays much attention to gender, age and “some other” characteristics of the user with the expressed self–presentation in a network [11]. More detailed analysis is presented by I. S. Shevchenko [12]. She distinguishes the following things of such personality: low dynamism of self–presentations, obstructivity of change of steady “psychological me”, stereotype of self–presentation images, constriction and block of installations. E. Yu. Krylov gives us a bit different list of the specific features leading to a virtual form of self–presentation such as self–satisfaction, self–confidence, achievement need, sensitivity to influence of others, realizing the received respect from people around, openness [13]. However, in this case we mean not only self–presentation but also conation to publicity.

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V. Frindto and T. Köhler are beyond exclusively personal features of this category of Internet users [14]. They define 4 factors influencing self–presentation in an Internet network:

- experience of interaction with the computer and the communication mediated by the computer;
- audience;
- degree of consciousness of the owner;
- identification with a certain social group (social identity).

Thus, we can note a simultaneous versatility of approaches to virtual self–presentation studying and a set of not enough studied aspects. Due to growth and numbers of Internet users and much time spent in a network it is necessary to do a serious research in this direction.

### *Methods*

The object of the research was the personality included in the process of realization of virtual self–presentation.

Subject: specific features of virtual self–presentation.

The objective is personality research with the expressed virtual self–presentation. The following tasks are:

1. The theoretical review of the works devoted to a phenomenon of virtual self–presentation.
2. Justification, approbation and realization of empirical research.
3. Definition of main types of activity in an Internet environment of the users inclined to virtual self–presentation.
4. Detection of specific features of the personality with the expressed interest to virtual self–presentation.
5. Analysis of the Internet influence on activity of this category of users.

*Research selection:* taking into consideration large volume of test material research was carried out in two stages. 102 respondents took part at the first stage and 106 respondents took part at the second stage. All respondents are Internet users.

### *Justification and description of tools*

While studying virtual self–presentation it is necessary to consider that an implementer of this process is a number of the opportunities given by the Internet. The main channels can be considered:

- 1) pseudonyms or nicknames (in terminology of virtual space) which can correspond to reality and can be fictional. It is very informative for studying VSP;
- 2) the placed information from the social and demographic point of view which is also characterized by various degree of reliability (thus it is very difficult to check it);
- 3) the visual expressions of the personality image (photos and videos); they may belong to the personality and may not be directly relevant to the personality. Those images which the user selects for identification of the personality have special value;
- 4) a resource of “statuses” is a summary about thoughts, health, mood, a condition of the user at the moment. Thus they can concern both private life (most often) and public events;
- 5) the placed products of the personality activity, as professional (certificates, awards, etc.) and creative (photos of creativity products);
- 6) participation and belonging to various groups and communities. This indicator reflects not only virtual identity but also self–presentation. Demonstration of belonging to certain groups is also the instrument of creation of an image;
- 7) placement of quotes or pieces from the correspondence with other persons lets also correct created virtual image;

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8) there is also a quantitative index. It includes a number of own pages, the sites, social networks which the user is registered in.

We notice that with the development of the Internet and its opportunities this list can be enlarged.

In this work we consider both the general aspiration for the virtual self–presentation which is subjectively estimated by respondents themselves and the enumerated indicators above.

In addition to the author's questionnaire the testing method is actively applied. We use the following test techniques:

- 1) Test of Hall's emotional intelligence.
- 2) Simptom Check List-90-Revised is the clinical test and screening technique dealing with the assessment of patterns of psychological signs of psychiatric patients and healthy people.
- 3) Personal profile of crisis (TARAS, 2003).
- 4) A questionnaire for definition of a type of loneliness (S. G. Korchagina).
- 5) A questionnaire for studying the personality aspiration for living positions “to have”, “to seem”, “to be” (Sushkov I. R., Kozlova N. S.).
- 6) G. Ayzenk's questionnaire (mental conditions of the personality).
- 7) O. F. Potemkina's technique of diagnostics of social mental sets of the personality in a motivational and need sphere.
- 8) Professional orientation of the personality (J. Holland's test)
- 9) A. Assinger's test “An aggression assessment in the relations”.
- 10) “The differential test of perfectionism” (Zolotareva A. A.).
- 11) A scale of subjective wellbeing (It is developed by Perrudent–Badox, Mendelsohn and Chiche, adaptation of M. V. Sokolov's technique).
- 12) Emotional orientation (B. I. Dodonov).
- 13) Kuhn's Test. The test is “Who am I?” (M. Kuhn, T. McPartland; T. V. Rumyantseva's modification).
- 14) Test questionnaire “Social and communicative competence” by E. F. Zeer, E. E. Symanyuk.

As methods of mathematical processing descriptive and analytical statistics was used (the correlation analysis, comparison of groups by Student's method of T–criterion, the unidimensional dispersive analysis).

Before passing to the analysis of the received results we underline that this work generalizes a cycle of our researches concerning the problem of virtual self–presentation [15–18].

### *Results*

#### *The analysis of an orientation of Internet activity of persons with high virtual self–presentation*

Analyzing the type of activity of users with high expressiveness of virtual self–presentation it should be noted that among the aspects which directly reflect self–expression there is a creation of own sites and pages ( $r = 0.42$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ) ( $r$  — coefficient of correlation,  $p$  — a probability error).

However, if we consider that the self–presentation doesn't happen out of communication the distinct communication orientation in a network confirms existence of desire of self–image creation especially in virtual space. Such users in a network are focused on interaction with people. Thus, they communicate not only with those people to whom they seldom contact in real life but also with whom they often contact ( $r=0.35$ ,  $r=0.33$ ,  $r=0.40$ ,  $r=0.31$  respectively). Besides, communication expansion in an Internet environment where the personality can make acquaintance with new people is observed ( $r=0.36$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ).

It is obvious that interaction process is a foundation and a starting point for self–expression and creation of the necessary self–image. Within this process there is another side (whether it is one person or a group of persons). It proves the fact that a question “WHOM” (“HOW” respectively) I show



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myself is of great significance. The last is mediated by specifics of process of relationship creation. It explains a close connection of virtual self–presentation with the aspiration for communication which becomes the leading type of Internet activity for such users.

Participation of the respondent in public work ( $r=0.33$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ) and political life of community ( $r=0.29$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ) can be considered as a special form of self–presentation. Unlike the real world these kinds of activity don't take great expenses and resources on the Internet but help to present yourself as the active, socially useful, not indifferent personality.

#### *Internet Influence on users' life with the expressed virtual self–presentation*

Within this part of the analysis we will consider two problems.

The first problem is that the users with the aspiration for the virtual self–presentation admit that the Internet plays the leading role in their activity and in quantitative value it occupies the most part of their time ( $r=0.54$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ). It speaks about a tendency of gradual transition from the real world into virtual one, about replacement of one another.

The second problem is that such users don't see or deny negative consequences of a network involvement.

In general they give a positive assessment of Internet influence ( $r=0.33$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ). There is also communication growth ( $r=0.56$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ) and that is obvious if we remember the leading type of their Internet activity. As a result they feel that it becomes easier to communicate for them ( $r=0.34$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ), they can increase their knowledge of others ( $r=0.46$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ). They become more open ( $r=0.37$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ). From their point of view all this in general leads to growth of a self–assessment and more positive self–relation ( $r=0.30$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ).

However, we can suppose that it is only illusion, there is no basic changes of the personality. Specifics of an Internet network extend and impose certain forms of “positive statements” to other people through different comments, “like”, reminders of birthdays, etc. (as a result the personality can have a feeling of own importance).

This tendency is proved by the fact that such users are sure: the virtual world is capable to satisfy their needs with care of others ( $r=0.31$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ), love ( $r=0.42$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ) and friendship ( $r=0.37$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ). And in this case we are also inclined to suppose illusiveness of similar representations as realization of these motives in an Internet environment is fully impossible because of the lack of direct contact which is necessary for satisfaction of such requirements. It is also possible to suppose considering aspiration of this category of respondents for virtual self–presentation that they prefer to include such traits as care, ability to make friends, love, etc. in the built image.

From the point of view of these users there are two more requirements which the Internet is capable to satisfy: it is need for aggression ( $r=0.28$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ) and an order ( $r=0.41$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ). In our opinion it is connected with ease and safety of actualization of these desires in specific virtual space.

As a result we would like to notice that the self–presentation which is realized in a network and shown in tendency to active communication and the close and deep relations can very strongly deform and depreciate interaction and the relations of the personality with the real world in general. Transformation is very much in evidence in their motivational and need sphere, too. Realization of a number of social motives such as love, friendship, care of others are transferred by them from real into virtual world. Such users try to achieve those things which are realized only during the real interaction.

#### *Personal features of the user inclined to virtual self–presentation*

The personality inclined to the exaggerated self–presentation in the virtual world possesses a high pressure as an indicator of subjective wellbeing ( $r=0.31$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ). In this case there is also

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a connection with such mental state as uneasiness ( $r=0.33$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ). As the result there is an idea that the negative psychological state and troubles make the personality try to create other self-image with the help of the virtual world. At the same time it doesn't allow to get relief.

This regularity is also confirmed by the fact that the aspiration for virtual self-presentation has correlations with several scales of the Symptomatic questionnaire directed on identification and an assessment of patterns of psychological signs. Our analysis shows that the users realizing self-expression in an Internet environment are characterized by existence of compulsions ( $r=0.32$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ), a depression ( $r=0.31$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ), hostility ( $r=0.29$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ), the expressed phobias ( $r=0.39$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ), a paranoic state ( $r=0.28$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ) and psychism ( $r=0.37$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ).

Some indicators of personal crisis also are added to it: complication of attention concentration ( $r=0.35$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ), depressions ( $r=0.28$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ), problem absorption ( $r=0.30$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ). In general we see the unsuccessful personality, being in critical condition in the real world that causes the necessity of creation of other self-image.

On the basis of it the practical importance of this research is explicitly shown. If the personality has obviously expressed aspiration for virtual self-presentation, it indicates the existence of very serious problems in personality psychological state and means need of the psychological or psychotherapeutic assistance. So, this type of Internet activity is a sign or a symptom capable to orient the expert.

As a result, we draw the conclusion that it is necessary to restrict Internet access especially to social networks (they give the greatest opportunities for self-presentation) of children and teenagers. Moreover, our analysis shows that first of all VSP is peculiar to users of younger age ( $r = -0.41$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ).

The users focused on virtual self-presentation are characterized by many problems in the communicative sphere. The tendency to comfort ability ( $r=0.33$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ) and frustration non-tolerance ( $r=0.30$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ) are inherent to them. This combination is just capable to cause a condition of intensity on the basis of which there are other negative mental states.

One more characteristics of such users is the expressed emotional orientation of different types. They have both glory ( $r=0.30$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ), shy ( $r=0.34$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ), romantic ( $r=0.49$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ), and hedonic ( $r=0.37$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ) orientation. So there is a certain blurring and no structure in the emotional sphere.

Additional features of the personality focused on VSP show high aspiration for leadership. It is proved by the fact that they identify themselves with the head or the leader ( $r=0.32$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ). Thus, among attitudes they have work ( $r=0.38$ , at  $p \leq 0.01$ ) and freedom ( $r=0.32$ , at  $p \leq 0.05$ ) orientation. In this case we doubt that this sphere can be a source of the critical condition revealed at these respondents and we are inclined to see communicative and emotional spheres as the reason; it is proved by the existing concepts about the leading role of the relations and prevalence of emotions over reason in activity of the personality.

### *Conclusion*

Summing up this work we would like to emphasize that the problem of virtual self-presentation demands serious studying. Our research is only capable to specify this question. Thus, we obviously find out that the studied phenomenon is connected with critical condition of the personality.

So, users with high expressiveness of virtual self-presentation are really characterized by the extremely negative mental state: tonicity, uneasiness, compulsion, depressions, hostility, phobias, a paranoic state, a psychism and as a result they have no opportunity to solve problems in real life.

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Thus difficulties in communicative and emotional spheres of such respondents are observed. Perhaps, it causes as a whole or in a chain need of creation of new, more successful and safe self-image which is much simpler to make in the virtual world. However, real problems dependence remains and therefore this critical condition is also left untouched. So the virtual self-presentation can't be a way of a productive coping strategy or problem solving. It becomes only a symptom of the state demanding the psychological or psychotherapeutic assistance.

The assessment of consequences of the Internet influence on life of such users also sends to need of the address to the expert. There is a distortion of communication and the relations of the personality with the real world. Also considerable deformation of motivational and need sphere is observed: aspirations for love, friendship, cares of others are transferred from real to the virtual world. However, these values transferred to the virtual world aren't capable to be realized completely, remaining a substitute.

In conclusion we would like to stress that these phenomena are the most dangerous for persons with unripe mentality, it concerns children and teenagers. And it demands restriction of their using the Internet. If there is a concept "Internet addiction" (A. E. Voyskunskiy's work [19] is most essential in this direction from the latest works), it is necessary to take preventive measures similar to restraint on alienation of alcohol and cigarettes to persons who are younger than 18 years.

#### *Limitations*

This research was conducted in the territory of the Russian Federation (Ivanovo, the Ivanovo region, Yaroslavl, Moscow, St. Petersburg). In this regard we consider illegal to extend the received results to the residents of other states. Also we will note that there is an insignificant overweight at age aspect in selection. The persons at the age of forty-five being active Internet users are presented in small quantity.

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*Работа поступила в редакцию  
15.03.2016 г.*

*Принята к публикации  
20.03.2016 г.*