

An Inquiry into The Psychic Dimensions of Digital: Consuming, Judgement, Affection and Awareness

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Abstract

According to anthropology, humanity is not a “substance” but a process of permanent transformation of its features and potentialities. Digital wireless technology is a relevant and, at the same time, dangerous ally for the metamorphosis of humans and their natural and social environment. Indeed, new technology requires a co-creation of online activities and meanings as well as an active and deep involvement of users in everyday life. Such phenomenon can be defined as a ‘process of subjectivation’ since it is based on mediated interaction which produces a modification of that same individual. AI, therefore, provides a subjectivity shaping which implies several psychic dimensions such as consumption, judgement and affection. This work mainly focuses on the subjective implications of human-digital interaction in terms of the transformation of the way humans perceive and conceive their lives. In particular, does a digitally mediated environment guarantee a subjects’ awareness?

The work is conducted by interweaving interdisciplinary concepts and methodology to highlight the psychic emergence in the digital world and the processes of subjectivation determined by the constant online activity which is enriched by subjective, affective and cognitive human potentialities. Concepts such as consumption, judgment and affection are highlighted to analyze the psychic level of subjectivity and lead a reflection on the problem of awareness of subjects who establish a close correlation between their lives and the digital world.

Keywords: Awareness; Digital technology; Neurosciences; Philosophy; Subjectivation

1. Introduction

“The bigger picture is not that we have a new industrial or technology revolution, but that we actually have a revolution of humanity”. (Skinner, 2018)

The premise of this work is that human life, in a large proportion of the planet, tends to be totally immersed in digital flow. According to the Internet World Stats, the rate of Internet usage is growing rapidly (see the Table below). The most interesting data, found among these figures, are the Penetration rate and the Growth index which demonstrate that the Internet usage via digital devices has increased in the last 3 years in every part of the world.

Table 1: World Internet usage

WORLD INTERNET USAGE AND POPULATION STATISTICS 2023 Year Estimates						
World Regions	Population (2022 Est.)	Population % of World	Internet Users 31 Dec 2021	Penetration Rate (% Pop.)	Growth 2000-2023	Internet World %
Africa	1,394,588,547	17.6 %	601,940,784	43.2 %	13,233 %	11.2 %
Asia	4,352,169,960	54.9 %	2,916,890,209	67.0 %	2,452 %	54.2 %
Europe	837,472,045	10.6 %	747,214,734	89.2 %	611 %	13.9 %
Latin America / Carib.	664,099,841	8.4 %	534,526,057	80.5 %	2,858 %	9.9 %
North America	372,555,585	4.7 %	347,916,694	93.4 %	222 %	6.5 %
Middle East	268,302,801	3.4 %	206,760,743	77.1 %	6,194 %	3.8 %
Oceania / Australia	43,602,955	0.5 %	30,549,185	70.1 %	301 %	0.6 %
WORLD TOTAL	7,932,791,734	100.0 %	5,385,798,406	67.9 %	1,392 %	100.0 %

Source: <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

Such data are very important and are representative of contemporary society which uses the Internet for sociality, profit, education, entertainment, public needs, research and so on. The digital world involves several dimensions, and consists of the intertwining of human and non human interactions into a material, technological, and informational dimension that includes the partial replacement of humans by objects. As users (meant as individuals and groups) are more and more exposed to digital experiences, the concepts of society and environment are changing.

Karin Knorr Cetina, a sociologist of knowledge, combines the sociological dimension of the concept of society with a social psychological element. The result is the definition of “postsociality” which characterises the current transformation of forms of society and sociali-

ty in globalised information societies “that is something like the other side of the coin of the contemporary experience of individualization” (Knorr Cetina, 1997, p. 9). The sociological description of subjectivity is based on the characteristics of digital culture (Stalder, 2018), the conditions of informationalism (Castells, 2010), and the recognition of a new psychic development which has gone hand in hand with a rise in individualisation.

The profound and long-lasting philosophical reflection on the subject, linked to the desire to build a solid reference figure over the centuries, has come to terms with its fragmentation in modern and contemporary society, admitting the need to define subjectivity as a process with the help of other disciplines. In its way, philosophy has found itself together with sociology and psychoanalysis, but also with neuroscience, revealing the impossibility of a universal categorization and the reality of the processes of subjectivation that take place in specific contexts. (Landolfi, 2010)

Within the past twenty years, post-structuralist methodologies, particularly those inspired by Michel Foucault, have grown significantly influential in the investigation of socially mediated subjectivity. This viewpoint has led to the development of subjectivity theories that draw on historical precedents influenced by transcendental philosophy or the philosophy of consciousness.

The concepts of subjectivity and subjectivation have not been abandoned by research; in fact, they have been revisited in numerous ways (Alkemeyer, Bröckling & Peter, 2018), although, as Schenk points out, “the study of subjectivity does not amount to an established independent field of network analysis or research.” (Schenk, 2022, p.27)

In fact, “This evident capacity of the network to connect disparate phenomena might suggest to us that the concept's use in explorations of the formation of subjectivity in the digital condition, informationalism or postsociality is no random choice. In contrast to its function in social theory as a term in the critical analysis of our time, the network appears in explorations of subjectivation as more of a heuristic and metaphorical term.” (Schenk, 2022, p.27)

However, according to Ricken (Ricken, Casale & Thompson, 2019, p.7), these ideas contain the ability to allow researchers who use empirical and analytical methods to overcome previously prevalent oppositions (such the one between active control and passive submission) and reevaluate social and cultural emergence processes.

From psychoanalysis it is possible to derive a perspective on subjectivation and apply it to the dynamics in the digital world, recalling the ‘mirror stage’ proposed by Jacques Lacan, who ascribes a central importance to the initiation of self-consciousness as an independent entity in the child’s self-knowledge in the mirror. Lacan’s structural description of the constant effort to maintain libidinous object relations that include power and economic interests can also be related to the present analysis of the consumer digital industry (see infra). (Schenk and Hoffarth, 2018; Mayer and Schenk, 2018)

Meyer (2018) invokes Lacan’s model of the psychic apparatus underlying the dynamics of lack and desire which is composed by the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary.

These facets become interwoven into a “Borromean link”, in which Meyer sees a representation of “network-like subjectivity” (ibid., p. 40). As the Internet is not only mediating but is shaping human interactions with the world as well, in a process which involves the psychic

dimension, subjectivity is changing. Subjectivity is the result of an individual disposition and the external stimuli of society and the environment. Epigenetic paradigm, which analyses the mechanism for regulating gene expression, demonstrates that humans do not coincide with their genes and subjecthood is not simply determined by inherited biology, but by the environment (González-Pardo, Pérez, 2013). Society molds subjectivity through a technological process of transformation of the environment. As living beings need Umwelt to satisfy their needs (Uexkull, 1957), contemporary subjects are in search of their satisfaction into the digital environment thus developing a digital Umwelt (Landolfi, 2016). It follows that subjecthood is shaped by digital experiences.

2. Digital psychic challenges

Nowadays humans stand at the point where they can radically transform the whole of nature and their being itself. Elon Musk's Neuralink corporation is developing a Brain-computer interface by implanting a chip into the human brain to achieve symbiosis with artificial intelligence. The sophisticated brain machine interface systems may have relevant therapeutic benefit, as Musk stated. (Musk, 2019), by treating a variety of neurological disorders, from crippling migraines to Parkinson's disease and epilepsy. Additionally, it might significantly enhance how users interact with and manage prosthesis, especially those that take the place of impaired sensory function. The technology would be used as well to improve the performance of healthy users through fast, wireless brain machine interfaces. One can easily imagine that this technology could find a large market in the gaming sector which is probably the least controlled and the most suitable for the expression of the deepest aspects of the individual and collective imagination.

The wireless technology makes the relationship between hardware and software, real and virtual objects, human and non human, individual and environment, fluid and osmotic. Organic computing and molecular cybernetics are the new development front of technology.

Digital seems to offer a Kantian transcendental field of possibility of experience itself since it is applied to emotions, affections, consciousness and thought. (Kim & Schönecker, 2022) This type of environment is organized to satisfy the expectations of digital users.

In fact, Hooman Samani (University of the Arts, London), has been designing "emotional robots" equipped with an artificial version of love hormones (oxytocin, dopamine, serotonin and endorphins), which are capable of recognizing the moods of humans by reading facial expressions, blood pressure etc, but also to respond accordingly, demonstrating love, happiness, jealousy, disgust, anger or other emotions through movements and signals. (<http://www.lovotics.com/>) (Jui & Samani, 2017).

In addition to the production of cybernetic objects that replace the human being by mimicking it in all its manifestations, even the most intimate and profound ones, holograms and APPs make it possible to obtain a virtual affective environment. One of these, the APP

“REPLIKA” lets people create a personal AI soulmate in order to fill the absence of a real person.

Before this phenomenon spreads, a general question which requires an interdisciplinary approach needs to be posed: Is users’ awareness at risk whereas the activity of digital psyche seems to be analogous to a video game or a digital movie?

Another question would be: Which psychic factors can be recognized as a tool for measuring and evaluating the degree of awareness of the digital subjects?

There is no denying that the technological evolution has allowed a great advance for the development of human potential. However, the recent debate about GPT chat (Haleem, Javaid & Pratap Singh, 2022) has made us realize that digital technology is close to replacing the human entirely, to the point that it is not possible to predict:

- a. in 10 years which socioeconomic scenario will be realised and what kind of subjectivity will be able to survive in it;
- b. what will be the cognitive and affective skills and competencies needed;
- c. what values will the new society digitally biomediated be based on?
- d. what will the human and nature actually consist of in relation to the digital world;
- e. and especially if it will be possible to identify a strategy or a logic in this advanced digitalisation process in which full control could be for absurd assumed by machines as in science fiction films.

No one can answer these questions; not even the greatest experts and scientists. In the meantime, however, we can try to analyse the human digitalisation process that has taken place and that escalated very quickly in recent years to understand what has happened on a psychic level in terms of awareness and in terms of the transformation of subjectivity.

As today the processes of formation of subjectivity take place in social media (Landolfi, 2016) and that this occurs through consumption, judgement and affection, the dynamics into digital life between these dimensions which belong to psychic sphere let us analyse the present and discuss the question of awareness.

3. Consuming, judgement and affection

3.1 Consuming

According to the Nobel Prize winner Thomas Schelling, the imaginative and emotional activities of a subject are essentially definable as consuming; therefore, consuming is essentially a mental and emotional activity which produces subjectivity. In other words, it would be possible to theorize a sort of virtual dimension into our mind in which experiences are prefigured and anticipated. (Schelling, 1984)

To affirm this, Schelling describes the last half hour of a man's life, surrounded by the people he loved, spent choosing delicious foods and wines. Effective access to the pleasure of the

meal is forbidden to the man who dies: his experience of consumption is only pre-tasted with thoughts.

However, such a meal, mentally consumed, is supposed to constitute the most gratifying meal experience of his life. The step is short from such a consumption of food to a consumption of events that we can recall, past or future (images that promise future enjoyment), convictions and beliefs (with respect to the surrounding world, relationships, possibilities), and feelings, pleasant thoughts, good and bad news.

What is being proposed is a notion of the mind as a consuming organ. From this point of view, it is difficult to establish a difference between mental processes and consumption, since they coincide, and enjoyment itself is reduced to an elaboration of thought data.

If it is true, the digital media could be the privileged tool for the extension of psychic consuming and for production of forms of subjectivity, that is to say, if such theory is true, consuming, as a mental activity, is intertwined with the modalities in which the identity takes shape. One can argue that consuming is the consuming of psychic experiences, and this is peculiarly evident in the digital media. (Landolfi, 2016)

In this perspective, consumption is not a passive and alienating activity which numbs the subjects by preventing them from gaining awareness, but it is nourishment for the mind, food for the thought-body, food which allows the growth of the mental faculties, their development and full development. (Landolfi, 2008)

Cognitive processes, linguistic formulations and consumption, production (of ideas, of knowledge, of communication, of signs and symbols, of value) and enjoyment, if the theory holds up, converge and occur simultaneously. A consumption that produces communication and, through this, convictions, beliefs and expectations (norms) is envisaged.

Memory itself would constitute an immense shelf of mental products to be fished out for one's own enjoyment following a choice among them. Through the profiling of consumers on the Internet, we not only understand the tastes that determine purchases on the market, but also subjectivities and by influencing consumption we also affect subjectivity itself.

This scenario has great implications. Digital is a tool for a pervasive power on subjecthood. The question of the mental consumption of experiences and emotions which renders reality useless is also linked to 'brain uploading' which is being discussed as a possibility in the not too distant future. It is about uploading a person's memory onto a digital medium. In this way, a paradox would be created: a virtual subject who virtually consumes life! (Graziano, 2019)

The complexity of the question certainly raises the alarm on the need to develop awareness of the mental processes active in surfing the Internet. Plus, the mental consumption paradigm does not necessarily have to be accepted.

3.2 Judgement

On the Internet we are witnessing stereotyped manifestations especially in social networks and the growing dissemination of techniques for managing one's emotions in order to obtain a human product compatible with social, market and political expectations.

The work that subjects do on themselves to please others on digital media corresponds to a form of new capitalization of the self as a product and to a form of valorisation that derives from a new original accumulation, this time not on lands or means of production, but on one's own person as a sort of "psychic enclosure". (Landolfi, 2016) Pleasing others not only starts a new economy of the self that is sold online through Instagram, TikTok and other channels, but also, in addition, activates the reward system or a gratification system that lights up in the brain and transmits hormones with the effect of a feeling of well-being in the subject.

This system produces a circularity as users seek to repeat te experiences that give gratification and cause satisfaction through the reward system (Rajanen & Weng, 2017) and, of course, the digital platforms are oriented to allow it.

On the Internet, the relationship is based on judgement: the dominance of the image and the creation of the self as a "brand" let possible the growth of a judgemental approach to others. There is no causality: you find people, products and events in a very selective way give value or not, based on personal preferences regulated by algorithms. Such situation determines a spectacularized experience in which we continuously very fast accept or refuse what we see.

The phenomenon of judgement on digital media has been analysed by Rosalind Gill (Gill, 2023). Gill conducted research with a diverse group of young people living in the UK. The research shows that the experience on the Internet is perceived both as evaluative and forensic due to the feeling to be watched and surveilled, in other words, of being judged all the time. Judgement conditions the subjects by curbing the inventive and affective potential.

3.3 Affection

In Western culture, traditionally, it has been assigned a dominance to the dimension of the LOGOS, of rationality that has characterized and defined the human. As such confidence has failed due to the environmental disasters, the violence, the imbalance between people, between the social classes, the marginalization, the wars and of the discriminations and of the many errors of which the human being has been capable of course it is no longer possible to maintain that what characterizes the human is rationality. A plot of emotions, anger, passions, instinctive desires to create, to transform, to overcome traditions, a whole set of irrationalities in action forces us to imagine the human interacting with the digital in its deepest component. And we can perceive how quickly an extraordinarily creative, but also extraordinarily dangerous tipping point can be reached if we combine this great technological advance with the great loss of control that humans have over themselves.

The predominance of emotional and irrational factors in humans has been studied by the Estonian neuroscientist Panksepp (Panksepp, 2004) who identifies in all mammals an original

functioning system useful for survival. Although it has been demonstrated that, at birth, the mammalian brain, especially the neocortex in humans, is essentially a blank slate, in the most primitive part of it we can recognize seven original systems that explain animal behaviour. These primary emotional systems are "affective", indeed Panksepp speaks of affective neuroscience: the search for food and the ability to defend oneself from dangers are dictated by the systems of -that the author writes using capital letters-SEARCH, CARE, LUST, PLAY (positive emotions) and FEAR, ANGER, SADNESS (negative emotions).

In many disciplines in recent years the role of human affectivity has been recognized. We speak, in fact, of Affective turn (Harkness, 2007). As we read in Anderson, even the physical spaces and places are produced through an affective affirmation and it is through this that subjects are constituted and worlds are created, that connections are established with the inorganic and ecological discourses are produced, furthermore it is the level of affections that forms power, identities are 'felt' and experienced. (Anderson, 2014)

It is not possible to imagine the digital world excluding the affective field because human are affective beings. The problematic issues concern the consequences of the affective processes implied in the digital, their creative or destructive potentialities, the awareness of users, the freedom of expression, the manipulation and control of emotions and the mental states. The subjectivity process digitally mediated, in fact, can be divided into two levels of analysis: one related to identification, knowledge sharing and self-awareness, and the other related to control and dependency. (Rossi Ramos, 2020)

4. Conclusive reflection: the issue of Awareness in Digital

As technological progress aims to enhance its defects and limits and respond to all the needs of humanity, it is clear that there will be an extension of the digital on all levels of the living. Such discourse is valid in the case of the material production of object and of the production of intangible features of human experience. The intense embrace that the human maintains with the digital eliminates the unpredictability, the imperfection and the beauty. It resets nature: it is no coincidence that today we speak of the Anthropocene, that is of an era in which every aspect of reality has been technologically modified by humans.

The digital technological advance is reconfiguring both the very nature of the human and the institutional scenarios within which subjectivity has so far been conceived, with the risk that the processes of subjectivation are increasingly incorporated into technocratic apparatuses that directly manage the imaginative and emotional level through visual and emotional marketing techniques with results and challenges that are still unclear. In such a scenario, the psychic condition requires great attention.

Contemporary subjectivity takes many turns, generally raising the problem of a subjects' awareness of their involvement in the dynamics of power, meant nowadays as technoeconomic dynamics which affect the metamorphoses of the subjects, almost completely wrapped /involved. The increase in the use of persuasion techniques in digital media leads to

a critical reflection by identifying in affection a line of escape to produce other paths, in an effort to relocate the production of reality, typical of desire, in the affective sphere. (Landolfi, 2015)

Awareness is connected with the freedom to create the new and the unexpected. Digital control brings about the repetition of the identical, not the originality of a spontaneous and casual invention. To gain awareness it is necessary to develop a new approach to affective experience in a non-judgemental sense (Landolfi, 2019) to amplify and multiply inventive opportunities. Awareness needs crisis, inconveniences, surprises, shocks, mistakes, unknown phenomena, voids, inactivity, shortcomings, mysteries, dilemmas, emotions out of context to be reached.

The danger of digital is represented by its power to simplify every message and to fill fast material gaps. Simplification of procedures and of results, simplification of messages and contents, of techniques and meanings it makes the mind lazy and does not allow the activation of the SEEK system (Panksepp, 2004), so fundamental for the enrichment of the personality. Simplification does not allow the development of creativity and the skill we call problem-solving due to the saturation of user demand through answers based on basic needs.

In this perspective, the mind would improve its mere operational functions, overriding the body and driving it into a stimulus-response loop without higher goals, authentic and spontaneous emotions or existential dilemmas. It is an interesting challenge if we consider the enriching aspect of the addition of information in digital and the increasingly sophisticated and rapid degree of calculations, but also a total emptying of the person from the elements that have led humans to think since the dawn of civilization such as, for example, wonder, amazement, pain, fear, difficulties, love. If we consider ancient cultures we realize that it is precisely around wonder, ideas, visions, emotions and other psychic dimensions that the first forms of social organization, the first constitutions, the first discoveries and the first inventions arose. In modern time, scientific and technological revolution are been possible thanks to errors, experiments, casual results and thus to human factor meant as imagination, emotions and so on.

Humans need complexity and challenges to be overcome in order to still define themselves as living beings. In fact, humans risk a great de-personalization process and cooling process of emotions, a lowering of the involvement of the psyche in experiences, as well as a project of cancelling reality as such in favour of what is perceived, recorded and manipulated by digital technology which implies the management of our life and of conscious and unconscious processes of identity construction.

What is ultimately at stake is the possibility of users to develop an aware subjectivity.

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