Essay on the extent to which online users alter their identity

By Natilene Bowker

The online medium offers many opportunities for people to explore their identity. In particular, text-based communication enables users to present themselves in ways that may not be possible in face-to-face contexts because of the lack of physical appearance cues. Two such online communities, which operate textually, and in real-time, are Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). IRC offers users access to hundreds of chatrooms on a vast range of topics. Users are identified by their choice of nickname, dissimilar to real life names, in which "users can appear to be, quite literally, whoever they wish" (Reid, 1993, p. 63). MUDs are virtual reality, role-playing environments where users create their own character by selecting a name, a gender including neuter and plural, and a description of their physical appearance (Curtis, 1997). Text-based communication forums offer users unprecedented freedoms for identity alteration through the anonymity of the online medium, which enables users to break free from social norms. However, online users' capacity to alter their identity is also constrained by gender norms, including gender socialisation differences in risk-taking online.

Research has reported the unprecedented freedom of identity exploration online. Turkle's (1995) observations on MUDs identified how role-playing allows users to explore various aspects of their identity, as well as the capacity to take on other identities. This included opportunities to explore a wider range of roles than those available in real life, such as experimenting with radically different personae and transcending to a higher power, in addition to adopting multiple characters with different genders simultaneously. Similarly, on IRC users have the ability to take on multiple identities, signified through user nicknames,

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Comment [n1]: Very general opening sentence about the broad topic area.

Comment [n2]: Begins narrowing the topic down to a closer focus for this essay. Here, the setting moves from "online" to more specific features, namely, "text-based communication".

Comment [n3]: These examples indicate to the reader that the essay question is being addressed within the scope of these kinds of online contexts. Hence, the writer is not having to cover all online contexts.

Comment [n4]: The full term followed immediately by the abbreviation is given for each online community. This means that the full term does not need to be repeated in the body of the essay. So, from here on in, IRC and MUDs are used.

Comment [n5]: These final two sentences in the introduction present the thesis statement for the essay. Instead of saying, "This essay will argue…", it cuts to the chase. Due to the number of aspects involved, the thesis statement has been broken into two sentences, which summarise two distinct positions.

Comment [n6]: Topic sentence for the first paragraph, focusing on the unprecedented freedom of identity exploration online, which was mentioned in the thesis statement.

Comment [n7]: Evidence from a study is presented to back up the topic sentence.

simultaneously (Reid, 1993). Such activities demonstrate the freedom users have in constructing identities online as the constraints of physical reality are suspended (Calvert, Mahler, Zehnder, Jenkins, & Lee, 2003). This evidence indicates that the capacity for identity alteration online is vast.

Underlying users' capacity for identity alteration may be the anonymity of online communication. Researchers have argued that users alter their identity because of the anonymous features of the online medium, in which physical appearance cues are unavailable. This allows users to break free of social norms. For instance, Reid (1993) argues that the anonymity "and therefore invulnerability" (p. 403) surrounding one's real life identity enables users to experiment with gender identity norms online by letting go of their social and cultural inhibitions. Literature exists about men and women masquerading as the opposite gender online (Curtis, 1997; Reid, 1996; Turkle, 1995). Consequently, as Calvert (2002) confirms, the anonymity of online interactions enables participants to freely express themselves in ways that are not as constrained by real world expectations.

Further, the physical distance between IRC participants, combined with the anonymity surrounding users' real life identities, means few consequences exist for acting inappropriately and breaking social norms (Reid, 1993). According to Calvert (2002), the lack of consequences for breaching social norms permits users to explore more about themselves, compared to real life. Indeed, the popularity of experimenting with sexual identity on IRC may be indicative of the proportion of adolescent and young adult users able to safely explore their sexuality without the behavioural taboos of real life (Reid). Also, Calvert suggests how assuming other identities online may offer users, particularly adolescents who are less popular in real life, the chance to gain social importance. Hence, removing the rigid identity boundaries of such factors as age, ethnicity, and gender, which

64

Comment [n8]: A second piece of evidence is given.

Comment [n9]: A citation from a further author is used to reinforce the idea that the online medium has unprecedented opportunities for identity exploration compared to real life.

Comment [n10]: Words in the final sentence link back to the same/similar words used in the essay question: "identity alteration online". This helps to bring the reader back to the essay topic, as the essay has moved from specific examples to reaffirming the essay's first line of argument. This sentence confirms that there are opportunities, which also links back to the first part of the thesis statement.

Comment [n11]: Topic sentence moves to a reason for identity alteration. Hence, this is dealing with the *why* in relation to answering the essay question.

Comment [n12]: Whenever authors are introduced into the sentence, the year follows in brackets.

Comment [n13]: Whenever a quote is used, a page number is also required.

Comment [n14]: A claim is made about the literature, which is then backed up with citations of the literature in brackets. When more than one citation is mentioned, these are added into the brackets after a semi-colon. Note that these references are in alphabetical order.

Comment [n15]: Statement at end of paragraph functions to summarise the points made, which also subtly acts to bring the reader back to the broader topic.

Comment [n16]: Another topic sentence elaborating on the rationale for identity construction online.

Comment [n17]: As Reid has already been mentioned in the paragraph, further references to Reid do not need a year, likewise for Calvert.

Comment [n18]: An example is provided demonstrating the benefits of experimenting with identity online for a particular group, and likewise for the following sentence.

circumscribe behaviour offline, enables the reconstruction of identity online, where the only limits are those created by the users (Reid).

So far then, the research evidence indicates that text-based communication forums offer users unprecedented freedoms for identity alteration. This is made possible through the anonymity of the online medium, which enables users to break free from social norms constraining offline behaviour. Further, the lack of social consequences for breaking free of social norms, as a result of anonymity in conjunction with the geographic distance between online users, provides additional support for users' identity alteration online.

Nevertheless, while online users have the capacity to alter their identity and interact as other than themselves, Baym (1998) argues that, in reality, many probably create identities consistent with real life. In support of this, Baym points out how online norms develop out of pre-existing norms within contexts external to online environments. For instance, according to Reid (1993), IRC users consistently prefer being identified under one nickname – which is consistent with identifying under one name in real life contexts – as opposed to multiple nicknames.

Other research reinforces the view that online users may also behave much as they do in real life and conform to identity norms common in face-to-face contexts. For instance, a posting to a discussion group about online personae highlighted equal numbers of participants acted the same as real life versus being different (Turkle, 1997). While MUD users can adopt a character as near or as distant from their real life self (Turkle), with neuter, plural, and hermaphrodite choices available, a number of MUDs have restricted gender to male and female only (Reid, 1996). Similarly, Curtis' (1997) observations from a 12-month longitudinal study of LambdaMOO, a highly populated MUD, indicated gender identity comprised the fewest choices available. Further, even when players identified under a non-

65

Comment [n19]: This final sentence rounds off the paragraph by looking at the situation from a broader and more inclusive perspective, which takes into account several variables – age, ethnicity, as well as gender. The word "hence" functions to create an explanation for the events that have occurred.

Comment [n20]: This paragraph serves a very specific function – to summarise the evidence presented so far. This brings the reader immediately back to the first part of the thesis statement, mentioned in the introductory paragraph. This summary paragraph is needed because the argument in this essay is complex as it is organised around two very distinct points of view: the unprecedented freedom surrounding identity alteration online, and the gender socialisation constraints influencing identity alteration online.

Comment [n21]: This sentence turns the essay towards a different path, which contrasts with the preceding argument. "Nevertheless" functions to emphasise this change of direction.

Comment [n22]: Including this author's idea serves to provide a justification for users' online behaviour, and, consequently, the proceeding examples, which function to support the influence of offline norms. "In support of this" is a useful phrase to tell the reader that back up for the position follows.

Comment [n23]: Another topic sentence, which summarises the evidence presented in this paragraph.

traditional gender, other users still requested real life gender identity disclosure. This evidence suggests that despite the opportunities for identity alteration, some online users, at least, are choosing to retain offline identity conventions, which constrains their identity construction.

> **Comment [n24]:** Another summary sentence, which rounds the paragraph off by acknowledging that while opportunities are available for identity alteration, online users are also following real life conventions.

Another study, conducted by Danet (1998), also offers further evidence in support of online users conforming to real life identity conventions. Danet's analysis of gender identities chosen on two MUDs (MediaMOO and LambdaMOO), constituting 1055 and 7308 players, revealed that a majority chose male or female, while only a minority adopted unconventional identities encompassing neuter and gender neutral. Further, far fewer players (3% and 4%) chose to create unique gender identities.

> **Comment [n25]:** This paragraph is made up of only three sentences – the minimum number of sentences required for a paragraph. It is good to have variation in paragraph length. The first sentence functions to highlight the new evidence contained in the paragraph, and, thus, makes distinct the topic of the paragraph.

Although it was not possible to verify the real life gender identity of the players in Danet's (1998) study, Danet estimated, based on current internet user population statistics recording 70% male and 30% female participation, that many male players were likely to be identifying under a female or unconventional identity. In support of males' likelihood to explore identity boundaries, Reid's (1996) survey results of LambdaMOO showed a majority were male (76.6%). Similarly, Turkle's (1997) observations on the MUD, Habitat, revealed that while there was a 4:1 ratio of male versus female real life participants, the ratio of male to female presenting players was actually 3:1, indicating a greater proportion of males altering their gender identity. This evidence also suggests that while some users' may participate in identity alteration, male users may be more likely to do so than females.

> **Comment [n26]:** While the evidence in this paragraph belongs to the study mentioned in the former paragraph, it highlights a different focus of attention: males may be more likely to alter their identity online than females. Consequently, the idea warrants a separate paragraph.

Researchers have proposed several reasons for males altering their gender identity online. For instance, according to Curtis (1997), males are the most common MUD participants, which leads to a lack of female (presenting) players. This scarcity heightens the novelty of interacting with females online, leading real life males to present as female to gain the same

> **Comment [n27]:** This sentence states that authors have presented justification. The next sentence backs this up by naming an author who provides such justification for males' gender identity alteration online.

attention. Another prominent reason for males' altering their gender identity is to find out what it is like to be treated as a female. Males are also attracted to the fun in deceiving other males and enticing them into sexually explicit interactions by taking on a female gender identity (Curtis).

Comment [n28]: This paragraph provides justification for males' identity alteration online.

However, females also alter their gender identity, but typically for a different reason. Due to the proportion of males gender-switching, many females have been required to "prove" their real life gender. Consequently, many females alter their identity from female to neuter, gender-neutral, or male (Curtis, 1997). Similarly, other research indicates that females alter their identity to avoid harassment, including sexual harassment (Turkle, 1995).

Comment [n29]: Topic sentence indicates a change in direction in that it acknowledges that females also alter identity online. This is qualified by the fact that they do so for a very different reason.

Comment [n30]: "Other research" is backed up with the citation from Turkle in brackets at the end of the sentence.

Research investigations indicate that when it comes to identity alteration online, it is not a simple case of observing whether or not the behaviour occurs. Rather, researchers also need to consider the reasons for users engaging in identity alteration, to better understand the extent to which online users actually alter their identity. Indeed, the evidence indicates that males and females may alter their gender identity for very different reasons. While males may do so for a range of reasons, including general identity exploration, gaining attention, and deceiving others, the research suggests that females typically do so to avoid harassment. Furthermore, this contrast in reasons may reflect effects of gender socialisation differences in risk-taking behaviours, learnt in real life, face-to-face contexts.

Comment [n31]: This paragraph functions to summarise the ideas mentioned to date, which link into the second part of the thesis statement mentioned in the introductory paragraph.

Comment [n32]: This part of the sentence works to support the focus in the essay on explaining why users engage in identity alteration online – so that researchers attain a *better understanding* of the events taking place.

Comment [n33]: This clause has been specifically constructed to conform to the essay question – notice the overlap in phrasing in terms of "the extent to which online users [actually] alter their identity". This helps demonstrate to the reader that the essay question has been addressed.

Comment [n34]: This end sentence moves the focus forward by suggesting further justification, through theoretical evidence, to support the second position in the thesis statement.

In support of gender socialisation differences in risk-taking behaviour, underlying gender socialisation theory is the notion that males learn to engage in risk-taking activities by extending behavioural boundaries. In contrast, females learn to stay within appropriate behavioural conventions, maintaining their safety (Spender, 1995). The disorientation

67

surrounding the adoption of masculine identities by real life females, evident in Bruckman (1996) and Reid's (1996) gender-switching encounter, in contrast to the liberation from the restrictions of gender appropriate behaviour experienced by a male when gender-switching (Reid), together, may provide some support for the influence of gender socialisation differences in risk-taking online.

Further, the anonymity created by textual communication forums online provides a protective mechanism, reducing social risk. If social errors occur, players can easily log on as another character without redress. Hence, the shield of anonymity relieves players of any accountability for their actions, eliminating the physical consequences of irresponsible and offensive acts (Curtis, 1997). Subsequently, it is argued that those more likely to engage in risk-taking, namely males (Coet & McDermott, 1979), may also be more likely to utilise online environments for identity exploration, including identity alteration, compared to females.

Indeed, the evidence indicates that while males and females may alter their identity online, they do so to different extents. Males engage in identity alteration for a variety of reasons, not least of which includes identity exploration. This supports males' predisposition to engage in risk-taking behaviours as a consequence of their gender socialisation. In contrast, females engage in identity alteration to stay safe, by escaping harassment. In support of such normative behaviour practices online, Curtis (1997) argues that although MUD players may create a character vastly different from how they are in reality, many conform to their real life behaviours and personality.

In conclusion, the extent to which online users alter their identity is a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, evidence demonstrates the unprecedented freedom of identity exploration online. The anonymity of online communication forums enables users to break free of social

Comment [n35]: This paragraph functions to provide the link between gender socialisation differences in risk-taking between males and females off line, and males and females' risk-taking in identity alteration online.

Comment [n36]: While this evidence repeats and elaborates earlier evidence mentioned in the first part of the essay supporting the first argument, it also functions here to support the second argument in the thesis statement.

Comment [n37]: This citation backs up the statement that males are more likely to engage in risk-taking.

Comment [n38]: This paragraph summarises the second argument in the thesis statement.

Comment [n39]: This topic sentence introduces the concluding paragraph. It manages to bring together the different points of view by highlighting the fact that it is a complex situation.

norms because of the lack of physical appearance cues, which may constrain behaviour in face-to-face contexts. Secondly, the physical distance between users, in conjunction with the anonymous nature of the online medium, means there are few social consequences for breaching social conventions, which offers further support for users to freely engage in identity alteration online. Yet, despite freedom from the constraints of social norms governing online behaviour, leading to increased opportunities for identity alteration online compared to real life, the extent to which online users freely alter their identity may be influenced by the reproduction of gender socialisation norms. Indeed, the literature suggests that males and females' identity alteration may be linked to their gender socialisation differences in risk-taking, leading males to be more likely to take risks in exploring their identity online. This finding has implications for research into cyberpsychology, in which gender socialisation differences may influence other behaviours of online users, beyond just identity alteration.

Comment [n40]: These sentences summarise the first argument in the thesis statement.

Comment [n41]: These sentences summarise the second argument in the thesis statement.

Comment [n42]: This last sentence works to bring the essay forward beyond the immediate essay context to consider the implications within a broader topic setting, namely, cyberpsychology. This movement forward from addressing the essay question is achieved without raising any new evidence.

References

Baym, N. (1998). The emergence of on-line community. In S. G. Jones (Ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 35-68). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bruckman, A. S. (1996). Gender swapping on the internet. In P. Ludlow (Ed.), *High noon on the electronic frontier: Conceptual issues in cyberspace* (pp. 317-325). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Calvert, S. L. (2002). Identity construction on the Internet. In S. L. Calvert, A. B. Jordan, & R.R. Cocking (Eds.), *Children in the digital age* (pp. 57-70). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Calvert, S. L., Mahler, B. A., Zehnder, S. M., Jenkins, A., & Lee, M. S. (2003). Gender differences in preadolescent children's online interactions: Symbolic modes of self-presentation and self-expression. *Journal of Applied Development Psychology, 24*, 627-644.

Coet, L. J., & McDermott, P. J. (1979). Sex, instructional set, and group make-up: Organismic and situational factors influencing risk-taking. *Psychological Reports, 44*(3), 1283-1294.

Curtis, P. (1997). Mudding: Social Phenomena in text-based virtual realities. In S. Keisler (Eds.), *Culture of the Internet* (pp. 121-142). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Danet, B. (1998). Text as mask: Gender, play, and performance on the Internet. In S. G. Jones (Ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 129-158). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Reid, E. (1993). Electronic chat: Social issues on internet relay chat. *Media Information Australia, 67*, 62-70.

Comment [n43]: Notice that book chapters make up a significant proportion of the references. There is much less to read in a book chapter versus a whole book.

Comment [n44]: Within the references, two more recent (at the time this book was printed) publications have been sourced, which indicates that up-to-date ideas have been found.

Reid, E. (1996). Text-based virtual realities: Identity and the cyborg body. In P. Ludlow

(Ed.), *High noon on the electronic frontier: Conceptual issues in cyberspace* (pp. 327-

345). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Spender, D. (1995). *Nattering on the net: Women, power and cyberspace.* Melbourne,

Australia: Spinifex Press.

Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet.* New York: Simon &

Schuster.

Turkle, S. (1997). Constructions and reconstructions of self in virtual reality: Playing in

MUDs. In S. Kiesler (Ed.), *Culture of the internet* (pp. 143-155). Mahwah, NJ:

Erlbaum.

Comment [n45]: Interestingly, while the essay topic focuses on the online medium, no references present online documents. Rather, they have all be sourced from traditional hard copy sources – which may add credibility to the research for the essay because the ideas identified have been peer-reviewed, which is not always the case with online sources.