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The Virtual Me. A New Way and Practice of Identity Construction and Language Use

Orsolya GERGELY

Sapientia University
Department of Social Sciences
gergelyorsolya@sapientia.siculorum.ro

Abstract. The paper is based on a sociological research (2009) focused on the population of a social networking site in a smaller East European town (Miercurea Ciuc, Romania). 1327 iWiW accounts were chosen by sampling and a database was created based on the visible data from each account. Using this database, we can draw a picture about this town's iWiW users: along what kind of socio-demographic parameters we can describe its population, what they present about themselves, how many connections they have, how much information they share, what they say about themselves and in what way. Besides the database, content analysis was used as well. This was applied in two main categories: *(1.) about myself*: given answers to the open questions of the profile page: *length* (whether there are short or long phrases), *language* (Hungarian or other), *spelling* (correct, incorrect, use of emoticons), *originality* (own words or quotations), *style* (sober or funny, likely or unlikely valid), and *(2.)* the *photographs* they share, along five aspects: *character(s)* (presented on the picture), *theme* (of the profile picture), *place*, *subtitle* (whether there are any or none, metaphoric or simple ones, in which language, whether there are any emoticons used) and *design* (whether they are "original" or "edited"). A comparison was also made between younger and older users (under the age of 20 and older than 20), with regard to the major differences between different age-groups: the younger users' "behavior" was very dissimilar to that of all the other users.

Keywords: social networking site, content analysis, virtual identity, profile analysis, cyborg-behavior

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1. Introduction

The online world creates an opportunity for connection through a new kind of behavior, labeled as "cyborg". By even ensuring the anonymity, the cyborg-behavior appears as an opportunity of liberation in common social knowledge, and in the virtual sphere the simulation of life situations is possible (which may not be in the non-virtual environment) (Papacharissi, "The Virtual Geographies" 200). The first such discussions about virtual behavior were focusing on the structural characteristics of the effects of online space on self-representation and self-expression—since the self-presentation is not the same in virtual world as in face-to-face interactions (Papacharissi, "The Presentation of Self" 645-46). Recently, accent has been transposed on the structural and design elements of online social network sites, on the social capital production of the virtual connections as well as on the effective communication (Papacharissi, "The Virtual Geographies" 200). However, there are studies that analyze one or more community sites, or how these sites (such as the Facebook, the AsmallWorld etc.) influence the definition of patterns of community and individual identity (see Papacharissi, "The Virtual Geographies" 201).

The concepts of identity and community have been in the focus of the new media research for a long time. According to the specialist literature, first of all the social networking sites are built on a niché of audience, although the attractiveness of these sites reaches a lot wider target group (Papacharissi, "The Virtual Geographies" 200). The literature defines the social networking site as a service that allows individuals (1) to build a public or a semi-public profile page within a given system, (2) to see other users' profiles with whom they are connected, and (3) to see and review their network or the network of any person belonging to the "system" (Boyd-Ellison 212). The regulations of these sites depend on the features of the community site. Such social network sites have appeared by the dozen during the past decade and the phenomenon continues. The first sites appeared in the second half of the 1990s, and the real dumping was sometime between 2003-2006.

In Romania the most popular ones are the hi5 and recently the Facebook. For the Hungarian community in Romania the most important social network site is the iWiW (International Who is Who). We could ask whether the scientific interest is justified. And the answer is yes, because it is a current social phenomenon, broad masses of people are involved; it raises the question whether a whole new, previously unknown communication platform affects the identity and personal image construction; it presents the changed markings in the community patterns of a rapidly and continuously changing world; it is a challenge to draw a picture about the people who use this kind of social network sites, how and what they tell about themselves, with how many people they are in "virtual" connection, what they

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show and what they would like to show with the pictures they present about themselves.

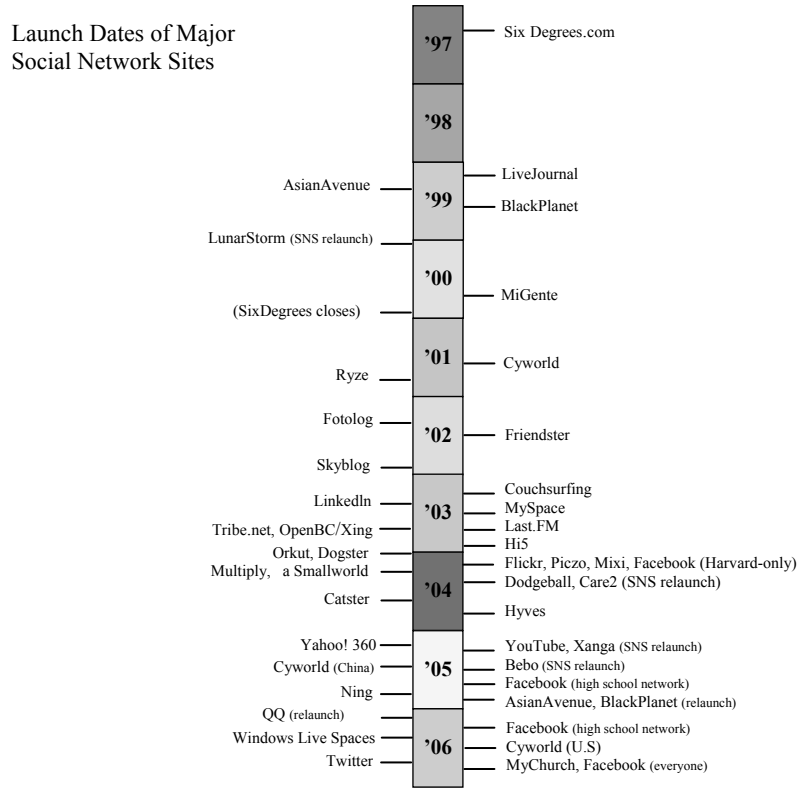


Figure 1. The appearance of Major Social Network Sites. (Boyd-Ellison 215)

1.1. Contextualizing the topic

Our world is enmeshed by the Internet and the social sites. If you are not in, you do not exist, so you had better register—this is one of the main everyday theories. Similarly to the physical spaces, the virtual spaces also have their architecture. Particular forms of interaction are suggested and enabled at the same time by the architecture of virtual spaces. This new kind of "architecture" has been connected to a new kind of behavior too, named "cyborg". This cyborg-behavior has two main very positive and brand new peculiarities: (1) it can be related to anonymity, which can have a liberating impression; (2) it can have a strong "real life" character, even if everything happens in a virtual world (Papacharissi, "The Virtual Geographies" 200). The earlier works in this topic were adapted to the

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question if the self-presentation and expression are influenced by the structural features of online spaces; recently the structural and design elements of online social networks are in the limelight.

The virtual has no boundaries, even in an Eastern European small semi-rural town the presence in one ore more social networking sites on the Internet is very important. And, of course, the young people are the most interested and the most concerned about this presence (Livingstone 396). For the Hungarian community in Romania the most important social networking site is the iWiW. The hi5 and the Facebook enjoy huge popularity and this has been growing very quickly in the past few years among the population of Romania. But for the Hungarian minority, the iWiW was the very first and the most important: first of all, because it is in Hungarian, and secondly, there are a lot of possibilities to find common faces: renewal of acquaintance, finding old friends, families who have emigrated and so on. Of course, during the past years even this has changed, but for the Hungarian population the iWiW is still very important. Miercurea Ciuc is a small town (around 45,000 inhabitants, 85% Hungarian people) and in January 2009 there were about 11,000 iWiW-users from this town. In this paper I will examine one social network and I will present how the "cyborg-behavior" of youngsters is different even from the little bit older people, what the main characteristics of identity construction are, and in what way it differs from the other—older—users.

2. Methodology

The sociological research took place in January and February 2009. 1327 iWiW-accounts were chosen by *sampling*, and in this way a database was created with all the visible data from each account. Then, by using this database, we can draw a picture about this town's iWiW-users: along what kind of socio/demographic parameters this town's iWiW-population can be described, who these people are, what they present about themselves, how many connections they have, how much information they share, what they say about themselves and in what way. Besides the database, *content analysis* was also applied. There are two main categories: (1) the photographs they share and (2) the given answers to open questions of the profile page. All the profile pictures were analyzed along four aspects: character or characters (who or what is/are presented on the picture), place, subtitle (whether there are any or none, metaphoric or simple ones, in what language, whether any emoticons are used) and design (whether the pictures are "original" or "edited"). The iWiW account contains several places where every user can write whatever s/he wants. There are such categories: "About myself," "When I work, I do this," "When I don't work, I do this". These phrases are analyzed as well: (a) length (whether there are short—one or a few words—or long phrases), (b) language (Hungarian or other), (c) spelling (correct, incorrect, the use

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of emoticons), (d) originality (own words or quotations), (e) style (sober or funny, likely or unlikely valid).

3. Major findings

The profile page contains a data sheet, on which there are—commonly—available (I.) personal data, (II.) contact information, (III.) club-information and (IV) information regarding school and/or work. Besides these, there are two other categories of data, I would call them closed questions and open questions: there is a category of data, where the person does not have to write anything, only to choose the answer which applies to him/her and there is another category of questions, where they have to write something about themselves. The data analysis is based on these pieces of information, collected from the 1347 users' profile pages. In the major part of the paper the common iWiW users' profiles will be presented—in three main chapters—and the results of the content analysis will be presented as well.

3.1. Users' profile

Based on the data introduced in the database, we can draw a picture about the iWiW users of this town. A selection was carried out; only the most important and more relevant observations are presented. The results show that every second present user entered the iWiW in 2008 (51.8%), and only 9.1% of the users registered before 2007. Two-thirds of the users are female, and most of them (71.3%) were invited to the iWiW by another female user. As concerns the male users, most of them (60.6%) received an invitation from a female person, who was already an iWiW user. Regarding the marital status of the users, surprisingly the majority of the users is married (33.0%) or is in a relationship (16.5%) and only one person out of ten is single. There is a very small group that makes this information available only for his/her contacts, but—as we can see—this is not typical at all. But—at the same time—there is an important number of people (35.4%), who do not write anything in this line.

Regarding the age of users, we can conclude that this social network site "is conquered" by young adults: more than a half of the users is older than 18 and younger than 34 and the "most popular" age category is the 19–24: more than 20% of the town's users belongs to this age category. In this category there is also a large number of users who do not reveal their age on their profile page (24.5%).

Almost everyone (83.4%) has at least one picture attached to his/her profile page, in average the common users uploaded around 5 photos to their profile pages (which means 5,392), but there are users who show a lot more (the maximum value is 80). Regarding the number of contacts: common users have around two hundred

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contacts (which means 222,56), but there are people who have much more: here the highest number was 1953.

Based on the data available on the profile page of the users, we can draw up the profile of the "typical" iWiW user. The typical iWiW user from Miercurea Ciuc is female, in her early 30's, she is married, has about 5 photos uploaded, joined the iWiW in 2008, the invitation was sent by another woman and has connections with approx. 220 other iWiW users. She is Hungarian, but she speaks Romanian and often English as well, has secondary education and her photos present her family and children.

3.2. Personal data

As we have mentioned above, the data sheet contains some open questions, where everyone can write whatever s/he wants. There are three categories and we can find sentences like: 1. "About myself" [in Hungarian: "Magamról"]—only 24% of the users completed this line. 2. "This is what I do when I work"—49% completed this one. 3. "This is what I do when I don't work"—46% wrote something here. Since this is only a subtopic of this analysis, we will discuss only the major issues.

The given answers or written answers were analyzed according to *length* (whether there are short—one or a few words—or long phrases), *language* (Hungarian or other), *spelling* (correct, incorrect, use of emotions), *originality* (own words or quotations) and *style* (sober or funny, likely or unlikely valid).

3.2.1. About myself

We can usually find very short phrases (fewer than 5 words), but the opposite extreme as well: with one person nothing, with the other one a long text or several texts. In the majority of the cases the words and sentences are written in Hungarian and only in a very few cases in English (2%, e.g., *Holiday, Sunrise, New look, Train, Nice*). In the "about myself" head we can meet the English language use as well, but only in a very few cases (2% in the case of the *"About myself"* and 3% in the case of "*I do this when I work*"). We can also observe a very interesting phenomenon, namely words taken from English and "adapted" to Hungarian, which means that they are written with Hungarian spelling, but English words are used: *e.g.*, "*Nájsz*" [=nice], "*Jessz of kórsz*" [Yes of course], "*mejd báj me*" [made by me]. This is a peculiarity which can be observed in all the cases of content analysis of a written text, so in the case of the photo subtitle as well. Another trait of the language is the use of the "Szekler" language that has recently became popular. We could name some regionalisms, characteristic of the rural oral

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language, which have become very popular and are used among young people who live in urban areas.[1]

These few words or phrases are usually grammatically correct, or more or less correct, but they are incorrect regarding the use of Hungarian accents: only 1 out of 7 of users uses the Hungarian accents (instead of á, é, í, ó, ö, ő, ú, ü, ű only a, e, i, o and u). Here the fact has to be mentioned that there is a statistical correlation between the age and the correct spelling: the very young population cares less about this: they use a *cyborg language*, with no accents and a lot of abbreviations,[2] they use only the first letter of very frequently used words (e.g., only *h* instead of *hogy*), using "conventional" words (e.g., *vok* instead of *vagyok*). One explanation can be that this generation has written a lot of text messages on their telephones where the number of characters is limited and they are the first chat-generation, they have already spent a lot of time on the messenger, so they are more familiar with this language than with the literary accepted one. They do not pay attention to the accent, to switching the keyboard to Hungarian keys.

Regarding originality, it can be stated that the majority writes something short and formulated by himself/herself. But at the same time a lot of people use quotations by Hungarian and non-Hungarian writers, popular people, most often by Coelho, Márai, Esterházy, Kennedy and Márquez. And usually even clichés: e.g., "*Time goes by*". Most of the teenager users put a link here. And this link very often transfers one to another social network site, mainly to hi5 and by clicking here the person's profile pictures from that site will be visible.

As for the style, in many cases the sentences about themselves are very funny or would like to sound like that, they play upon words for the sake of making fun. The sober style can be found as well, but more often it is neither sober nor funny, just a common style. Only in a very few cases these lines have a double meaning and use both meanings or use a metaphor. "*Jó munkásember*" [good hard worker: a quite normal person, but at the same time we know that the person says that s/he works a lot]. Another thing regarding the style: there are users, usually older people, who write in a very formal way, presenting often a quasi curriculum vitae: *I was born in, I finished school at, I have been working since....* and so on. The majority of the users, usually the youngsters, are very informal; sometimes even rude (e.g., "*It's not your business*").

3.2.2. I do this

This subchapter presents some results of the content analysis, that is, some interesting things which were not mentioned in the previous subchapter. The open

[1] A few examples: "*esment"*—literary: *ismét*, *"ejsze mi van?"*—literary: *mi a helyzet?*

[2] This is also valid in the case of photo subtitles and other open questions.

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question is: *I do this when I work* and *I do this when I do not work*. First of all I would like to present the reason or hypothetic explanation for the question why people answer these two questions of the data sheet and say nothing about themselves. One of the reasons could be the easier expressiveness: they can express themselves more objectively, because it is something about an activity, so half of the users have written a few words here. Another reason might be the mechanical registration. The Web forces us to become practical and quick. The people have to log in on so many web pages and very often it is specified which data are required and which are optional. So even among the iWiW users there are people who want to finish quickly, filling in only the "required" information. From their point of view, providing information about themselves, finding the right words to express themselves could be optional.

We comment these two questions together, because the majority of the users proceed in the same way: they make a connection between the two answers. For example: a.) *I make people drink coffee* b) *I drink coffee*. [in original: "*kávéztatok, kávézom*"—A coffee sales manager, who sells coffee.] Here we can find humor more often (*"I count money"*—we guess, maybe s/he works in a bank) and metaphoric language use: even in the above mentioned example: "*kávézom*" — which means 'I drink coffee', but also 'I am involved with something connected to the coffee'. Another example: "*Tamagocsizok*" 'playing with tamagotchi' and playing with her own daughter, whose name is Tamara, and using this nickname.

3.3. Profile pictures

Eight people out of ten have a picture uploaded on their iWiW profile. Since more than one picture can be uploaded, during the research the decision was that in the content analysis only the profile picture will be included: we could say that it is the most important picture, because this is the "logo" of the person, this appears every time when one looks at the profile page. So only one photo is analyzed, and this analysis is made along five aspects: *character(s*) (presented on the picture), *place* (the ambience, the milieu of the photo), *theme* (the main topics represented by the pictures), *subtitle* (whether there are any or none, metaphoric or simple ones, language, the use of emoticons) and *design* (whether the pictures are "original" or "edited").

3.3.1. Character

We can conclude: the main character of the profile picture is the person itself—only one person out of thirty does not appear on his/her profile picture, and in the majority of cases (68.1%) the page owner appears alone.

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Table 1: The character of the profile picture

	Percentage
The person alone	68.1
The person with his/her child, children	8
The person with his/her partner/husband-wife	7.6
The person with his/her family	5.5
The person with a family member	1.2
The person with a very important person, friend	1.8
The person with an animal (dog)	0.9
The person with friends	2.1
The person in crowd	0.6
The person with an object (car, house, mouse, PC)	0.9
The person does not appear on the picture	3.3
Total	***100.00%***

Very often the other character(s) on the picture are the child or the children of the profile owner (8.0%), the second most popular character in a secondary role is the partner (7.6%). Every 21st user shows a classical family picture: there appears the whole family and usually on an important occasion (e.g., graduation, wedding, religious ceremony etc.).

A few common symbols can be identified, which appear on the picture: traditional costumes (family and/or religious ceremonial), gown (graduation) and elegant costumes (festivities).

The plot of the pictures is usually a very simple one or it can be figured out easily. Very often it is obvious that the character is posing and in many other cases there are no identifiable actions: the character is doing nothing. But the symbols of "being all right" are visible in most of the cases: the people are smiling, having fun, being happy.

3.3.2. Place

Mostly, the environment of the picture is provided by the atmosphere of the home: the character(s) appear(s) in a room (33%), very often on a sofa, in the living room. The family around a Christmas tree (7%). Another group's profile picture shows an exotic place, exotic for the region of Miercurea Ciuc (seaside, very hot summer etc.). The nature appears in the third group, too: but most of the time the nature appears in spring or summer, only in a very few cases in winter. This is paradoxical, as weather in Miercurea Ciuc is very cold from September until April, with fog and only for a very few weeks it is warm and sunny. But this third category of places is very "home-type," it presents very beautiful, shiny places of this region.

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3.3.3. Themes

The main themes of the photos can be grouped into three categories: 1. the message of the photo deals with the question of the family, which I labeled: "Family comes first"; 2. another group, significant in number has chosen a photo as profile picture on which the person appears next to his/her partner, so it can be labeled: "You're my mate" and 3. this category clusters the photos where everything is about and only about the person, labeled: "I, me, myself". To have an idea what these themes and pictures are about, let us see some models from each category and these pictures will also demonstrate some earlier observations.

Subtitle: *"With my husband and with my grandchild: Tamara"*
[User's data: female, No. of photo: 1; no. of contacts: 68.]



Picture 1: Profile picture / Themes / Family comes first

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Subtitle: "*Tunisia 627*"
Male, married, age: 31, 1 photo, no. of contacts: 365



Picture 2: Profile picture / Themes / You're my mate 2.

Subtitle: "*Playing music*"
Male, divorced, 4 photos, no. of contacts: 229



Picture 3: Profile picture / Themes / I, me, myself

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3.3.4. Subtitle

As we can see, in many cases there are no subtitles (38%). When there are subtitles, usually they are simple ones. Only in very few cases (4%) they are metaphoric or suggest a secondary meaning. They are written mainly in Hungarian, similar to open questions and also without using the Hungarian accents. Mostly they do not contain emoticons, smiles (only in 8% of the cases). The most frequently used emoticon is, of course, the smile (in 60%, and the :P, :D, ;)). In the majority of the cases (65%) the subtitle refers to the character: *Me with...*, *When I am happy*, *Me in the mountains*, *This is me*, *Me*. In the case of every fifth person's (20%) profile, in the subtitle of pictures there appears the word "I" ("me") ("*én,*" "*én és . . .,*" "*én lennék,*" "*ez is én volnék*"), other 10% writes the first name—usually the person's name ("Andrea," "andika," "Zsu," "Boldizsár," "*I am Jocó*"), or another very close, very important person's name ("*Me and my daughter, Emo,*" "*Me and Réka* [friend]," "*Gizikém*"). Only 1% of the subtitles contain something in plural ("*We,*" "*The two of us*")*.*

Every second person mentions his/her *child, children* ("*My son,*" "*With my daughter,*" "*Our children*"), or the word *family (*"*My family,*" "*The family,*" "*With my family,*" "*Among family*"*)* on their profile picture subtitles. 10% refers to a place (a town, a city, a geographic place): almost half refers to exotic, popular tourist places (e.g., Paris, Pisa, Egypt, Tunisia, Croatia, Venice), the other half refers to a place in Hungary or to a Romanian tourist resort (e.g., Sovata, Tusnad, Sighisoara, Delta). 20% refers to an action or an event (e.g., job or free time, festivities).

3.3.5. Design

In a professional sense, most of the photos are not very well designed: they are often taken by the person him/herself, so we could not say that there is a very deliberate picture editing. But most pictures are not edited technically (using photoshop is not typical at all). We could say that only every tenth photo is "edited". In the majority of the cases the uploaded photos are not very good (the other, not profile pictures are often much better).

4. Conclusions

Analyzing the profile pages of these 1347 users, which is a representative sample, we can draw conclusions by making some statements regarding the typical iWiW user and by drawing a typology. The analysis was carried out according to two variables: the scale of information sharing (how much information they share, write about themselves) and the consciousness of the profile management (the awareness of what and how they communicate about themselves, the rate of filling

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in the data sheet, how they upload the pictures, whether there are subtitles below the pictures, whether the subtitles have a metaphoric meaning etc.). Considering all these, 4 types of users can be identified, which are of course ideal types: the *hard core* user, the *cautious* user, the *good soldier* and the *lunk*.

		CONSCIOUS PROFILE-MANAGEMENT	
		Characteristic	Uncharacteristic
THE SCALE OF INFO-SHARING	Characteristic	"**Hard-core**"	**"Lunk"**
	Uncharacteristic	"**Cautious**"	**"Soldier"**

The conclusion can be that the "awareness" of profile-building is much lower than it was assumed at the beginning of the research: 25% of the users do not pay attention at all to their profile page; usually they have not made any changes to their user profile since they entered the iWiW. Usually they have no photos or only one or two photos. They have not completed the data sheet in more than 50%. The one who signed up to the iWiW because everybody else did can be labeled as the *good soldier*; s/he did not want to miss a thing, but s/he was not willing to waste too much energy and time. This can be found with all age groups. There is the *lunk,* who shares more information about himself/herself, but s/he is not too familiar with the IT world or does not consider it very important. S/he is older than 35, his/her photos are often not turned in the right position; they do not have a subtitle. S/he completes the data sheet, but only the closed questions. The third category is the *cautious* user, who is not old, but not too young either. This person provides a relatively large amount of information about him/her, but these data can be mainly seen by friends, his/her contacts. His/her photos are subtitled. The last group contains the *hard-core* iWiW-user. S/he has very many photos which are definitely subtitled. These titles have a secondary meaning, so s/he uses metaphors and labels. This person does not write anything randomly about himself/herself and often shares personal information with anyone. Members of this group visit their iWiW profile on a daily basis and make changes on their profile page very often. Actually, the latent hypothesis can be fully confirmed only for this group and less in the case of the cautious user.

Nevertheless, we can conclude that writing without Hungarian accent is completely taken for granted for the iWiW-users. The grammatically incorrect writing is not a deviant thing at all. By analyzing iWiW-users we can affirm that users—and not only the users of this social network site—can be labeled as the citizens of a "*click-society*": the majority of people avoid text-writing, they rather complete parts where only a click is needed, but leave the places blank where something "written," formulated is needed (*about myself*, *when I do this ... is to supply pictures* etc.—the majority of the users do not complete these lines, do not make any supplementary effort). At the same time, the use of clichés is very

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frequent: "*When I work: I work,*" "*I would prefer you to ask others,*" "*I have no time for this, maybe another time*" etc.

The findings also reveal the fact that there are huge differences between different age groups and mainly the young users (under 20) are more concerned with their accounts: they have much more photos, their photos are well-edited and they pay attention to what they show about themselves. We can realize what is important for them, and what is not: for instance, correct spelling is not an issue for the young people: they do not use the Hungarian accentuated letters, they use shortened words and a lot of common acronyms and emoticons. They write only a few words, but show much more by pictures, so we can say that they are more visual than the older users. For the young people the iWiW is not the most important online social network, the hi5 is much more important, and there they could be more active (e.g., they can write comments to each other, they can monitor who has taken a look at their accounts etc.).

We can conclude that iWiW is a façade—in the positive sense of the word. The person presented is an image, which varies from person to person, regarding the construction of consciousness. There are a lot of users who care more, who are "working on it," but even more who do not care about their iWiW profile managing. We could say that the image presented about the person itself is idealistic: smile, happiness, summer, children, best time, best friends, best look, best party and best memories. Is there a virtual identity? Yes, we could state that there is a virtual identity that can be grabbed behind the user habit. A virtual behavior, which also has an everyday character: real people, real happenings and real photos. It contains "imported" components from his/her non-virtual identity: the virtual behavior presents—whether consciously or not—his/her most important things and values. Such values are family, traditional values, religious festivities and friends. At the same time, it presents a desired character: the aspired image of life—shine, sunny photos in a very cold, half-year-winter town. Yes, we can say that a new kind of identity can be observed: a new practice of self-presentation by using IT, *sending* a complex message about myself for others, friends or strangers. This message can be "created," "recreated" or "changed," "modulated". It is in a very strong correlation with *real* identity, it is not something totally different, but it has a strong "cyborg" character: almost everything is possible. We can say that it is more optimistic and more adaptable: it can present even the identity which we would really like to acquire.

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