The influence of Internet use on identity in Asia: A social psychological approach

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Abstract

George Herbert Mead suggested that identity is constructed rather than fixed, a notion taken up by Erving Goffman in his detailed analysis of social interaction (Goffman, 1959). Goffman described social behaviour using a theatrical metaphor in which roles are performed for an audience. Role descriptions describe how to behave and interact; it is the detail of such descriptions that is socially negotiated during identity construction. This construction can be considered as a tension between internal and external forces.

Not all identities are equally malleable during the identity construction process; those identities strongly influenced by internalised norms and values, or by embodiment, are resistant to change (although change is not impossible). Others, such as professional identity, are much more flexible.

A considerable portion of the literature relating to identity online examines gender, yet gender is one of the more change-resistant aspects of identity. However, there are many other aspects to identity that are more likely to be influenced by the different social interactions to which Internet-use exposes us.

This paper uses interview data from university students from a number of Asian countries to explore which aspects of their identities are most influenced by social interactions made possible by the Internet. The findings suggest that identity construction is indeed influenced by Internet use, although not necessarily in a uniform way.

1 Introduction

Identity is one of the most enduring concepts in social psychology and there has been an explosion in discourse on this subject. Even so, there is still a need for further debate about this poorly understood concept (Hall, 1996). One of the key difficulties one faces when contemplating identity is that it is "never *a priori*, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality" (Bhabha, 1994: 41); in

other words, identity is a moving target. It is intangible, difficult to identify, and dependent on perception.

For these reasons identity scholarship is difficult enough at the best of times, even without the added complications brought by globalisation. Globalisation cannot be ignored, however, and many have asked what impact globalisation might be having on identity (e.g. Peters, 2003; Meyer and Geschiere, 1999; Barker, 1999).

As a "flagship" technology of globalisation, the issues of concern relating to globalisation are epitomised by the Internet (Milio, 2001). While considerable research has investigated social effects of virtual environments, the majority of social theories cannot be applied to virtual interaction, leading to what Holmes (1997) calls a "crisis in social science research".

Nevertheless, the Internet has been the focus of discussion for many authors interested in the impact of globalisation on identity (e.g. Pardo, 1998; Poster, 1999). It is commonly argued that the Internet allows the creation of virtual communities and contributes to the disconnection of place and identity (e.g. Capling and Nossal, 2001; Hampton, 2002).

This paper contributes to the globalisation debate by examining the impact of Internet use by Asian students on their sense of identity. The next section discusses the nature of identity and the social psychological framework used to guide this pilot study.

2 Identity

Although many concepts in social psychology are not universally accepted, self, identity and situations are generally agreed upon. The *self* is who we are, *identity* is who others think we are, and *situations* are the circumstances in which others learn who we are. Identity is a process, not a product. It requires consensus between the way we see ourselves and the way others see us, and is negotiated during social interaction (Altheide, 2000). George Herbert Mead understood the self to have two parts; an impulsive and spontaneous 'I', and a regulating, socially constructed 'me'. The 'me' represents the expectations of others that are negotiated through social interaction (Langer, 1996).

This negotiation process is expanded upon in great detail in Erving Goffman's (1959) landmark text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. It is in this work that Goffman first describes his dramaturgical framework for analysing social behaviour, and in doing so he demonstrates extraordinary insight into human behaviour. Indeed, of all sociologists, Goffman is the one who most often "startles one into self-recognition" (Bennett, 1994).

The essence of dramaturgy is that human behaviour can be understood using the metaphor of the actor and the stage. The dramaturgical metaphor is that each of us plays many different roles during our day-to-day lives. For example, a school-teacher will play different roles in the classroom, the staff room, or at home. Even within the staff room that same teacher will play different roles, for example, when talking to the department head or with a confidant.

While Goffman's methods were put forward well before the Internet was created, they nevertheless can be particularly valuable for studying communications on the Internet. Central concepts in dramaturgy, such as awareness of the audience, framed interactions, expected and realized reciprocity, and co-construction of identity are all fundamental to shaping of identity, whether it occurs online or not (Lamb and Davidson, 2002).

A number of studies of the Internet have used Goffman's approach to study identity construction (e.g. Lamb and Davidson, 2002; Arnold and Miller, 2000; Cheung, 2000; Karlsson, 1998; Miller and Mather, 1998; Walker, 2000; Rutter and Smith, 1999). Most Goffman-based studies consider identity performance in personal web pages and not in interpersonal applications such as email or chat services. This paper has these less studied interpersonal applications as its central focus, and seeks to investigate whether the Internet, as a technology of globalisation, influences the social interaction process such that identity construction is also influenced.

Such influence may stem from at least three sources. First is the oft-cited ability to engage in "identity play", to experiment with or try on different identities. "The obese can be slender, the beautiful plain", as Turkle (1995) famously expressed it.

The notion of identity play is entirely consistent with Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor. Play requires both simulation of reality and awareness of that simulation (Fry, 1963); thus, performing an identity online that does not mirror the performer's physical identity is a form of play. Indeed, when we describe an actor performing a role as "playing a part" we are acknowledging that the performance is a simulation.

Goffman, however, contends that not all performance is insincere; thus, while an actor may be playing a part, in sincere performances the actor has no need to pretend.

Identity play is said to be a common phenomenon online, which may be explained by Serpe and Stryker's (1987) observation that people seek relationships that give them the opportunity to behave in ways that reinforce salient identities. While based on a sample exclusively of university students, Serpe and Stryker's conclusion is probably also true of other age groups. Certainly, while the literature tends to focus on identity play among younger users such as children and teenagers (Livingstone, 2002, 2003; Simpson, 2005; Sjöberg, 1999), it also occurs among adults (McKenna and Bargh, 2000), which suggests that they too seek relationships online to reinforce identities they cannot reinforce in other ways.

A second way in which the Internet affects identity is that, as a technology of globalisation, it weakens the relationship of identity to place. Reshaping of time-space relationships has "profound" impact on identity (Hall, 1992), and as a technology that allows users to transcend temporal and spatial barriers, the Internet has a potentially greater impact than other technologies.

This may be caused by a homogenising of cultures and identities, sometimes called "McDonaldisation" (Ritzer, 2004), or by the supplanting of place-based, national identity with identity of virtual spaces. Even if it does not contribute to homogenising of identities around the world, national and cultural identities might still be otherwise affected by the influx of influences via the Internet.

That globalisation will lead to homogenisation is not necessarily a foregone conclusion, however. While geographic places may exclude various identities (Vertovec, 2001), such as identities of (dis)ability or sexuality, the Internet allows individuals so excluded to find more inclusive environments online (Dell, 2001). While a variety of place-based identities may be weakened, a new variety of identities based on virtual places may develop, and there could be many such virtual places.

Third is the potential impact of language. Language can be used to construct, negotiate and communicate identity both directly, through interaction, and discursively, through different media (McAdams, 1995; Warschauer, 2000), and in an environment in which all interaction is mediated through language the potential for effects on identity is especially acute. And as the Internet has drastically altered the way people use language (Noblia, 1998; Baron, 2003), it is likely that the identities constructed are also altered.

One such change is that language becomes more explicit (ten Have, 2000). At the same time, language use on the Internet is reported to be less expressive and less sophisticated than other forms of writing (Hård, 2002). No research has been found in the literature on the impact of less sophisticated and expressive language on identity, however it seems likely that identities thus negotiated may be more reliant on stereotypes due to hampered ability of the language to express nuanced identity information.

Further, some commentators have expressed concern that English is becoming the *de facto* language of the Internet (Kadende-Kaiser, 2000; Pardo, 1998; Noblia, 1998). This

may also lead to the imposition of the values of English-speaking cultures upon other cultures (Noblia, 1998).

This paper summarises pilot research that investigates the way in which these three issues influence identity formation. The next section describes the data collection and analysis methods followed.

3 Data Collection and Methodology

The research approach adopted in this study is informed by Kendall's (1998) observations on studying effects of online interaction on identity:

> "In order to evaluate the potential effects of online interactions on identity, researchers need to consider not just how the interactions differ from (or are similar to) offline interactions, but also the understandings participants have of these differences and similarities." (Kendall, 1998: 130)

Interviews were used as the most appropriate source of data to investigate participants' understandings of their interactions. Interviews were conducted with six participants in both face-to-face and email environments; nine face-to-face interviews were conducted, and email interviews lasted for a period of approximately four weeks. Responses were analysed using a qualitative and interpretive approach.

Bampton and Cowton (2002) discuss a number of benefits of email interviewing that have relevance to this project, including alleviating the need for travel, avoiding

scheduling problems with participants, And giving participants time to reflect before forming responses, thus increasing the quality of their participation. Further, it is possible to conduct interviews simultaneously and feed responses from one interview into others.

In qualitative research the presence of the researcher triggers the creation of data that would otherwise not be created, and thus it is necessary for the researcher to consider their own theoretical conceptualisation, thoughts and feelings when conducting research (Breuer, 2000). Particular care was taken in this study not to impose the conceptual framework discussed above on the participants. The researcher was obliged to confront a number of his own preconceptions about the subject matter, which had been formed largely from reading research literature.

Consequently, a key outcome of the project is to examine assumptions intrinsic in past literature on the relationship between the Internet and identity, by determining if the experiences of the interviewees corroborate the theory and conjecture of existing literature. The next section examines the interview data in this light.

4   On multiple identities

There is considerable literature on people using the Internet for the purposes of exploring identity issues, particularly through identity play and the use of multiple identities (see Danet, 1996; Turkle, 1995, 1999; Danet *et al*., 1997; Maczewski, 2002; Kendall, 1998; Kitzmann, 2003; Mowbray, 2000; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000; Kadende-Kaiser, 2000; Sjöberg, 1999). This perspective is common although not

universal; Bechar-Israeli (1995) for example is one of the few dissenting authors who suggest that identity play is not widespread.

Supporters of identity play hold that the anonymity provided by the Internet allows and encourages users to explore their identities by adopting one or more online personae. This is particularly true of post-modernist writers, Turkle (1995) being the most prominent example. This belief also appears to be held outside of academic and research circles – Participant 2 thought that this might be true in many cases, for example – although it was not true for any of the interviewees themselves.

Yet while researchers in the past have interpreted users having multiple accounts as an effort to explore new identities, this was not the case for any of the participants in this study. While having multiple email and chat accounts appears to be the norm, this is driven by pragmatic concerns rather than a desire to engage in identity play.

It is common to use different accounts for different purposes – five of the six participants reported doing so. It is common that one account will be used for communicating with family and friends, while another is used for official communication with employers or prospective employers, university lecturers, and so on. In Goffmanian terms, this is a straight-forward example of audience segregation (see Dell and Marinova, 2002), and no more implies identity play than differences in one's face-to-face behaviour in front of one's boss or one's family.

Indeed, no individual is without multiplicity of personality, an aspect of social life that has fascinated Goffman as well as other sociologists (Berger, 1963: 125), so to assume that performing multiple roles is somehow a consequence of Internet use seems naïve.

Other pragmatic drivers of the use of multiple accounts are the desire to take advantage of different features of different systems, and to be compatible with friends and family who use different services. In the words of Participant 1, MSN Chat is "cooler" than Yahoo Chat – that is, MSN supports features that Yahoo does not – and thus is the favoured chat service. However, she maintains accounts in both services because she still uses Yahoo Chat when chatting with others who do not use MSN.

Note that the prime concern is the audience with whom one chats, and the technology is subordinate to this. Some concern has been expressed in the past that the Internet would weaken social bonds, however in this case it seems that existing social bonds are reinforced by Internet use, and few new social bonds are formed. This was the case for half the participants in this study.

None of the participants reported regularly creating new accounts; rather, all participants have stable accounts that rarely change. Most participants choose usernames that are in someway linked to their physical identity, contrary to claims that users seek out anonymous interaction to explore new identities. Even when nicknames are played with (see Danet et al., 1997; Bechar-Israeli, 1995) this is often not to explore identities but for practical reasons such as concern for personal safety, particularly among female users. Participant 1 noted another common functional concern is to

convey a message to other users; for example one might change one's nickname to "Waiting 4 U Peter" to indicate to another user that one wants to chat with them.

A relationship between anonymity and misrepresentation does exist (Goffman, 1959), but it appears that taking advantage of this opportunity while online is not widespread among young Asians. Although the mass media are a key source of information about other roles and can inform the anticipatory socialisation process (Weidman *et al.*, 2001), and presumably can also inform misrepresentation processes, none of the participants reported any serious misrepresentation. This concurs with the thoughts of Chester (2004), who suggests that university students have a "strong desire for authentic self-presentation".

So why this disparity between the experiences of participants in this study and other reports in the literature? Many analyses of identity play have focused on online communities (e.g. Danet *et al.*, 1996; Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Danet *et al.*, 1997; Kendall, 1998; Dibbell, 1996; Kadende-Kaiser, 2000). Other studies have focused on the use of personal web pages as vehicles for identity exploration (e.g. Kitzmann, 2003; Chandler, 1998; Cheung, 2000; Hine, 2001; Miller and Mather, 1998; Walker, 2000; Miller, 1995). Yet it is not clear what proportion of Internet users belong to such communities or create such web pages. None of the participants interviewed in this study belong to any online communities of the kind usually described in the literature, and none maintained personal web pages.

Further, for half the participants, online communication was mostly with people they knew. This would also limit the ability to play with identity, due to others' pre-existing knowledge of one's identity, and users' awareness of that pre-existing knowledge.

4.1   Gender

Of the different aspects of identity, gender is prominent among the literature on online identity. Ever since early reports, on reading the literature one almost gains an impression that the Internet is awash with users pretending to be another gender (e.g. Van Gelder, 1985; Stone, 1991; Danet, 1996; Kendall, 1998; Danet *et al.*, 1997; Climo, 2001; Whitty, 2002; Siebers, 2004). Sometimes they may not even restrict themselves to the usual male/female dichotomy, but invent entirely new genders; Mowbray (2000) muses on the existence of an "other" gender in MUDs, for example.

This, and the abundance of other gender-related Internet literature, would suggest that users are remarkably preoccupied with gender. Yet none of the participants in this study felt strongly about this issue. While four of the six participants reported having misrepresented their identity online in the past, none reported doing it often. Further, in all of the cases in which participants reported gender misrepresentation, their motives were often light-hearted, such as playing a trick on a friend. One participant reported this kind of activity when he is bored and has nothing to do.

There appears to be little motivation for continued gender play for female users. One female participant reported pretending to be male to see how people related to a male user, however she was soon "starved" of conversation and quickly changed back to her

regular, female identity. This experience can be explained by the finding by Wolak *et al*. (2002) that most online relationships among younger users are cross-gender, and the greater numbers of male users online.

Similarly to the finding above that identity play does not appear as widespread as the literature would suggest, it appears that participants in this study do not find gender nearly as significant an issue as the literature would suggest. Joke genders (e.g. "sex: go ahead") as discussed in Mowbray (2000) perhaps indicate that participants in the online forums where gender is analysed may not treat the issue with the same import as social researchers.

There is little statistical evidence to suggest that those users who wrestle with gender identity issues online are widespread. Famous cases such as those described by Van Gelder (1985) and Joinson and Dietz-Uhler (2002) may be high profile, but they are rare. It seems likely that such users would be preoccupied with gender regardless of whether they were online; the Internet does not cause the identity crisis, it merely provides a mechanism to work through it.

4.2   Conclusions on multiple identities

While the use of multiple identities is common among all interviewees in this study, identity play is far less common that previous reports suggest. Much of their communication is with people known to them from offline interaction, limiting opportunities for identity misrepresentation. It seems that young Asians are pragmatic in the way they use the Internet, and choose to segment audiences in a way that is

consistent with Goffmanian dramaturgy. On the whole, the various identities presented by participants online simply reflect the different roles they play in everyday life.

A long-standing debate in identity research is whether identity is derived from roles or from category membership. This paper supports the claim made by Hogg *et al*. (1995) that this debate is perhaps unnecessary. The separation of audiences for different identity performances is clearly consistent with the former claim that roles are significant, yet the frequency with which participants are asked to share "ASL"[1] details when meeting someone new online indicates that category membership is clearly important to others.

It seems that while roles may influence how we perform our identity for others – that is, our roles affect our social behaviour – our performances are considered by others in conjunction with the categories to which we belong. Hence, gender, a category, is not significant to participants when considering their own identity performances, but is still significant in the way we are received by others.

This explains why gender is one of the aspects of identity most discussed by Internet scholars, but is not imbued with the same significance by any of the participants. Occasionally participants may misrepresent their gender online, but this appears to be as a result of idle curiosity and boredom rather than a serious identity crisis.

This study suggests that rather than the much-hyped impact of the Internet on identity, particularly gender identity, the Internet seems to have more subtle consequences on

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[1] "Age / Sex / Location"

young Asians, although these consequences are largely ignored by the literature. Some of these are discussed in the following sections.

5   New insights into the self

One of the ways in which Internet use influences identity is via fostering new insights about the self. By altering how we see ourselves, the way we present ourselves to the audience is subsequently altered. A number of participants reported gaining such insights through social interaction online, and all such cases were facilitated by the greater intimacy made possible by the Internet (see Rosson, 1999).

For example, Participant 2 became aware of the nature of her personality and attitudes. By seeing differences between her own attitudes and the attitudes evident in the way people treated each other on the Internet, Participant 2 recognised in herself an element of self-centredness and reluctance to share knowledge, experience or ideas. This led to a change in her social behaviour, both online and offline.

Participant 4 also reported learning new things about herself as a consequence of Internet use, citing as an example an interaction she had with a friend. The friend in question divulged intimate feelings about her, and admitted that he could not have said such things to her in person. This surprised Participant 4, who had thought of herself as easy to talk to. Consequently, she became more aware of the way she related to others, and began making a conscious effort to be more open with others and to allow them to be more open with her in both online and offline interactions.

Participant 4's example also illustrates the comparative ease with which users can broach sensitive subjects while online, which can then alter the nature of relationships with others. Participant 1 and Participant 2 also report similar cases in which the Internet was used to reveal intimate details to others close to them.

Interpersonal interactions lead to intrapersonal changes, which in turn influence interpersonal interaction, and the intimacy fostered by the relative anonymity of communication online can amplify this cycle. In other words, the negotiation of role identity during interaction can lead to changes in the self, which in turn influences future role negotiations, and the Internet's anonymity can allow greater freedom in the role negotiation process.

The examples above are of interaction with people already known to each other. The Internet promotes global interaction, not just interaction with proximate others. Some consequences of global communication are discussed in the next section.

6 Global aspects of the Internet

Globalised communication systems such as the Internet allow people to interact without the confines of geographic or political borders (Dell, 2001). In contrast to the telephone system, the Internet allows people to stay in contact much more cheaply than the telephone system, and is in many ways analogous to a public space that allows for a wide variety of social interaction.

While not common among participants, one example was cited by a participant who had gained new insights into her own national culture as a result of interactions with people in other countries. The Internet has allowed her to "see [her compatriots'] behaviour in a different light" by providing the opportunity to interact with people from contrasting cultures.

The contrast has been most distinct in the degree to which people refrain from discussing their emotions. In Participant 1's experience, people from Sri Lanka tend not to open up and discuss their feelings with others, while people from other cultures are more willing to discuss their emotions. While it is difficult to generalise from a single case, Participant 1 believed this experience is also common among her Sri Lankan friends.

Further, Participant 1 believed that Sri Lankan men generally have very traditional views regarding marriage and place great importance on a bride's reputation and dowry. Her experience, facilitated by the Internet, has been that Indian men do not place such importance on these issues. This has led Participant 1 to prefer Indian to Sri Lankan men when considering a life partner.

While only a single example, this anecdote illustrates how global communication can affect an individual's perceptions of categories such as nationality. The impact is not necessarily to weaken one's connection with one's own nation, however, as explained in the next section.

6.1   Maintenance of national identity

As well as functioning as a form of public space, the Internet also allows the user to access information sources such as newspapers and other publications. Globalisation in general may lead to questioning of national identity, and "increasingly desperate maintenance" of national identity, as it has done in the case of Japan (Burgess, 2004). The concern among many is that global access to news and information media such as the Internet will facilitate the propagation of select, dominant cultural identities to the detriment of others.

While it is noted that all participants in this study live abroad, and their experiences cannot be generalised to people who do not, none of the participants in this study felt that their national identity had been eroded by Internet use. Further, all use the Internet to stay in touch with their home country. All but one read online news sites from their home country, and in most cases this is a significant change since leaving their home country. Not surprisingly, it seems that as young Asians travel abroad for work or study they become aware of a need to keep in touch with events at home. Such a change may be either by seeking new information sources (newspapers and so on), or a change in the nature of topics discussed in email or chat services.

It is in this sense that the Internet is a source of paradox because although it has introduced a great deal of anxiety about erosion of national identities, the Internet is also used as a tool to support their maintenance.

However, information flows in two directions. Not only do young Asians abroad use the Internet to keep in touch with their home countries, they also send news of foreign countries to friends back home as family and friends are often keen to hear about life in a foreign country. Thus, while the Internet may strengthen a sense of national identity for one person, for the other it may lead to increased global awareness. This paper does not suggest that this might supplant national identity among those who receive such news or information, but identifies it as an area for future study.

6.2   Language

One of the most important ways in which the Internet is thought to erode national cultures is through the imposition of a common language. This view has been challenged more recently, and the rise of other languages has led some to suggest that concerns about an English-dominated Internet were premature (Warschauer, 2000).

Yet the experiences of participants suggest that English is indeed the *lingua franca* of Internet use for many Asians, although this is not always a consequence of the Internet itself. Participant 6 for example uses English because it is his first language, and because his Punjabi is "terrible". Likewise, Participant 4 uses English for the majority of her online communications, because although she can speak Hindi, her first language is English.

In other cases, English is used because of technical difficulties experienced using other languages. For example, Participant 2, whose first language is Burmese, reports using English to communicate with friends, even when they are also from Burma. The only

person she communicates with in Burmese when online is her mother, because her mother does not speak English. English is preferred because it is more practical to type in English than Burmese, because the Burmese character set is not supported in most chat or email applications.

Likewise, Participant 3 uses English for the majority of online communications, because of the difficulty in setting up the computer to communicate in Arabic or Persian. Participant 1 reports the same reason for use of English over her native Singhalese – it is simply too difficult to type in Singhalese; indeed many Sri Lankans consider it impossible.

Another reason driving the use of English among those for whom it is not a first language is that English is perceived by many in Asia as a very useful language, and hence the Internet provides a valuable opportunity to practice one's English. This can occasionally result in subtle pressure to avoid English, however, as Participant 5 noted: use of English when the recipient is not fluent can be perceived as "showing off" one's English fluency.

Concern has been expressed in many quarters about changes in language as a result of Internet use, and many cases of such concern have been widely reported in the media. For example, the Shanghai People's Congress recently considered restricting use of Internet slang use by civil service, public bodies and media organisations, and from official publications and school classrooms. Similar concerns have also been expressed in France and Greece (Haines, 2005).

Several participants found that their use of English has changed as a result of Internet use. In some cases, such as that cited by Participant 6, English is often interspersed with foreign words, particularly obscenities. In other cases, the change has been to adopt Western slang expressions. In the case of one participant, this has led to friends commenting on her increased use of slang in everyday language, and the need to be increasingly careful not to use slang expressions when communicating with her parents. Another participant referred to using slang expressions peculiar to online chat environments in face-to-face interaction. Not all participants experienced such outcomes, however.

6.3   Conclusions on global aspects

Global communication such as the Internet can undoubtedly affect our perceptions of cultures, including our own. The nature of the effect will depend on many factors, not least of which is the chance interactions we may encounter online. The Internet can also fulfil a desire to keep in touch with one's home country when abroad, and thus can help maintain a sense of national identity while living in another country. Again, the degree to which this occurs will vary from one user to another.

Thus, in order to thoroughly understand the way in which the Internet influences national identity, one must also consider other aspects of globalisation, such as affordable international travel. For the participants in this study, Internet use and travel influence each other and both have consequences for national identity.

The effects of Internet use on language appear diverse and largely dependent on the individual. While the choice of English as a *de facto* communication standard is often driven by technical difficulties in using other languages, there are some identity-related effects.

By communicating in English one must automatically identify as one who can speak English. In some cases this may not be a favourable identity, which may lead to selection of another language for communication with some audiences. Likewise, the incorporation of words from other languages allows one to identify as multilingual, and with other cultures. These are classic examples of what Goffman termed impression management; hiding some information about the self while revealing other information in order to manage the impression others might form about one's identity.

7   Conclusions

This paper reinforces that there is no "main effect" of Internet use. Other authors have suggested the consequences of Internet use also depend on the individual, their goals and their social context (McKenna and Bargh, 2000; Katz and Rice, 2002; Tyler, 2002; Riva, 2002; Matzat, 2004; Bessière *et al.*, 2004). This project concludes that the effects also depend on chance social interactions that happen online. Roles are continually negotiated and renegotiated during such interaction, just as they are offline. It is imprudent to claim that the Internet necessarily has any particular impact on identities; instead the Internet affects the negotiation process. The intimacy encouraged by Internet interaction makes it easier to negotiate changes in roles.

This paper calls into question the extent to which identity play occurs online. The manipulation of identity is no different online to its manipulation offline. Goffmanian concepts such as audience segregation and impression management are all evident in the online world.

Gender identity particularly does not appear to be subject to experimentation to the degree that past literature suggests. While adapted to the media, presentation of identity online is not significantly different to presentation of identity offline. The same issues affect the way identities are performed, including audience segregation and impression management.

Finally, national identity is not necessarily under threat simply as a consequence of Internet use. The Internet is only one facet of globalisation and appears to have diverse affects that are dependent on the individual, including reinforcing national identity otherwise weakened by other aspects of globalisation.

Appendix

In-depth interviews were conducted with six participants from a range of Asian countries. Participants are as follows:

- Participant 1 is female, in her 20s, and recently graduated from a business degree. She is from Colombo, Sri Lanka, but currently lives in Australia. She communicates using email or chat services mostly with people she knows, either

directly or to whom she has been introduced by a friend. Participant 1 does not generally use the Internet to chat to strangers.

- Participant 2 is female, in her 20s, and recently graduated from a business degree. From Burma, she currently lives and works in Australia. Mostly she uses the Internet to communicate with people from different ethnic backgrounds. About half the people she communicates with are friends she has met in Australia, and about half are friends in Burma[2].

- Participant 3 is male, in his 20s, and currently studying an undergraduate business degree. He is from Bahrain and has used the Internet for over seven years. He enjoys communicating with people from different countries and will deliberately try to chat with people from different cultures in order to learn about them.

- Participant 4 is a 22-year-old female, studying a graduate diploma in the social sciences at an Australian university. Originally from Mumbai, Participant 4 moved to Australia to pursue graduate studies. She uses the Internet to communicate mostly with friends and family.

- Participant 5 is from Thailand and is in his 20s. He is currently studying a postgraduate technology degree at an Australian university. Participant 5 uses the Internet to keep in touch with family and friends while studying abroad, and to make new friends.

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[2] Note that Burma is made up of a number of ethnic groups, so while Participant 2's contacts may be from Burma, they are not necessarily from the same ethnic group.

- Participant 6 is an Indian in his 20s from Singapore who recently completed a business degree and is currently working in Thailand. Chat software runs when he is in the office, although he does not use it at home because he tries not to use the PC at home.

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