Individuals in Relation to the Digital Social World
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From its earliest days as a science fiction dream to its current commercial incarnation, the Internet has produced numerous fantasies about a life free of physical and social constraints. Online society was to be utopian, prompting researchers and users to work towards this ideal. Unfortunately, as with all good dreams, we are reaching the moment of waking and becoming aware of the constraints of reality. Cyberspace is not the utopian fantasy once envisioned. Many of the social constraints articulated by Freud, Goffman, Mead, and Weber framing physical reality are quickly seeping into the digital world. Although these interactions took place long before the invention of the Internet, a brief examination of them is applicable as we look at major contemporary thought and themes dealing with individuals in relation to their digital social world.

During social interaction, people regularly present themselves while simultaneously reading the presentations of others. Depending on one's personality, an individual will adjust aspects of their presentation according to the reactions and presentations of those around them. Fundamentally, social interaction is a negotiation between individuals performing within a particular social context to convey aspects of their identity. This negotiation often occurs with little conscious thought. People comfortably interact with one another, revealing what is appropriate while assessing what information is being given. It is important to look at some of the underlying motivations and actions that occur as people interact, focusing on face-to-face communication. Of particular interest is the multi-faceted approach to identity, Goffman's notions of performance/perception, and the importance of and mechanisms for context awareness and regulation. Multiple notions of identity, the internal vs. the social self-awareness, allow individuals to have a sense of who they are in relation to society and culture. By reflexively adjusting one's perception of self in reaction to society, people construct their individual identity.

Approaches to identity abound, and they refer to many different ideas about the self, much of which is grounded in contemporary Western cultural values. Frequently, identity refers to at least two different aspects of the individual - that which is an internalized notion of the self, and that which is the projected version of one's internalized self. Researchers have constructed this distinction in various ways. For example, in *Sex and Temperament*, Margaret Mead described the proof that sex roles are culturally derived. After describing the Arapesh, the Mundugumor, and the Tchambuli culture, where sex behavior is claimed to be of a different order than traditionally expected, Mead concludes that these three situations suggest a very definite conclusion. If those temperamental attitudes which we have traditionally regarded as feminine, such as passivity, responsiveness, and a willingness to cherish children, can so easily be set up as the masculine pattern in one tribe, and in another be outlawed for the majority of women as well as for the majority of men, we no longer have any basis for regarding such aspects of behavior as sex-linked.

Most controversially Freud distinguishes between a public ego, an internal selfish side, and an internal conscience or super-ego. While these approaches are vastly different, they all recognize that the self is complicated, in part because of a separation between internal notions and external ones. In other words, what people produce or convey to others is not necessarily the same as their internal perception of self.

When people interact with others, whether face-to-face or digitally, they convey aspects of themselves through a set of signals that others must learn to read and evaluate. The negotiation between self-presentation and external evaluation can be viewed as a performance, which helps construct an individual's social identity. While internal identity is entirely constructed and maintained by the individual, social identity is perceived externally, relying not on the intention, but the effective expression and perception of an individual's presentation. While one's social identity emerges from one's internal identity, its manifestation is read in light of body conveying it and the situation in which it is being conveyed. The environment plays a crucial role in the production and perception of one's social identity.

While interacting socially, people are aware of and react to the feedback that they receive by the other people in an environment. They adjust their body posture, their facial expressions, and their general presentation. These adjustments are made not to be artificial but to convey appropriate social information for the situation. In the digital world, this adjustment is made by tone and symbols. As articulated best by Goffman, all social interactions can be seen as a series of interactive performances, where the actors are constantly altering their presentation based on their assumptions about what is acceptable in this situation and the reactions that they receive from others. People perform aspects of themselves in order to generate specific impressions, often so that others will perceive them in a positive light.

Drawing from Goffman's performance theory, there are three fundamental components to the passage of social information between individuals. When information is to be conveyed explicitly, it is given, but these messages are also impacted by the subtle and perhaps unconscious messages that are given off by the actors, as well as the intention that the observer might infer. Thus, any social message is not simply a set of factual data, but a negotiation in communication relying on both the signals presented by the actor as well as the signs perceived by the observer. The observer's impressions of a situation are based on inference, which results from mental models derived from previous interactions. As such, a viewer does not always perceive the intentions of an actor. In the digital world, the actor can often mask his intentions.

While interaction operates on impressions, people are often naturally motivated to suppress their own desires in order to please others. In other words, they seek to create a good impression. Social conformity, or collective action, relies on this behavior. The internal need to conform and the fear of perceived social gatekeepers or chat room monitors creates a mechanism for society to be regulated by social norms. Yet, while there is a general desire to

follow the social order, individual personality characteristics determine how important and relevant conformity is.

Additionally, people's previous experiences affect their perception. When reading an actor's performance, the observer is constantly integrating the portrayed information with all previous knowledge, experience, and relevant communicative situations. In evaluating an actor's presentation, people categorize and stereotype the interactions in order to position the actor within their mental model of human behavior. While categorization provides an observer with a mechanism to quickly understand the information that they are being given, it also makes it difficult for an individual to overcome their initial impressions, based on the language used.

Although language may seem just words, text and talk play a vital role in the reproduction of racism. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon writes, "Yes, I must take great pains with my speech, because I shall be more or less judged by it." Thus the role of language not only serves to provide communication, it can be the main way a person is considered to be integrated, or not, into the community. Recognizing this, people are motivated to make that first impression count. When developing a presentation to create a desired impression, people assess what is appropriate and expected, while trying to determine how their presentation is going to be perceived. In other words, people constantly adjust for context and social authority, as described by Weber.

Weber's methodology of situating the social sciences between natural sciences and the cultural sciences were distinctive. He is one of the founding theorists of modernity. He was the first to recognize several diverse aspects of social authority, including charismatic, traditional, and legitimate forms of authority. Much of Weber's concern about social science finds its roots in the idea of culture. Weber takes seriously the notion of culture. He recognizes that to ask a question about society or humans is itself a cultural act. It requires us to place value on something. In other words, for us to even see a problem to study, we must have a value that helps us to see it. Weber sees culture as a historical process that at times leads social change and at others simply reinforces it.

Habits of the Heart by Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton gives us interpretations of modern American culture and a quest for a democratic community that draws on our diverse religious and civic traditions. The arguments of the book speak to the current realities of American society and to the contemporary debate about the country's future. Drawing on sociological and historical studies and on interviews with 'representative' Americans, the authors conclude that the tension between individualism and commitment is central to understanding American culture. The term "lifestyle" is addressed as an expression of private life.

Cultural knowledge requires an understanding of the social qualities of the environment including the location, the time period, the particular occasion, and the general politics and values of the society. Based on previous experiences in a given context, people start developing mental models of these situations, just as they build mental models of people. These models

allow people to associate particular architectural forms with functions and behaviors, allowing people to more rapidly process the situation. People have learned to understand particular design forms and they can quickly separate a fast food restaurant from a pub. Likewise, they understand the meaning of specific situations, thereby realizing that a solemn funeral is an inappropriate place to scream the latest football scores or typing in all capital letters is considered shouting in the digital world.

In addition to situational cues, people adjust for interpersonal context information. When an individual enters a room, they reflect on the others in that space. Even without conversing, people evaluate each other's performances, develop mental categories and get a sense of the people in relation to the space. In such situations, people recognize that they are being observed as well as observing and thus present themselves to be read. Interpersonal contextual information allows the observer to determine what the appropriate roles in this environment are, what types of social identities are acceptable and whether or not they will have anything in common with the other people. Not only does one evaluate the type of people around, but also each individual's presentation. This is not as easy to do in the context of the chat room.

People present themselves differently in particular situations, not always because they are hiding aspects of themselves, but because some behaviors are more appropriate in one context than another. A working mother does not act like a mother in a boardroom meeting; the language that one uses at a pub is not appropriate for church; while leather skirts meant one thing in 1985, they mean something very different in 2002. Based on contextual cues, an individual determines what acceptable behavior is and what aspects of their identity they should perform, not only face-to-face, but on the Internet.

Because a variety of contexts affect individuals differently, one's social identity appears to regularly change in relation to the social situation. As such, an individual may appear to have many different and conflicting social identities. Starting with Freud's divergent opinion in *An Autobiographical Study*, postmodern theorists began to think of the self as incorrigibly fragmented. Seeing the unconscious as a product of culture, not individuality suggests that the self is the product of imagination. Thus, their presentations reflect multiple subject positions, where people can be viewed an aspect of the text of a given situation; the subject is not separated from the situation. Given this take on the individual, it is not surprising that postmodern theorists view the modern individual as undergoing an identity crisis.

In a society where people play many different roles and must constantly adjust for different social contexts, their presentation may appear to be fragmented, but this does not imply that they are. Instead, such adjustments suggest that the individual is maintaining and presenting multiple facets of their identity as appropriate. In any given situation, an individual presents a face, which is the social presentation of one facet of their identity. People maintain many different social facets and often associate particular facets, and therefore faces, with particular contexts. These multitudes of faces and facets do not indicate a collapse of the individual, but instead represent the control with which an individual manages their presentation in everyday life. With little consciousness, people quickly evaluate the context of a given situation,

determine which facet of their identity they wish to convey, and construct a face from which to perform this identity. Thus, in managing multiple facets, people are simply fragmenting their social identities. As people negotiate multiple facets, they unconsciously associate different facets of their identity with particular contexts. For example, one may maintain a work-based facet that only appears when one enters the workspace.

Situations that present conflicting, misleading or inaccurate contextual cues can be disconcerting. For example, it is embarrassing to arrive at a formal cocktail party in a risqué costume having understood the invite to be for a masquerade ball. Misunderstood contextual cues can lead individuals to present inappropriate faces, thereby giving off the wrong impression in cyberspace as well. When an individual wants to contextualize their presentation, such experiences can be perplexing. This is particularly true when segregated contexts are collapsed.

When an individual is placed into a social situation where they relate to different people through different roles, they must reassess what is an appropriate face to present. Situations where multiple contexts collide encourage individuals to react in one of two ways - either aim to present a face that is universally acceptable or risk the social consequences of conveying inappropriate information to some of those observing your presentation. While people seek to present themselves appropriately, they do not necessarily have control over what others reveal about their identity. When two worlds are bridged, information that may have been shared in one context can be shared in the other, potentially creating an awkward social situation. In maintaining and adjusting their identity, people tend to be cognizant of their social surroundings.

Social regulation is effective when people feel the need to conform to social norms. Through fear of disapproval, social sanctions or other consequences, people will self-regulate their own behavior. While social pressure operates in almost any type of social interaction, its impact on crowd behavior takes on an entirely different form. The norms of a crowd are quite different than the average of the individuals' values, as they are fundamentally impacted by the opportunity for anonymity. At the same time, the collective pressure to conform in crowds is dramatically increased. By asserting one's individuality, one is no longer a part of the crowd. As the power of the crowd is quite effective, such nonconformity puts the individual at greater risk. Just as the crowd alters the mental state of an individual, so does perceived authority. Both crowd behavior and obedience to authority indicate the magnitude of social regulatory forces. As people avoid social embarrassment, they are quite likely to behave according to the social norms laid out by the collective.

In order for these forces to function, certain social structures must be operational. First, people must be able to observe or otherwise understand the socially acceptable behaviors. Second, others must be able to observe when an individual is acting out of line and signal their disapproval or suggest punitive possibilities. Third, there must be a mechanism by which people can publicly admonish an individual in an environment where people dread the effects of the potential punishment. People need to have a sense of the other individual, of their existence,

since without the concept of an individual; we could have no sense of responsibility. Thus, in anonymous situations, people's lack of fear of retribution or sense of other people undermines the effectiveness of social regulation.

In the crowd, or chat room environment, it is not a sense of the individual that matters, but the sense of the group as a substitute for the individual. As such, it is more apparent to an individual that they will be punished for acting against the crowd than for acting with the crowd against a broader social norm. Thus, they are more likely to go along with the crowd, as individuality is what is punished in such an environment. Social regulation helps create the norms that people use when they are determining how to properly act. By creating a set of social standards, regulation helps people properly assess the context of a situation. Social regulation also acts as a motivating force for people to perform their identity in a meaningful manner. Without the social pressures of inappropriateness, it is difficult for people to evaluate others and adjust their performance according to the social values, context and perception of others.

While social interaction requires little conscious effort, there are complex processes continually at play. People must process a situation, read the contextual cues, present their internal sense of self in a meaningful way, adjust their presentation depending on others' reactions, and constantly negotiate what is socially acceptable. In all interactions, identity, performance, context and regulation are constantly operating and interacting. Although understanding these behaviors may appear to be a futile academic exercise, it is necessary understanding the digital environment people now play in. While these processes occur unconsciously in the physical world, the underlying structure that motivates them is drastically altered by the new digital environment. Such structural changes result in subtle but significant differences in social interaction, not unlike those described by Freud, Goffman, Mead, and Weber and in *Habits of the Heart*.

References

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