



Your *Virtual-Real* Identity Online

Contemporary college students are a very inter-connected generation. They maintain electronic or “virtual” identities on the World Wide Web on a number of sites. They use multimedia as a matter-of-course. They use the Internet to conduct all sorts of business and to meet up with others. These various electronic uses are raising some concerns.

The Electronic Self

We’re all about the electronic. We Facebook™ and have hundreds or thousands of friends. We join social causes virtually and send moneys electronically. We YouTube™ or Vimeo™. We star in our own videos and feature our friends in them as well. We Twitter™ and share our free-associations and real-time experiences. We share and over-share.

We SecondLife™, and we make our 3D avatars look like ourselves, or even more, we’ll change ourselves to look like our digital avatars. We have our real selves, and we also have many versions of our virtual selves.

We do it live. We have live-multi-point video and can watch live TV at any time 24/7/365. We TM-our friends. We vlog (video-blog). We micro-blog. We not only know our friends’ secrets (along with the rest of the world), but we even know what they are thinking in real time.

We go on MMORPGs and play for hours at a time, sometimes days and nights. And we keep those game identities and play these games for years and years.

On our mobile devices, we let everyone know our latitude and our longitude—in real time. The secret then is to stay on the move and keep ahead of what we’re revealing about ourselves.

The above is an overhyped version of the electronic reality of many college students today. The above reality may be accurate for some subset of students, but it’s certainly not accurate for all. Why are some mental health and educational professionals concerned about all this?

Effects on the Real

One of the central concerns raised in recent years involves how the brain is “rewired” by the high exposure to screen time and screen ways of interacting. Learners today have much shorter attention spans. They assume they can multi-task based on a number of simultaneously-running mobile devices (laptops, mobile phones), but the neuroscience research finds otherwise. People may be able to quickly make one decision after another, but to have multiple streams of information going at one time, a majority of people will fail to multi-task. There will be severe degradations in

people's memory retention and performances.

Law enforcement has expressed concerns about people sharing private information, on purpose and also inadvertently. Privacy advocates suggest that people may have their information mis-used by criminal gangs who fake identities in order to compromise people's finances. Others troll social sites for contact information—to plan attacks on unsuspecting individuals.

Employers will go into social networking sites to “check out” applicants' online identities to see what others have said about them. They also look to see what applicants say about themselves and will use that information to head-off potential risks in the hiring.

In higher education, many have complained about the current tendency by some students to lapse into incivility when they disagree with others. The speed of the Internet and the feeling of anonymity has resulted in a culture of flaming and character assassination. Many have used the public forum of the WWW to try to embarrass others or to cause harm.

People have expressed concern that time spent online means lost opportunities in the real. There are “opportunity costs” for immersion online.

People create and live with “virtual identities” that they've created for years, and while this has allowed for experimentation of various identity types, it has also led some to turn away from their real physical selves and to focus almost exclusively on the virtual. This focus on the

virtual has led some to have inaccurate body image or self-image.

Healthy Uses of Web 2.0 Technologies

Web 2.0 technologies are very social and viral. Engaging with such technologies can be very healthy and important for future work lives. Problems emerge when the virtual identities spill over in unhealthy ways in actual lived lives—in obsessions and parasocial relationships, in life disruptions, in unhealthy behaviors, in poor study habits, or in poor social skills.

Many would argue that these concerns are over-blown and based on a few rare occurrences. Others would argue that while the research information is incomplete, there have been sufficient signs to cause some worry. Students have to find the right balances of the virtual and the real for themselves.

And those who may need some professional support may do well to seek that out.



© All articles are used by permission of the respective author(s). Copyright belongs to the University Life Café. No part of this may be used without authorization.