

Name: _____

Class: _____

Online Identity

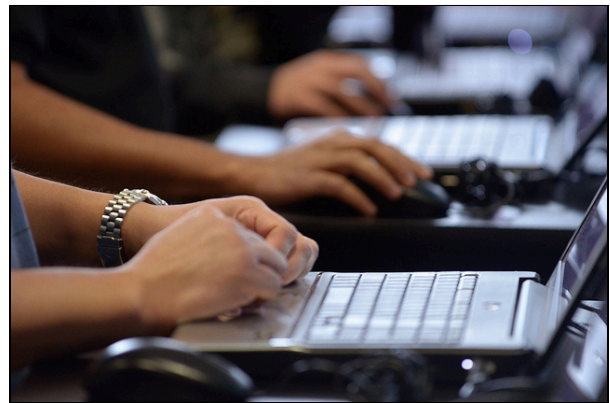
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Consider the different ways we express ourselves, especially in the new age of technology. The Internet has heavily shaped our notion of identity. On the Internet, people can create a multitude of personas, some of which can be created with false information. As you read, take notes on the ways in which people express their identity on the Internet.

Online Identities

- [1] An online identity, sometimes called an Internet persona, is an identity established by a user to interact with others through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, or multi-player games. Although some people use their real names online, many Internet users prefer to be anonymous, identifying themselves by pseudonyms¹. Some users can be deceptive² about their identity.



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Users express online identity both explicitly and implicitly. Users express themselves explicitly through usernames, pictures, and the information about themselves that they choose to give others, such as their hometown. They can also explicitly express their identity by choosing an avatar, an icon-sized graphic image, or by creating user profiles in social media networks, such as Facebook. Implicitly, users express their identity through what they say to other users and the opinions they express. As other users interact with an established online identity, it gains a reputation, which enables them to decide whether the identity is worthy of trust.

The Reliability of Online Identity and the “Mask” Effect

Social networking services and online avatars have made the notion of identity far more complex, because the identities that people define in the social media are not necessarily the

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1. **Pseudonym** (*noun*) a false name
 2. **Deceptive** (*adjective*) meant to trick or deceive someone

identities that they actually have. For example, several studies have shown that people lie about themselves in online dating profiles, or in communication with potential partners.

A person may feel that she is able to lie about her identity on the Internet because it creates a “mask” effect, where no one can see her “true self.” Social theorists believe that whenever an individual interacts with others online, she portrays a mask of her identity, not her true identity. This is partly due to the fact that in some online contexts, such as Facebook, she must answer specific questions to create an online profile. Further, as she begins to interact with others, she adds more and more layers to her mask through the vocabulary she uses and the topics she writes about.

- [5] The kind of mask one chooses reveals at least something about the person who chooses it. While the online mask does not reveal the actual identity of the person, it does reveal an example of what lies behind the mask. For instance, if a person chooses to act like a rock star online, this may mean that he or she has an interest in rock music. Even a person choosing to hide behind a totally false identity says something about the fear and lack of self-esteem he or she may be experiencing.

Relation to real-world physical and sensory constraints

Online identity offers potential social benefits to those with physical and sensory³ disabilities, because others cannot see them. These users can free themselves from their disabilities by creating online personas that are not disabled. This is called “disembodiment,” and gives these users the opportunity to operate outside the constraints of social stigmatization. They can be treated on their merits as a person, rather than being seen as someone inferior due to a disability.

Concerns

Most concerns about virtual identity revolve around the contrast between online and offline existence. The ability to challenge the notion of what “real” means has raised questions about how virtual experience may affect one’s offline emotions.

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3. **Sensory** (*adjective*) something that can be felt by the five senses

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes the central idea of the article?
 - A. Individuals are more likely to explicitly share their true interests and personality on social media because online identities are anonymous.
 - B. Online identities allow people to shape how others see them and express themselves in a way they are unable or unwilling to in real life.
 - C. Individuals use online personas to positively and safely express their identities without people judging how they really look, speak, and behave.
 - D. Online identities are deceptive representations of people who are unhappy with themselves and lie about their identity so they can be accepted by other online personas.

2. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Users express themselves explicitly through usernames, pictures, and the information about themselves" (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "For example, several studies have shown that people lie about themselves in online dating profiles" (Paragraph 3)
 - C. "They can be treated on their merits as a person, rather than being seen as someone inferior due to a disability." (Paragraph 6)
 - D. "Most concerns about virtual identity revolve around the contrast between online and offline existence." (Paragraph 7)

3. PART A: What does the word "stigmatization" mean as it is used in paragraph 6?
 - A. standards
 - B. portrayals
 - C. approval
 - D. judgement

4. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "decide whether the identity is worthy of trust" (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "an example of what lies behind the mask" (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "seen as someone inferior due to a disability" (Paragraph 6)
 - D. "the contrast between online and offline existence" (Paragraph 7)

5. How does paragraph 5 contribute to the development of the ideas in the text? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In your opinion, can a person truly become someone else on the Internet? Explain your answer using specific evidence from the text.
2. What makes a person who they are—how they see themselves, how other people see them, or their behaviors, and decisions? Explain your answer.
3. Can you change your identity? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art or literature to explain your answer.