Chapter 7
Virtual Communication:
Strengthening of Real Relationships or Simulation?

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ABSTRACT

The shift of the real communication to the virtual sphere has influenced the nature of interpersonal relations. The article focuses on the characterization of the phenomenon 'virtual communication', playing the dominating role in the electronic world culture. Drawing from a socio-cultural analysis and the theory of simulacra by J. Baudrillard, the article proposes the classification of the virtual communication types in terms of the nature of human relations and illustrates their peculiarities and features. Using the axiological approach, the author characterizes the phenomenon of the virtual communication and the existential and ethical aspects of the interpersonal relation transfer to the sphere of the information contact. The research resulted in revealing the features and peculiarities of the virtual communication and the benefits and risks for human beings and society.

INTRODUCTION

The information age generated an electronic culture, virtual space and virtual time, the electronic status of a person, having formed some kind of 'the third nature' – the world of virtual phenomena. For the last two decades, the key spheres of human existence (education, communication, art, science, and creative activity) have globally changed. They have primarily been virtualized, that is, transferred from a real life form into digital and simulative ones. In this sense, the information age has not only united people into a uniform network system but changed the essence of their communication and relations. First of all, it resulted in the virtualization of the interpersonal communication, caused by the invention of the remote access technology and the user's remote communication. However, the consequences of this technological leap have changed the system of human relations, generated a special electronic form of the culture, and induced new existential and ethical problems which a modern person has to solve (Baeva, 2013).

BACKGROUND

The studies of many researchers (philosophers, sociologists, economists, etc.) have focused on the problems of the information technology's influence on the modern society for more than 30 years. One of the major problems in this area is the virtualization of the modern human life style, the shift of people from a real being to virtual being. The term 'virtuality' and the concept 'virtual reality' were introduced by Jaron Lanier in the late 1980s. He used these terms to denote the electronic devices, carrying their user to new existence dimension, the information world, the digital and interactive environment of technologically produced simulacra that is absolutely unusual for individuals, all those things that they can be given only in experience of the sensory perception of the reality (Bodalev, 2011).

In the humanities, such scientists as J. Baudrillard, F. Jameson, J.-F. Lyotard, P. Virilio, G. Deleuze, S. Zizek, M. Heim, N. Karpitskiy, N. B. Mankovskaya, N. A. Nosov, A. Yu. Sevalnikov, S. S. Khoruzhiy, etc. have been studying the development problems of the virtual reality and culture.

J. Baudrillard thoroughly explored the essence of the human entry into the virtual culture. He determined the ontologic status of the simulation in terms of the formation of the 'hyper-reality', absorbing and eliminating the reality. J. Baudrillard (2000) believes that the development of the science and the world of things predestined the appearance of this quasi-reality. The reality is defined as something that may be equivalently reproduced. Such a definition was formulated along with the science, postulating that any process can be reproduced precisely in specified conditions. As a result of this reproductive process, the reality represents not just that phenomenon which can be reproduced but that one, which has been already reproduced, i.e., hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 2000). Discussing the consequences of the virtual hyper reality development, J. Baudrillard gave two assessments. On the one hand, he predicts universe cloning as an unconscious choice of the mankind, refusing the natural state in favor of artificial, more viable, and effective things. On the other hand, he asserts that the impetuous development of the virtual will lead to implosion, i.e., blurring of the borders between the real and alternative worlds. In both cases, the object - subject relations replace subject-object ones when the things, the products created by individuals, start swallowing up their originators, manipulating them, and subordinating them to their functioning.

INTERPRETATION

Relying on the methods of J. Baudrillard and the approaches he followed, I define virtualization as the process when the real processes and phenomena are replaced by the virtual forms. On the one hand, it deals with the creation of digital analogs and the simulations of the real culture objects and on the other hand, it deals with the creativity of the new cyberspace and its phenomena. In such a case, the consciousness of the subject is a source of new reality, some kind of 'the third nature' where the products of mind creativity are combined with the visual images, completed by the information resources. The infinite multiplication of copies reveals the peculiarity of the reality virtualization, i.e., 'copies of copies' - the digital infinity which distances the objects from their creators. The virtualization of the modern culture has characteristic features: access freedom, openness for the information society members (those who have electronic resources), remotability, the activity in gaining access to electronic information, the possibility to participate in generating information contents from any point of the 'information community', liberality, descriptiveness, the absence of strict rules, norms (including ethical), clip thinking, the domination of

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