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**Psychology of subculture: Phenomenology and Contemporary  
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**MEDIATIZATION OF COPING STRATEGIES  
IN VIRTUAL SUBCULTURE**

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*Abstract*

The article analyzes the phenomenon of the mediatization of coping strategies in social networks as an example of the blurring boundaries between the real and virtual dimensions of social space in a modern technological and digital society. The microunit of the structural analysis of the virtual social networks is the subculture defined as the community with its identity styles and coping strategies. The interconnection of the Internet addiction tendency, identity styles and coping strategies in the off-line and on-line realities is hypothesized. The results of the empirical research demonstrate that the members of social networks use constructive and flexible coping strategies. The different styles of identity (M. Berzonsky) are mediatized constructs themselves which reflect the deep mediatization (N. Couldry and A. Hepp) of social cognition and behavior. The aim of future research is to find new coping strategies in virtual communication that are not fixed by the traditional survey methodology.

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**Keywords:** Mediatization, digital society, virtual communication, social networks, coping strategies.



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## 1. Introduction

Media technologies rapidly transform the society and culture, personal and social representations about space and time, the world-image and self-image in general since the internalization of technologies took place (Martsinkovskaya, 2018), what has been predicted earlier by the philosophers from M. McLuhan to J. Baudrillard. The time has come to explore how the media really shapes the human mind. In the Russian tradition of cultural-historical psychology the *mediatization* of the social worlds is conceptualized not only as the interrelation between the change of media and the change of culture or society (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Thompson, 1995), but also as the transformation of the higher mental functions mediated by the new technologies in the situation of the blurring boundaries between the real and virtual social spaces. The main problem here is to rethink the classical theories of psychology in the modern context. One of the possible methodological turns is not to consider the mediatized or digital society as a whole, but to distinguish its various structures (to move from macro- to micro- approach). We can define the virtual subculture in social networks as the microunit of analysis and its psychological criteria – the original identity style and coping strategies in difficult communication situations. Social context influences situational demands, resources, coping response selection and the costs and benefits of coping responses; but more work is required to understand how society and culture interact with coping and personality (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). So, the key research problem of the present paper is the mediatization of coping strategies in the virtual communities as the example of the *mediatization of everything* (Livingstone, 2009).

## 2. Problem Statement

The study of the virtual subcultures and communities is in fashion today, but the contradictory data raises some different psychological interpretations of the mediatization of the communication and interaction structure in social networks. Let us discuss them in detail.

According to one point of view, people pay less attention to the observance of communicative norms in network communication, which makes such communication less formal and more confidential (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and leads to the formation of specific languages and sets “equal status” of users and ultimately changes the principles of network communities construction (Voiskounsky, 2016).

In accordance with another position, in an effort to reduce the uncertainty of norms of network communication, users actively support the observance of traditional social norms and not only build their communication more normatively but also rely mainly on their real social identity (Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & de Groot, 2001).

Similar contradictory is observed in the empirical results concerning the content of the norms of network communication. Thus, the norm of mutual aid and mutual emotional support (the predominance of cooperation, the demonstration of agreement and friendliness through signs of “like”, “share” or “forward”) is combined with the statement of the facts of aggression in network communication, the radicalization of conflict interaction and cyberbullying. The last phenomena show the “dark” side of mediatization, which is very easy to use for the interpersonal and political manipulations (like in the “Black Mirror” series).

From our point of view, such inconsistency of research data is the outcome of the uncertainty identity (Hogg, 2007) constructed in virtual communication. The identity borders and the self-categorization become more liquid, according to Bauman's (2000) famous metaphor, in the social network, which normative structure is rather flexible and can easily be changed by the users (you just need to leave one community or subculture and join to another one, and the spectrum of opportunities of such «imagined» membership seems to be really unlimited). The informational, normative and diffuse-avoidant identity styles (Berzonsky, 2008) are possible to interpret as the result of the mediatization of identity and the construction of a new digital self (you can be creative to analysis discrepant information and internalize it as the part of your own self-concept or you can just disappear in the stream of visual signs).

The other and much less studied side of virtual communication is the study of coping with difficult situations. There are two possible directions of research: the first direction is associated with the study of changes in the system of coping resources and relevant transformation processes of categorization of difficult situations, and the second one is based on the analysis of the processes of coping with the possible risks in the information environment. Ambiguity, inconsistency, and insufficiency of available empirical data were noted in our previous articles (Belinskaya, 2014). It was emphasized that original dichotomy of understanding the role of internet communication in human development (its interpretation as compensatory vs complementary) sets certain limitations in understanding the realities of coping in the information age.

Firstly, the influence of the virtual communication on coping processes is possible through changes in the individual definition of the difficult situation that requires coping (the cognitive component allows to modify the behavior as a function of the subjective interpretation of the situation). The criteria of such situations that are most often noted in scientific literature include the duration and degree of controllability: the social situation is perceived as a difficult one when its duration is unknown and the obstacles are uncontrollable.

It is possible to propose that the expanded experience of virtual communication and interaction will have an ambiguous influence on the categorization parameters of difficult situations. Their duration can be underestimated because of the new phenomenology of the mediatized temporality (Fornäs, 2016) and at the same time the degree of controllability can be overestimated (because of the possibility of a one-sided rejection of communication at any moment). All this leads potentially to a decrease of the effectiveness of coping strategies (the classical thesis of the psychological coping theory – the possibilities of constructive coping are reduced if the cognitive assessment of the situation is inadequate).

Secondly, the coping strategies change in the virtual communication and interaction, moreover, the new mediatized coping strategies can be invented which are not described by psychology yet. The reason is the inevitable increase of communication partners which leads us to suggest expanding the possibilities of social support while experiencing difficulties. However, a few studies of this coping strategy in network communication demonstrate the ambiguity of the results. So, although the search for social support in the case of certain stressful life events through communication in social networks is becoming more and more common, it does not always lead to effective coping (Martsinkovskaya et al., 2017; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017).

### **3. Research Questions**

The concept of mediatization as the theoretical framework for the research study forces to address the questions about transformations of the coping strategies in the virtual subcultures and communities. Thus, the main research question is the definition of the interconnection between internet addiction, identity styles and coping strategies in mediatized communication.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to find out the preferences of active users of the social networks in choosing coping strategies in difficult situations in virtual communication. The survey sample involved 345 users of social networks (VKontakte and Facebook) aged 16 to 20 years (median age is 18.5 years). All the participants gave their consent to participate in the study.

### **5. Research Methods**

- 5.1. The ways of the coping questionnaire (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988) for the real self and virtual self.
  - 5.2. The Identity Style Inventory (Berzonsky, 2008).
  - 5.3. The Internet Addiction Test (Young, 1998).
  - 5.4. The original questionnaire with open-ended questions about the activity in virtual social networks.
- All questionnaires were modified and adapted for the Russian language.

### **6. Findings**

6.1. The group of the individuals non-addicted to the Internet showed itself homogenous by choosing coping strategies in difficult situations in virtual and real communication. At the same time, the group of the individuals addicted to Internet was heterogeneous by choosing coping strategies in difficult communicative situations depending on the kind of communication. In the latter case, the Internet-addicted individuals preferred choosing constructive coping strategies.

The comparative analysis of coping strategies by people with and without Internet addiction showed the following statistically significant distinction verified with the help of the Mann-Whitney test.

The group of the individuals addicted to Internet obtained results lower than age-specific standards on the “accepting responsibility” and “self-control” scales, what is in line with phenomenological descriptions of this kind of dependence. In addition, the results of this group on the “confrontive coping” and “distancing” were within the test standards and were similar to the results of the group of Internet non-addicts. The group of the Internet-addicted tends to use the “escape-avoidance” strategy more often than the other group but the difference between two groups on this level was not very significant. The differences in the “planful problem solving”, “seeking social support” and “positive reappraisal” scales were not significant. In other words, the use of coping strategies by people with Internet addiction can be considered as successful.

6.2. The Internet-users with the informational style of identity prefer combining “seeking social support” strategy with “planful problem solving” regardless of the kind of communication (real or virtual). This group of respondents showed a certain uniformity by the manifestation of personal traits in communication. The informational identity style as the cognitive product of the mediated communication integrates the real and virtual social spaces.

The respondents with normative and diffuse identity style have often combined the “seeking social support” strategy with emotional coping strategies. It is to point out that their ‘real-self’ and ‘virtual-self’ were related to different types of combining these strategies. The users with normative identity had the tendency to use in an equal measure such strategies as “seeking social support”, “planful problem solving”, ‘self-control’ and “accepting responsibility” in real communication. In virtual communication, the same group reduced the number of used strategies and chose “seeking social support”, combined with “positive reappraisal” and “escape-avoidance”. Taking into consideration the fact that this group of individuals showed themselves as passive communication actors in the virtual world, this result seems to be quite logical. By reducing their normativity in virtual communication, they were losing their communicative habits and were trying to apply the coping strategies not related to constructive activity.

The users with diffuse identity showed a better variability of coping repertoire by ‘real-self’ than by ‘virtual-self’. In the case of virtual communication, they preferred using of such strategies as “seeking social support”, “confrontive coping”, “distancing”, “positive reappraisal”, “self-control” and “escape-avoidance”. In other words, the virtual communication represented more uncertainty by building self-image and by decision-making and, likewise, promoted the variability by choosing of coping strategies.

## **7. Conclusion**

Analysis of the research results demonstrates that it is impossible to find simple psychological differences between online and off-line communication. The virtual communication became a significant part of the everyday life in the mediated / digital society, and psychology and social theory have to develop a new methodology to make these changes clear. Obviously, identification with the subculture or community is correlated with a decrease of personal self-control and acceptance of responsibility, and at the same time, constructive coping strategies in network communication are manifested quite well. In other words, the aim of the future research is to find the intermediate variables as the types of the interaction situations, the personal and social identity or maybe the new coping strategies in the virtual communication that are not fixed by the traditional existing questionnaires.

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