

## **Identity and Relationships on the Internet: Are We Being True to Ourselves?**

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Human communication has undoubtedly changed ever since the Internet became a part of modern day society. In the past, letters and phones were the most common tools used in order to communicate with others from a distance. Now, for many, the Internet is a major part in keeping contact with family, friends, and acquaintances of all sorts. Email has become a replacement for “snail mail” letters since it can send a message to someone across the world in a matter of seconds. Instant messaging and chat rooms allow for real-time conversations between two or more people, no matter how physically far apart they are. Message boards and other online communities allow for the creation of friendships between people who share interests but may never have the chance to meet offline. The Internet has quickly become an influential part of American society. It is important to consider how it affects communication right now, and how it can affect communication in the future.

My interest in online communication and identities come from my own experience using the Internet. I became involved in an online community and became friends with a small group of users; we all shared the same common interest (a certain video game that is playable online), and we began to appreciate each other even outside the game. In the time that I was involved with the group, we became close to one another, sharing secrets and personal aspects about our lives, and some even expressed attraction to other members. After a lot of time had passed, I also discovered these people faking several aspects about themselves; one close friend of mine had faked her appearance, name, and possibly her gender, while another continuously lied about personal details about himself that he had shared with us. Considering none of us had known each other before meeting on the message board, I began to think about whether friendships that are held over the Internet could be as successful as those that are held offline, and I also questioned why people would fake their own identities when given the chance. To answer these questions, I had to research aspects of human communication, psychology, and the technology that brings people together.

One important part of human communication is not the conversation itself, but how the people involved present themselves. We do this offline all the time; we dress up appropriately for job interviews, we act on our best behavior when meeting a significant

other's parents, and we understand that it might not be appropriate to tell jokes at a funeral. To understand how people may focus on self-presentation online, consider the field of online dating, where a person signs up on a specific website (such as eHarmony.com, Chemistry.com, or Match.com), fills out a profile with pictures and personal information about him or herself, and then contacts others as prospects for real world conversation.

The study "Managing Impressions Online: Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment" uses interviews in order to examine how members of a large online dating site control their virtual appearance in order to make themselves more appealing; those same members look for signals that are unintentionally expressed by others in order to determine whom they would like to meet. The authors of the study explained the importance of cues in both online and offline communication; cues that are *given* are intentionally conveyed by the communicator, such as the person's spoken words, while cues that are *given off* are unintentional, such as body language and other forms of eye contact (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs). They then explain three forms of the self: "the *actual self* (attributes an individual possesses), the *ideal self* (attributes an individual would ideally possess), and the *ought self* (attributes an individual ought to possess)". The actual self is how someone is in the "real" world; if a man weighs 200 pounds then his weight is a part of his actual self. The ideal self is what an individual wants to be like; if the man wants to lose weight and be thinner, that is the ideal self that he is striving to become. The ought self is what an individual feels that he or she should be; if the man wants to lose weight because he feels that he should be healthier, then that is his ought self.

With the virtual nature of self-portrayal and communication in an online dating website, there is a higher focus on controlling one's cues that are given off in order to show oneself as closer to one's ideal self (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs). The majority of people surveyed, however, reported that they tried to strike a balance between the accuracy of their information and the desirability they want to show to potential dates; this is because most of the subjects "expressed incomprehension as to why others with a shared goal of an offline romantic relationship would intentionally misrepresent themselves" (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs). There is also an element of competition that is present in portraying oneself; people want to look as attractive as possible, and that means relying on every tool that is available, including the ability to control what appears

on one's online profile. This is similar to what people do offline in order to appear favorable for job interviews, perform well in sports, and get good grades in school; whether the things people do in some cases are actually legal or admirable (such as steroids or cheating on tests) is another question. In online dating, it was in the subjects' best interests to tweak their online persona in order to accomplish their goals, and most, if not all of them were able to use communication cues to their advantage.

There are websites that are similar to online dating sites in that users want to portray their ideal self; there are other sites that are significantly more chaotic and provocative, with exhibitionists leaving little to the imagination. One such website is Chatroulette, a place where anyone with a webcam will be randomly matched up with somebody else currently on a webcam. There are no filters or censors; a person will see how others choose to portray themselves, no matter how unusual or obscene the setting. Sam Anderson, a writer for *New York Magazine*, gives an account of his experience on Chatroulette; he describes the website as chaotic and untamed, similar to the Wild West. Anderson explains that some of the people he was matched with were shamelessly soliciting or engaging in sexual activity while on camera, and others would display obscene images; one user displayed a picture of a man who had hanged himself, which was "terrifying even after you realize it's fake" (Anderson). That brings up the possibility that with websites such as Chatroulette, someone could seriously choose to hurt themselves in front of an audience, and thanks to the untamed nature of the site, it would be hard for anyone to do anything about it.

In his time on Chatroulette, Anderson explains that there were some people with whom he had "normal" exchanges; he found teenagers and adults who were interested in regular conversation, and there were times when he admitted to "dancing" with the people on the other end (both parties danced along to loud party music in the background). The fast-paced interaction is comparable to "Tweeters" drifting through short, concise Twitter posts where attention might only be held for a few seconds before curiosity persuades them to move on to the next person (Anderson).

It is obvious that self-portrayal on a website like Chatroulette does not follow the same rules as online dating sites. In online dating, there are certain strategies that people use in order to not only show off their ideal self, but to see who may be compatible with them; on Chatroulette, anything goes, and people are not afraid to show themselves in

whatever way they desire, no matter what the other person may think. There seems to be no need for an *ideal self* and it may be that the *actual self* is all one really needs in order to obtain fulfillment there; of course, the actual self that one portrays online may be different from the actual self one portrays offline. Also, the portrayal of oneself on Chatroulette may promote a different sort of competition than online dating; people on Chatroulette may try to gain as much attention as they possibly can. The people that Anderson had encountered on the website, for example, may have done outrageous things (such as the person who displayed a picture of a person who had hanged himself) in order to be noticed by as many people as possible. It seems that Chatroulette allows and even encourages people to discard the social norms that the offline society pushes onto them, and that is one reason that they may do the things they do.

Just as Chatroulette shows that it is possible to “change” your identity through video on the Internet, it is also possible to define your identity only through text. MUDs, or Multi-User Dungeons, are games in which a group of people collaborate by typing out their actions and, indirectly, their identities. There, according to Sherry Turkle, professor of Sociology of Science at MIT, people “become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (Turkle, “Who Am We?”). This is because MUDs give several players a chance to become a new person, or even several new people; for many, creating characters could often lead to showing off different sides of themselves that they would not be able to show otherwise. Turkle, in her book, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, quotes a student who took her MUD personas very seriously: “I am always very self-conscious when I create a new character. Usually, I end up creating someone I wouldn’t want my parents to know about. It takes me, like, three hours. But that someone is part of me” (Turkle, *Life on the Screen* 260). Even though these games were mainly played in the 1990s, before graphical computer games became more popular and accessible, the concept of creating a virtual identity remains the same today.

What could make creating a virtual character so different from oneself so appealing? Turkle wrote about the story of Stewart, a graduate student who lived a quiet, reclusive life and spent over 40 hours a week on a German MUD. Stewart’s heart trouble stopped him from being able to do a lot of strenuous, physical activity, and he felt that MUDs “allow him to be a better version of himself” (Turkle, “Who Am We?”). This goes back

to the concept of the ideal self, but in MUDs, a player basically has complete control over everything in his or her own portrayal; as stated earlier, a MUD player can create a character from scratch, and the player can control how everyone else will see the character, and therefore, the player. While Stewart had little luck in relationships in the outside world, he was able to charm one of the female players (or more specifically, the female character), whom he ended up “marrying” in-game. Though the wedding was only virtual, some of the players actually met up in Germany and held a celebration, complete with champagne; even though he was not physically with the rest of his MUD friends, Stewart felt that this was an escape, and it gave him a sense of temporary fulfillment (Turkle, “Who Am We?”). However, Stewart admitted that in the end, he felt worse because he thought that everything that his character, Achilles, had accomplished is impossible for him; he was able to portray his “ideal” self over the Internet, but he thought that he was powerless to do anything about his offline life, and so he continued to have low self esteem despite what he had accomplished online.

The story of Stewart shows how people can build bonds through a medium such as the Internet; Stewart’s case is different from the case of online dating in that he may never meet his online friends face-to-face. This may seem like an unconventional way to form and strengthen relationships with others, but there are studies that show that it is possible to foster emotional ties through Internet communication. A study, “Friendships through IM: Examining the Relationship between Instant Messaging and Intimacy” surveyed 138 college students at an American university about their IM (instant messaging) use; the survey took into account how long they actually talked to people through IM, how long they left the program on, but did not actually talk (idle time), and where they used the IM program. The researchers also asked the students about how intimate they were with the friends they talked to through IM. Though the group of subjects in the study was fairly small, its results support the contention that “there is a positive relationship between the amount of IM use and verbal, affective, and social intimacy” and that IM use actually encouraged face-to-face interaction later on (Hu et al).

Hu’s group listed some possible factors that could lead to increased intimacy through IM use. One possibility is that a private atmosphere would encourage an IM user to take part in more intimate conversation; another is that the physical environment plays a part in whether IM users would be willing to disclose any personal or private issues

they want to talk about (Hu et al). For example, if a person is at home chatting with someone else through IM, then they will be more likely to have an intimate conversation over the Internet than if he or she were at the campus computer lab. The study also mentions that people tend to use IM when they are “at home, late at night, and separately, where they are vulnerable and lonely” (Hu et al). Since IM is synchronous in that two participants are communicating in real time with one another, it encourages more personal conversations than asynchronous forms of communication such as text messaging and email (Hu et al). Though this study did not take into account whether or not friendships were established before IM, it is a sign that online communication can lead to emotional, personal conversations between two people.

Intimate friendships can be formed by individuals who share common interests, beliefs, or goals; this goes for both offline and online relationships. MMORPGs, or “massively multiplayer online role-playing games”, are games that can be played with hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people on the Internet; think of them as a much more advanced version of a MUD, with graphical avatars instead of plain-text descriptions of characters and actions. These games, including the popular “World of Warcraft” (also known as “WoW”), are known for having a lot of social potential since players tend to join alliances with other players; they can then work together to complete quests and earn virtual money, defeat monsters, become stronger as fighters, and better compete against rival groups in battle.

The study “Social interactions in massively multiplayer online role-playing gamers” by Helena Cole and Mark D. Griffiths explored the social activity of 912 MMORPG players from 45 countries through the use of an online questionnaire. Their results show that about three quarters of both the male and female groups studied (76.2% of males, 74.7% of females) reported having made good friends through the MMORPGs they played; among those subjects, 55.4% of females and 37.6% of males reported wanting to meet their online friends in real life (Cole and Griffiths). The study also shows that 31.3% of the sample reported being attracted to another player at one point in time, and 49.8% of those players had said that the attraction was mutual. About 45.6% of the participants said that their online friends were comparable to their offline friends, and 39.3% of players reported having discussed sensitive issues (such as family problems and losing loved ones) with other players in the game (Cole and Griffiths). This study shows

how online friendships can consist of the same qualities as their offline counterparts, and how online friendships can lead to a desire to become interact even outside of the online community, or in this case, the online game. For people like those in this study, friendships can exist without the need of face-to-face communication; they are pen-pals of the digital age.

Just as Hu's study showed that the use of IM can facilitate intimacy between friends who already know each other, MMORPGs can do the same for people who have never met offline. Some possibilities are that the games are designed to encourage social interaction between players. In WoW, for example, social encouragement can be seen through the use of "friend lists" which keep track of an individual's in-game friends (Chen and Duh). There are also "parties," which are small groups of 2-5 players that can communicate privately through their own chat channel, and "raids," which are larger groups of up to 8 parties for tasks that smaller groups may not be able to handle (Chen and Duh). Quests can encourage players to work together for a certain goal, and while players may team up for a quest and never speak to each other again afterward, the quests could allow a common objective for players to start communication; this is similar to how people in the same club or sports team can establish friendships based on their shared interests and goals. Chen and Duh also give examples of out-of-game social interaction that was facilitated through World of Warcraft, including a 53-year-old mother who plays and communicates more with her son through the game; they also acknowledge that the game can have adverse effects on players' offline social interaction, as some "value the ability to get away from offline relationships through the game" (Chen and Duh). People can choose to use Internet communication either as a complement, or as a replacement to face-to-face interaction, and it gives users a lot of control with how they communicate.

The Internet allows people to communicate with others without ever "seeing" or "hearing" the person on the other side; it also allows us to portray ourselves more carefully in order to make others see us a certain way. But what if someone completely falsifies a major aspect of his or her identity? Gender-swapping is portraying oneself as the opposite gender. Turkle explains that the concept of gender-swapping has existed since the time of Shakespeare, as the play *As You Like It* "uses gender-swapping to reveal new aspects of identity and to permit greater complexity of relationships" (Turkle, *Life on the Screen* 215). On the Internet, it's not uncommon for one to have to simply click on

“Female” in order to be identified by that website, and its community, as female. However, technology does not change the fact that one would have to keep up a female persona, which, according to Turkle, could be “psychologically complicated” and cause one person to be “embarked on an enterprise that is not without some gravity and emotional risk” (Turkle, *Life on the Screen* 213). With today’s technology, gender-swapping can be done fairly easily within online communities such as those found on message boards, chat rooms, and MMORPGs.

A study by Zaheer Hussein and Mark D. Griffiths, “Gender Swapping and Socializing in Cyberspace: An Exploratory Study”, involved giving an online questionnaire to 119 volunteers on message boards specifically for online gamers; they were asked several questions about how MMORPGs affected them in a social context, and they were also asked about their experiences with gender-swapping. The results showed that 54% of males and 68% of females surveyed actively played online as characters of the opposite gender (Hussein and Griffiths). The motivations for why people changed their displayed gender when playing online varied from person to person. One female participant explained that she was tired of “creepy guys hitting on [her] female characters” and played as a male character in order to avoid those uncomfortable situations; on the other hand, male participants said that in MMORPGs, “if you make your character a woman, men tend to treat you [far] better” and “if you play a chick and know what the usual nerd wants to read, you will get free items” (Hussein and Griffiths). Others in the study showed that they wanted to switch genders in order to experiment with their identity, or just “for fun”. The statements from the subjects in this study demonstrate that gender-swapping can be used in order to take advantage of other people, to avoid the stigmas that may come with being of a certain gender, or simply as a social experiment that is much more difficult to perform in the offline world. What could these results show about how people communicate with people online, especially when both parties have never met face-to-face?

There are studies that show that Internet communication may be used as a “replacement” for face-to-face human interaction. Some may think that with the Internet, there is no advantage to talking to people in reality because they have so much more control when communicating online. However, the Internet is not the only modern technology that can have this effect; cell phones, portable media devices, and video

games are all examples of technology that can substitute for “real” communication. The Internet is merely a frame for a larger concept in human communication; technology in general, it seems, is making us, as a society, less skilled in face-to-face social situations.

Imagine a world where humans are isolated from one another, living in self-sufficient cells without need to leave the confines of their rooms and interact with one another. They have the ability to keep music playing in the background all the time, devices that allow them to talk to others without anyone ever seeing their faces, and machines that perform the simplest of tasks for them. Most of the inhabitants feel that they have no need to physically go out of their way to talk to others, and they have no desire to enter the outside world if they do not have to. Does this world sound familiar? This is actually the world portrayed in E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops”; despite the fact that it was written in 1909, over one hundred years ago, it portrays an eerily accurate prediction of what our world is starting to become. Much of the technology featured in his story now exists in one form or another; cell phones allow for easy, controllable communication, mp3 players allow us to drown out the outside world with our own music, and computers make many tedious tasks much easier to accomplish. People in the story feel that they do not need to have physical interaction with others, just as some people in today’s society feel that computers and the Internet are good enough to substitute for face-to-face human communication. Lastly, the people in the story felt that technology, or “the Machine” as they called it, was their god, as shown in this excerpt:

“The Machine,” they exclaimed, “feeds us and clothes us and houses us; through it we speak to one another, through it we see one another, in it we have our being. The Machine is the friend of ideas and the enemy of superstition: the Machine is omnipotent, eternal; blessed is the Machine.” (Forster)

In “The Machine Stops”, technology had become more than something to help human lives; it had *consumed* human lives. At the end of the story, when the Machine grinds to a halt, the result is the destruction of the totally dependent society, leaving only the Homeless, or the few people who had chosen to live in the outside world. It is a scary, but possible prospect, similar to what our world can become if we continue to let advancing technology render us so dependent that it devours what makes us human.

Though human civilization has not been driven to the extreme depicted in “The Machine Stops”, technology has already begun to change the way we act around other

people. Christine Rosen, writer for *The New Atlantis*, explains how devices like TiVo and iPods are affecting society, and not necessarily for the better. TiVo is a digital video recorder that allows users to control when they can watch their favorite television shows, eliminating the need to be at a TV when programs are broadcast. According to Rosen, evidence has suggested that “TiVo users actually end up watching more hours of television every week, including shows they might have skipped without regret if they were not available “on demand”.” Instead of using TiVo’s efficiency to watch less television, people use it to watch even more, reducing the time that they could be doing other things, such as working, reading, getting physical exercise, or socializing with others. People are one step closer to becoming like those in “The Machine Stops” who simply isolate themselves within solitary cells in order to fulfill their needs for entertainment.

Rosen also considers how iPods and other portable mp3 players can cause people to become less social. With an iPod, one can listen to his or her own personal soundtrack and pay less attention to things happening in the outside world. People walking down the streets, sitting on the bus, or waiting in line for something can use their earphones as a sort of barrier between themselves and the other people around them. Rosen says that “[iPod users] might be enjoying their unique life soundtrack, but they are also practicing ‘absent presence’ in public spaces, paying little or no attention to the world immediately around them.” Given the popularity of mp3 players in recent years, the technology can discourage people from talking to others, especially strangers who they might have talked to if they had not been listening to their music. One user explained that because of the iPod he was “increasingly numb” to his surroundings and often “trapped in a self-imposed bubble” (Rosen). Similarly to TiVo, the increased control given by the iPod gives us more incentive to *not* talk to others, isolating us from one another, just as Forster envisioned.

Does this mean that technology will someday drive society to the point where we will be physically and socially separated, even mentally and emotionally detached from ourselves? There is no guarantee it will not; but because of the conventional wisdom involving technology (faster is better, smaller is better, and overall, scientific progress is better), it is unlikely that we will be able to control, let alone reverse, advancing technology. This means that the Internet will continue to get faster, spreading to every

nook and cranny in the planet. Individuals can moderate their own use of devices like laptops and music players in order to keep themselves socially active, but a widespread reversal will be much more difficult to accomplish, as human civilization has often proved to move in the direction conventionally considered as progress without looking back. This has happened throughout human history, including notable inventions such as the printing press, the automobile, and the airplane. Though we humans need to learn how to incorporate advancement as a complement to our social, physical, and mental lives, instead of as a replacement, the deep rooted tendency to avoid the effort says that, unfortunately, few will.

Of course, this does not mean that technology only has downsides. As the studies referenced above show, the Internet can be used as a tool for more than just communication; it has become a new medium for social activity. The Internet, like most tools, must be used carefully; it has tradeoffs, and there are both benefits and costs, though human nature sometimes stops us from noticing the latter. Friendships and relationships can be made in cyberspace, but one should always be aware that persons on the other side may not be exactly who they say they are. Even though the Internet requires two people to communicate through a digital medium, that does not change the fact that real bonds can be formed; emotions are still present online, and the relationships that can be created may be just as complex as offline relationships, if not more complex due to the nature of the medium. Online communication might fool some people into thinking that offline interaction is unnecessary, but such extremism will only lead to increasing social isolation, potentially severing the ties that are vital to any and all societies. Only through moderation, caution, and most importantly, vigilance, can people use online communication to its fullest potential without sacrificing the deep rooted need for face-to-face human interaction. People who have no choice but to use modern advances to communicate would have new doors open to them, while everyone else can still communicate in both new and traditional ways. Technology has the ability to change identity, communication, and society as we know it; we should not let it change what makes us human, nor should we let it stop us from being true to ourselves.

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