

Under the WEB Spotlight: Exploring Virtual Psychoanalytic Identities and Identifications on the WEB and on our Sites

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How psychoanalysis appears online and how psychoanalysts represent themselves on their websites

The internet has transformed how information is shared, communicated, and accessed. In this digital age, it is essential to investigate how psychoanalysis appears online and how psychoanalysts express themselves on their websites. This work looks at image of psychoanalysis in the online world.

Having managed the website and social media for the Psychoanalytic Centre of Florence for the past four years, I've noticed that our digital spaces were often seen by members as places to showcase their work, rather than spaces for sharing psychoanalytic ideas with everyone, particularly those unfamiliar with the subject.

My presentation's purpose is to get us thinking about how our digital spaces may promote and make psychoanalysis more widely known and appreciated for its distinctive qualities.

The Virtual Self of the Psychoanalyst

To explain how individuals develop their identities, Winnicott introduced the concepts of the **"True Self"** and **"False Self"**. As a protective mask, a child creates a False Self to conform to

external expectations and protect themselves from perceived threats. The False Self conceals the True Self and presents a more socially acceptable facade to others.

Kohut, on the other hand, believes that the self develops through the combination of narcissistic mirroring and idealized parental figures, providing a child with a sense of value and purpose.

Similar to our authentic selves, our virtual selves rely on acknowledging the presence of others to shape their identity. What do we find in our virtual selves that reflects these narcissistic and idealized aspects?

Does the Virtual Self that Psychoanalysts present on the web, mirror the authentic Self, or does it rather embody a defensive false Self?

I investigated the **twenty-five most visited pages** of the website of one of the local centres of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society, the **Psychoanalytic Centre of Florence (PCF)**.

I analysed the texts from the PCF website's most popular pages as well as randomly selected pages from the Italian Psychoanalytic Society website's different sections. I used open-source software meant to promote an 'accessible and inclusive' web (<https://farfalla-project.org/>). This tool incorporates the **Gulpease readability index**, which measures **text readability based on educational level**.

The results range from 0 to 100, with '100' indicating the highest readability and '0' indicating the lowest.

In general, texts with a Gulpease index rate:

- **below 80** are difficult to read for those with an **elementary** school education
- **below 60** are difficult to read for those with a **middle school** education

- **below 40** are difficult to read for those with a **higher diploma**

The scores obtained from the examined articles range **between 40 and 60**. This means that 37.4% of the Italian population (the percentage of Italian adults with elementary-middle school or no education, according to Istat data from 2022) is unable to comprehend the content we publish on our websites, which ideally serve as a platform for disseminating psychoanalysis. Additionally, it's also important to consider that in 2022, the percentage of young adults in Italy having a university degree was only 27.4% aged 30 to 34 and 29.2% aged 25 to 34.

I would like to point out that, while analysing various excerpts from **Freud's works**, the scores range between **68 and 70**.

It can be asserted that the Virtual Self of the psychoanalyst, as represented in our websites, represents an **intellectualized Self**. In this context, narcissistic and idealized parts appear to be predominant, elements that are not prevalent in our interactions with patients. However, it is essential to emphasize that these aspects should not be prioritized in channels dedicated to public outreach.

OUR TARGET AUDIENCE: Who do we engage with in our digital space?

In his 1919 paper *'Lines of Advance in Psychoanalytic Therapy'*, Freud suggested that psychoanalysis should reach a broader audience. He stated, ***'We need to alloy the pure gold of analysis with the copper of direct suggestion.'*** In the same paper, Freud wished for a more accessible psychoanalysis open to everyone, including those from less wealthy socio-cultural

backgrounds. He emphasized the importance of communicating theoretical concepts in the **'simplest and most tangible'** way while keeping their foundations.

Pontalis (2002) points out that *"Freud, even in his most difficult texts, the most resistant ones - resistant because it is the unconscious itself that resists - refuses to address only a small circle of experts, initiates, or chosen ones: he does not set limits."*

A **search query in Google** is a precise set of words or phrases that a user enters the search bar when looking for information on the internet. It is essentially an inquiry or request made by the user to the search engine. Google then uses sophisticated algorithms to assess these queries to provide relevant search results based on the terms given. Users can search for information, websites, images, videos, and other content by entering a variety of queries, such as questions, keywords, or phrases.

In 2022, The **most common search queries in the field of mental health** were:

1. *"How to manage **daily stress**?"*
2. *"Symptoms of **depression** and how to cope with them"*
3. *"Tips to improve the **quality of sleep**"*
4. *"How to handle **social anxiety**"*
5. *"Treatments for **panic attacks**"*
6. *"**Diet and lifestyle** for mental health"*
7. *"How to find psychological or therapeutic **support**"*

Having categorized the top 100 queries that directed users to the Psychoanalytic Centre of Florence website, I've organized them into six distinct categories:

- **Clinical** - Inquiries related to psychological symptoms and emotional distress
- **Info PCF** - Requests for information about the PCF, IPS, or individual members

- **Psy** - Specific psychological questions, likely from students or colleagues in the Psy field
- **Book** - Searches for fiction books
- **Movie** – Searches for movies
- **Society** - Inquiries about social changes.

Analysing the search queries that led visitors to the website of the Psychoanalytic Centre of Florence, the following results emerge:

	% Clic	N Impressions
INFO PCF	34,56%	8672
PSY	31,27%	18098
MOVIE	20,77%	74343
CLINICAL	9,87%	26052
BOOK	2,64%	7306
SOCIETY	0,89%	247
total	100,00%	134718

As you can see, even though our main emphasis is on clinical work, the number of queries related to this topic that led to our website is limited. This happens because, while users are actively searching the web for topics related to our field of work, only a small fraction of these queries lead them to our site. This can be attributed to our limited presence of clinically relevant content, which may not be recognized as meaningful by **Google's algorithms**. We need to have a stronger online presence by providing article that directly addresses the needs and concerns within our professional field.

In my opinion the '**copper**' we are being asked to assimilate consists of the **laws that govern the digital world**.

The internet provides an exclusive opportunity for promoting psychoanalysis; through the digital arena, we are able to communicate psychoanalytic thinking and our perspective on care with anyone experiencing psychological fragility but who may be disoriented about these difficulties.

In our daily practice, we focus on clinical work, where we guide our patients on a transformative journey of self-discovery and healing, by **speaking their language**. I believe we must mirror this strategy on the web.

Luciana Nissim, in her famous 1984 work, writes: *"To see through the eyes of the patient means to change the vantage point of observation when one cannot see much from the place where one is observing the patient."*

To explain what she means, she recounts a Chassidic tale where the King's son began to behave as if he were a chicken, pecking grain under the table. No doctor called by the King could restore him to his human identity until a wise man sat under the table and began to peck with him.

Luciana Nissim goes on writing that *"The little story continues until the happy ending, which is when the king's son returns as a human among humans. Our results, however, are not always equally brilliant, even if, like us, when we accept a patient into analysis, we implicitly commit to welcoming and supporting them on their journey, attempting to meet them where they are."*

According to Winnicott (1971), we have **primary identification** before the infant is able to **put themselves into the other's shoes**. While **secondary identifications**, refers to the capacity to discern the **Other as separate**.

Identification with our patients is the ability that enables us to assist and accompany them in their transformation journey. Dana Birksted-Breen, in the introduction to her 2016 book *'The Work of Psychoanalysis'* writes that *'clinical psychoanalysis deals with situations where an individual finds themselves stuck in repetitive patterns that they cannot change over time, as they have lost contact with aspects of the self. [...] The past can paralyze the present, and the present can be persecutory when there is no sense of a future, or when the future is seen as a catastrophe or an impossible ideal'* (p.8).

Is this the challenge psychoanalysis faces online? It seems we're trying to rediscover aspects of our analytical self. It seems we are mostly embracing narcissistic and idealized elements, creating an image of an ideal self that struggles to connect with the online audience.

When we expose ourselves on the web, it's as if we are hiding behind a screen steeped in classical culture, which isn't shared by the majority of people. It's almost as if we are defending ourselves from revealing our true self, which we use in our daily interactions with patients.

Freud, S. (1919) "Lines of Advance in Psycho-Analytic Therapy". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 17:157-168.

Jean Bertrand Pontalis (2002) "En marge des jours". Gallimard, Paris.

Kohut, H. (1978) "The Search for the Self". International Universities Press, New York.

Winnicott D. W. (1971). "Playing and Reality". Tavistock: London.