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The self between digital and dialogic

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ABSTRACT

Background: The advent of social media has led to the birth of new identities with the consequent redefinition of the Self. Even researchers and scholars had to adapt their theories to the latest advances with a disruptive force: the emergence of the Digital Self and the new conceptions enclosed within the dialogical Self. Suddenly, they had to deal with an individual who built his identity according to virtual relationships through storytelling and the publication of images and posters.

Objective : The present work reviews the scientific literature that revolves around these topics, assuming, if subsequent research data should confirm it, that narrating oneself on the net performs the same functions as narration within novels or short stories, that of being able to resolve, through writing and self-examination "The Digital Self", previously experienced.

Method : A bibliographic search was conducted on Scopus using "construction of the self and digital self" as keywords.

Results: From the literature, it emerges that the digital self was conceived in dialogical terms, that is, as many parts that communicate with each other and are capable of responding to the ever-changing conditions to which the web subjects individuals. Basically, it is a Self capable of adapting to the multitude of relationships and connections we encounter in everyday life.

Conclusion: The concept of the dialogic Self arises and develops from the consideration that identity is no longer understood as a nucleus of relatively stable or more or less innately defined traits or aspects, but rather as a complex and multiple construct, subject and object of continuous constructions and reconstructions. Literature, however, does not address the objective we set ourselves: whether storytelling can be the answer for a fragmented self following traumatic events.

Keywords: *Digital self, dialogic self, digital identity, dialogic identity, identity and social media, virtual relationships, construction of reality*

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Introduction

The advent and spread of digital media (Logan, 2010) if, on the one hand, have brought advantages to everyone's life - primarily the easy availability of information, and the agility and speed of communications - on the other hand, they have entailed large psychological costs, reducing socio-emotional well-being and exposing personal and social identity to countless risks and disempowerment phenomena (De Canale, 2016).

It is through their diffusion that virtual identity began to be defined, as technology allows us to overcome the boundary between fantasy and reality, that is, between the virtual and the real (Marsh, 2010). In this way, individuals have the opportunity to create their own online identities, referring to their expectations and desires (Kennedy, 2006). In the aforementioned study, Jerry & Tavares-James (2012) argue that individual identity comprises a real self and a virtual self, which represent different aspects of each person's personality.

Nagy & Koles (2014) described virtual identity as a multidimensional construct comprising three structural levels: individual, micro, and macro.

The first level consists of avatars that embody the self in the virtual world. The micro-level includes:

- the narrative scripts that represent the virtual life stories of people, the ways in which one represents oneself within the network, in which the objectives, values, and beliefs of the subjects are reported (Dickey, 2011);
- virtual intimacy, which concerns the different meanings that individuals attribute to their roles and relationships. In particular, it refers to the identification of subjects in the relationships they establish and is connected to the extension of the self-concept in relation to a specific role (Sluss and Ashfort, 2007). Roles that concern social environments exert a strong influence on the creation of virtual identity (Spence, 2008).
- the virtual community, which recalls the need for belonging and identification with a group. In order to preserve the social aspects of identity, one must experience the perception of feeling part of a group within the virtual world which represents the first step to considering oneself a member of a larger online community (Riberio, 2009) and, at the same time, virtual communities provide individuals who are part of them with social feedback, promoting their sense of belonging (Taylor, 2006);
- culture since the virtual products used have a different meaning for each individual, but at the same time, their value is partly influenced by the virtual community in which people are inserted and by the characteristics of the digital world.

The macro-level also consists of:

- from the narrative scripts which, at this level, represent the individual story that is constantly evolving, created so that a sense of unity can be recognized in it (McAdams & Olson, 2010); from virtual intimacy, which implies the desire to embark on a relationship with a member of the digital world. Usually, people try to establish online relationships when they realize that real relationships are not as satisfying as they would like (Scott et al., 2006). However, individuals consider new knowledge in the digital world to be true (Gilbert et al., 2011). Users of the virtual world consider partners met on the web to be more fun than real ones (Gilbert et al., 2011);
- from the virtual community, which includes the set of groups representing individuals within the digital society. These communities can be divided into two types of online environments.

The first concerns games in which the community serves as the fantasy setting. The second refers to the social sector, where communities represent a fantastic or realistic component from the culture that corresponds to the relationship established between digital artefacts and social relations. The online world has developed its own material culture, through which people have used virtual objects for both functionality and symbolic value (Lehdonvirta, 2010).

Alongside these studies, other researchers have focused on the risks and implications that the use of these tools could entail in relation to identity construction processes; think of the phenomena of hacking, spyware, phishing, lurking, consider again the studies relating to emotional illiteracy (Goleman, 1995; Galimberti, 2007), the episodes of flame war (Kiesler and Sproull, 1992; Thompsen and Ahn, 1992), the risks of information overload (Shenk, 1997; Van Dijk, 1999), Internet Addiction Disorder (Coker, 2011; Ferrari, 2009; Cantelmi et al., 2000; Ferraro et al., 2007; Griffiths, 2000, 1998; Caretti and La Barbera, 2001; La Barbera, 2005).

There is no doubt, however, as Gallese (2026) claims, that we need to rethink the self as an embodied, relational, and technologically modulated reality. The digital self proposes a new onto-phenomenology of the subject, capable of integrating the transformations of experience introduced by interactive devices, artificial intelligence, and immersive digital environments. Starting from these considerations, this work revisits the scientific literature through a systematic review of the literature on narration and the construction of the self within digital media.

Method

The review was conducted using Rodgers' evolutionary concept analysis (Rodgers, 2000 - 2018), integrating it with the integrative review methodology, which includes both theoretical and empirical sources and qualitative and quantitative data (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005). The method was chosen because it aims to clarify the current use of a concept by identifying its attributes and is based on the assumption that the meaning and use of a concept are influenced by time, and the resulting dynamism does not aim to establish an absolute definition, but is useful for further research developments, which is the primary objective of this work:

1. Identify the name and concept of interest and associated expressions.
2. Identify and select the appropriate setting.
3. Collection of data to identify:
 - a. The attributes of the concept.
 - b. The contextual basis of the concept.
1. Data analysis.
5. If appropriate, identify an example of the concept.
6. Identify hypotheses and implications for further development of the concept.

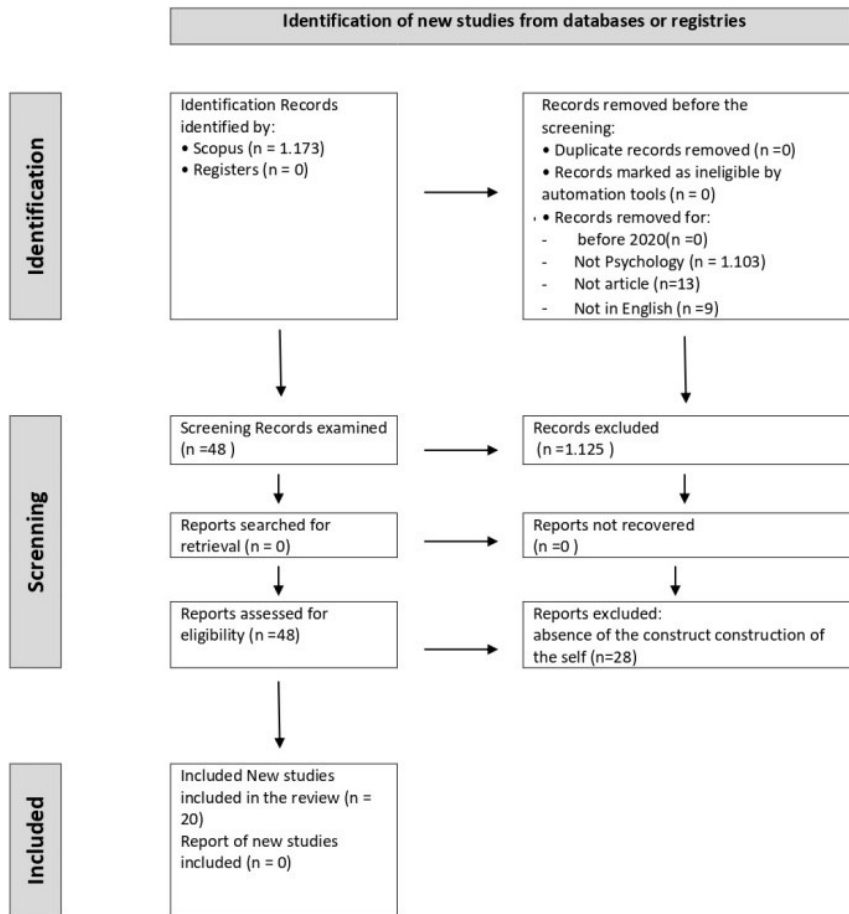
The search was conducted on Scopus using the query "Sleep Texting". 1,763 articles were found to which the following inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied, following the Prisma 2020 guidelines

(tab. 1):

1. Psychology sector
2. In English
3. period 2020 – 2026
4. Articles

In the end, 48 works were returned, to which a further exclusion criterion was applied: the presence of the construct of self-construction within digital media. After applying the above criterion, 20 articles were included in the review.

Tab. 1 PRISMA 2020 flowchart for systematic reviews



Risultati:

Le informazioni descrittive relative ai 20 articoli inclusi nell'analisi tematica sono presentate nella Tabella 2.

Table 2 Descriptive information regarding the studies included in the analysis (N=20)

| AUTHORS | YEAR | SUBJECTS INVOLVED | Context | HYPOTHESIS |
|--------------------------------------|------|---------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Li, H. et al. | 2026 | Student | China | How AI Literacy (AIL) shapes college students' Creative Personal Identity (CPI). |
| Pérez-Llantada, C. | 2025 | Children | Canada | identity construction in citizen science web texts |
| Zhao, S | 2025 | Adolescents | China | how individuals engage in self-oriented activities on social media to document, reflect, and construct the self. |
| Zhang, Q.. | 2025 | Adolescents | China | how Chinese teenagers built their digital identities on Douyin and examined the role of parents in this process |
| Safa, M. et al. | 2025 | Women | Bangladeshi | The role of Facebook activity in building social capital and developing identity among Bangladeshi women |
| Antwi, B. B. et. al. | 2025 | Adolescent and early adolescent | Ghana | how smartwatches influence users' understanding and construction of their fitness identities, social identities, and body ideals. |
| Gabarnet, A. | 2025 | Online players | USA | propose a typology of the different ways in which players interpret their virtual identities in online video games |
| van Heerden, K.. | 2025 | Gay | USA | gays' use of virtual photography to build their avatar in Final Fantasy XIV Online |
| Chen, J. et al. | 2025 | Student | China | explore the unmet psychological needs underlying mobile phone addiction among undergraduate medical students from the perspective of Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) |
| Ruggieri, R.A., Mollo, M. | 2025 | Case Report | Malaise | how digital technologies have contributed to the spread of anomic relational models characterized by emotional superficiality and the inability to form authentic bonds |
| Jung, J., & Gillet, G. | 2025 | Sistematic review | France | the subjectivizing effects of the materialization of psychic processes in video games, in particular through the "primary forms of the double", i.e. proto-representative and non-anthropomorphic forms of the double encoded within the software's source code and actualized through the player's involvement |
| Xu, Q. | 2024 | divorced spouses | USA | explore variations in speakers' evaluative meaning-making in conflict discourses |
| Pérez-Torres, V. | 2024 | Adolescents | USA | examine the available empirical evidence and discuss four general themes related to identity construction in social media |
| Yang, J., & Zhang, M. | 2023 | Sina Weibo users | China | builds a conceptual framework through the analytical tool of "platform affordance" to reveal how the mutual construction of humans and technology extends the boundaries of digital inequality beyond structural factors |
| Zestanakis, P. | 2023 | Adolescents | Greece | the online construction of masculinity and fatherhood in contemporary Greece |
| Hernández-Orellana, Marisol et al. . | 2023 | Students | Chile | describe the physical self in digital media, according to gender under its binary conceptualization of man and woman, in order to identify stereotypical gender behaviors that should be considered in the training process in students of the Chilean area of Health Sciences |
| Burnell, K., . | 2021 | Students | USA | quantitatively and qualitatively examine the transmission of appearance evaluation text messages |
| Vendemia, M. A., & DeAndrea, D. C | 2021 | Women | Italy | how the construction and distribution of selfies might interact with newer media characteristics to influence women who share selfies on social media |
| Ehrenreich, S. E | 2020 | Student | USA | investigate the frequency, content, and timing of texting with parents, peers, and romantic partners |
| Lamont, M., & Ross, A. S | 2020 | Cyclists | USA | analyze the multimodal components of cyclists' Instagram posts tagged with the popular hashtag #fromwhereiride |

Contest

The research was carried out primarily in the United States of America and China. The population concerned is mainly adolescents and students. The choice of the population is probably linked to statistical reports (Pew Research Center (2022): report on the use of smartphones and social media in the USA; ISTAT (2023): data on the use of internet and technologies in Italy) which indicate that, in developed countries, over 90% of adolescents have a mobile phone and that on average they use it for around 3 - 4 hours a day for social media, instant messaging, videos (YouTube, TikTok), games and music. Twege (2019), analyzing the IGen generation, points out that the "super-connection" to which natives were subjected from 1995 to 2012 influenced their behavior, values, mental health, and well-being. In particular, it highlights that time spent online has increased at the expense of face-to-face interactions, and that the widespread use of smartphones and social media has radically changed how young people communicate and socialize.

The attributes of the concept, as analyzed by the identified studies, are summarized in the tab. 3.

Tab. 3 attributes of concept

| | | |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Self construction: | creative identity in the digital age | Li et al., 2025 |
| | professional identity | Pérez-Llantada, 2024 |
| | intertwining past, present and future selves | Zhao, 2025 |
| | guided by psychological needs such as belonging, personal identity and social recognition | Zhang, Q, 2025 |
| | calculated as self-expression | Safa et al., 2025 |
| | for fitness identities, social identities, and body ideals. | Antwi et al., 2025 |
| | for: - escape from a basic autonomy, self-regulation, escape from the pressure of reality and negative affects; - competence, which includes the results obtained through mobile applications and the effects on social performance capabilities; - meaning in life, which includes confusion of life direction and confusion of values. | Chen et al., 2025 |
| | Self-construction to escape anomic relational models characterized by emotional superficiality and inability to form authentic bonds. | Ruggieri & Mollo, 2025 |
| | as therapeutic potential | Jung & Gillet, 2025 |
| | express interests, ideas and beliefs about oneself (identification and exploration of the role) in order to obtain, through feedback, the confirmation of the self-concept | Pérez-Torres, 2024 |
| | to weaken social inequalities | Yang & Zhang, 2023 |
| | aimed at the persistence of archetypes | Zestanakis, 2023 |
| | to maintain gender stereotypes as self-validation | Hernández-Orellana, 2023 Burnell, 2021 |
| | to address the main challenges of adolescent development: the creation of autonomy, intimate relationships between peers, romantic relationships and personal identity. | Vendemia & DeAndrea, 2021 |
| | to overcome power and gender struggles | Lamont & Ross, 2020 |

Discussion

The concept of the dialogic Self was born and developed starting from the nineties with the progressive expansion of the internet and the birth of social media since identity is no longer understood as a nucleus of relatively stable or defined traits or aspects in a more or less innate way, but rather as a complex and multiple construct, subject and object of continuous constructions and reconstructions. Ligorio and Hermans (2005) point out that identity no longer refers only to the individual constellation of the Self, but also to relational dynamics that arise and develop in the daily lives of individuals, both offline and online. This presupposes a greater "liquidity" of the identity structure, sensitive to the continuous transition from the real world to the virtual one. Identity is thus redefined through the mirror of relationships, not only concrete but also built directly in the virtual world of the internet, in a continuous process of construction-deconstruction of one's identity. In fact, the self, conceived as dialogic, presents a series of distinctive characteristics that must

manifest in individuals' behavior across multiple contexts (Hevern, 2000).

To this end, the dialogic self must be:

1. Spatially organized: the self occupies and moves in an imaginary space (Hermans et al., 1992);
2. Narratively structured (temporally organized): the self as narrator moves through and accounts for experience over time through stories (Hermans, 1996);
3. Motivated narrator: the self expresses motivation in telling stories (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen, 1995);
4. Embodied: The self is rooted in the physical world rather than disembodied or functioning as a purely rationalist or Cartesian mind (Hermans et al., 1992);
5. Social and multivocal: "other people occupy positions in the multivocal self" (Hermans et al., 1992), where multivocality describes a relative autonomy for the voices that occupy the positions: "A position is like another person in the self, with its own voice or sonic perspective.

This implies that each position is endowed with the agent quality of the self and functions as an original center of organization in the self" (Hermans, 1996).

Basically, different selves coexist within the individual, continuously communicate with one another, and indicate the presence of a rich and flexible identity that allows the individual to adapt to different contexts. For positioning of the self, in fact, with Harrè and Van Langenhove (1991), we can hypothesize the existence of a spatial dimension of the Self populated by different identities that occupy specific positions of the Self-Space that are enriched by the encounter with the Other: internal dialogues intersect with interpersonal dialogue generating new forms of positioning of the Self, new ways of being in relationships and contexts. Identity is therefore built through dialogues with others and continually renewed by the quality and quantity of interactions and contexts (Renati et al. 2011). From this point of view, the network constitutes, as stated by Ligorio and Hermans (2005), a functional opportunity for the growth of the dialogic self since it offers the possibility of multiple interactions within cyberspace and, consequently, the opportunities for redefining identities. This statement is supported by many studies and research that have been carried out in the last twenty years (Hevern, 2000; Ligorio and Pugliese, 2004; Ligorio, Pugliese, and Spadaro, 2004; Talamo, Ligorio and Zucchermaglio, 2004) which state that the internet and the web, in particular, is an environment in which it would be possible to structure identity. As Lévy (2011) observed, virtualization is not a derealization, but a change of identity. The "digital self", however, is not just an extension and enhancement of our mental abilities, but is becoming a real doubling of our personality: our alter ego in the digital world, understood however more as a guardian angel who watches over us and helps us to "be-in-the-world" rather than as a container where we can project fears and aggressive instincts. Within the digital world, in fact, the individual oscillates between being and being able to be, or between a physical and virtual reality. Social networks allow you to build your digital self by offering greater freedom to shape your identity, freeing you from bodily limits and constraints. Through the publication of photos, videos, stories, and comments, users can tell their own stories and create a personality that responds to the interaction context in which they are inserted. According to an estimate by White (2021), around 1.42 trillion images are taken every year, largely the result of selfies shared on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, and therefore held, as Riva (2016) points out, by Mark Zuckerberg. Amendola and Grillo (2021) rightly ask themselves, "In the name of what are we willing to lose ground on a private level to subject ourselves to the gaze of others?" It is clear that the stakes are high, and it has to do with the definition of the self. In fact, overexposure finds

its *raison d'être* in strengthening identity. The latter, as highlighted by many scholars, including Simmel (2013), is based on recognition. Recognition, the construction or perception of identity, belonging, is to be referred to "the place of the other," which is nothing more than a symbolic space determined by culture. In this regard, Bauman (2010) talks about "wardrobe community", a metaphor relating to the spectators who gather at the theater cloakroom where everyone leaves their overcoat. "These are phantom, illusory communities [...] the kind of community in which one feels united simply by being where the others are." Changing identity, like changing clothes, according to Bauman, "is about the dream of making uncertainties less discouraging and happiness deeper". In virtual life, expressed across various social platforms, a new pleasure emerges: fiction, the act of being other to obtain recognisability, a reputation that follows the logic of personal branding. It is clear that "consumer culture is also marked by a strong tension to be someone else [...] Changing identities, freeing oneself from the past and seeking new beginnings, fighting to be reborn: all this is encouraged as a duty disguised as a privilege" (Bauman, op. cit). Even the body has become integrated with consumer culture through the publication of photos and images. Codeluppi (2007) formulated the concept of "body-packaging" to refer to a body that follows the packaging communication technique and aims to attract attention to itself relative to other exposed subjects. The body, therefore, becomes the means to define one's own social identity. Personal qualities are put in the background to satisfy a Self formed by market trends.

Codeluppi also speaks of "body-flow", that is, without a fixed identity and in continuous evolution, being closely linked to changes in trends. One of the processes most common on social platforms is the "window dressing of the Self" (Pira, 2021), in which the body is displayed on noticeboards or in posts, as well as in other clothing in shop windows. In the same way, the body inserted within the communicative flows becomes a commodity of barter and commodification (Amendola and Grillo, op. cit.).

Furthermore, as maintained by Mead (1972) the Ego projects its own Self into a whole, a "generalized other", that is, into a "form with which the community exercises its control over the conduct of individual members and it is therefore in this way that the social process or the community is inserted as a determining factor in the individual's way of thinking".

Colombo (2012) makes an important clarification by maintaining that mediums such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn "perform a double function: they are in fact a specific place (albeit within a different articulation of the real/virtual space that arises from the combination of the "everywhere" of the web and the other "everywhere" offered by the mobility of devices); but they also perform the function of interfaces, equipped with specific knowledge and skills, which provide tools to the various users by suggesting how (with what form graphics, in which characters, with or without images, with or without words) and what to say ("I am here"; "I am thinking this"; "I like/don't like this thing"...). This is what many French scholars define as "construction éditoriale", and which is in practice a rhetoric that the user uses, which, on the one hand, he takes control of, but on the other, he sticks to (think of some of the Facebook violations, which could be considered negations of its frame, and which are punished with exclusion from the social network." Beyond the limits of the media, however, as Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) argue, narration and storytelling are strictly functional tools for the processing of information in human culture.

On the other hand, Bruner (1992), who was the first to talk about narration and narrative techniques, maintains that "life itself is narration as history" and continues by stating that human beings have an "aptitude or predisposition to organize experience in narrative form" since they feel the "need to reconstruct reality by giving it a specific meaning at a temporal or cultural level". Furthermore, narration is one of the most precious tools on a cultural level, as through stories, it is possible to negotiate common meanings and convey them from an early age and in a pleasant way. This would increase the cohesion of the group and the reiteration of the system of values and beliefs".

Boyd and Ellison (2007), speaking of the information society, in which narration is exposed to the

changes induced by technological evolutions which offer a plurality of communication tools capable of infinitely expanding the possibility of narrating oneself, of talking about oneself, of telling oneself and of being recognised, maintain that in social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn we can witness the construction of daily micro narratives, in which it is the user himself digital that creates a specific portrait of oneself:

these representations are configured as digital places dedicated to the expression of social and individual identity. Shafak (2015), in one of his studies, reports that users have a real obsession with posting images on social media. Obsession that is necessary to fuel the digital Self. Rice and Yoshioka-Maxwell (2015) highlight that social networks do not require digital users to have profiles that are “coherent and not fragmented, or that stories follow a clear narrative arc,” which could potentially limit a user's narrative freedom to represent themselves on the platform.

On the contrary, social networks allow digital users to tell their story through experimenting with roles and identities, choosing which aspects of themselves to communicate and enhance. In the fluid universe of social networks, the subject therefore has the opportunity to narrate his own story by becoming the bearer of multiple images of himself.

Conclusions

The relationship between the web and cultural and social phenomena is conflicted, and the network is often blamed for many of the evils that afflict the social system and individuals. Even the same transformations in the construction of identity and self are arbitrarily attributed to technological development and the advent of social media. Changes are experienced with suspicion and almost always become the source of everything that apparently cannot be explained. Unfortunately, despite the advent of second cybernetics, we are imprisoned within a linear, deterministic logic in which, given an effect, we must research and find the cause that lies behind it. Given their complexity, social and cultural phenomena escape this rule, and what can be an effect is at the same time a cause and vice versa. This is the case of the definitions of the digital self and of the consequent digital identity. There is no doubt that "the digital revolution and the pervasiveness of new information and communication technologies have changed the perception not only of the reality in which the individual lives but also the essence of his uniqueness, his perception of himself and his identity" (Africa, 2021), but it is equally true that similar phenomena have occurred, throughout the history of humanity, regularly in the face of every technological innovation (Carr, 2011). And not only that, although the mediums of relationships have changed, some parameters have remained unchanged and will remain immutable; that is, the construction of identity occurs and will occur through the Other.

Without the Other, the sense of belonging, recognizing oneself, and being recognized disappears. As McKenna and Bargh (2000) warn, in fact, researchers have often approached these topics by applying previous psychological theories without taking new contexts into account. The great challenge, on the contrary, is to develop theories that take into account the changes that have occurred to explain the meaning of the digital self and, consequently, of identity. From these considerations, Hermans et al. (1992 - 1996) elaborate the concept of the Dialogical Self as a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous positions in an imaginary landscape. In this conception, the Ego has the possibility of moving, as in a space, from one position to another in accordance with changes in situation and time.

The Ego oscillates between different, and even opposing, positions and has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice, thereby establishing dialogic relations between positions. Voices function as interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of questioning and answering, agreeing and disagreeing. Each of them has a story to tell about their experiences, their position. As different voices, these characters exchange information about their respective Mes, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self.

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