Psychological and communicative correlates of online disinhibition

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Summary

This work offers a definition of the online disinhibition and its psychological and communicative correlates and it describes its different manifestations and theirs implications for a deeper understanding of a phenomenon that involves all the cybernauts to varying degrees. It also wants to be a reflection on the psychological implications of the phenomenon and the constructive and destructive possibilities that it brings with it. The first part of the paper explains briefly what the online disinhibition effect is. The second part of the paper addresses the potential that cyberspace has to encourage the free expression of oneself and in particular all those aspects of the self that are usually repressed or expressed with difficulty and limitations; we will talk about the difference between true self and actual self. The third and final part of the paper gives a brief overview of the immense possibilities of the online disinhibition effect to manifest, by focusing on the main possibilities and the implications that they bring with them and by following the footsteps of the fundamental distinction between positive and negative online disinhibition. The bibliography cited and consulted is also provided and critical observations and brief considerations are made on all these works.

Introduction

The topic of this paper is online disinhibition and its psychological and communicative correlates. It offers a definition of the phenomenon that refers to the work of Suler (2002) and describes its different manifestations and theirs implications. The purpose of the work is a preliminary to a deeper understanding of a phenomenon so current and so vast that it involves all the cybernauts to varying degrees. This paper also wants to be a reflection on the psychological implications of the phenomenon and the constructive and destructive possibilities that it brings with it.

The first part of the paper explains briefly what the online disinhibition effect is, referring to Suler (2004). He was the first to give a definition and reviewed all of the characteristics of the cyberspace that influence user behavior by encouraging them to loosen its inhibitory brakes, while being protected by factors such as anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, or as a direct consequence of a solipsist introjection, a dissociative imagination, or the minimization of the authority that reigns on the web.

The second part of the paper addresses the potential that cyberspace has to encourage the free expression of oneself and in particular all those aspects of the self that are usually repressed or expressed with difficulty and limitations. Bargh et al. (2002) are cited and they refer to these aspects of the self with the term "true self". The authors conducted a study in which they highlight how much greater the accessibility of the "true self" is after a virtual interaction rather than after a face-to-face interaction. In addition, other authors who have been involved in the connection between expression of the "true self" and personality traits are mentioned. They advance the hypothesis that the cyberspace is not universally used to express the "true self", but that this way of expression is typical only of some subjects, especially those who feel dissatisfied with their social identity. A positive correlation between expression of

the true self on the web and introversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism is demonstrated in favor of these hypotheses in this paper.

The third and final part of the paper gives a brief overview of the immense possibilities of the online disinhibition effect to manifest, by focusing on the main possibilities and the implications that they bring with them and by following the footsteps of the fundamental distinction made by Suler (2004) between positive and negative online disinhibition.

Contextual factors that facilitate the event of the online disinhibition effect

The concept of online disinhibition effect was coined by John Suler (2004), professor of psychology at Rider University, in Lawrenceville, to refer to the loss of social restrictions and the inhibition that characterizes interactive exchanges in the virtual world and that normally is present in face-to-face interactions. In his article, "The Online Disinhibition Effect", Suler (2004) describes the following six factors that facilitate the manifestation of the phenomenon: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority. In some individuals, only one or two of these factors are responsible for the disinhibition, but in most cases they interact with each other to produce a wider and more complex effect.

Dissociative anonymity

On the Internet, you do not know who the others really are. You can only know what they decide to tell about themselves. Everyone can present only the aspects of his personality that they desire, for example the most pleasant ones, while concealing the others. They can even present themselves for someone they are not. In this way, Internet gives people the opportunity to separate their actions from their real identity, feeling thus less vulnerable and more willing to open up, but also less responsible for their actions. Therefore people can express themselves in a way that normally they would not adopt in a real interaction.

Anonymity is the main online disinhibition factor because it generates in the person a sense of omnipotence given by the possibility of absolute control of one's own identity and of the aspects to be revealed, concealed, or modified. Anonymity also generates a sense of impunity in the people since they can hardly be identified for their actions and this increases the manifestation of negative disinhibition by promoting offensive, violent, immoral, and illegal behaviors.

Invisibility

Cyberspace allows individuals to decide whether to make themselves visible, through the use of photos, videoss or webcams, or invisible, preventing any stereotype and prejudice of ethnic and sexual nature or related to the body. Invisibility facilitates disinhibition for two reasons:

1) because when you write something, you do not have to worry about your appearances,

2) because you do not have to worry about the reaction of others. The lack of visual contact, in fact, allows you not to be conditioned by the sensory feedbacks of your interlocutor, thus making you feel free to appear as you want, away from a world that gives too much importance to the outward appearance.

The study conducted by Castellá et al. (cited in Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012) on the impact of invisibility on the effect of online disinhibition is significant. The authors compared the level of "flaming" that emerged in different discussion groups that used different methods of communication. They have demonstrated that the level of flaming that emerges from a textual telematic communication is greater than from a face-to-face interaction and a telematic conversation via webcam.

Asynchronicity

When communicating online, individuals do not necessarily interact simultaneously. When they do not communicate with each other in real time, a message will require time to reach the other and to receive an answer. The lack of an immediate feedback from the interlocutor can have a disinhibitory effect. Virtual communication is therefore often referred to as "hit and run". In the cyberspace, in fact, you can make content, get rid of it, and then move away, relying on the fact that the person will receive it later and you will not have an immediate response. This way of acting is typical of the so-called "Internet trolls", who sow discord by leaving provocative, offensive, irritating, or simply nonsensical messages with a deliberately provocative intent.

Solipsistic Introjection

In the cyberspace every boundary is blurred, and this can destabilize the self and confuse the distinction between self and other from oneself. In fact, it

may happen that individuals feel so close to their interlocutors that they can perceive them as their own inner voice. The psyche of the self and the interlocutor overlap, and the latter becomes a character of one's own inner world, generating an altered state of consciousness comparable to a dream experience. Solipsist introjection is influenced by the characteristics of the interlocutor and by the needs, the desires, and the expectations that are projected on the other during the interaction. This can entail risks for the psychophysical health of the individual.

Dissociative imagination

Individuals can come to believe that the imaginary world they created, to which they are a part of it, exists in a parallel dimension. This is easily seen in gaming contexts and especially in role-playing games in which characters are created with whom one can identify, with the belief that they continue to live in real life. This is the case of the so-called MUDs, or Multi-User Dungeons, textual role-playing games in which users interact through keyboard commands, but also every fantasy videogame that involves the interaction of different virtual users on the same platform.

Every user can build his or her self-image that he or she prefers, similar, or completely different from the real-life self. The possibilities of creating one's virtual self are almost infinite and range from the incarnation in common individuals, to animals or fantastic creatures with all kinds of potential or magical power.

SANTORO (1998: 31) argues that: "*there are more than a few problems posed by such an engaging and innovative experience. Just think about the decrease of psychological defenses that from the virtual world can be brought into real life, or the imbalances that occur when some favorable situations created in MUDs - usually sentimental - are not replicated in reality. Thus, if on one hand the virtuality contributes to broaden the awareness of the self, giving shape to the multiple instances present in the individual, on the other hand it can lead to a sometimes dramatic overlap between fiction and reality. Only by keeping apart the events experienced inside and outside the screen, it is then possible to grasp the extraordinary advantages of this experience, which can help us understand the polymorphic complexity of our psychic life and redefine our presence in the real world*".

Minimization of authority

The Internet represents a democratic context in which everyone has the same right to speak and this allows individuals to express themselves more freely. This facilitates the removal of elements that indicate the authority of a person, usually provided by feedback in terms of body language and clothing, and wipes out the fear of sanctions. On the web, communication skills, perseverance, quality of content and of ideas, and technical knowledge have an influence on others.

ONLINE DISINHIBITION AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE "TRUE SELF" IN THE VIRTUAL INTERACTIONS

According to Sherry Turkle (cited in BARGH ET AL., 2002), the Internet represents a sort of laboratory in which the individuals can explore and experiment different versions of themselves. Especially the aspects of the self that are not expressed frequently or easily, without the fear to incur in disapproval or social sanctions.

According to BARGH ET AL. (2002), these aspects of the self that struggle to be expressed constitute the so-called "true self", distinct from the "actual self" that consists of all those aspects of the own self normally expressed in social interactions. They suggest that the Internet, as a means of communication, facilitates the expression of the "true self" for two main reasons: the possibility of anonymity that encourages free expression of the self and the lack of social costs, normally present in face-to-face interactions when negative aspects of one's self are expressed. They also theorize that we are led to express our "true self" online because we feel the need for these aspects of one's self to be validated and recognized as its own in the social sphere.

For a better understanding of this phenomenon, it may be useful to report an experiment conducted by BARGH ET AL. (2002) with the purpose to demonstrate how the "true self" of an individual is more reachable during online interactions rather than during face-to-face interactions.

Forty-six New York University students (18 men and 28 women) were recruited. Each one of them was first interviewed alone by an experimenter who asked them to write up a list of traits and features (no more than 10) that they believed to possess and express in a social context (measure of the actual self) and a list of traits and characteristics that they believed to possess but were not recurring or capable of expressing (measure of the "true self").

The second phase of the experiment asked to all the participants to interact in pairs, face-to-face or in a chat room for 5 or 10 minutes. The research needed two temporal variables to understand if the

amount of time spent by talking with the interlocutor and the amount of information assimilated had any effect on the openness to the other and on the expression of the "true self". The couples of participants were left alone to interact with each other, and in the meantime, the experimenter inserted the traits of the list drawn up by the students in the test of the third phase. During this last phase of the experiment, the participants answered individually to a self-describing test that evaluated the speed of reaction to the proposed stimuli. A list of words appeared on a computer screen for a few seconds, and the participants had to press one of two buttons as soon as possible, one for "yes", if the word described them, and one for "no", if the word did not describe them.

The research produced the following results: no significant differences were found between the responses given by participants who had interacted with a partner of the same sex and between those who had interacted with a partner of the opposite sex, therefore the gender is irrelevant; the participants responded more quickly about the traits of the "actual self" rather than of the "true self", either after interacting face-to-face or via chat; the participants responded more quickly about the traits of the "actual self" after interacting face-to-face rather than after a virtual interaction; participants responded more quickly about the "true self" traits after interacting in chat rather than face-to-face; the length of the interaction did not produce significant differences.

In conclusion it can be said that the accessibility in memory of traits attributable to the "true self" of the individual is greater after an interaction with a virtual interlocutor. Therefore, it is not influenced by quantitative variables, but by the quality of the interaction.

Among the factors that influence the online behavior of the individual, individual differences, and especially personality traits and styles, play an important role. Suler (2004) argues that a histrionic personality tends to be very open and emotional, while a compulsive personality tends to be more reserved. Several studies have compared the use of the Internet with the personality traits proposed by Eysenck & Eysenck (1991), and it has emerged that the expression of the "true self" in the cyberspace seems to be negatively correlated with extroversion and positively correlated with neuroticism. According to some studies, it is also positively correlated to introversion (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002), while according to other studies it is positively correlated also with psychoticism (Tosun & Lajunen, 2009).

Tosun & Jajunen (2009) also theorized a relationship between the personality traits proposed by Eysenck & Eysenck (1991) and the purpose of virtual interactions. They have shown that psychoticism is associated with the use of the Internet as a substitute for face-to-face interactions due to the difficulties a psychotic individual has in building satisfying interpersonal relationships in the real life. On the contrary, extroversion is associated with the use of the Internet as an adjuvant to face-to-face interactions. The authors proposed four social motivations to explain the use of cyberspace: "to establish new relationships" and "to have friends on the Internet" are significantly related to psychoticism, while "to maintain relationships at a distance" and "to support face-to-face daily relationships" are significantly related to extroversion.

Amiel & Sargent (2004) agree with Tosun & Jajunen (2009), and they have also showed that extroverts refuse to use the web as a substitute for daily human contact. Extroverts prefer to use the web for more instrumental purposes, as giving voice to one's opinion, doing research, sharing and downloading music, rather than to use the Internet as a means of communication. Neurotic individuals use the web to escape loneliness, to belong to a group, to learn about alternative news, and potential threats. Psychotic individuals use the web for more deviant and provocative purposes, as visiting pornographic websites, using file sharing services for copyrighted material illegally distributed, looking for information on threats that may be perpetrated on them, but not on others, and to see what is happening in the world, as well as being completely disinterested about everything that concerns fun and entertainment.

It is therefore assumed that those who are more satisfied with their social life prefer to use the Internet for more instrumental purposes (for example searching for information) and to express their "true self" in everyday interactions. On the contrary, those who are dissatisfied with their social life prefer to use the web to build relationships and express those aspects of one's "true self" normally denied outside the virtual context.

Two sides of the same coin, positive and negative online disinhibition

After having outlined the factors that induce a loss of inhibitions, we will now define the various possible expressions of the online disinhibition effect.

The Internet is a powerful means of communication and information that, by nullifying space and time, allows to express oneself freely. There are two directions in which online disinhibition can manifest: positive and negative.

The positive or negative direction of the disinhibitory processes can depend on individual variables such as personality traits and potential clinical disorders and on contextual variables such as the type of virtual environment frequented and the presence or absence of other deviant cybernauts.

Positive or benign disinhibition (SULER, 2004) entails pro-social attitudes of kindness, generosity, support, sharing, emotional support, openness to the other, ease of communication, and sharing of very personal traits such as thoughts, emotions, fears, and hidden desires. It appears by visiting websites that promote social and voluntary campaigns, listening and support groups, virtual spaces in which one can ask for help, open freely, ask or give advice.

Negative or toxic disinhibition (SULER, 2004) entails behaviors detrimental to others or to one's own self, among which there are aggressive and antisocial behaviors of various kinds, the use of foul language, gratuitous insults, threats, manifestations of anger or hatred. It appears by visiting websites with pornography or child pornography and websites that encourage violence and hatred towards oneself (for example web pages pro anorexia, pro bulimia, pro suicide) or towards the misfit.

Online disinhibition as an expression of solidarity or aggression towards the other

One of the main manifestations of the online disinhibition effect entails acts of kindness or aggression: in the first case we speak about the random act of kindness, in the second case, the phenomenon of flaming and cyberbullying. Random act of kindness (RAK) is an expression used to refer to all actions of kindness and / or generosity without any instrumental purpose aimed exclusively at the benefit of the other, without obtaining anything else but the pleasant sensation of being useful for someone or kind to someone. Several examples of RACs are the exchange of advice, the provision of free useful material, the sharing of information, explanatory tutorials, positive comments to the other, the response to requests for help, the promotion of charity, the emphatic listening of the other, etc.

Flaming, on the other hand, is the practice of sending messages or leaving deliberately hostile and provocative comments on the web. An example of flaming is the use of offenses, criticisms, threats, and blasphemies for pure enjoyment. However, there are also cases in which the flaming is not intentional, for example when disagreements or sarcastic comments become the subject of misunderstanding, triggering an exchange of

"flames" even if the original intention is not provocative. When flaming involves more than two users in a continuous exchange of provocative messages, the phenomenon takes the name of "flame war". Flaming and cyberbullying, namely the act of deliberately and continuously attacking one or more virtual users over time, are unfortunately two widespread phenomena in the web, mainly due to the characteristics that this context brings with it: the invisibility, the sense of impunity, the normalization that users operate on these phenomena, allowing them to go more and more unnoticed, and the de-identification that users who implement deviant behavior produce both on themselves and on the victims, considered less and less human or real (FEDELI, 2013).

The disinhibition can manifest not only in acts of kindness or aggression, but of true brotherhood or hate too. In fact, there are many movements of peace, charity, and voluntary service, which use the Internet as a means to spread virally their missions, recruiting more and more people to pursue good causes, such as raising funds for diseases researches, or for helping developing countries or countries that are going through critical situations. However, hatred and intolerance towards the "misfits" are rapidly growing on the web, especially on Facebook, which seems to guarantee greater impunity.

They seem to be widespread mainly among young people, called "haters", who express intolerance and violent expressions towards sex, religion, ethnic and cultural diversities. As a counterpart, more and more movements aimed at eliminating large-scale discrimination are spreading. They are movements that condemn and denounce violent conduct, and seek to close down any page inciting hatred and violence to promote peace. One of the main movements in this direction is NO HATE SPEECH (http://www.nohatespeech.it/), launched by the Council of Europe as a form of protection of human rights in response to violence, hatred, and intolerance expressed through the web.

Online disinhibition and the creation of functional or dysfunctional virtual relationships

As we have already mentioned, the disinhibition online effect can manifest with greater openness to the other and greater ease of communication and to establish relationships in a short time.

PARKS & FLOYD (cited in BARGH & MCKENNA, 2004), by giving a questionnaire related to online friendships, have shown that virtual relationships are

very similar to those developed face-to-face in terms of magnitude, depth, and quality. In another study, McKenna et al. (2002) have shown that people form on the Internet intimate and lasting relationships over time, and that intimacy with a virtual interlocutor is achieved faster than with a physical interlocutor. They have also shown that the users are able to successfully make their virtual relationships an integral part of their daily life outside of cyberspace. By interviewing a small sample of lovers couples formed on the Internet two years before, 71% of them still loved each other.

Online dating platforms are very popular today because many users feel more comfortable to approach the other in front of screen and keyboard, protected from a distance that allows them to focus more on the message they want to communicate than on the physical appearance or on the clothes. However, disinhibition can become a double-edged sword, since the user can establish positive or harmful relationships based on fiction. Alongside a large number of real relationships born on the web, however, there are many others born from the deception of those who build false identities and mantain relations in the cyberspace by refusing any face-to-face interaction. Some people deceive their interlocutors by creating false identities in the chat rooms and pretending to be someone else, often using photos taken from other profiles and writing biographical information that are completely false. These people are called catfish, hence the name of the homonymous broadcast on MTV, Catfish: The TV Show, which tells the truths and the lies of online relationships.

Online disinhibition and creation of a virtual cathartic or self-injurious setting

We have said that the web, thanks to its characteristic of ensuring, if one wants, anonymity and invisibility, allows individuals to open up much more easily and to confide parts of themselves or face problems that could never be talked about face-to-face. In this way, online disinhibition can have a cathartic and liberating effect for the individual, who can find a way to express his deepest torments and concerns.

Not only casual interlocutors can respond to these needs of the individual, but also real experts who offer their own online consultation, allowing them to find answers to questions of a medical, sexual or psychological nature that would otherwise remain unanswered. Abroad, online psychology services have existed for some time now, and in recent years they have been spreading to Italy too. The intervention of the online psychologist is done via email, chat, and video calls. While these can not replace a therapy, they make it easier for the patient to feel free to expose issues that are otherwise hard to talk about. They also allow to meet patients with disabilities or disorders that prevent them from leaving their homes.

The possibility to talk openly about oneself on the web and to have access to any kind of information without any kind of barrier does not always lead to positive forms of disinhibition. In some individuals, the trigger for disinhibition does not come from surges of life but from surges of death. This leads to the proliferation of websites that promote self-damaging behaviors. Among the best-known, there are the pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites. However, there are also pro-suicide communities in which, with lighter tones, the users arrange to meet and take their lives together or they discuss the most painless ways to take their own lives, the so-called "suicidal chatrooms" (Mason, 2010). There are even chats that promote "bugchasing" or unprotected sex with HIV-positive individuals in order to contract HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus.

Online disinhibition as an expression of one's own potential or immoral conduct

The web is often used by its users as a "stage" to express themselves, their potential, their skills, their passions or simply to show off, to look for a shred of fame. Once again, in this case we talk about forms of disinhibition that can be to the advantage or disadvantage of the user.

There are many cases in which the web has served as a stepping stone to get a wider audience and works more suited to their passions: it is the case of singers, musicians, makeup artists, application developers, and more. The other side of the medal is composed by those who instead achieve notoriety in an absolutely immoral way, if not illegal, sensationalizing violence, shooting videos in which they show sexual acts, rapes, gruesome scenes, violence, aggression of any kind or self-injurious behaviors. Unfortunately, stories about children who become famous within their own scholastic context and their social circle for having filmed acts of violence and vandalism at school or acts of physical or sexual violence against defenseless girls or boys are now a daily occurrence. If it is true that bullying has always existed, however, one wonders whether the accessibility to violent content and the ease to transmit virally a message, together with the need to be noticed, do not make the Internet a dangerous weapon, in the hands of certain individuals.

Conclusions

The work proposed here has focused on the theme of online disinhibition, a phenomenon so widespread, yet so little has been said in the literature.

Through computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones and any other mobile device, online browsing is an integral part of the daily life of a very large audience. One need only think of all the advertisements that promote offers to connect more easily and the increasingly young age to which children and adolescents approach for the first time the cyberspace. It would therefore be desirable to prepare for the proper management of virtual relationships and web uses aimed at promoting the infinite possibilities of personal growth that could benefit users, while at the same time warning them about the consequences that the improper use of the web could cause.

Appropriate learning programs should be implemented in every school, especially because young people are mainly the authors and victims of online disinhibition. However, the importance of promoting such initiatives for the benefit of the parents should not be overlooked. Finally, it would be desirable for the topic of online disinhibition and its psychological implications to be addressed in the classrooms of Italian psychology universities, to educate future psychologists about the virtual context, to the importance of the consideration of the virtual identity of the users, and for the possibility to work as online psychologists to exploit the potential of cyberspace, first of all the ease of expression, which can activate the creation of a therapeutic setting.

A problem encountered during the drafting of this paper is the lack of literature on this topic. It is hoped that the phenomenon will not only be studied in more depth and with scientific validity, but that it will be redefined conceptually and operationally, to better identify a reality with contours so far too broad and vague.

"Online disinhibition" is a sort of "umbrella term" that contains under its name a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted phenomenon that would require clarification.

Assuming that in informal language the term disinhibition usually has a negative connotation, one wonders whether it is misleading to talk about positive online disinhibition, and whether it is correct to speak of disinhibition referring to the manifestation of altruism on the web, the openness to the other, the creation of virtual relationships, or if it is simply a constructive use of the virtual context, not for this labeled as acts of disinhibition.

In conclusion, we hope for a greater clarity and openness to the dialogue on the subject of online disinhibition, especially in schools and training contexts.

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