THE IDENTITY REPERTOIRES OF ROMANIAN MICROCELEBRITIES. A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY APPROACH TO TELLING A LIFE STORY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT. *The Identity Repertoires of Romanian Microcelebrities. A Digital Ethnography Approach to Telling a Life Story on Social Media.* The multimodal identities of microcelebrities on social network sites and the complementarity between textual and visual elements contribute to telling an autobiographical story that surpasses the digital world. Using a digital ethnography approach, we aim to analyse the way in which queer Romanian microcelebrities construct an online presence and produce online diaries of their personal lives. Adjacent to this analysis of constant online identity performance, this study will show that the digital practices used by these netizens also raise awareness of the minority groups they represent and shed light on various contemporary social issues. As such, placing emphasis on the collage technique, a qualitative analysis is needed to provide an emic perspective of the performance of fluid identities and the narrativisation of the self via complex language, discourse, and semiotic architecture.

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The significance of our sociocultural linguistic study is discussed in relation to the fact that the microcelebrities under consideration showcase Romanian emblematic profiles of the selfie-culture in which self-representation is constructed by apparently disjointed bits and pieces that constitute a complex matrix.

Keywords: *digital discourse, digital ethnography, fluid identity, multimodal identity repertoires, microcelebrity*

REZUMAT. *Repertoriile identitare ale microcelebrităților românești. O abordare etnografică digitală a construirii unor autobiografii pe platformele online de socializare.* Identitățile multimodale ale microcelebrităților de pe platformele de socializare și complementaritatea dintre elementele textuale și cele vizuale contribuie la relatarea unei povești autobiografice care transcende lumea digitală. Folosind abordarea etnografiei digitale, ne propunem să analizăm modul în care microcelebritățile queer din România își construiesc o imagine online și produc jurnale online ale vieții lor personale. Adiacent la această analiză a construcției identitare în spațiul digital, acest studiu va arăta că practicile digitale folosite de utilizatori sensibilizează, de asemenea, grupurile minoritare pe care le reprezintă și pune în lumină diferitele probleme sociale contemporane. Din cauza caracterului fragmentar al discursului în mediul online, este necesară o analiză calitativă pentru a oferi o perspectivă emică asupra identităților fluide și a narativizării sinelui prin intermediul limbajului complex, al discursului și al arhitecturii semiotice.

Importanța studiului nostru constă în faptul că microcelebritățile analizate prezintă profile românești emblematice ale culturii selfie în care auto-reprezentarea este construită prin fragmente aparent disjuncte care constituie o matrice complexă.

Cuvinte-cheie: discurs digital, etnografie digitală, identitate fluidă, repertorii identitare multimodale, microcelebritate

Introduction

The online space offers a voice to the voiceless and, through the use of digital technologies, users become part of participatory cultures and communities of practice. Through digital discourse (posts, comments, and images), users express and construct their identities, while at the same time contributing to the construction of other people's identities and engaging in various forms of digital activism in order to promote and defend ideologies, life beliefs, and rights. In this respect, the marginalised groups represented by the Romanian queer influencers construct multimodal discourses which reflect light identities

in the online space. They also aim to tell a story with a social impact. The content produced in interaction with other users is strongly connected to issues and problems faced on a daily basis by these individuals in particular contexts, determining these users to take a stance and express attitudes that could change the sociocultural scenarios for the better, embracing diversity and including people regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, religion and beliefs, economic status, and other diverse backgrounds.

This study aims to analyse examples produced by three Romanian queer microcelebrities on social network sites (Instagram and YouTube): Daria Jane, a transgender woman from Bucharest, and Antonio and Răzvan, a gay couple who lives in Cluj-Napoca. Daria Jane is a very active user, posting regularly on her YouTube channel and producing content almost daily on her Instagram. Antonio and Răzvan were as active as Daria Jane regarding issues concerning the LGBTQIA+ for a long period, but they have recently changed their digital behaviour entirely, shifting from an active and engaging online queer presence to creators of content addressing topics like fitness, challenges, food, professional identity content, omitting the queer dimension entirely.

These three users' online content was similar in their approach to addressing LGBTQIA+ rights for a considerable amount of time. They have been acknowledged as microcelebrities as a result of a consistent online presence, and they have received recognition and validation not only in their communities but also outside the boundaries of these communities. They now play a prominent role in the Romanian LGBTQIA+ community and have become iconic figures.

They typically depict themselves engaging in mundane activities with their mothers, siblings, and partners, such as drinking coffee, going to work, or participating in social events. This digital behaviour and exposure demonstrate that queer people's lives are on a par with those of cisgender and heterosexual people[3], offering an example for other couples and encouraging everyone to embrace their life stories openly. In addition, they also post reactions to the social problems persisting in Romanian society, such as (Christian) homophobia, transphobia, abortion, abuse, sexual education, patriarchy, and gender versus sex.

This paper starts by outlining a context and highlighting theoretical considerations, the methodology, and three aspects essential for our analysis of

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[3] There is an ongoing discussion on the use of proper terminology, as the spectrum is diverse, some terminological clarification is needed: *heterosexual* refers to sexual orientation, as opposed to *homosexuals* and *lesbians* which refer to people who are attracted to same sex; *cisgender* is used to describe a person whose gender matches the body they were born with; *transgender* person is used to describe a person whose gender does not match the body they were born with.

marginalised identity repertoires. We will also examine and discuss a few examples from our corpus. The corpus is mostly written in Romanian, and for authenticity reasons, we will provide screenshots from YouTube and Instagram, and we translate keywords and relevant excerpts. We also provide our conclusions.

Sociocultural Background

Analysing the identity mechanisms and the categories identified requires situating the topic into the local context which has had conservative representatives whose views are against same sex marriage and transitioning. *The Coalition for Family* was created in the first decade of the 2000s, gathering people of different religions who initiated the Referendum in Romania (6-7 October 2018) with the aim of changing the constitution to mention that marriage is the union between a man and a woman, not merely between two spouses. By asking for this constitutional change, the leaders of the pro-referendum parties, such as *The Coalition for Family*, declared that there was a need to make clear that marriage can only happen between two individuals of the opposite sex, thus excluding gay couples from winning the right to get married. As a consequence to this initiative, NGOs such as *Accept Romania*[4] and *MosaiQ*[5] started organising online boycotting campaigns (only a low percentage of eligible voters cast their votes), which determined the government to extend the vote to two days instead of one. This was reported as unusual in the media relating the event (see BBC news[6], *Romania marriage poll: Referendum to ban gay unions fails*). And it was an ad hoc change regarding the timeline of the process which was perceived as contradicting the intrinsic idea of democratisation and participation.

The constitution retained the neutral wording, and no change occurred after the referendum, which could be considered a milestone in Romanian society, signalling a shift towards a more accepting and inclusive culture. In this context, micro-celebrities' discourses and user-generated content started to disclose information pertaining to a broad spectrum of queer communities in both media and new media. As such, it determined more high-profile individuals

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[4] ACCEPT Association is the first non-governmental human rights organisation in Romania that defends and promotes LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual) rights at national level. Link: *https://acceptromania.ro/*

[5] MozaiQ is a community organisation that addresses LGBTQIA+ people in Romania. MozaiQ places special attention to different groups in the community: LGBTQIA+ Roma people, trans people, HIV+ people, sex workers, LGBTQIA+ people in a precarious socio-economic situation, people with different abilities, as well as seniors and young people. Link: *https://www.mozaiqlgbt.ro/*

[6] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45779107

to openly discuss aspects of their personal lives that had been previously tabooed. Some examples include Dragoş Bucurenci, a Romanian journalist and trainer, and Emil Rengle, a Romanian dancer, choreographer, and winner of Romania's Got Talent in 2018, who outed themselves as being bisexual. This paved the way for a new era of digital activism in support of LGBTQIA+ rights, and more and more young adults started their own YouTube channels, some of them gaining so much popularity that they became microcelebrities.

Daria Jane is an advocate of transwomen and configures a digital space in which she constructs her representation as iconic for the community of transwomen. She emphasises that transwomen should not be regarded as abnormal and raises awareness on the relevant aspects of the lives of transwomen and on the risks and steps to consider in the process of transitioning from a male body to a female body. While engaging in this complex self-representation with the aim of gaining her rights in society and empowering and encouraging other transwomen as well, she places herself in a position of power and shows that transwomen can have the same roles as biological women.

Antonio and Razvan, the gay couple, decided to launch their YouTube channel in 2020, being the first Romanian gay couple that wanted to participate in the process of normalization of queer identities in Romania. Their main wish was to show normality, to prove that their life is as ordinary as any other heterosexual couple's. Their discourse did not only advocate for the LGBTQIA+ community at large; rather, it placed particular emphasis on normalising the discussion about homosexuality and the fact that homosexuality is natural.

Microcelebrities like Daria Jane, Antonio, and Razvan have constructed their online personas in accordance with the affordances of the digital space and the derived norms of the Selfie culture, which has narcissistic and, at times, shallow undertones, but also mirrors marginalised identities and mainstream society through multimodal content with the goal of engaging in digital activism and changing people's mentalities towards accepting otherness, embracing diversity, expressing their individual identity freely and taking a stance in their community. They give other users a voice in various groups and online spaces, denouncing inequality and discrimination and making a solid case for the need to act and react in order to make a change.

The way in which these microcelebrities are received by established media and new media content producers also echoes how Romanian society perceives the LGBTQIA+ community as the nexus online-offline is based on the mutual influence of one medium over the other. On the one hand, the online environment is a significant social and communicative discursive space where offline identities are continuously exposed and negotiated. On the other hand, actants in the offline space further inquire about online identity construction

practices. For example, *Vice* magazine published an interview[7] with Antonio and Răzvan after the two men launched their YouTube channel. In this interview, Antonio and Răzvan explain the reason behind creating a YouTube channel, emphasising that they decided to present themselves as a couple with the aim to helping people by showing that they are in a happy relationship, and not alone and isolated due to their sexual orientation. They state:

> You rarely meet two gay men who are assertive and open about their relationship. In fact, many straight people can't imagine how two men can live together and think of their relationship as a sci-fi movie. We want to show that we are not more special than a straight couple. We are two people who love each other and want to build a memorable life together. (our translation)[8]

The VICE interviewers note that Răzvan and Antonio's online practice of exposing their offline gay identities influences in a positive way the online audiences who declare having partaken in their online production together with family members who are traditionalists and the videos helped both parties to find middle ground and have a positive attitude towards topics that initially had been difficult to tackle:

> Although they have only been doing this for a short time, they have received messages from young people telling them they watched their first video with their homophobic parents, and the reaction has been positive. Their work is paying off and can bring about change, as in the case of one young woman who told them how her mother didn't accept her sexuality. "They watched the show together, and then her mom told her it was okay if she loved someone the way we love each other. That gave us hope," they say. (our translation)[9]

The users in this study represent the category of educated people, having invested in their personal and professional development and growth. They express their sexual orientation, talk about their gender transition, and engage in

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[7] https://www.vice.com/ro/article/xgd8zw/cuplu-vloggeri-gay-romania-mrandmr-rob-youtube

[8] „Rar întâlnești doi gay care să fie asumați și deschiși în privința relației lor. De altfel, multe persoane hetero nu-și pot închipui cum doi bărbați pot să conviețuiască împreună și se gândesc la relația dintre noi ca la un film SF. Vrem să arătăm că nu suntem cu nimic mai speciali decât un cuplu hetero. Suntem două persoane care se iubesc și care vor să construiască o viață memorabilă împreună". Link: https://www.vice.com/ro/article/xgd8zw/cuplu-vloggeri-gay-romania-mrandmr-rob-youtube

[9] Deși fac treaba asta de puțin timp, au primit mesaje de la tineri care le-au spus că s-au uitat la primul lor video alături de părinții homofobi, iar reacția a fost pozitivă. Munca lor dă roade și poate aduce schimbare, așa cum s-a întâmplat și în cazul unei tinere care le-a povestit despre cum mama ei nu-i accepta sexualitatea. „Au văzut emisiunea împreună, iar apoi i-a spus că e okay dacă și ea iubește la fel ca noi. Asta ne-a dat speranță", spun ei.

an articulate dialogue with their community of fans, but also with users opposing their life choices. They stand amongst those who openly talk not only about their daily routines but also about more sensitive topics that might offer support and guidelines to the communities. In this respect, see their comments extracted from the same article that appeared in VICE:

> "It's essential to have examples of happy, openly queer people in your country."
> "Accountability is built little by little every day. We don't believe that there is a moment when you behave radically differently because you realise certain things, but the other way around, by experiencing certain shocks you manage to gradually change the way you see life and stop letting feelings of guilt and fear control you." (our translation)[10]

Mapping the Selfie Culture through Digital Ethnography

The content posted by queer users stands as "an example of cultural realities existing in the online sphere that are worthy of ethnographic insight" (Kaur-Gill and Dutta 2017, 2) because the texts and images posted by these users contain complex meanings and show a rich "communicative ecosystem" (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz 2014, 7), while portraying ritual practices and cultural modes. As such, the digital ethnography approach adopted in this study "examines how cultural identities, representations, and imaginaries, such as those hinged to youth, diaspora, nation, and indigeneity, are remade, subverted, communicated, and circulated through individual and collective engagement with digital technologies" (Coleman 2010, 488). Coleman's concept of digital ethnography aligns with the idea that the LGBTQIA+ community leverages new media to remake, subvert, communicate, and circulate cultural identities and representations, ultimately contributing to the visibility and empowerment of LGBTQIA+ individuals in digital spaces.

The users under scrutiny are well aware of the fact that digital spaces, through their very glocal nature, are powerful tools in displaying transformations and behaviours which are subsequently endorsed by the audience in a reciprocal way: "users generate discourses that are embedded in ideologies (beliefs, points of view and ideas that they share within particular groups) and become social actors who sometimes design and redesign their behaviour and life decisions in relation to the individuals and groups they interact with online"

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[10] „Este esențial să ai exemple de oameni asumați și fericiți din țara ta."
„Asumarea se construiește puțin câte puțin în fiecare zi. Nu credem că există un moment în care te poți comporta radical diferit pentru că realizezi anumite lucruri, ci invers, trecând prin anumite șocuri reușești să-ți schimbi treptat modul în care vezi viața și nu mai lași sentimentele de vină și frică să te mai controleze."

(Cotoc and Radu 2022, 57). There is an inherent transformative relationship between the content produced and consumed, which spreads belief systems and desired lifestyles. In this sense, digital media has a global reach, but at the same time also a provincialising effect, becoming "central to the articulation of cherished beliefs, ritual practices, and modes of being in the world" (Coleman 2010, 489). In line with the digital ethnography approach and the principles of digital media, Răzvan and Antonio, and Daria Jane become links between the lives of globally known queer VIPs and the local members of the community who aspire to have similar openly embraced lives.

In "the self-photographing cultures" (Peraica 2017, 8) of social media sites, images and text are powerful tools for exposing life narratives with an impact both on the online autobiographical manifestation and at the level of local communities in which users construct individual and group identities with the aim of belonging and integrating into society as a whole.

In the case of marginalised groups, in social media, the nexus image-text communicates a story with light multimodal identities that are intertwined. Text and images produce content through a digital collage. More than in a face-to-face context, identities emerge from the narrativization of the self, which implies the 'suturing into the story' that is partially imaginary (Hall 1996, 4), and the identities are always constructed through the relationship with *the other*, *the constitutive outside* (concept that Hall has taken from Derrida 1981; Laclau 1990; Butler 1993).

The regular people in this study have become microcelebrities in the selfie-culture of the social network sites by revealing information about themselves and posting content to audiences and communities. "People practicing microcelebrity must uneasily navigate between revealing personal information to seem truthful and real to their fans and revealing something that could harm them personally and professionally" (Marwick 2013, 361). There is always this erosion between private and public, as noticed by many researchers (e.g. Senft 2013) and this erosion constitutes an assumed risk, microcelebrity bringing new threats and opportunities. "It also means new responsibilities. In a time when we can intervene in the lives of others in so many ways remotely, we must explain why we've chosen to watch certain events transpire in front of our eyes" (Marwick 2013, 353).

The profiles analysed have a double function, that we describe in Rugg's words:

> "the awareness of the autobiographical self as decentred, multiple, fragmented, and divided against itself in the act of observing and being; and the simultaneous insistence on the presence of an integrated, authorial self, located

in a body, a place, and a time. Photographs enter the autobiographical narrative to support both of these apparently opposing views; photography placed in conjunction with autobiographical texts helps to unpack the issue of reference in all its complexity" (1997, 2).

These users' activity stands as proof that "there is a kind of utopian optimism around the greater visibility digital imaging technologies create—especially for the minoritized and voiceless, who have historically found themselves shut out of representation, or wilfully misrepresented, stereotyped, or caricatured" (Murray 2022, 7). In the case of the Romanian queer community, cyberspace offers a voice to those who want to create representations of their identities as they wish. Also, the multimodal representations connect "not just what is said, but also the context within which narratives unfold" (Giffney 2009, 7 in Leap 2013, 562), being "an exercise in discourse analysis" in the sense that "[it] takes very seriously the significance of words and the power of language" (2009, 7). Moreover, exactly as "the 'queerness' of linguistic practices derives as much from the audience response to linguistic practice as from any formal representation that speakers give to intended message or meaning" (Leap 2013, 563), the digital practices and identities of the three users are deeply intertwined with the audience response, and there are always "intersubjective negotiations" that stem not only from "a predetermined inventory", but also from "the dynamic engagement of speakers and interlocutors" (see Leap 2013, 565).

In the beginning, selfies do not contribute much to community building, but the emergent identities are constructed gradually, and most often than not they grow to become microcelebrities. In this way, online self-representation becomes relevant to the queer community, providing the members of the community with an authentic, unbiased, and iconic voice that other people can relate to and even trust. We observe that in the case of self-representation in cyberspace the image prevails over the text and validation is quantifiable through the number of likes/shares/comments and thus becomes iconic for the community.

Becoming iconic for the community and acknowledging the impact of online identity construction on both personal and professional lives enables new discursive possibilities and dimensions to play with the content so that it serves users' purposes at a specific time. The content can be revised and changed in accordance with the expectations of the audience. This affordance of revising and changing content emphasises the fluidity of online identity and all the possible configurations of shifting desired representations of online presence on social media sites.

Glocal Spaces for Marginalised Identity Repertoires

For our study, we provide a diachronic perspective on the YouTube and Instagram accounts, collecting corpus from YouTube and Instagram and operating a selection of examples from 2017 until 2023 by focusing on milestones. We chose YouTube because these users document their lives via videos and multimodal cues and Instagram because it complements the audio-video elements with powerful images and text. The affordances of these two platforms allow for a multimodal representation of stories and identities while foregrounding visual storytelling through instantaneous, genuine, and multimodal content and ensuring the mimetic desire and function on the part of the audience wanting to emulate the practices presented.

Three aspects are essential for our analysis of marginalised identity repertoires: the interconnection between visual representations and written content in constructing autobiographies of marginalised Romanian queer users; online persona manifestations as dynamic modes of expression with a stable core; online identity changes based on the desired outcome and *status quo*.

As previously mentioned, our study focuses on the multimodal content produced by a transgender influencer Daria Jane and a gay couple, Antonio and Răzvan on Instagram and YouTube.

Daria Jane started her YouTube channel (see Figure 1.) in 2017 with her first video *Male to Female (My transition timeline),* which currently has 926k views (see Figure 2.). She currently has 144k subscribers on YouTube and 130 videos. She uploads approximately one video per week and removes previous content that no longer reflects her desired identity.

Figure 1. Daria Jane YouTube channel

Figure 2. Daria Jane: Male to Female

On Instagram, she has the username daria.janee 28.9T followers. She invests a lot of time in curating images, selfies, the descriptions accompanying the images, and the YouTube thumbnails. She describes herself as:

Daria Jane 🦋 she/her
Digital creator
🎧 Transylvanian Music Producer & Songwriter
🔥 Accidentally DJ
🦉 Check out my other socials ➡️ @daria.everywhere
🌍 Business inquiries: iamdariajane@yahoo.com

Antonio and Răzvan started their YouTube channel on September 29, 2021, with their first video *Cuplu gay. Premieră în România*, which had 23k views. They changed the name of the channel to AntonioRob and their channel currently has 5.59k subscribers. They used to post roughly a video per week. Each of them also has an account on Instagram, but their online presence has undergone a fundamental transformation. While Răzvan had the account *Razvansabau* with 4.893 followers, deleted this account and opened a new one (*razvan__sabau*, 1.112 followers), Antonio had the account *antoniorob* (5.102 followers) which changed, and it is now called *potentialinfinit* (5.499 followers) (See Figure 3.). However, both of them shifted focus from their gay couple life to their professional identities: Răzvan constructs the professional identity of a hairstylist, while Antonio that of a Transpersonal Psychology Coach, but the content related to their relationship is still produced regularly. The only digital trace of their gay couple life can be found on VICE magazine, where a photo of the two men is captioned as: *This gay couple of vloggers from Cluj showed me that there is hope for the homophobic Romania* (our translation) (see Figure 4.).
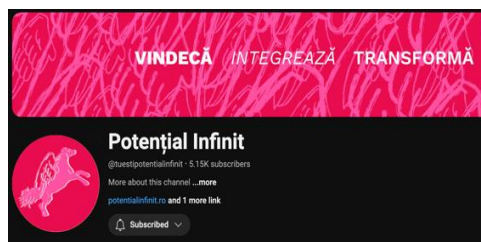

Figure 3. Răzvan YouTube Channel

Figure 4. Antonio and Răzvan in VICE

We started analysing the accounts of Daria Jane and Antonio and Răzvan in April 2022 and we continuously followed closely their means of constructing an identity which proved to be fluid and volatile as anticipated. We noticed that since they first produced content (Daria Jane in 2017 and Antonio and Răzvan in 2021), they have shaped and reshaped some of their posts to match their evolving identities. Both in the case of Daria Jane and Antonio and Răzvan, their online activity functions like a diary available not only to followers but also to themselves, curating, documenting, and archiving life through multimodal content.

The photoshopped thumbnails, their Instagram stories and posts are symbols for idiosyncratic aspects of their personal and public lives. Complemented by the text and interpreted in the whole assemblage of posts, these productions constitute a collage representing their *light multimodal identity* (see Blommaert 2017). All elements create a "horizon of expectation" (Jauss 1982) and the images can be decoded exactly as a book cover with titles complementing the images.

Identity Repertoires through Salient Categories

The content posted reveals their autobiographies in detail, bringing into light even intimate details from their offline lives such as their coming out stories, the process of transitioning, episodes of depression and burnout, and also daily life such as having a coffee with their partners, meeting their families, decorating the Christmas tree and so on. We analyse the digital content they created by organising some of the content into salient categories: close family ties, social and mundane activities, professional life, social activism, artistic photos.

Close Family Ties

Photographs of the netizens' family members address sensitive issues, promoting acceptance and a healthy, loving family relationship that is not dependent on one's sexual orientation or gender identity. The pictures and the accompanying text raise awareness and constitute an attempt to normalise their sexual orientation and individuality inside their families, and in society, in general. As can be seen in the two examples below, the text serves as an aid to the visual element, complementing the photo's meaning and simultaneously constructing moments of life and relationship celebration. The emergent discourse in Figure 5 is a post made by Antonio with the occasion of his 29th birthday. The picture shows Antonio with Răzvan and Răzvan's mother spending time together. A fragment of this post is: [Today I am celebrating my 29th birthday, but I don't feel like celebrating. I feel like it's all about a life that, for the first time, I'm really starting to live] (*Azi împlinesc 29 de ani. Dar nu simt că e despre o zi pe care să o sărbătoresc. Simt că e despre o viață pe care, pentru prima oară, încep cu adevărat să o trăiesc*). Figure 6 contains a multimodal discourse expressing gratefulness towards the mother who supported Daria in becoming a new person: [I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for her, or if she wasn't the way she is] (our translation). Daria also demonstrates that she has reached a point in her life where she has the financial means to show gratitude to her mother even by inviting her to travel together to an exotic destination: [The wheel has turned: she no longer takes me on holidays as she used to do every year when I was a child, now I take her. I brought her to a place that is very dear to me for many reasons, the Costa del Sol].
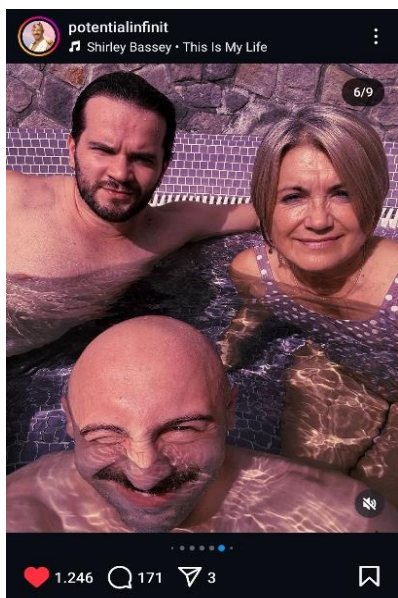
Figure 5. Răzvan´s Mom

Figure 6. Daria´s Mom

Figure 7. Antonio's Father

Figure 8. Antonio's grandmother

On Instagram, the focus is on visual displays that show the users with their family members in ordinary settings (for instance, Răzvan and his father in front of a house, Figure 7) or Antonio's grandmother with a birthday cake (Figure 8). The texts accompanying these images are only descriptions of the obvious representation, which does not require further interpretation.

The discursive attitude adopted both on YouTube and Instagram aims to have an effect on the audience in terms of their cognitive processing, emotive experiences, and behavioural patterns which would eventually lead to an online community in which marginal identities are depicted as equal to mainstream identities.

Social and Mundane Activities

The Instagram pictures depict Daria, Antonio and Răzvan in various social activities: going to restaurants, cinema, interacting with family members, and partners, and traveling. Memories are thus digitally archived and construct the puzzle of their online identities and digital footprints. These pictures are accompanied by a short explanatory text. Daria uses English in many of these descriptions and also highlights a wealthy lifestyle, Figure 9: *I got myself a car and some hair extensions. Life is cool*; Figure 10: *Sometimes all I need is Istanbul*. She involves her partner in many social activities, emphasising the fact that they are a strong couple regardless of social conventions. Comparing themselves to Bonnie and Clyde, as the photo description shows (Figure 11), she portrays themselves as a rebel couple that stands out and is destined to gain notoriety.

Figure 9. Wealthy lifestyle   **Figure 10.** Istanbul   **Figure 11.** Bonnie & Clyde

Răzvan and Antonio exhibit a more playful explanatory text alongside the images chosen, and they also address the audience directly, eliciting reactions from the online community, while at the same time engaging the audience in the public arenas created on their Instagram pages. The examples selected show direct address and thankfulness addressed to the followers: *La mulți ani, în fiecare zi, vouă și vă mulțumesc că sunteți aici. Am încredere în voi!* 🦋 [Happy birthday every day to you and thank you for being here. I trust you!] (Figure 12)*;* an invitation to reflective thoughts on one's relationship: [5 signs that you suffer from relationship anxiety] (Figure 13).
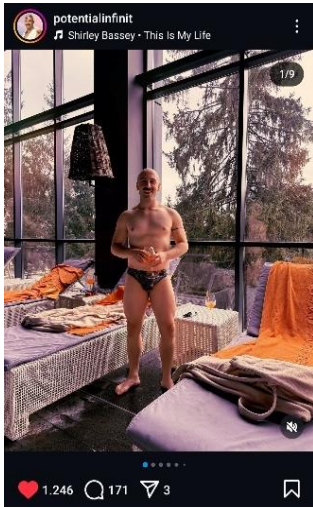

Figure 12. Cheers!   **Figure 13.** Dinner for Two

This display of social activities and the digital participation of followers are practices that Jan-Hinrik Schmidt would consider part of personal public spheres formed through the information that is personally relevant for the users themselves, even though it presents only mundane activities. This information about their social activities is "directed to an intended audience of strong and weak ties (instead of the dispersed, unconnected, and unknown audience of mass-mediated public spheres); and [...] "is presented mainly to engage in conversation (in contrast to the one-way mode of publishing)" (2013, 371). Exposing this information blurs the boundaries between public and private information and fosters ''digital exhibitionism'', but it also builds a networked identity and a "connected presence" (Licoppe and Smoreda 2005, 317). They document their lives while performing daily routines: repotting plants, bathing in the river, having breakfast in bed, etc. (see Figures 14-16 below).

Figure 14. Repotting plants

Figure 15. Bathing in the river

Figure 16. Bed and Breakfast

Professional Life

Their fulfilment in their professional lives is also often depicted because, especially for microcelebrities, "the Internet contributes to a dynamic by which users frame themselves simultaneously as seller, buyer, and commodity" (Senft 2013, 348). Daria is a content creator and influencer, participating in various online marketing campaigns (see Figure 17 below), while Antonio and Răzvan promote their businesses online (see Figures 18 and 19 below).

These three users want to show to the members of the community and to others that one can be gay, trans, etc., and successful in their workplace at the same time. Thus, they intend to showcase the fact that they have a complete life and that, career-wise, they are on par with any other heterosexual Romanian.

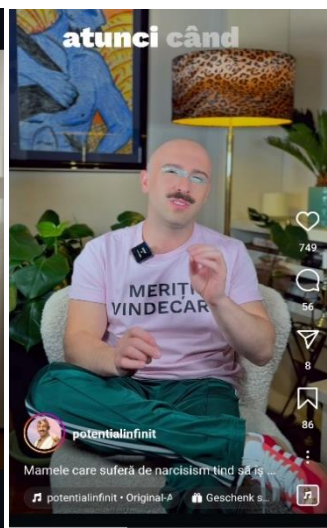**Figure 17.** Influencer   **Figure 18.** Hairdresser   **Figure 19.** Transpersonal Coach

Social activism

Almost all their posts contain messages that encourage the members of the community to be authentic and to take all the steps to be happy and fulfilled. In some posts, they explicitly offer informative and insightful content about various social causes and their position in society as gay, or transgender: they react to homophobia and transphobia (see Figures 20 and 21), to abortion, to the ideas put forward by conservatives, and they provide information on the history of homosexuality, gender studies, feminism, and other related topics. They choose thumbnails which are self-explanatory in revealing the social cause they fight for.

Figure 20. Homophobia   **Figure 21.** Transphobia

Artistic Photos

These three users dedicate time and effort to constructing artistic images, and this demonstrates the significance that they place on the aesthetic dimension. The semiotic architecture of text and images reveals curated online representations, but also various imageries. In the case of Daria, the imagery pertains to feminine beauty and perfection: *Celebrating the divine feminine… It's Isis, Aphrodite, Venus, Astarte, Bastet… all of them and many more that lie within ourselves* (see Figure 22); self-confidence and self-awareness: *Peace is a state of mind* (see Figure 23). Many of her photos also evoke eroticism, advocate for feminism and freedom of expression, and normalise body exposure.

Antonio and Răzvan produce erotic and sensual content (see Figure 24). Many of their pictures contain also teasers/captatio benevolentiae/linguistic strategies for attracting and maintaining followers, collage technique, humorous discourse.

Figure 22. The divine feminine

Figure 23. Peace

Figure 24. Couple Portrait

Autobiography: Change of Course (Daria Jane)

We identified this last salient category only in Daria's online journal. She thoroughly presents her autobiography, including very intimate details with the aim to familiarise Romanian people with the journey of transitioning from a male body to a female body. She digitally documents her autobiography in an impactful manner, making use of straightforward images, illustrating cliches, and sometimes using the collage technique to which she adds simple, concise, and short text with a focus on keywords. The keywords are sometimes written in capital letters and highlighted in different colours. Some examples include: "Ce înseamnă să fii fată TRANSGENDER?" [What does it mean to be a TRANSGENDER girl?]; "Am făcut o SCHIMBARE DE SEX?!" [Have I undergone SEX CHANGE?!] (our translation), which is the Netspeak signal of surprise, or shock, or they function as attention-grabbing devices. The transitioning process is depicted in a non-glamorous manner in both her discourse and her choice of images. She often uses images that you cannot unsee in order to explain the complex and difficult journey of transitioning, but also to raise awareness about the implications of the procedure.

Conclusions

The selection of emblematic examples from the YouTube and Instagram accounts of the featured microcelebrities demonstrates that online identity is a fluid representation, and it is carefully curated by users. Users shift their focus as many times as they wish, they juggle with the content by using techniques and multimodal strategies that keep their followers engaged, and they create stories that are not necessarily predictable but, in most cases, relatable. The online identity constructed is a fluid multimodal representation with a stable core. Besides, online identity is a multidimensional construct which shifts focus depending on the desired outcome and *status quo*.

Their approach is convincing because it is authentic; their images placed in conjunction with autobiographical texts help in unpacking the story of all marginalised Romanian queer users. They all have a voice through the voices of Antonio, Răzvan and Daria. They cover a wide range of issues and reveal so much of their personal lives that anyone can find something that speaks to them directly.

The fluidity of online identities is manifested by the subjective selection of the content they decide to post, by the carefully constructed images, and by various multimodal strategies and digital practices (using caps lock, colours, including hashtags, collage techniques, etc.). In the case of Daria Jane, we notice an evolving identity as she documents all the changes that occurred after the aesthetic surgeries, thus constructing an archive of representations marked by fluidity. Moreover, in some posts the focus is on her being like any other woman, while in other posts, the trans identity is foregrounded. In the case of Antonio and Răzvan, fluidity is manifested differently, in the sense that they decided to completely reshape their online representation, deleting all their videos on their YouTube channel, and reconfiguring their Instagram profiles. They expressed their desire to no longer be viewed as an unconventional couple because they are gay. They stated that they would continue to post and share content from their personal and professional life, but they stopped foregrounding the idea that they are gay/homosexuals.

As "digital media are effective tools for liberation, empowerment, self-actualisation, and participation" (Lindgren 2017, 73), the rise of microcelebrities, notably exemplified by Daria Jane, has led to their recognition, resulting in invitations to diverse events such as festivals and mainstream TV shows[11]

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[11] *Teo Show* 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NSYr8yIqwA and 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItEXdB1-dqU; *În Oglindă* 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOa2MQ3-RKo&t=696s; *La Măruță* 2020: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfJuNp-5JcE; 2021:

meant to educate the Romanian audience on LGBTQIA+ topics and issues. This phenomenon demonstrates a substantial social impact within Romanian society, especially when compared to other transgender women in their participation in TV shows a decade ago, when being queer was stigmatised in the media. Thus, originating from their online presence and fuelled by the powerful and catchy nature of visual content, these netizens succeeded in making a difference in perspective and perception of queer identities. As suggested by De Jesus and Tchalian (2021, 243), "historical processes develop from discursive changes, which also take place in daily life".

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LVsyQMSDPk;   Galben   2023:
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INTERNET SOURCES

Figure 1. Daria Jane YouTube channel
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Figure 2. Daria Jane: Male to Female
Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aSIsFZQctI
Figure 3. Răzvan YouTube Channel.
Available at:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7pi6djpL6CVIhbURlm4Bfw/featured
Figure 4. Antonio and Răzvan in VICE
Available at:
https://www.vice.com/ro/article/cuplu-vloggeri-gay-romania-mrandmr-rob-youtube/
Figure 5. Răzvan´s Mom.
https://www.instagram.com/p/DAs6fvTIpo1/?img_index=5&igsh=azJvM3dsN3Y3aTQw
Figure 6. Daria´s Mom
Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cd7nFJcDa7p/?img_index=1
Figure 7. Antonio's father
Available at:
https://www.instagram.com/p/C-QPkZjoqfc/?igsh=ZmQwZzFvcHMzOW96&img_index=1
Figure 8. Antonio's grandmother
Available at:
https://www.instagram.com/p/C-QPkZjoqfc/?igsh=ZmQwZzFvcHMzOW96&img_index=8
Figure 9. Wealthy lifestyle
Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/Ce1JipdDvCj/?img_index=1
Figure 10. Istanbul
Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ7AiXNMlh3/?img_index=1
Figure 11. Bonnie & Clyde
Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbk0yydMgmK/
Figure 12. Cheers!
Available at:
https://www.instagram.com/p/DAs6fvTIpo1/?img_index=5&igsh=azJvM3dsN3Y3aTQw
Figure 13. Dinner for Two
Available at:
https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9znjnrIZIS/?igsh=ZGljbTQwMmJ1amZr
Figure 14. Repotting plants
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Figure 15. Bathing in the river
Available at:
https://www.instagram.com/reel/C-kFQx8oFZf/?igsh=OXV0OGdqMjZvbG9p
Figure 16. Bed and Breakfast
Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CbhjM91suNK/?img_index=1
Figure 17. Influencer
Available at:
https://www.instagram.com/p/Czrnid3ojgB/?igsh=MWwzMjFuc3ZmOGhtMQ%3D%3D
Figure 18. Hairdresser
Available at:
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Figure 19. Transpersonal Coach
Available at:
https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBOP2xxolB-/?igsh=MXF5dml3aThsdmNjOQ%3D%3D
Figure 20. Homophobia.

Available at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxm-UIJO6hM&t=6s
Figure 21. Transphobia
Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5PXAF8tYdE&t=1s
Figure 22. The divine feminine
Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca2MFYLMGrx/
Figure 23. Peace
Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CY_CYXIoUMv/
Figure 24. Couple Portrait
Available at:
https://www.vice.com/ro/article/cuplu-vloggeri-gay-romania-mrandmr-rob-youtube/
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