

A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SELF DEVELOPMENT FROM THE ROMANIAN ONLINE SPACE

*Sergiu BORTOȘ**

Abstract

The personal development represents more than a simple literature genre, the implications of this in diverse plans must be analysed. Starting from this assumption, through this research we have proposed an analysis of self development of the Romanian online space, using content analysis (quantitative and qualitative). So, through this approach, we identified a set of common characteristics, *patterns*, of the writings from this field of the Romanian online space: the using of lists, questions-answers rhetoric, the “what?”, “why?”, “how?” approach, the use of examples, the urge to experience and experientiality, the use of quotes and examples (both personal and from celebrities lives), also common subjects regarding success and failure, education, couple and interpersonal relationships, formal and informal education, career and work relationships. This paper could be in the area of interest of specialists from other fields for research the self development from other perspective.

Keywords: personal development, online space

Résumé

Le développement personnel est beaucoup plus qu'un simple genre littéraire et ses implications diverses doivent être bien analysés. En commençant avec cette assumption, on s'est proposé, par la présente recherche, d'analyser le développement personnel qu'on peut retrouver sur des différents sites en ligne roumains, en utilisant l'analyse du contenu (l'analyse quantitative et l'analyse qualitative).

Après ce démarche, on peut identifier, donc, une série de caractéristiques communes, présentes dans ce domaine roumain en ligne: l'utilisation des listes, une rhétorique interrogative spécifique, l'utilisation d'une façon récurrente des certaines questions, des demandes pour l'expérience et l'orientation pour expérimenter, l'utilisation des certaines citations et des exemples (personnelles et aussi présentes dans les vies des différentes célébrités), mais aussi, des sujets communes qui concernent le succès et l'échec, l'éducation, les relations de couple et interpersonnelles, l'éducation formale et informale, le travail et les relations au travail. La présente recherche, pourrait intéresser les spécialistes dans des différentes domaines, pour étudier le développement personnel, en ayant une autre perspective.

Mots-clé: développement personnel, en ligne

Rezumat

Dezvoltarea personală reprezintă mai mult decât un simplu gen de literatură, implicațiile acesteia în diverse planuri trebuind supuse analizei. Pornind de la această asumție, prin

* MA student at Communitarian Security and Violence Control, Sociology and Social Work Department, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Carol I 11, 700506, Iași, Romania; e-mail: bortos.sergiu@gmail.com

cercetarea de față ne-am propus radiografierea dezvoltării personale din mediul online românesc, folosind analiza de conținut (cantitativă și calitativă). Astfel, în urma acestui demers, am identificat o serie de caracteristici comune, *patternuri*, ale scrierilor din domeniu din mediul online românesc: utilizarea listelor, o retorică interogativă specifică, utilizarea recurentă a unor întrebări, îndemnuri spre experiență și orientarea către experiențialitate, utilizarea citatelor și exemplelor (atât personale, cât și din viațile unor celebri-tăți), precum și subiecte comune privind succesul și eșecul, educația, relațiile de cuplu și interpersonale, educația formală și informală, munca și relațiile de muncă. Cercetarea de față ar putea stârni interesul specialiștilor din alte domenii pentru studierea dezvoltării personale dintr-o altă perspectivă.

Cuvinte cheie: dezvoltare personală, mediul online

1. Introduction

Self development represents a complex field which has the tendency to treat topics from different areas, for example, aspects from readers' personal life to education and economics subjects. This "industry" developed on the values crisis that modernity has brought with it, being a form of balance found some time ago from other source (such as religion).

The long term consequences, warn some authors (Ehrenreich 2009; Roubini&Mihm 2010; Nehring *et all.* 2016), may be the most unexpected. The modernity promoted the ideas of evolution of the self, creation of self identity, and the self development took advantage of this opportunity and gave birth to a "publishing phenomenon" (Gauntlett 2008), known also as "popular psychology", "[b]ut positive thinking is not just a diffuse cultural consensus, spread by contagion. It has its ideologues, spokespeople, preachers, and salespersons – authors of self-help books, motivational speakers, coaches, and trainers." (Ehrenreich 2009, 34)

In the literature that analyses the self development is highlighted the relation between historical evolution of neoliberalism and the raise of self development. The neoliberalism constitutes a political and economical theory, which emphasizes the individual initiative on the market, beyond any state intervention. Trifan (2016) starting from the ideas of neoliberalism finds that the culture of self development is based on promoting of the individualism and of the individual economic freedom, all of these synthesized in the common idea of self development of "the best version of you".

Binkley (2011) sets a parallel between the project of neoliberalist governmentality project, happiness and the ideas promoted by the self development, that have the roots into the positive psychology, creating a so-called

“popular psychology”. In this way, the happiness has been transformed from an individual temperamental attribute into an “object” that can be studied analitically and, moreover, it can be measured and managed through neoliberal policies, between the macro and micro levels of the society. So, the politics caught the happiness and transformed it into a social scope. Dâncu (2016, 63-64) presents the example of Romania, where we can find an Institute of Happiness, and gives an example of a conference where Vanessa King spoke, with a discourse that combined the positive psychology and self development.

Coming back to microsocial level, the self development posits that the individual can self-govern and has the capacity to adapt in various contexts. The historical evolution of the economic markets conducted to the growth of neoliberal ideas on the markets. So, starting from a high industrialized society, where the individual had a well defined position, the changes brought by the modernity (the rise of services as a dominant segment of the economy, introduction of varied technologies into production) reduced the importance of the human factor in the production. The impact of these was felt strongly by the individuals involved in the production process and they simply being left without a job, had to reprofile, to become more flexible, to accept signing short-term employment contracts (Trifan 2015). The self development is shown here as a possible response to all of these perverse effects fetched by the neoliberal economy.

Turken, Nafstad, Blakar & Roen (2016) realised a media analysis where they described how the neoliberal ideas are mixed with the messages of self development in various media. The results described four interrelated discourses (rationality, autonomy and responsibility, entrepreneurship and positivity and self-confidence), all of the cases analysed by them were not compatible with the notions of colectivity, citizenship and group identity. This is a principal consequence of the neoliberalist ideas, being also a main characteristic of the self development.

The elaborate analysis of Dolby (2005) defines the self development as a creation of the american culture, as a result of a culturological study conducted on 300 books of self development. The main conclusions are that the self development culture is a genuine part of american culture, this being the environment where it was created and shaped.

Another approach on self development is provided by Rindfleish (2014), this postulating the idea that the “inspirational literature” (how the author defines the self development) is one of the creations of postmodernity, as a way of “self-surveillance”. Rindfleish the socio-cultural path of the first

ideas of self development, identifying its roots in the socratic texts, that urged the readers to know themselves. The apogee, from the author's point of view, can be identified in the works of Descartes, in the idea of mind-body dualism, from this moment started the delimitation between mind and body that raised the "turn to self" and "the primacy of the self" (*Ibidem*). These two concepts were exploited closely by the consumerist culture.

Gokhale (2013) presents examples from writings of self-development, these having some common elements: the language used is simple, without leaving room for multiple interpretations, the life stories are organised chronologically, all of these to avoid the complications; the changes are presented as processes that can be realised in a short period of time, with the condition of doing the steps recommended by the authors, also with the help of some techniques and practices described in the work of the authors.

2. Method

The research consists of a content analysis of twenty self development online publications from Romania from which we selected the last twenty published articles. We opted for qualitative content analysis which was completed with quantitative data, because of the lack of information about this field, especially in Romanian online space.

Throughout the analysis we used the comparative method: we realised comparison between the analysed units, between codes and categories, between the authors of the analysed articles (Dușa 2014).

The aim of this paper is to identify the main subjects from the self development articles from Romanian online space, to identify and describe the patterns found in these publications. The research universe consists of all the Romanian websites that post self development articles. Target group is consisting of twenty Romanian websites which publish self development articles and from each one we selected 20 articles.

2.1. Case selection

The cases were selected using theoretical sampling, after we explored the web space, using research engines, web directories and web catalogues, web statistics tools. We followed the inclusion in the sample of the representative and known websites, also, we included the websites found after reviewing the self development literature from Romania. We also used the snowball sampling, after we reviewed the websites structure included in the

analysis and then we followed the links to other similar self care websites for case diversification (personal blogs, websites specialized on the self development subjects, websites with multiple authors, e.g. magazines).

2.2. Data collection

We realised this process using NCapture extension developed by the QSR Nvivo software for Google Chrome. This helped us to isolate the title and body of the article and to export this in PDF format, after that we imported in QSR Nvivo software for analysing them.

In this first stage, we realised an open coding during which we grouped the collected data in codes. In total, we collected data from 400 articles and analysed it in QSR Nvivo 11. After that, we continued the next stage - the axial coding, during which we refined the codes and the established other categories. In the last stage – selective coding, we identified a central category and we grouped the other categories around it and we made connections between them. We stopped the comparative process when we reached saturation (Babbie 2009).

3. Data analysing and findings

In data analysis we chose a thematic analysis, from R.K. Merton point of view and represents the classification of the main themes which are implicit or explicit (Iordache 2004). Forwards, we will presents the main themes found in analysed article from the 20 personal development websites.

3.1. The using of lists

One of the characteristics often met in the structure of the analysed articles is the using of lists. 41.75% out of the articles contain different lists, either numbered lists or using graphics (bullets, dashes, arrows etc.).

The lists have the benefit of being easily to follow by the readers. Simply, the ideas are enumerated in a logical and chronological order. In this way, the authors try to facilitate the readers' effort to follow the content – conferring a predefined structure that the readers are used with.

When the authors create different lists, they use staging, especially when it is described how to achieve a certain goal, for example:

- “**3 ideas** which may change your life”, **S3**;
- “**7 steps** to become a real man”, **S18**;
- “Use **12M** to solve the problems and avoid the unnecessary stress”, **S13**.

The usage of the lists in elaboration of the articles leads to their fracture in small parts which are easily to understand and follow. Beyond that, lists present certain situations, such as problems or advices in a reductionist manner, the authors try to prove that the entire reality is presented in these lists.

Also, we have noticed that among articles which have different lists in their structure, there is a trend to create “recipes”. The recipes either define and describe certain situations (e.g., “4 critical milestones which destroy relationship after relationship”, S17) or include tips and solutions to the readers (“6 advices – how you become smarter?”, S13). The lists is an element which Gokhale (2013) defined it as “simplification”, this is one of the techniques through which the self development authors bulid their speeches.

3.2. *Questions-answers rhetoric*

The question-answer game has a special place in the self development articles. This back-and-forth is the attempt of the authors to maintain the articles attractive for the readers, without complicating the language. 9.25% out of the analysed articles use linguistic constructions as questions and answers, these comes to explain certain theses and provide solutions for certain problems. The questions can be found in the headlines or they can appear throughout the articles in order to find the answers to the interrogations.

For example, S2 presents an article entitled “How do you know you have find your vocation?”. In the first paragraph, the author writes:

How do you know you have find your vocation? I don't know about others, but I presume your story is very similar I can tell you, certainly, howit was for me.
Secret no.1 is to try.

As we can notice, the interrogations are adressed in an informal and direct way in order to establish a relation between the author and the readers based on the similarity between these entities.

3.3. *The “what?”, “why?”, “how?” approach*

The self development authors use a set of questions in writing of the articles. So, depending on the issue, the authors can choose one of these questions – what?, why? or how? which can be found during the article. The articles may have one or all of these questions in their structure (*Table 1*).

Table 1. An example of the questions from the S18 article

<i>Why do you get dependent on the woman you love and how to avoid this situation ?</i>	Title
<i>What motivated me to write this article ?</i>	Subtitle
<i>Why is it important to continue to read further ?</i>	Subtitle
<i>How can you recognize the neediness ?</i>	Subtitle
<i>How can you know that you are needy ?</i>	Subtitle
<i>How to get out of “NEEDINESS” ?</i>	Subtitle

After analysing the data, we have noticed that the frequency of these questions is the following (Table 2).

Table 2. The frequency of the “what?”, “why?”, “how?” questions in the analysed articles

Question type	Use (% of total)	Examples
How?	18,75%	“How can you pass the life exams ?”, S14, title Watch out of the negativisms around you. How we deal with them?”, S15, title
What?	14,5%	“What can we learn from the spartan culture ?”, S6, title “What happens with our brain when we are vulnerable to addictions ?”, S17, title
Why?	9%	“Why doesn't work for me ?”, S2, title “A angry boy... and why Romania needs him?”, S1, title

The use of these questions makes a logical structure an the information is very easily to read and to follow by the readers. Besides these questions, some authors use different interrogations such as: Who? (e.g., Who else says you should follow you passion?, **S16**), “Where?” (“Where is the self-confidence hidden?”, **S7**), which have the aim to make the information clearer.

3.4. The use of examples

Besides the patterns already mentioned and described, in the self development articles we found te use of examples; 25.75% out of the articles contain either examples of the lives of some celebrities (5.25%) or from the authors’ lives (20.5%). These examples have the aim to create a feeling of similarity between the readers and the author. The author is entitled to offer

advices, because in his past, he was in the same situation as the readers are now and he successfully overcame the situation. So, he is seen as an expert due to his experiences. This personal example is presented as a good practice model, because the method he used to succeed was effective.

The examples from the celebrities lives has the purpose to legitimate what the author states. Examples of celebrities used by the self development authors in the analysed articles are: Albert Einstein, Mark Zuckerberg, Nicolae Iorga, J. K. Rowling, Garry Vaynerchuk, Dalai Lama, Dale Carnegie, Elon Musk.

If I get through this speech, it'll be the first I actually finish something at Harvard (Mark Zuckerberg started his speech smiling at the Harvard university, where he was student 12 years ago, but... he didn't finish his studies., S1).

3.5. Individual author vs. collective editorial

Analysing the differences between the articles sources in online space, we have noticed that 7 of 20 them have individual authors and the publication are either personal diaries which also include information from self development field or specialized publications. Also, we have found articles published by the guests (guest posts) – readers or other authors.

The publications with an individual author have around them a cybercommunity interested in a common subject (e.g., S17 - addiction treatment, S8, S12, S20 – economics, investments, business). The members of the cybercommunity are usually invited to know each other in real life; also, they can know the *core of the community* – the author of the website.

Besides these type of these sources, we discovered online publication where the articles are not written by the same author, they had many contributors. Regarding the collective editorial, there is a diversification of the self development subjects, every editor has his specific style.

3.6. Definition and recommendation of certain methods and practices

Defining certain problems (failure, the lack of money, malfunctioning interpersonal relationships etc.), the authors enumerate solutions and advices for them. They identified a way for succeed: the readers have to use some specific methods and practices if they want to override the failure. The most frequent form through which these pseudo-methods and practices are presented is the gradual form as a list, but also, they are presented through abbreviations such as:

- “5 exercises to keep your motivation”, S5;
- “3 techniques of fast and effective learning”, S5;
- “3 simple methods which Accomplished Women uses”, S9;
- “Time management – the Tank method”, S13.

11% out of the analysed articles have the purpose to present certain ways defined by the authors in different manners (instruments, method, technique, habits, practices etc). All of these help the readers to achieve certain goals or to resolve different problems.

3.7. Books and events recommendations

Self development articles published in online space are used to recommend other self development materials, there are a communication bridge between the între autori authors and the readers.

So, the recommendations from the analysed articles, which can be found in 29% out of the articles can be classified in:

- self development events recommendations (workshops, conferences);
- books recommendation (lists of books, book review);
- video and audio materials (movies, recordings).

If you are really passionate and you want to get to the next level, then I invite you at Smart Living Mastermind, the place where you will learn to follow your passion and to achieve your goals easily. **S16**

These recommendations are followed by a set of personal testimonies, either from the authors or from other persons who got in touch with these events or video and audio materials.

3.8. Professional advices

Self development approaches also the professional matters. In the analysed articles, we have identified situations when the authors approached this subject:

- advices regarding the career paths;
- presentation of certain human resources management methods, using examples from personal;
- skills required by the employers;
- recommendations for integration in a new workgroup;
- presentation of the work relationships and the ways you can manage them;
- the importance of the volunteering;
- giving up work for becoming “your own boss”, S19.

The most frequent subject among these articles is figured by the choice of a career and the improvement of work relationships, also the escape from the current work environment and creating his own business. The work relationships are presented from a deficit perspective: the chiefs are “the bad persons” with nonconforming interests. So, the authors offer as solution the elimination of these relationships from their lives.

3.9. *The use of quotes*

Quotes play a special role for arguing the subjects, these are “wisdom” forms. 23% out of the analysed articles contain quotes from papers from different fields: the main criterion is that this quote to be connected with the subject. They are extremely simplified forms, as Gokhale (2013), defined them “crystallized nuggets of wisdom”. The using of the quotes aims a transfer of authority, a transfer of a symbolic capital assigned to the works and to the author of quotes. We have noticed the ambiguity and the generality of quotes uses in the analysed articles: the quotes were used out of context and they expressed only what the authors want.

3.10. *Experience and experientiality*

The experience is of the advantages which entrust the authors with the authority of giving advices to others. The personal experience (stories from the author’s life) is completed by the urge to live the moment (*Carpe diem*), to describe the experientiality as being a personal fulfillment.

In the following fragment from S2 article, the author described why the suggestions he read from self development literature didn’t worked for him. He sustained that the experience proved to him that he has to be critical and skeptical when in the selection of the consulted sources and he discovered certain “secrets” which he shared with the readers.

Why doesn't work for me?

The first time when I read about self development I was impatient to apply the techniques in my life because I wanted to make changes. My great disappointment was when I noticed, after I started to applied those techniques, that nothing works for me., S2

3.11. *Education approaches*

The authors of the analysed articles have a negative vision about the formal education, the education institutions are seen by then as they indoctrinate.

5 ways in which education has made you lose your self-confidence

I am not against school, actually I had made too much school in my life. But I believe the school, or better said, the system is outdated and defective., S7

For them, self development is an alternative education, an informal. To sustain this idea, the authors came with examples, the celebrities who succeed, even if their teachers didn't believe in them or they gave up on formal education, celebrities as Nikola Tesla, Albert Einstein, Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates or James Cameron; sometimes they presented common aspects from their lives. Indirectly, they offered as an alternative the self development and the self-education through their techniques.

3.12. Other topics approached in self development articles

3.12.1. Money, business, entrepreneurship, marketing

27,5% out of the 400 analysed articles were dedicated or included economic tips, business and entrepreneurship suggestions. The authors suggested that taking the risks is the best solution to get out from a negative situation.

3.12.2. *Success and failure*

The success is seen as a state of happiness and the failure is the barrier to success. 4 of the 20 selected has the "success" syntagma. The failure appears from the reader's fears to drop through.

3.12.3. Couple and interpersonal relationships

Self development articles also approached the relationships the readers have, and gave advice for improving them. Frequently, it is found the "relational ecology" idea – the eradication of all the relationships which do not bring any benefits or which cause discomfort and negative emotions.

3.12.4. The secret and the pursuit of the uniqueness

Every author wants to find that element which makes him unique; also, he argues that he holds the secret. This looks like is more a technique to attract the readers, to make them believe that they found things they have never heard before.

3.12.5. The pursuit of happiness

Happiness is the result of the entire self development process. All the actions taken during the process have as purpose a state of satisfaction and fulfillment. The result of the success, of the fulfillment etc. is the same: happiness. We can find the joint elements between the neoliberalist project and the self development as a way of achieving the goal. McKenzie (2016)

defined this self development process as an attempt of pursuit of the self, the pursuit of happiness.

4. Conclusions

The main conclusion of this research is that the self development articles respect a certain pattern and they have specific elements in common. Actually, the common structure is a formula which simplifies the content, without elaborated explications or too complicated concepts. The analysed self development articles comes with examples from the personal experience or quote fragments from celebrities lives (just for prove the efficiency of the recommended techniques by the author or to complete the given information). The general trend is to build around the websites and the blogs certain cybercommunities; also there is encouraged the interaction between the members on the other social platforms (social networks, forums etc.) or even in the offline space (workshops, courses etc.).

Besides these, we have noticed that the authors discuss topics such as aspects of professional life (how to choose the career, the regulations of the work relationships). In the articles, we found advices for the readers regarding the giving up on the job, not without taking the risk and having an entrepreneurial plan.

So, it must been noticed the self development tendency to capture in its area of expertise miscellaneous fields (financial, personal life, professional life etc.). The authors use concepts from other fields: Phisycs, Psychology, Neurology, Economics, Philosophy.

5. Limitations and future directions

The obtained results have to be interpreted strictly in relation with the profile of the cases included in the content analysis. The actual research was realised only in the Romanian online space and the results reflect just a hypostasis of this social reality.

Future direction include the extension of the research- for example, the diversification of the research universe (trainers, self development consultants, coaches, the consumers) and the use of different methods and techniques may complete the actual data and may give a more complete perspective about this subject.

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