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Identity Management in Cyberspace

John R. Suler^{1,2}

Who are you in cyberspace? Am I the same John Suler I am in-person or someone a bit different? One of the interesting things about the internet is the opportunity it offers people to present themselves in a variety of different ways. You can alter your style of being just slightly or indulge in wild experiments with your identity by changing your age, history, personality, physical appearance, even your gender. The username you choose, the details you do or don't indicate about yourself, the information presented on your personal web page, the persona or avatar you assume in an online community - all are important aspects of how people manage their identity in cyberspace. Identity is a very complex aspect of human nature. Here I will briefly explore five interlocking factors that are useful in navigating that maze of how people manage who they are in cyberspace:

1. LEVEL OF DISSOCIATION AND INTEGRATION

A single person's identity embodies multiplicity. You possess many sectors within your personality and play numerous roles in your life - such as child, parent, student, employee, neighbor, and friend. Cyberspace offers a niche for each of these specific facets of selfhood. Some people even talk about how we can "deconstruct" ourselves online. We don't have to present ourselves in toto - how we look, talk, move, our history, thoughts, feelings, and personality, all in one big package. In different environments we can divvy up and present our self-representations into packets of various sizes and content. Thanks to thousands of online groups each devoted to a distinct professional, vocational, or personal topic, we

¹ Department of Psychology, Rider University, Lawrenceville, NJ

² Correspondence should be directed to John Suler, Ph.D., Psychology Department, Rider University, 2083 Lawrenceville Road, NJ 08648; email: suler@rider.edu

can express, highlight, and develop specific interests and life experiences while setting aside others. You don't have to mention to your stock trading e-mail list that you also belong to a flower arranging discussion group. When you join an online community, you often have a choice about how much, if any, personal information you place into the members' profile database. Online communication tools even give you the choice about whether you want people to see how you look or hear your voice. The desire to remain anonymous reflects the need to eliminate those critical features of your identity that you do not want to display in that particular environment or group. The desire to lurk - to hide completely - indicates the person's need to split off his entire personal identity from his observing of those around him: he wants to look, but not be seen.

Compartmentalizing or dissociating one's various online identities like this can be an efficient, focused way to manage the multiplicities of selfhood. William James talked about how the normal mind operates in a "field" of consciousness in which one's awareness shifts among different hot spots of ideas, memories, and feelings. Role theory in social psychology speaks about how a successful life is an efficient juggling of the various tasks and positions we accumulate and develop from childhood through adulthood. Psychoanalytic theorists point to an intrapsychic world filled with interactions among complex constellations of self and object representations. Cyberspace living is yet another manifestation of this shifting, juggling maneuver. It gives people the opportunity to focus on and develop a particular aspect of who they are. It may even give people the chance to express and explore facets of their identity that they do not express in their face-to-face world. Everyone in Jim's in-person world may not know that he is a romantic medieval knight in an online role-playing game. However, while online roles may provide an outlet for otherwise hidden dimensions of self, the importance of integrating the assorted components of selfhood should not be ignored. Bringing together the various components of online and offline identity into one balanced, harmonious whole may be the hallmark of mental health - what I like to call the integration principle.

2. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE VALENCE

The different components of who we are can be categorized as either positive or negative. There are some universal criteria that can help us distinguish the two. Most of the time we will criticize a person's need to hurt other people and applaud compassion. But it's not necessary to present universal truisms about good and bad. Subjectively and often idiosyncratically, people can feel shame, guilt, fear, anxiety, or hatred about some aspect of their identities, while accepting and appreciating other aspects. People also strive to attain new, idealized ways of being.

Those who act out in cyberspace - who are in some way hurting or violating the rights of others, or hurting themselves - are usually discharging some negatively charged aspect of their psyche. This purely cathartic act often goes nowhere. An insecure, passive-aggressive person gets stuck in an endless stream of online arguments. Others may use cyberspace as a opportunity to exercise their positive characteristics, or to develop new ones in a self-actualizing process. Online romances, even those involving a clearly recognized element of fantasy, can be growth promoting. In some cases people may express a negative trait in an attempt to work through it. They are trying to transform the negative feature of their identity into a positive one, or perhaps change their attitude about that feature. A gay person who learns to accept his homosexuality as a result of participation in an online support group has changed the valence from negative to positive.

Whether we view something about ourselves as positive or negative can become a complex issue. Is it good or bad that a person tends to be quiet? Sometimes we have mixed feelings. We are ambivalent. The various environments and styles of communication on the internet serve as a flexible testing ground for exploring those intertwining pluses and minuses. In back-channel e-mail, a fellow lurker in an email group for professionals may help the quiet person learn the value of being silent in some situations. In a chat room, that same quiet person comes to realize the freedom and delight of spontaneously opening up, and how that leads to friendships.

3. LEVEL OF FANTASY OR REALITY

In some online groups - for example, professional email lists - you are expected to present yourself as you truly are. You don't pretend to be someone other than your true identity. Other groups in cyberspace encourage or even require that you assume an imaginary persona, as in the fantasy worlds of MOOs, MUDs, and other game environments. In avatar communities, you have no choice but to wear an imaginative looking image to represent yourself. Many other environments fall somewhere in between reality and fantasy. You could get away with pretending to be someone very different than who you are, or you could alter just a few features - like your name, occupation, or physical appearance - while retaining your other true characteristics. No one will know, especially in text-only environments. In fact, you don't know for sure if other people are altering their identities, or how many people are altering their identities. This power to alter oneself often interlocks with dissociation and valence. Hidden positive and negative parts of oneself may seek expression in an imaginary identity that comes to life online.

The tricky phenomenological issue with the real versus fantasy self is this: What is one's true identity? We usually assume it must be the self that you present to others and consciously experience in your day-to-day living. But is that the true self? Many people walk around in their face-to-face lives wearing masks that are quite different than how they think and feel internally. All the time people are discovering aspects of their personality that they never realized before. As psychoanalytic clinicians well know, our daydreams and fantasies often reveal hidden aspects of what we need or wish to be. If people drop the usual face-to-face persona and bring to life online those hidden or fantasied identities, might not that be in some ways more true or "real"?

4. LEVEL OF CONSCIOUS AWARENESS AND CONTROL

How we decide to present ourselves in cyberspace isn't always a purely conscious choice. Some aspects of identity are hidden below the surface. Covert wishes and inclinations leak out in roundabout or disguised ways without our even knowing it. We're not always aware of how we dissociate parts of our identity or even of the emotional valence we attach to them. People usually select a username or avatar on a whim, because it appeals to them, without fully understanding the deeper symbolic meanings of that choice. Or they join an online group because it seems interesting while failing to realize the motives concealed in that decision. The anonymity, fantasy, and numerous varieties of online environments give ample opportunity for this expression of unconscious needs and emotions. Transference of all shapes and sizes steer the numerous choices we make online.

People vary greatly in the degree to which they are consciously aware of and control their identity in cyberspace. For example, some people who role play imaginary characters report how the characters may take on a life of their own. They temporarily have surrendered their normal identity to the imaginary persona, perhaps later understanding the meaning of this transformation. Those who are acting out their underlying negative impulses usually have little insight into why they do so. By contrast, attempts to work through conflicted aspects of identity necessarily entail a conscious grappling with the unconscious elements of one's personality. Striving in cyberspace to be a "better" person also requires at least some conscious awareness - a premeditated vision of where one is headed. Some people, on their own, make a fully intentional choice about who they want to be in cyberspace. Some are partially aware of their choice and with help or through experience become more aware. Others resist any self-insight at all. They live under the illusion that they are in control of themselves.

5. THE MEDIA CHOSEN

We express our identity in the clothes we wear, in our body language, through the careers and hobbies we pursue. We can think of these things as the media through which we communicate who we are. Similarly, in cyberspace, people choose a specific communication channel to express themselves. There are a variety of possibilities and combinations of possibilities, with each choice giving rise to specific attributes of identity. People who rely on text communication prefer the semantics of language and perhaps also the linear, composed, rational, analytic dimensions of self that surface via written discourse. They may be the "verbalizers" that have been described in the cognitive psychology literature - as opposed to "visualizers" who may enjoy the more symbolic, imagistic, and holistic reasoning that is expressed via the creation of avatars and web graphics. Some people prefer synchronous communication - like chat - which reflects the spontaneous, freeform, witty, and temporally "present" self. Others are drawn to the more thoughtful, reflective, and measured style of asynchronous communication, as in message boards and e-mail. There are personalities that want to show and not receive too much by using web cams or creating web pages; to receive and not show too much by lurking or web browsing; and still others who want to dive into highly interactive social environments where both showing and receiving thrive.

The media chosen can intimately interlock with the degree of identity integration and dissociation, and with the extent to which a person presents a real or imaginary self. One interesting question concerning the future of the internet is whether people will want to use audio and video tools. Do they want others to experience their identity as if it were a f2f meeting, with voice and body language? Or will they prefer the alternative communication pathways in order to express their identity in new and different ways?