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'The presentation of self in the online world': Goffman and the study of online identities

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Liam Bullingham

Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Ana C. Vasconcelos

University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract

This paper presents an exemplification and discussion of the contemporaneity of Erving Goffman's work and of its applicability to the analysis of identity and presentation of self in the blogging and Second Life [SL] contexts. An analysis of online identity and interaction practices in ten different cases of bloggers and SL inhabitants and of their online spaces is presented in terms of: expressions given; embellishment as minor form of persona adoption; dividing the self; conforming and 'fitting in'; and masking, anonymity and pseudonymity. The key finding of the research is that, contrary to engaging with the process of whole persona adoption, participants were keen to re-create their offline self online, but engaged in editing facets of self. This emphasizes the key premise in Goffman's work that when in 'front stage', people deliberately chose to project a given identity. It is concluded that Goffman's original framework is of great usefulness as an explanatory framework for understanding identity through interaction and the presentation of self in the online world. Equally, the online environment, with its enhanced potential for editing the self, can offer opportunities to contribute to the further development of the Goffman framework.

Keywords

Online identity; online interaction; Erving Goffman; constructivist case studies

1. Introduction: Erving Goffman and online identity and interaction

Erving Goffman introduced a novel conceptualisation of identity construction in the study of human interaction through the use of metaphors borrowed from *dramaturgy* [1]. In his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman [1] analyses interpersonal interaction and how individuals 'perform' in order to project a desirable image, using the theatre to illustrate individuals' contrasting *front stage* and *back stage* behaviour. During interaction, those participating are viewed as *actors* [1]. When in front stage, an actor is conscious of being observed by an audience and will perform to those watching by observing certain rules and social conventions [1], as failing to do so means *losing face* [2] and failing to project the image/persona they wish to create. The actor's behaviour will be different in a private, backstage environment, however, as no performance is necessary. Brown [3, p. 162] refers to performance as 'self presentation', considering that it provides us with a way to form new identities and thus convince ourselves we become an enhanced person. One of Goffman's key arguments is that individuals have both expressions that they *give* and those that they *give off* [1]. In the case of the former, impressions that the individual intends to produce are communicated, but with the latter, impressions that were not intended to be given are received by the audience.

In addition to the impressions we give and give off, Goffman also considered more-established metaphors such as the *mask* as a means for deception in face-to-face interaction [1, p. 57]. Because 'a mask of manner can be held in place from within' an individual can bring forth certain aspects of his/her self in the interaction while simultaneously marginalising others. The individual is not 'becoming somebody else' when s/he does this, but rather as Park [4] argued and Goffman later illustrated by citing communities in Shetland and the army soldier [1], both the mask worn

Corresponding author:

Liam Bullingham, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, S1 1WB. Email: l.bullingham@shu.ac.uk

and the hidden person behind it are facets of the same individual.

Goffman considered that technology of his day could facilitate the 'interaction order', a notion he adopted for the entire face-to-face interaction domain [5], but argued that telephone conversations are essentially 'a departure from the norm' [6], a 'marginal' way to interact socially [7, p. 70] and provide an inferior version of 'the primordial real thing' [5], implying that technology-mediated interaction may be insufficiently rich due to a lack of visible cues present in physical interaction.

In proceeding years, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has meant non-physical online environments for social interaction have emerged and it has been debated whether Goffman's interaction order is still applicable to these online environments. Arundale [8] argues that Goffman's work, being several decades old, is now outmoded and should be remodelled to incorporate progress in research and technology, but Miller explains that electronic interaction is a natural extension to what Goffman posited [9].

Blogging technology has now advanced to include web 2.0 and multimedia features such as photos, videos, 'gadgets', favourite music, personal biography, 'friends' lists, and links to the blogger's social networking profiles [10]. All of these, in addition to highly customisable backgrounds, allow bloggers to present a wide range of identity indicators [11] and therefore introduce 'richness' to their communications. Jenkins [12] notes that face-to-face interaction remains 'the real thing', but acknowledges the technological progress in CMC and finds virtual world avatars to be 'perhaps, among the most elaborate examples of impression management that one can imagine'. Jenkins then claims the gulf between face-to-face and digital interaction that Miller [9] identified has been bridged due to a relative richness in modern CMC. Laughey [13] also proposes that Goffman's theories can be applied to CMC and Jacobsen, [14] endorses the timelessness and versatility of Goffman's theories. More recently, Miller and Arnold [15] viewed online interaction in Goffman's terms by seeing offline interactions as back-stage preparation areas for interactions that occur online. It also can be argued that the notions of *giving* and *giving off* could be carried across to CMC, including the spheres of blogs and SL.

This paper explores and discusses the applicability of Goffman's work to the analysis of the presentation of self and of interaction in the online world. The following sections discuss the relationship between Goffman's propositions and current online identity and interaction in more detail. Then, an analysis of online identity and interaction practices in ten different cases of bloggers, SL inhabitants and their online spaces is presented. We conclude by discussing the key finding of this research.

2. The presentation of self in the online world

2.1. Online selves and alternative personæ

It has been proposed above that online environments provide their users the potential to perform and present different identities. The distance between performer and audience that physical detachment provides makes it easy to conceal aspects of the offline self and embellish the online - Goffman might consider this to be a reflection of 'the 'splitting' character of the self during interaction' [7, p. 117] where the self is divided. Baptista [16, p. 212] considers that new identities are not created online, but division of the self 'can be found in everyday face-to-face interaction'. In this case, the 'online self' can be thought of as a facet of a wider identity, joining the self in other offline contexts, whereas, in contrast, Vaast [17] discusses the creation of 'new selves' online. In contrast,

Regardless of how the self is conceptualised, both Vaast [17] and Whitworth [18] argue that online identity facilitates persona adoption. Waggoner [19, p. 1] advocates that the term 'real world' should be replaced by that of 'non virtual', stating "*virtual identities, created and maintained by users' non-virtual identities, may be just as "real" to users as their non-virtual identities*". Individuals, then, may not perceive their online identities being distanced from reality.

Baker [20] introduces an alternative perspective, through the concept of 'blended identity', whereby the offline-self informs the creation of a new, online-self which then re-informs the offline-self in further interaction with those the individual first met online. This can be understood in terms of Goffman's *face*, whereby an individual is expected to 'keep face' by maintaining the initial impression that they have made on an audience and 'live up to it' [2]. This construction of face is likened to wearing a mask by Goffman [21]. Considering blended identity within the Goffman framework, it can be understood that the self is merely the *mask* one chooses to wear in a given situation – the mask is donned when an actor interacts with others online and is left on for the purposes of face in future physical interaction, with the audience ignorant that a different self lies beneath for use in a different situation.

The avatar has been seen as a form of mask in the online environment, and its appearance demonstrates the role or interests of its user [22]. Avatar customisation has been found to be more important to SL users than in other virtual worlds, suggesting they place value on how they present themselves:

users prefer avatars that look better, are fitter and stand out more than they do in real life – a form of identity exploration, to be sure, but a somewhat one-sided version of it [23]

In this context, the online environment could be seen as a stage with the offline life as the backstage, and these particular actors strongly invest in their *costume* – wishing to provoke the desired reaction from other SL inhabitants. Avatars are then subject to transformed social interaction [24]. This phenomenon means that with the advent of avatars, users have been able to emphasise and minimise certain aspects of self, such as appearance or behaviour. This has become possible because users are now editors and creators – designing and creating their self-representations, choosing what to bring to the foreground or hide in the background.

Maintaining multiple blogs means the blogger can create different personae to suit each blog, and so the self is effectively broken up with its varying readerships receiving different information. Some of these blogs could be anonymous, with the blogger disseminating risqué or inappropriate subject matter away from their primary blog via a second blog. Here, there is a primary online self, but when needed a second persona is utilised, and to avoid its output compromising either the offline self or the primary online self and thus bringing about a loss of ‘face’, identity is masked. The SL equivalent of the second blog is the alternative avatar, or ‘alt’. These are additional avatars and are used for differing purposes to the primary one [25; 22] and can be independent of the core avatar in that they may have a different appearance and different friends, etc. though the user behind them remains the same. The very fact that alts are an option for SL users means that they may in fact not have a main avatar and that the different aspects of their identity are distributed among several avatars of equal significance. This is unlikely however, as it was found that 98% of SL users are able to cite one particular avatar as their primary representation [23]. Although Goffman's work concerned subtleties in everyday interaction, rather than extreme situations such as the use of alter egos, it can be considered that the use of alts is a manifestation of Goffman's claim that we adopt multiple roles and multiple identities in our everyday life [1].

Boellstorff [25] gathered many illuminating accounts from SL inhabitants concerning identity in interaction, such as: i) users soon cease role-playing and subsequently become themselves; ii) regardless of intentions, people behave slightly differently when interacting online; iii) most people engage with SL as themselves; iv) people online conceal some personality traits and emphasise others. In Goffman's terms: actors start using props but then marginalise them; however, the actor still performs on stage and it is the ‘unconscious performance’ that is noted; even when doing so, the user is still bringing an offline self which ‘performs’ in interaction with the online environment. Concealing personality traits is a direct example of Goffman's [1] ‘*impression management*’, as the actor attempts to control those aspects of self that the audience perceives. Boellstorff's accounts here serve to establish a link between Goffman's theories and online behaviour.

2.2. ‘Identity tourism’, masking and unmasking

Identity tourism [26] occurs when a user of an online environment such as blogging or SL utilises the potential for anonymity to adopt a different gender or race. Once doing this, the user, knowing nothing about being say, female or black (or both) behaves and talks in a stereotypical way with the result that they later feel they know how it is to inhabit this ‘other’ skin. There is a tendency for SL users to conform to norm within the virtual world:

While SL offers users avatar sets that reflect ethnic diversity, most users opt for an avatar that conforms to the ideal of beauty in American culture that is 20-something, toned/buxom and white [27]

It has also been found that users across three virtual worlds (including SL) aim for the Western concept of beauty, and that older or under/overweight users especially create “leaner, younger, more fashionable versions of themselves” [23]. Welles finds SL to be ‘the whitest environment I've ever experienced’ [28] and speculates that many black users may use white avatars in order to be accepted. Nakamura notes ‘there are social advantages to being white in-game’ [29] and among the literature there is little to contradict this view. Goffman, might argue that those attempting to match convention in SL are ‘cynical performers’, ‘whose audiences will not allow them to be sincere’ [1, p. 29].

Bloggers writing within sensitive political contexts may have to exercise self-censorship to avoid government filtering, arrest [30, p. 2-4] which can mean avoiding discussing politically-sensitive topics. In these contexts bloggers were shown to employ three tactics: commenting on events rather than stating personal opinion, using metaphor and analogy, and writing anonymously or pseudonymously [31]. This understood through Goffman [1, p. 14] means that bloggers showing their true identities carefully edit the messages they ‘give’ their audience and must hope they are ‘giving off’ nothing. It can be interpreted that, by self-censoring, these bloggers are forced to present a politically-

acceptable persona, but attempt to broadcast their true selves indirectly by using the first two tactics, or are being forced to mask identity due to political pressures.

Enjoying anonymity via the adoption of a pseudonym means bloggers writing in contexts characterised by freedom of speech need not censor themselves at all. Sex blogs - which are generally anonymous - allow bloggers to write, 'with total abandon. No taboos, no restrictions by the so-called rules of polite society' [32, p. viii]. Suler's 'online disinhibition effect' [33] occurs in these contexts. Boellstorff [25] finds the phenomenon is applicable to both SL and blogging. However Reid, discussing disinhibition in MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), reminds us:

Being disinhibited is not the same as being uninhibited. MUD users experience a redefinition of social inhibitions; they do not experience the annihilation of them...there is no moment on an MUD in which users are not enmeshed within a web of social rules and expectations [34, p. 112]

Individuals, therefore, encouraged by separation and the absence of effective retaliation, are encouraged to adopt a different online persona, but the effect is finite in that there is the need to observe rules and conventions local to the online community or environment. They are still bound by a *social contract* and interaction is ruled by *normative consensus* [5].

Belle de Jour [35] and *Nightjack* [36] were examples of bloggers emancipated by pseudonymity until the authors were forced to reveal their identity [37; 38]. In earlier posts, the bloggers could write anything that came to mind without fear of it affecting personal image or relationship with employer [39], but once unmasked, *Nightjack's* eponymous blog was deleted and any controversial comment made by 'Belle' would be damaging as it would be attributed to the offline identity of its author - as such, the nature of what the blog can provide changed. With the loss of their pseudonym, we may understand, in Goffman terms, that the bloggers have been unmasked on stage and that they must now minimise the expressions they 'give' to the audience, as those 'given off' could now cause substantial damage.

3. Methodology

The complex nature of online identity requires the exploration of rich data such as opinions, observations and anecdotes. The perceptions and viewpoints of users are important here and because this research focuses on intricate identity and on how it is constructed through interaction practices within two online communities, the 'contextual sensitivity' provided by qualitative research [40] is key. This research employed an approach that is both interpretive [41], understanding identity through the interpretations made by its participants, and constructivist [42], by perceiving identity as constructed through the interactions between the participants and their audience. Its research strategy was case study based, through the exploration of the individual cases of bloggers and their respective blogs, SL users and their respective usage of SL, or users of bot. A case study research design was deemed appropriate, as the exploration of context is a key component of the research design [43]). The use of constructivist case studies, based on the exploration of the experiences of individuals and their contexts, is not new in information research as exemplified, for example, by Pickard [44].

Due to ethical reasons, participants selected were competent adults not in dependent relationships. They either:

1. actively write a personal blog or have experience of doing so; or
2. are an active user of SL or have experience of being one; or
3. are active users of both and,
4. as participants were being asked to draw on experience when speaking about blogging or SL, participants with a minimum of 12 months' experience were sought.

The first two kinds of participants were interviewed as either bloggers or SL users, with no cross-over. This segregation is due to the objective of analysing findings from each medium individually before comparing them at the conclusion stage. Although recruiting participants solely from the third category may have produced highly useful comparative data, it was also important to gather the perspectives of those that had experience of only one of the environments. The sampling approach used a combination of convenience and snowballing techniques and led to the recruitment of the following participants, which, with their blogs and SL participation, provided ten different case studies:

ID	Pseudonym	Job/position	Profile
B1	<i>Saba</i>	Librarian	Four years' experience of writing a personal blog. Uses her blog to record her activities and professional interests.
B2	<i>Betty</i>	Retired social worker	Maintains a personal blog, writing under a pseudonym, created in order to explore the nature of blogging and

			express personal thoughts and feelings.
B3	<i>Alexander</i>	Lecturer	Wrote a blog from 2002-6 to reflect on PhD experiences, share advice and gain motivation. After his studies finished, Alexander ceased posting as the blog had served its purpose.
B4	<i>Hope</i>	Masters Student	Has blogged for three years. Reveals her offline identity and uses blogging to express feelings and communicate with face-to-face friends, who are the intended audience.
SL1	<i>Laura</i>	Librarian	Has been using SL for 5-6 years. Uses SL in collaboration with colleagues, for professional purposes, to keep up-to-date with technology, and to build professional knowledge.
SL2	<i>Robin</i>	PhD student	Has used SL since its beta version in 2002. Robin started using SL for amusement and out of curiosity about its potential. He has since started using SL for PhD research.
SL3	<i>Waris</i>	Lecturer	Started using SL explore its pedagogical potential. She has found it difficult and frustrating to use, however, and stays anonymous as she does not wish her self-perceived ineptness to reflect on her offline status.
SL4	<i>Marco</i>	PhD student	SL is the subject of Marco's PhD research; he is interested in its potential as an educational tool. He tries to make his avatar 'true to life', but admits his online self is more confident and does not use his offline name in SL.
B+SL1	<i>Leila</i>	Lecturer	Has been blogging since 2003 and using SL since 2007. She blogs to maintain a professional blogging presence and also uses SL to build a professional profile. Leila also uses SL to follow personal interests.
B+SL2	<i>Matilda</i>	MSc. Student	Has sporadically blogged for 4-5 years and has been using SL for less than a year. She uses her blog as a personal online diary and engages with SL for her Masters studies.

Table 1 – Participant profiles

Semi-structured interviews with a mixture of open and closed questions were used. This method allows interviewees to answer questions flexibly, expanding on topics in which they are interested [45] but also provide unambiguous answers when required. Open-ended questions however, can be difficult for interviewees to answer [4] so a set of prompts to either assist interviewees in answering questions or disclose everything they were willing to impart was prepared. The non-prescriptive structure enabled to elicit in-depth answers in the form of detailed accounts and anecdotes. Flexibility was also an advantage as follow-up questions were able to be asked spontaneously and so achieve a great level of depth in relation to discussing the complicated issue of identity. The interviews lasted between 20 and 120 minutes, with an average duration of 45 minutes per interview. All interviews were fully transcribed.

Ongoing desktop research was also used as a data collection method, and was specifically conducted before and after interviews depending on the context, as participants were able to indicate new directions for research.

The constant comparative method of Grounded Theory was used in the analysis. Strauss and Corbin [47] also emphasise the "close relationship" between data collection, analysis and the final theory here. In relation to this project, this means that the literature review, desktop research and interview data inform the analysis, which in turn also suggests new avenues for further data collection. A triangulation of methods also means that it becomes more difficult to misunderstand data [48], with many information sources providing voices that either agree or disagree about a point. Coding, using the constant comparative method, was central to the process however. Interview transcripts were screened several times and notes were taken before certain themes emerged. Silverman [49] argues that in qualitative research, apparently inconsequential details can prove to be excellent data, and so time was taken to study accounts all in responses, not just those that related to research questions. Themes were then colour-coded using Microsoft Word and subsequently the highlighted text was divided into categories. This was not exactly a linear process however, with the scope of several findings changing and other, marginal theories being abandoned. From this process, the following

five categories have emerged:

- Expressions given
- Embellishment as minor form of persona adoption
- Dividing the self
- Conforming and ‘fitting in’
- Masking, anonymity and pseudonymity

An additional stage of data analysis, exploring relationships between these categories, has subsequently led to the emergence of a core category, ‘recreating the offline self online’. This required a further stage of analysis, selective coding [47], involving the exploration of the relationships between this core category and the other five categories. These are now presented and discussed, respectively, in sections 4 and 5.

4. Research findings

4.1. Expressions given

Understood in terms of Goffman’s concept of expressions we ‘give’ to others [1], participants across blogging and SL were keen to present themselves in certain ways online. Female participants, for example, expressed their femininity using various methods. Asked to describe her blog, Matilda said, ‘it’s really pretty - pink with butterflies’. The expression of femininity expands to name - Betty prefers to blog anonymously, using the pseudonym ‘Velvet Paws’ and explains the reason for this choice by saying:

Well, Velvet Paws came about because I like velvet, and I like cats! I suppose it’s slightly feminine too, I wouldn’t want to sound like a man

Although the participant elects to mask offline identity by using a pseudonym, giving the impression of femininity is important, even though it means supplying an identity clue. Interestingly, male participants did not present contrasting displays of masculinity to re-affirm their persona, suggesting that the need to express maleness is less important, or rather when no other gender clues are provided, that it is assumed.

Appearing to be fun or creative online is also a consideration for participants. Matilda describes her SL home by saying ‘it’s in the tree house on the [site name] Island. I chose the location because it was fun and unusual’. Leila described her SL residence, which includes ‘a kind of amazing alien spaceship’, showing an appreciation of the imaginative ‘I really think it’s art, actually, because it’s extraordinary, it makes noises as well and it has colours and odd shapes’. In his early days in SL, Robin recalls walking around, ‘dressed in a wolf suit, stuff like that, you know, just for a giggle and a laugh’. Fun here directs the presentation of self.

In complete contrast, other participants might also seek to appear professional or proficient due to influences such as their career. Laura, a librarian, noted that, ‘potentially furrries can be offensive to people in different cultures’ and as such designed her avatar to be, ‘sort of MOR [middle-of-the-road], least offensive’ therefore projecting a professional image to library users. Similarly, Robin describes his current avatar as ‘my professional Joe one...I walk round in this posh brown suit’. To avoid alienating colleagues, Saba states ‘I never say anything on there that I wouldn’t say in work’. Work, here, is seen to take priority over expression.

Proficiency can be expressed in terms of removing blog posts that in hindsight ‘look silly or like nonsense’ (Hope), or making your SL workplace/island appear graphically impressive, presenting the user as ‘knowledgeable’ and ‘competent’ [50]. Leila has this latter motivation with her SL island, which she uses for her career. She talked of ‘trying to keep it up to date in terms of it looking quite fresh and not outmoded’ and demonstrated this by saying ‘there’s a lot of very high quality buildings and plants and all that kind of stuff that creates the environment’. Aspects of the self that do not comply with expectations are minimised or concealed in order to comply with this presentation, as demonstrated by Saba above.

All participants responded that they do not engage in gender swapping, race swapping, or significant departures from their offline selves. Marco and Alexander were emphatic on this point, saying ‘no never. I would not even think of it as something to do’ and also ‘no, not that I recall, not even to be tempted to either’.

The above suggests that participants present themselves as honest or candid, and indeed, there is evidence to confirm this, as seen from the following comments:

I just blog about what occurs to me. I hope I appear sincere (Betty)

I don't really want to have to put on a facade for people or play games with people, I don't see a need for it (Waris)

Closely related to this is the desire to appear to be speaking candidly, expressed through writing about emotions. Referring to her first blog, Matilda said 'When I started writing I was sad or depressed or I had something to say'. 'Having something to say' suggests a frank account, something the participant wishes to disclose. Speaking about one of her blogs, Leila contributed 'there's quite a lot of things on depression and also joy, so there's a lot more about how I'm feeling'. Extreme emotions here indicate sincerity, as the blog thus appears raw and unedited. This confessional style suggests that the reader is being given access to powerful feelings than have not been altered for style or storytelling, but rather, are sincere.

These accounts suggest that there are different gradations in expressions of self and perhaps a thin boundary between persona adoption and more emphasized enhancement of certain aspects of self. This is further developed in the following section.

4.2. *Embellishment as a minor form of persona adoption*

Several forms of 'embellishment of self' were found in both SL and blogging. Blogging participants admitted to exaggerating posts for the purposes of storytelling:

I might make events sound slightly neater or certainly I'd be selective in the way I tell a story...I might also talk about other things and make a joke or a story out of problems, rather than giving a holistic representation of what had gone on (Leila)

This represents a form of minor persona adoption, rather than creating a completely new identity online. However, the blogging environment provides an opportunity for the writer to exaggerate events.

The SL environment also presents opportunities for embellishment. Asked for an example of a minor persona adoption in SL, Waris volunteered:

Making yourself look like you were when you were 18, rather than when you are 50 or something. Going 'back in time', it's one place you can do it, it's really easily done. Present yourself as an 18 year old rather than a 50 year old

This idea of 'going back in time' could be a way for a SL user who worries about giving an accurate portrayal online to adopt a persona without compromising their moral values, or alternatively, the user may consider that they portraying an accurate self-representation, and that age is simply irrelevant online.

Robin highlights that users might have conditions that single them out for discrimination in the offline world, but do not disclose this to enjoy 'a level playing field' in SL.

Embellishment was identified as masking and as a minor form of persona adoption by participants and although it was found to occur in both media, it takes many more manifestations in SL than in blogging. SL then, has been found to be an open environment for many minor forms of persona adoption.

4.3. *Dividing the self*

Although participants generally reproduced their offline selves online, they would not always replicate their *whole* offline identity, but rather, just highlight aspects of their personality. What is meant by this is that the offline self is divided up into aspects of self, and only some of these aspects are presented online. This partially explains how users adopt online personae.

Leila maintains several blogs. Explaining why she and a colleague started one relating to information literacy (IL), she said 'the motive there started out being publicity for our project, making it better known' this developed subsequently though to involve part of the participant's personality 'it evolved into, I suppose it's an extension of having been a librarian, of useful stuff that people might want to know'. In contrast, her SL blog was established for different reasons:

It started as an outlet for a particular kind of writing which I enjoy doing, which is making little stories out of in this case what I was doing in SL, which seemed in some cases bizarre but also fascinating. In a lot of ways it's more personal, because I'm talking about my Second Life existence, but also my emotions

Leila here blogs about emotions within a narrative structure and also the writing in this blog is heavily stylised. As such, she presents an 'adventurous' or 'storytelling' side. Two blogs here, seemingly the antithesis of each other, are written by the same individual.

Laura takes care to separate the personal and professional here. Indeed, she later said ‘it’s personal in the sense that it’s personal professional development, but it’s not my home life’. What this means is that other SL users see Laura’s ‘professional side’ in interactions, but never her personal side. Similarly, Saba gave the following account about writing her blog:

I think that you have to think carefully about what you’re writing, just in case people are gonna come back and say ‘you really shouldn’t have written that on there’. I think defining my personal self and my professional self is something I’ve really struggled with

Perhaps this division of self is necessary due to the complexity of the offline self. It is a ‘melting pot’ of different contexts which need to be married, but in the online environment it is simpler and more relevant to divide the self into aspects like ‘professional’ or ‘storytelling’.

Although participants are not donning a mask, they are emphasising some parts of self and censoring others. The readership of the blog/other SL user is therefore presented with an edited version of the self, whereas offline it might be given a fuller picture, so what occurs is a ‘partial masking’. The literature recognises this, and perhaps goes further by identifying a dual process of repression and supplementation [51] whereby bloggers present certain aspects of their personality, but choose to not reveal others. This has been seen to be applicable to avatar-based environments such as SL and termed ‘transformed social interaction’ [24].

4.4. *Conforming and ‘fitting in’ - a key motivation for persona adoption*

SL users volunteered many reasons for persona adoption in comparison with blogging participants. Attempting to rationalise persona adoption in the Virtual World, Marco stated:

I have seen some users in Second Life who have actually a truly different appearance and identity in real life. I think they are the people mostly who cannot act in real life as they want to do because of family pressure or society pressure

Outside influence is important here. ‘Pressures’ come from the society SL users live in, but also within a more intimate circle, the family unit. The online disinhibition effect [33] is applicable here, and this process is highly similar to the one Bargh et al. [52] describe, whereby the true or inner-self is presented online, but not in face-to-face conversation. This represents an inversion of the intended process, but is relevant to the research nevertheless.

Closely related to societal pressure is the need conform, or ‘fit in’. This was found among SL users in the literature [23, 28, 29] and in the interview data. Laura recalled trying to design her avatar to closely resemble herself ‘But everybody’s avatar seems to be more beautiful and younger than they are’. Later in the interview, Laura attempted to explain a possible reason for this by saying, ‘there’s just more scope to make yourself look younger and more beautiful than there is to make yourself look old’. Leila would seem to agree, commenting, ‘it’s...more difficult for example to find skins that are wrinkled and so forth’. SL users are discouraged to make their avatars resemble anything but an idealised image of youth it seems; this is evidenced by the disproportional selection of SL skins, which does not stretch to more-mature ones. Further evidence is provided by SL shoe sizes, Leila gives the following account:

There was a point where my feet were outside my shoes. In Second Life, female shoes are mostly size zero. Once I realised my feet were outside my shoes, I tried to edit my shoes so they weren’t outside my feet and started to realise that it was quite difficult to find shoes that are decorative; and as my standards of appearance went up, as I found the fashion blogs and things and found out what was available, and found out this would be fun and I was willing to spend some of my own money on this, and for a while I had this worry about fashion image and how to be thin, and this sort of thing, and in the end I just gave up and shrunk my feet down to size 0.

Blogging examples were rarer, but Hope did opine, ‘things are a little bit more exaggerated when people talk for their communities’. The blogging community, that is, other users, can therefore influence what or how the blogger writes. However, blogging participants did not express a need to change themselves for the sake of their audience or community and their mode of engagement was perhaps closer to a *platform performance*, in Goffman terms [5]. Comments on the matter included: ‘I didn’t look for many audiences or readers; I just wanted to write for myself’ (Matilda) and ‘I had no sense of any actual audience – no-one ever emailed me to say they read it or anything like that’ (Alexander). Blogging participants do not feel the same pressure to conform as SL users do, perhaps because avatar appearance is central to fitting in the latter, and avatars are less important in blogging.

4.5. Masking, anonymity and pseudonymity

Fear is put forward as a strong reason for opting for anonymity in SL:

Griefing, verbal abuse or sexual abuse and perceived violence are the most negative experiences that people have in Second Life. Users know that these sorts of situations are happening and might also occur to them.

Therefore, I think users are wary and do not want to reveal their real life identity very much. (Marco)

This is fear of negative behaviour in interactions. By masking identity, this fear may be reduced, as the act cannot be carried through to the offline person. An avatar can be deleted, but if the negative act happens to an avatar associated with an offline person, then the act might seem more personal and permanent for the user, creating wariness on their part. Fear of damaging reputation is expressed by Waris, who holds a good reputation among colleagues and in her industry, but remains anonymous in SL:

Maybe they just don't like making fools of themselves...

There was however, a reported lack of faith in anonymity on the internet:

I'm not sure I believe in anonymity on the net, not entirely, anyway (Betty)

people think they're anonymous, that you can't really know who they are, whereas I would say there are certainly people who do know exactly who you are all the time, people like Google or your ISP, or so forth, they can link information up about you (Alexander)

Anonymising due of fear can be seen as a subtler form of masking and persona adoption, as users are pressured into it by external influences.

5. Recreating the offline self online

The key finding from interview data is that participants often attempt to re-create their offline selves online, rather than actively engaging with persona adoption. Waggoner noted that users can see their online selves as having equal status with their offline selves [19]; the two selves then, are not different, but the same entity in different contexts. Research findings agree to an extent by indicating that - if not seeing the two as identical - participants wish to keep them as close together as possible, and not adopt new personæ.

Asked how her blogging self compares with her offline one, Saba said 'I think we're the same, definitely...I find it very difficult to write not how I speak'. Hope added that although on the blogosphere, 'things are a little bit more exaggerated and people talk for their communities' she said of her blogging self, 'I don't think I'm a different person...no. I'm just me'. Blogging voice is found to be true to offline voice here.

In SL, recreation occurs more literally. Describing her avatar, Laura commented 'I tried to make her look as similar to me as possible'. Widening scope beyond this question, Robin outlines his view on the matter:

To me, the guy that's on the screen - because the avatar is essentially a different thing - but the guy that's on the screen is just a thing on the screen that I control; it's got my personality, it is me essentially

So, rather than there being a separate online self, the personality seen through the avatar is fully informed by the offline self for Robin.

Another example of the recreation of the offline self online is the personal information given by participants to others, the availability of 'first life' data to readers/other SL users 'anchors' the online self to the offline one, stunting persona adoption. Asked whether they publish personal information such as name and contact details, Saba responded 'Yeah, my name's on there, where I live, what I've done before, there's stuff about my own dissertation on there. It's pretty easy to find out about who I am and where I work'. Releasing such information invites blog readers to treat the blogging self as one and the same as the RL self. Even in the case of Matilda when some filtering occurs, the pseudonym used is the participant's nickname, and so is rooted in her offline self ('no, but for my friends it's obvious, because I use my nickname, so everyone knows me').

SL users shared their identities with offline friends:

I have friends in SL who are mostly my friends in RL as well. That is, I already know them in real life. So I don't have problem to reveal my real life identity to them (Robin)

Both friends and colleagues are thus allowed into the SL user's online life. The continuation of *contacts* and *encounters* [5] from offline life is evident here. As such, these users would have little reason for presenting themselves as being different in SL. SL users who wish to be themselves and reject role-playing are also observed by Boellstorff [25] and Katz writes:

In the metaverse, it's possible to try on all sorts of identities, but in the end, don't you bring yourself across the digital borders? [53]

Little is present from the blogging literature to refer to this though, other than that bloggers (more than gamers or dating website users) are likely to portray themselves as being close to their offline selves when given the opportunity to use a blogging avatar [54].

This phenomenon works in contrast with the practice of persona adoption, and shows that there is an espoused desire amongst users to give a true, undistorted picture of themselves online. They do this by including real life details on a blog or designing an avatar to have a keen likeness to their appearance. However, just because they do so, this does not mean that there is no scope for adoption in another avatar, another blog. Leila for example, has SY, a SL avatar who she thinks of as herself, but yet DS, her alt, is 'more like dressing up dollies' and both appears and acts differently to SY. It can be possible to both be one's 'real self' and through a different incarnation also experiment with a new self too.

6. Conclusions

This paper set out to discuss the applicability and contemporaneity of Goffman's work to the analysis of the presentation of self and of interaction in the online world, particularly in the blogging and SL contexts. Its key finding is that, contrary to engaging in the process of whole persona adoption, the participants in this particular study were keen to re-create their offline self online. This was achieved by creating a blogging voice which is true to the offline one, and by publishing personal details about the offline self online, or designing the avatar to resemble the offline self in SL, and in disclosing offline identity in SL. This means that the online self is 'anchored' to the offline one, and that disparity between the two selves is minimised. Reasons for this included wishing to be honest and direct with others, and the belief that identity does not really change online, it is still informed by the offline self. This type of statement, in itself, emphasizes a key premise in Goffman's work – that, when in 'front stage' we deliberately chose to project a given identity.

Nevertheless, various expressions were 'given' by respondents [1] that emphasize certain aspects of the self (such as being particularly feminine, creative, fun, professional, proficient, candid or belonging to a particular group) and minimise others. While it was not established that these were examples of personæ being adopted, it was clear that certain qualities could be suppressed while these qualities were emphasised, thus, offering opportunities for editing the self. These accounts suggested different gradations in edits of the self and perhaps a thin boundary between persona adoption and more emphasized editing of certain aspects of self.

Embellishment of self can be viewed as a subtle and limited form of persona adoption, especially when participants might not even consider that they are representing themselves differently or when there is no obvious obligation to present one's self as one appears offline. The research findings show that there are reasons why users choose to adopt personæ and particular masks - to conform and 'fit in' and to explore the advantages of anonymity. It was also seen that the process can be reversed, with the 'true self' being the persona in SL when the user's offline self is subject to family or societal pressure. Research findings also suggest that masking identity when motivated by fear could be considered a minor form of persona adoption.

There were differences between the practices of bloggers and those of SL inhabitants in this study, with the latter having more obvious options to deviate from the offline self and adopt personæ in terms of the appearance of the 3D avatar. In blogging, it is perhaps expected that persona adoption does not occur, unless a detachment from the offline self is obvious, such as in the case of pseudonymous blogging. Also, the nature of interaction is different, with blogging resembling more closely *platform performances* and the SL environment offering more opportunities for *contacts* and *encounters* [5]. It is suggested that further work in this area should shed light on the rules of engagement that are inherent to each context.

The findings from this research exemplify different aspects of the Goffman framework in understanding the process of construction of online identities and its manifestations. The various cases explored here demonstrate that Goffman's original framework is, not only still applicable, but also of great usefulness as an explanatory framework for understanding identity through interaction and presentation of self in the online world. Equally, the online environment, with its enhanced potential for editing the self, can offer opportunities to contribute to further developing the Goffman framework, namely, by suggesting that there are different gradations in editing the self and in its resulting manifestations and by exploring the boundary and grey areas between persona adoption and more pronounced editing of self.

7. References

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