

# What do online social networking sites bring us? : Discussion of online and offline identity, loneliness, and difference between digital communication and real-life social interaction

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## Abstract

There have been many debates about the pros and cons of online social networking. This article discusses the origin, spread, and influences of online social networking. The first part focuses on how people interact with each other online through their online identities (avatars), how people cultivate their online identities, and the reflection of differences between online and offline identities through personal experiences. The second part addresses the reasons why lonely and isolated individuals are more vulnerable to Internet addiction, why too much dependence on Internet can lead to increased loneliness, and the differences between online communication and real-life social interactions. This article sheds light on understanding people's online and offline behaviours and how technologies change the form of social interactions.

## Résumé

Il y a eu de nombreux débats au sujet des avantages et des inconvénients du réseautage social en ligne. Cet article décrit l'origine, le rayonnement et les influences du réseautage social en ligne. La première partie met l'accent sur la manière dont les personnes interagissent entre eux en ligne par leurs identités virtuelles (avatars), la manière dont les personnes cultivent leurs identités en ligne et une réflexion sur les différences entre les identités en ligne et hors ligne par le biais d'expériences personnelles. La seconde partie se penche sur les raisons pour lesquelles les personnes solitaires et isolées sont plus vulnérables à la cyberdépendance, les raisons pour lesquelles une trop grande dépendance à Internet peut conduire à une solitude accrue et les différences entre la communication en ligne et les interactions so-

ciales dans la vraie vie. Cet article jette un éclairage sur la compréhension des comportements en ligne et hors ligne des personnes et la manière dont les technologies changent la forme des interactions sociales.

Online social networking sites have gained significant popularity in subsequent years, such as Facebook and MySpace. Most of the social networking sites contain the following elements: personal profiles, posted pictures and statuses, interest groups, and friend lists. Social networks are "simultaneously real, like natures, narrated, like discourse and collective like society" (Bruno, 1993, p. 6). Online social networking sites combine people's social life with technology, provide a virtual platform for information transmission and opinion sharing, and their primary function is to promote online communication and social connection. This article explores the history of social networking sites, online and offline identity, avatars people create in video games and on social networking pages, how we look at each other online, and the paradox of connection and loneliness related to online social networking sites that impact people's lives. The exploration provokes understanding of people's online and offline behaviours, why online social networking sites became so popular among people, especially the young, and whether online interactions can serve the same role as real life social interactions in fulfilling human emotional needs and benefiting psychological well-being.

Online users represent themselves largely through avatars, which are digital characters created by a specific person and their behaviours are manipulated by him or her (Bailenson & Blascovich, 2004). Avatars

can be understood as a form of online identity. Online identities on social networking pages, or virtual characters we create in video games, can be either similar to or totally different from people's offline identities. An identity is a way people understand who and what they are (Schouten, 1991). In online social networking pages, people create their online avatars through identity performances such as "profile management, friending, becoming a fan ("liking" fan pages), tagging, being tagged, updating statuses, and having responses given by others to one's own status updates" (Salih, 2002). We look at and identify others online mainly through these identity performances, and, at the same time, are consistently being "watched" by others (Bauman, 1966). People gather on social networking sites to socialize, obtain recent information about an individual or a group, or learn about a person's likes and dislikes by exploring his or her profile (Bauman, 1996). Tyler (1994) found, "the subject can never reconcile the split between itself and its mirror image, the eye which sees and the eye which is seen, the I who speaks and the I who is spoken, the subject of desire and the subject of demand, who must pass through the defiles of the other's signifiers" (pp.212-248). This means one's identity is a combination of self-desire and other's evaluation, we identify ourselves both through our own intentions and what others view about us. For instance, one may need to suppress his or her beliefs because of the fear of violating social rules. One may behave in different ways when meeting people with different socio-economic status. People behave in a more causal way when interacting with close friends, but in a more formal way when working in the workplace. Likewise, online identity reflects some characters of the individual and is partly based on others' opinions. The individual can cultivate his or her online identity through activities shown in online social networking websites. For example, if one wants to be considered "cool" or "rebel", he or she may add many "liking" fan pages such as rock music in her personal profile; and if one is an environmentalist, he or she may "post" and "tweet" information about animal protection and environmental-friendly lifestyles and join online groups. This is done because information is shown in public and can influence other people's opinion about him or her. It can also be understood as a form of identity experimentation, because the online identity is more fluid and can be manipulated. This may be why people spend plenty of time online cultivating their online identities — it is a virtual place where people can present themselves in various ways and influence oth-

ers' opinions towards themselves.

An individual's identity is composed of some combination of "now selves"— images of the self as it is perceived by an individual at the time of observation, and the "possible selves"— images of the self that have not yet been realized but that are hoped for or feared (Markus & Nurius, 1986, pp. 954-969). Online social networks create a virtual world in which people can develop alternative identities and fulfill their "possible selves." For example, a girl in grade six or seven can enter a public chatroom and pretend to be a woman around her 20s because most of the identities online are anonymous. She may be very excited because online chatrooms provide her with a new identity  $\frac{3}{4}$  a woman in her 20s. It is normal for every girl to dream of being a lady. As such, chatrooms can be considered something like a time machine as she can go to the future and no longer be considered a child. This activity fulfills her wish of "possible selves." However, because of the "gap" between online and offline identities, the excitement is quickly reduced. After all, pretending to be an adult is hard for a child. Many studies find that pretending to be someone online is very popular among teenagers. According to Valkenburg's study (2008), more than half of the adolescents who use the Internet had experience of pretending to be someone else in emails, instant messaging (IM), or chat lines. One of the reasons may be that forming identity and developing a coherent sense of self is of greater importance during adolescence than any other developmental stages (Erikson, 1994), and online social networking sites provide a good place for experimenting identities and fulfilling possible selves. Another reason is that creating "alternative" identities can bring adolescents the thrilling feeling of escape from the confines of the body (Turkle, 1995), because in the offline adult world they are commonly treated as less knowledgeable, less serious and less competent than adults (Leung, 2011). However, in the online virtual world they can be equal to adults and have more power and control over their lives than in the real world. In a word, online social network page provides people an opportunity to present themselves online, let others know better about themselves, and for some of them, online identity can serve as "possible selves". The excitement of achieving possible selves and identity experimentation may help explain why online social networking is especially popular among teenagers.

Furthermore, I think social networking sites have created a paradox of connection and loneliness. On the one hand, it helps people keep in touch with

friends, broadens social circles and gain social support. As Marshall McLuhan (1962) explained in his work, the world is more like a "global village" connected by the Internet. The Internet helps shorten the physical distance between people and connect the people all around the world. Online social networking sites and virtual chat are also essential ways for people to gain social support. Social support can be seen as a source from which people receive care and compassion, material or behavioral assistance, guidance and advice, as long as evaluations. Social support plays an important role in reducing an individual's stress level, regulating an individual's mood, and providing individuals with sufficient support. A study done by Leimeister, Schweizer, and Kracmar (2008) found that virtual communities and relationships helped meet patient's social needs and offered emotional support; further, the information passed by virtual communities was of great importance in helping patients cope with illness.

Nevertheless, too much reliance on online social interaction can increase people's loneliness. Loneliness is a sense of deprivation in one's social relationships (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992). According to Moore and Schultz's study (1983), lonely adolescents with little social support in real life are less confident of their performances in face-to-face interactions and prefer communicating with people online to gain emotional support and build caring companionships. From one side, interacting with others online, making friends, and sharing interests may be a good way for lonely adolescents to gain the emotional and social support that they cannot get in real life in order to fulfill their psychological needs. Previous research also found lonely individuals preferred online interaction to face-to-face interaction more than non-lonely individuals, and this may due to the fluidity of online identities and anonymity in online interaction (Leung, 2011). Lonely individuals can build online identities that are difficult to achieve in real life; they also perceive online communication as the "Prozac of social communication" (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000, p.20), which makes them feel "safe" and brings less stress than face-to-face communication (Caplan, 2003; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). However, Kim (2009) found that the strong and excessive Internet use of lonely individuals could lead to negative life outcomes, such as harming others, and therefore, isolate them from healthy social activities and increase their loneliness. The findings suggest, even though online virtual communication temporarily fulfills individuals' social needs, it cannot teach people

social skills, such as how to act and communicate with others in offline social occasions. Man is a social animal who needs to communicate with others. Isolation from other people may have several long-term effects on individuals, such as decreasing communication ability, and increasing depression, social-anxiety and inappropriate social behaviours. Moreover, too much dependence on online social interaction and the avoidance of offline social interaction can disturb one's normal daily social activities and relationships with others. The individual who keeps texting, messaging online, refuses to talk with or maintain a relationship with one's parents or peers, risks damaging existing relationships, and causing more family conflict, bullying, and isolation (Leung, 2011). Inadequate family warmth and lack of friends are associated with increased loneliness and more severe individual addiction to the Internet (Caplan, 2003).

In addition, the quality and context of online communication or virtual talk are quite different from real life social interactions and may not fulfill the emotional needs of human beings. According to Harris and Sherblom (2005), synchronicity, media richness and social presence available through the medium are three key factors that shape the interactions that occur. Synchronicity can be defined as the ability of interactions to occur in real time (Harris & Sherblom, 2005). Media richness can be understood as the number of details the medium carries about the members of the group. Face-to-face communication is very high in media richness (e.g. words, voice, and gestures), whereas telephone conversation is not as rich (e.g. words and voice), and text-based conversation is very lean on detail (i.e. only words). Social presence requires the medium to form emotional connections between members (McArthur, 2009). Those three factors can be understood as qualitative elements that measure the quality of an interaction. Regarding these three elements, the quality of online social interactions is challenged. Online social interactions often occur with delay, lack media richness (most are text-based), and seldom build emotional connections between the conversation members. Additional information (e.g., eye contact, body language, and facial expression) also plays an important role in interpersonal communication. It helps people express their emotions and show concern towards others more authentically and fully. For example, smiling as a form of non-verbal communication can be a way of showing friendliness and has positive effects on others (Ekman, Davidson, & Friesen, 1990; Ekman & Friesen, 1982; Ekman, Friesen, & Ancoli, 1980). This

non-verbal information is essential in building a friendly and harmonious conversation environment. However, online conversation lacks these elements. Online interaction cannot provide as much emotional response, intimacy, and compassion as in face-to-face communication. For example, if one goes out with friends, one can enjoy the care and intimacy through eye-to-eye contact, gestures and feeling of being needed. This largely fulfills one's emotional needs and decreases loneliness.

In conclusion, the development of the Internet and social networking sites has facilitated social interactions, provided places for self-presentations and kept people in touch with their friends. However, it has also brought some problems, such as the split between online and offline identities, loneliness and low-quality social interactions. In the future, with the development of new technology, the ways for people to interact and communicate with each other will become more and more diverse. Whether digital communications can replace face-to-face conversations, meet people's emotional needs, and benefit people's psychological well-being is still in question.



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