Online Communication in the Digital Age
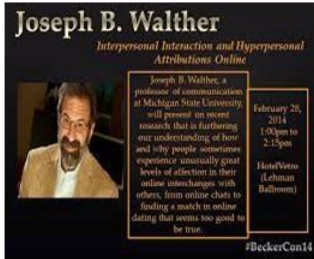**Prof. Rashmi Gaur**
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology
Lecture – 08
Theories of Digital Identity

Good morning and welcome to this module. In the previous module, we have analyzed issues pertaining to the management of digital identity. Today, we will discuss some more theoretical perspectives on identity, particularly those which emphasize on identity shifts. The first model which we would discuss is the hyperpersonal model developed by Joseph Walther in the context of CMC.

According to this model, people can present themselves in a selective and if they want in an idealized manner, which can lead to an enhanced and idealized perceptions of each other. This model is influenced by the ability of individuals to carefully construct their image, which they want to project on screen in the digital environment.

The hyperpersonal model also influences the identity shift and therefore, can be significantly impacted by the feedback to the self-presentation by the other interactants in the digital mode. So, we find that in the CMC, individuals when they prefer to selectively present themselves also modify the conventional transactional

communication model. In the backdrop of CMC, individuals have the ability to craft a carefully curated online persona through selective self-presentation. This involves highlighting their positive traits while minimizing or entirely omitting any negative aspects.

It results in an idealized representation of themselves. By purposefully shaping their digital image, individuals seek to enhance their likability and achieve their relational objectives. Consequently, others may also develop hyperpersonal perceptions of them, perceiving them in a more positive light than they might in face to face offline interactions.

The hyperpersonal model predicts that individuals will form enhanced and idealized impressions of others in CMC owing to four different factors. The first is the sender's selective self-presentation, which refers to individual capacity to selectively reveal their strengths and positive traits only, while concealing or downplaying their weaknesses or negative aspects of their personality in online communication.

Recipients of these selectively presented messages may also in turn learn to idealize or praise or even worship the sender, perceiving them as more attractive, more intelligent or likable than they are in an offline mode.

– This absence of visual and auditory cues can lead to a heightened focus on the textual or visual content, potentially amplifying the impact of the messages exchanged.

– As individuals receive positive responses and feedback from others based on their selective self-presentation, it reinforces their inclination to continue presenting themselves in an idealized manner. This feedback loop perpetuates the enhanced perceptions.

Source: commons.wikimedia.org
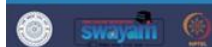
The absence of visual and auditory cues can lead to a heightened focus on the textual and visual content. It may potentially amplify the impact of the messages which are being exchanged. As individuals also receive positive responses and feedback from others based on their selective self-presentation, it reinforces their inclination to continue presenting themselves in the similar idealized manner. This feedback loop perpetuates the enhanced perceptions.

As an example, we may consider an individual who carefully curates the online profile by posting only the most flattering photographs, sharing achievements and presenting oneself in a positive light while avoiding sharing any negative aspects of their life. Others who view this profile may form idealized perceptions about this individual believing them to be exceptionally attractive, successful, likable, etc. Even though their offline life may have its share of challenges and imperfections. This idealization is a result of the sender's selective self-presentation and the receiver's tendency to create a more positive image of the person. Let us now consider the aspect of digital metamorphosis.

Digital Metamorphosis

- In the context of subjectivity, metamorphosis refers to the process of subjectification, which involves the creation of unique ways of life and identity.
  - Metamorphosis signifies a process of transformation, akin to the biological development of an animal from larva to adult.
- Digital technologies, especially online social networks, enable individuals to develop subjectivities that are not bound by stable criteria.
- The concept of "liquid modernity", coined by Zygmunt Bauman, characterizes our contemporary society as one in which identities and commitments are fluid and constantly changing.

Source: www.shutterstock.com

In the context of subjectivity, metamorphosis refers to the process of subjectification which involves the creation of unique ways of life and identity. Metamorphosis as we know signifies a process of transformation akin to the biological development of an animal from a larva to an adult. Digital technologies, especially online social networks enable individuals to develop subjectivities that are not bound by any stable criteria. The concept of liquid modernity which has been coined by Zygmunt Bauman characterizes our contemporary society as one in which identities and commitments are fluid and constantly changing. Such subjectivities are continually shaped by digitization, providing a multitude of possibilities for self-expression.

Fluidity of such identities is easily contrasted with earlier forms of social organization that had more stable anchors as Bauman has suggested. Digitization promotes a preference for change over constancy, evanescence over sustainability and encourages individuals to embrace a world where positions, decisions and responsibilities are subject to constant devaluation in favor of innovation. The transformative nature of digital technologies about subjectivity in society leads to a proliferation of identities as well as a shift towards a more fluid and change-oriented world.

- Online behavior, including profile management and friending activities, is a form of identity performance and self-constitution.
- Identities engage in performance through profile management and friending on platforms like Facebook contributing to the performance and transformation of identities online.
  – These activities can introduce gaps and inconsistencies in one's identity narrative, requiring effort to manage and reconcile.
- Drawing on Butlerian notions, online subjectivity is performed through two competing activities.
  a) Modifying one's own profile.
  b) Identifying in a relational sense with friends and networks.

Source: www.azquotes.com

In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names

— Judith Butler —

AZQUOTES

So, it can be said that online behavior including profile management and friending activities is a form of identity performance and self-constitution. Identities engage in performance through profile management and friending on platforms like Facebook contributing to the performance and transformation of identities online.

These activities can introduce gaps and inconsistencies in one's identity narrative requiring effort to manage and reconcile. Drawing on the notions of Judith Butler, online subjectivities is performed through two competing activities. First, modifying one's own profile and second is identifying in a relational sense with friends and networks. Modifying one's own profile involves choosing identity categories, providing information and making decisions, all of which are considered acts of identity performance. Identifying in a relational sense with friends and networks includes adding and accepting friend requests, managing one's friends list and making changes as necessary.

These two dimensions of social networking, profile management and friending while related to identity performance may sometimes operate in ways that challenge each other. Identifications are described as multiple and contestatory. The complexity of social networking activities can both construct and disrupt narratives of selfhood.

- Judith Butler's theory of identity performativity, drawing from Foucault and sometimes Lacanian psychoanalysis, proposes that subjects are constituted through repetitive performances, creating the illusion of an inner core.
- Identity becomes a normative ideal, not a fixed descriptor of experience.
- Butler's view challenges both essentialism and radical constructionism, emphasizing identity as a process that stabilizes over time, rejecting fixity and foundationalism.
- It challenges the idea that users approach these platforms with a pre-existing, coherent self.
- Online identity is a relational concept shaped by the interaction with others within these digital environments.

Source: www.byarcadia.org

Butler's theory of identity performativity has drawn from Foucault and also sometimes from Lacanian psychoanalysis. It proposes that subjects are constituted through repetitive performances, creating the illusion of an inner core.

Identity thus becomes a normative ideal, not a fixed descriptor of experience. Butler's view challenges both essentialism and radical constructionism, emphasizing identity as a process that stabilizes over time, rejecting fixity and foundationalism. It challenges the idea that users approach these platforms with a pre-existing coherent self. Online identity is a relational concept shaped by the interaction with others within these digital environments. In addition to challenging essentialism and radical constructionism, Butler's theory of identity performativity also underscores that identity is not solely an individual endeavor, but a collective and relational one.

Online identities are shaped and negotiated through interactions with others in digital spaces. Users engage in a continuous process of identity performance and recognition within these online communities, contributing to identity's dynamic and evolving nature.

- Mutual surveillance plays a crucial role in identity articulation, where users are always complicit in this surveillance.
- There are three specific ways in which social networking sites, like Facebook, can introduce identity incoherence:
  1. Through social networking walls and commentary spaces, friends can easily identify breaches in identity coherence.
  2. By allowing disruptions in the narrative through specific moments in the user's history represented by wall posts and status updates.
  3. Due to the fact that the user does not entirely control the narrative of the self on social networking sites; comments and unwanted photo tagging can challenge the user's performance of a coherent self.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-8mmDax8o4

8
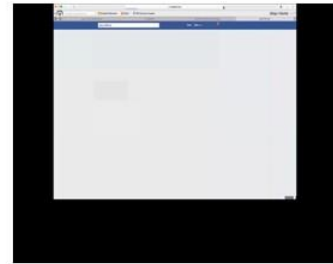
Mutual surveillance also plays a crucial role in identity articulation, where users are always complicit in this surveillance. There are three specific ways in which social networking sites like Facebook can introduce identity incoherence. First, it is through social networking walls and commentary spaces that friends can easily identify breaches in identity coherence.

Secondly, by allowing disruptions in the narrative through specific moments in the user's history represented by wall posts and status updates. Thirdly, due to the fact that the user does not entirely control the narrative of the self on social networking sites, comments and unwanted photo tagging can challenge the user's performance of a coherent self. Together, these elements illustrate that online identity is a dynamic and ever-evolving process. It is shaped not only by self-presentation, but also by active engagement and responses of the digital community. Users co-participate in this ongoing construction.

It can lead to a more fluid, relational and sometimes challenging manifestation of identity within social networking sites.

Tagging and Disrupting Identity Narratives

- Tagging, which links a user's name to a photograph, allowing others to associate behaviors or moments with that user, has been controversial on Facebook. It raises issues of awareness and authorization.
  - Tagging exemplifies the interactive, participatory nature of Web 2.0 culture, where users actively engage with content by adding tags and creating connections between users and images.
- Privacy concerns have emerged due to the increasing *searchability* of tagged non-textual items online. Unexpectedly tagged images or videos may impact how individuals perceive themselves.
  - Tagging can disrupt the coherent narrative of identity performance.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wo-C6a-e4

9

Let us look at tagging and disrupting identity narratives. Tagging which links a user's name to a photograph, allowing others to associate behaviors or moments with that user has been controversial on Facebook. It raises issues of awareness and authorization. Tagging exemplifies the interactive participatory nature of web 2.0 culture where users actively engage with content by adding tags and creating connections between users and images. Privacy concerns have emerged due to the increasing searchability of tagged non-textual items online. Unexpectedly tagged images or videos may impact how individuals perceive themselves and tagging can disrupt the coherent narrative of identity performance. The act of tagging individuals in photographs, especially in the context of past romantic relationships, has the potential to evoke feelings of jealousy and may significantly complicate the carefully constructed narrative of one's current relationships. It serves as a stark reminder that the interconnected web of digital platforms can unexpectedly and profoundly disrupt the ongoing performance of an intelligible self.

Identity Shift

- Identity shift refers to the process of self-transformation that occurs when individuals make mediated claims about themselves.
- The process of identity shift involves specific psychological mechanisms.
  - When composing self-statements online, individuals engage in more thought and internal cognition about themselves and the attributes they are communicating.
  - Identity shift goes beyond positive thinking; it involves deliberate self-presentation and self-transformation consistent with the selectively presented attributes.
- Identity shift is an internal transformation, taking place irrespective of whether one's self-presentation is made public.

Source: www.mobile-mentor.com
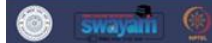
10

Identity shift refers to the process of self-transformation that occurs when individuals make mediated claims about themselves. The process of identity shift involves specific psychological mechanisms. When composing self-statements online, individuals engage in more thought and internal cognition about themselves and the attributes they are communicating. Identity shift goes beyond positive thinking. It involves deliberate self-presentation and self-transformation consistent with the selectively presented attributes.

Identity shift is an internal transformation taking place irrespective of whether one's self-presentation is made public or not. An example of identity shift can be observed when an individual consistently presents themselves as an expert in a particular field on social media platforms. Over time, as they share their knowledge, engage in discussions and receive positive feedback from others, they may begin to perceive themselves as even more knowledgeable and confident in that area than they did before they began their online self-presentation. This identity shift involves a transformation in their self-concept as they come to believe and behave in accordance with the selectively presented self-online, even if they did not initially see themselves in that way.

Self-Presentation

- Self-presentation in the context of identity shift is grounded in the hyperpersonal model, which suggests that mediated interactions allow individuals to present themselves selectively.

- This mindful and deliberate consideration of how one portrays oneself is crucial to an identity shift.

- This mediated self-presentation makes individuals both the sender and receiver of their self-portrayal, even if the message is not shared publicly.

  - Merely thinking about and taking the time to compose a statement that reflects a specific identity trait can lead to a slight adoption and incorporation of that trait into one's self-concept.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBMnLuCl7slg

11

Self-presentation in the context of identity shift is grounded in the hyperpersonal model which suggests that mediated interactions allow individuals to present themselves selectively.

This mindful and deliberate consideration of how one portrays oneself is crucial to an identity shift. This mediated self-presentation makes individuals both the sender and receiver of their self-portrayal even if the message is not shared publicly. Merely thinking about and taking the time to compose a statement that reflects a specific identity trait can lead to a slight adoption and incorporation of that trait into one's self-concept. Self-presentation on social media includes the content we share, how we present ourselves in photographs and the language we use in our posts. Some might use hashtags to align their online persona with their interest.

Feedback also plays a significant role in the process of identity shift which can be both intrapersonal and interpersonal as feedback from others can intensify this transformative effect. According to the hyperpersonal model, online interactions invite interactivity such as replies, comments or upvotes which allows others to provide feedback on our self-presentation. Feedback that is favorable to the stated traits reinforces the identity claim intensifying the identity shift. On the other hand, feedback that is inconsistent with the presented traits can have a contrasting effect. In instances where others disagree or offer a contradictory feedback, it may lead to a stronger self-transformation from the feedback rather than the original statement.

Feedback in online interactions can significantly impact the process of identity shift. It can reinforce the presented identity traits or trigger adjustments as well as transformations in response to contrasting feedback. This dynamic interplay between self-presentation and feedback contributes to the complexity of identity performance in digital environments.

Limitations to Identity Shift

- One limitation is that the effects of identity shift tend to be minor, making it not a quick-fix solution for self-transformation.

- A single post may lead to subtle changes in self-perception. At the same time, repeated public commitments to a specific identity, especially on social media, are more likely to result in noticeable transformations over time.

- Identity shift also requires individuals to identify with their self-presentation as their own.

- Anonymity can hinder identity shift effects, as individuals must engage in intrapersonal communication and strongly connect the presented self to their offline self.

- The transformation relies on drawing from actual life events and experiences that align with the self-presentations.

Source: www.identityshiftmethod.com
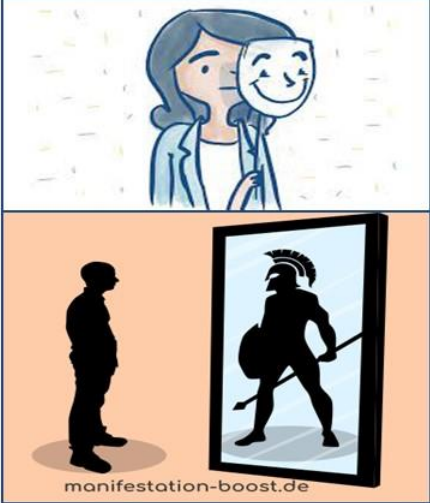
13

But there are several limitations to identity shift. One limitation is that the effects of identity shift tend to be minor making it not a quick fix solution for self-transformation.

 A single post may lead to subtle changes in self-perception. At the same time, repeated public commitments to a specific identity, especially on social media are more likely to result in noticeable transformations over time. Identity shift also requires individuals to identify with their self-presentation as their own. Anonymity can hinder identity shift effects as individuals must engage in intrapersonal communication and strongly connect the presented self to their offline self. The transformation relies on drawing from actual life, events and experiences that align with the self-presentations.

 Social media platforms due to their focus on self-identification are highly favorable environments for identity shifts to take place. However, in less identifiable communication channels, these effects might not be apparent unless participants are prompted to link their contributions with their actual identities. The extent of self-identifiability in a given platform appears critical in determining the likelihood of identity shifts occurring.

- Additionally, for an identity shift to occur, individuals must genuinely identify with their statements. Simply making up attributes about oneself does not lead to an identity shift.
  - Moreover, self-transformation must be feasible; repeatedly posting statements disconnected from reality will not magically lead to transformation without actual actions and experiences supporting the identity claims.

Source: https://steemit.com/life/@premraval010/or-or-6-laws-of-human-mechanism-part-iii-social-or-or, www.manifestation-boost.de

Additionally, for an identity shift to occur, individuals must genuinely identify with their statements. Simply making up attributes about oneself does not in fact lead to an identity shift.

Moreover, self-transformation must be feasible. Repeatedly posting statements disconnected from reality will perhaps not magically lead us to transformation without actual actions and experiences supporting the identity claims. Digital realities play a significant role in shaping, expressing and challenging identity in the modern age. Individuals navigate a complex landscape where they can explore and project different facets of their identity, interact with others in novel ways and confront new ethical and social considerations related to digital identity.

Digital Realities

- "Digital Realities" explore how identity shift, a form of intrapersonal communication occurring online through text-based tools like blogs and status posts, is being influenced and transformed by newer digital technologies.

- New tools and devices are emerging that allow for the encoding and transmitting of smell, taste, and touch, making online experiences more immersive and multisensory.
  - These devices can revolutionize how we interact and experience the world, opening up new possibilities for self-expression and self-perception in the virtual realm.

- This multimodal approach to online interactions aligns with the growing trend of making the digital realm more closely resemble the physical world.

VR Virtual Reality	AR Augmented Reality	MR Mixed Reality
Replacing real environments and objects with digital versions usually by means of a head-mounted display and spatial sound.	Overlaying digital objects into a real environment. This is either done with a transparent screen on a head-mounted display or by using a portable camera and monitor to render the object into the environment. Usually uses a type of QR code or floor sensing for placing the object in space.	Like Augmented Reality, but virtual objects are able to interact with the real environment.

Source: www.disher.com

15

Digital realities explore how identity shifts, which is a form of intrapersonal communication occurs online through text-based tools like blogs and status posts.

But in turn, it is also being influenced and also transformed by newer digital technologies. New tools and devices are emerging that allow for the encoding and transmitting of smell, taste and touch, making online experiences more immersive and multi-sensory. These devices can revolutionize the way we interact with and also experience the world, opening up new possibilities for self-expression and self-perception in the virtual realm. This multimodal help to online interactions aligns with the growing trend of making the digital realm more closely resemble the physical world.

They use VR, AR and MR. The incorporation of sensory feedback in online interactions could lead to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of one's digital identity. For example, experiencing a virtual environment that evokes the aroma of a favorable place or the taste of a cherished dish can profoundly affect self-perception as well as self-expression.

Virtual Realities

- Virtual reality (VR) is a digitally created space that users can access by wearing specialized headgear that provides visual Cand audio input, allowing them to see, hear, and even feel the virtual environment.

- The advancement of display and motion-tracking technologies has made VR experiences more accessible through gaming consoles and affordable headsets that can be used with smartphones.

  - VR can be a powerful tool to help individuals address phobias, practice public speaking, manipulate time and feedback, and engage in positive experiences to overcome fears or anxieties.

  - VR can also enable individuals to reflect on their self-concept and promote personal growth and behavioral change.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcdoR48PbK8

16

So, virtual realities or VR is a digitally created space that users can access by wearing a specialized headgear that provides visual and audio input, allowing them to see, hear and even feel the virtual environment. The advancement of display and motion tracking technologies have made VR experiences more accessible through gaming consoles and affordable headsets that can be used with smartphones. VR can also be a powerful tool to help individuals navigate through and address their phobias, practice public speaking, manipulate time and feedback and engage in positive experiences to overcome their anxieties or fears.

It can also enable individuals to reflect on their self-concept and promote personal growth and behavioral changes. VR technology continues to evolve, expanding its application in personal development and self-exploration. In later modules, we shall discuss VR as well as the related concept of Proteus effect in more details.

Proteus Effect

- The Proteus effect is an intrapersonal phenomenon in CMC, particularly relevant in immersive virtual environments.
  - Named after the Greek god of ever-changing rivers and streams, it refers to changes in self-behavior and self-perception based on alterations in self-representation.
- Unlike identity shift, which relies on textual self-presentation, the Proteus effect occurs when individuals visually perceive themselves within the virtual space and experience self-transformation.
  - To experience the Proteus effect, individuals must see themselves embodied in virtual avatars and feel connected.
- The Proteus effect is conceptually distinct from immersion, emphasizing how individuals view themselves through avatars.

What is the **Proteus Effect?**

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qj67_zfSlIM

17

The Proteus effect is an intrapersonal phenomenon in CMC, particularly relevant in immersive virtual environments. It is named after the Greek god of ever-changing rivers and streams and refers to changes in self-behavior and self-perception based on alterations in self-representation.

Unlike identity shift, which relies on textual self-presentation, the Proteus effect occurs when individuals visibly perceive themselves within the virtual space and experience self-transformation. To experience the Proteus effect, individuals must see themselves embodied in virtual avatars and feel connected. The Proteus effect is conceptually distinct from immersion, emphasizing how individuals view themselves through avatars. As individuals interact with others in the virtual space through a transformed avatar, they may find themselves adopting behaviors and attitudes that align with the persona they have created. Over time, they might become, for example, more outspoken and participate better in group activities, all of which may be quite different from their typical real-world behavior.

This change in self-perception and behavior stems from the influence of the avatar and the Proteus effect showcasing how individuals can experience self-transformation in virtual environments. In the twelfth week of this course, we will discuss this aspect in more details.

Source: www.link.springer.com
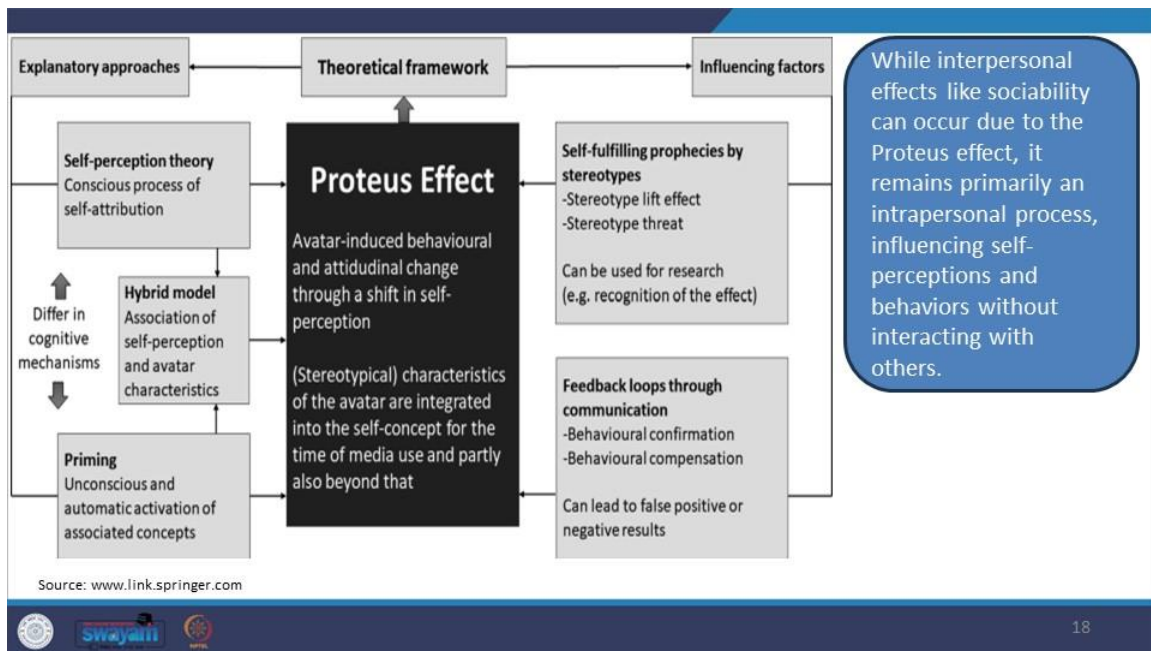
While interpersonal effects like sociability can occur due to the Proteus effect, it remains primarily an intrapersonal process influencing self-perceptions and behaviors without interacting with others. This concept is also displayed using this diagram. The Proteus effect showcases the malleability of human identity and behavior in virtual environments.

  This phenomenon offers exciting opportunities for personal growth, self-exploration and even therapeutic applications, making it a significant area of study in computer mediated communication.

Gaming

- In video games, players often use avatars, virtual representations controlled by them, to interact with the game world and other players.
- Avatars can be customized, allowing players to alter their physical appearance and create a representation that may or may not reflect their offline self.
  - This avatar customization process can influence players' self-construct and intrapersonal communication.
  - Players may use avatar customization to present themselves differently from their offline identity to avoid societal expectations or embody an idealized self.
- Spending time in the game world as their avatars leads players to identify with them strongly.

Source: www.psychologyofgames.com

Avatars and virtual representations are often used by players in video games. They are controlled by them to interact with the game world and with other players. Avatars can be customized allowing players to alter their physical appearance and create a representation that may or may not reflect their offline self. This customization of the avatar can influence players self-construct and intrapersonal communication also.

  Players may use avatar customization to present themselves differently from their offline identity to avoid societal expectations or embody an idealized self. Spending time in the game world as their avatars leads players to identify strongly with them. This implies that video games also have the potential to serve as a platform where identity shifts in the Proteus effect both involving processes of self-transformation through self-representation can take place. In these virtual gaming environments, individuals may experience shifts in their self-identity and behavior by embodying different roles in persona, reflecting the transformative power of interactive digital spaces.

Augmented Reality

- Augmented reality (AR) refers to using digital tools to alter and influence our perception of the physical world around us by overlaying computer-generated information.
- Unlike virtual reality, which creates entirely digital environments, AR enhances our real-world experience using smart devices like smartphones, tablets, or glasses.
  - AR offers numerous applications, ranging from entertainment and gaming to educational and practical uses.
- AR provides opportunities for self-exploration and intrapersonal communication.
  - By trying out different styles and appearances through AR apps, individuals can reflect on their self-perception and potentially change attitudes and behaviors.

Source: www.digitaltransformationtrends.com

20

Augmented reality or AR refers to using digital tools to alter and influence our perception of the physical world around us by overlaying computer generated information.

Unlike virtual reality which creates entirely digital environments, AR enhances our real-world experiences using smart devices like smartphones, tablets or glasses. It offers numerous applications ranging from entertainment and gaming to educational and practical uses. AR provides opportunities for self-exploration and intrapersonal communication. By trying out different styles and appearances through various AR apps, individuals can reflect on their self-perception and potentially change attitudes and behaviors. For example, trying on makeup virtually can alter someone's perceptions of their appearance and self-esteem.

These AR experiences can be both performative allowing users to experiment with different self-representations and informational providing feedback and skill development.

Conclusion

- Online identity is fundamentally relational, constantly molded by interactions within digital spaces.
- It undergoes a significant transformation influenced by the emergence of novel digital technologies and tools.
- Through mediated self-presentation, individuals can construct and showcase specific facets of their identity meticulously.
- Importantly, feedback from others becomes pivotal in this transformative journey, either amplifying the desired identity claims or offering contrasting perspectives.
- Moreover, the virtual realm, chiefly represented by virtual reality (VR), has brought forth a distinct dimension to the process of identity transformation.

Source: www. solcyber.com

Online identity is fundamentally relational, constantly molded by interactions within digital spaces. It undergoes a significant transformation influenced by the emergence of novel digital technologies and tools. Through mediated self-presentation, individuals can construct and showcase specific facets of their identity meticulously. Importantly, feedback from others becomes pivotal in this transformative journey either amplifying the desired identity claims or offering contrasting perspectives.

  Moreover, the virtual realm chiefly represented by virtual reality has brought forth a distinct dimension to the process of identity transformation. Today, we have introduced several concepts. Some of these AR, VR, their impact in gaming, Proteus effect as well as the hyperpersonal model developed by Joseph Walther shall also be taken later particularly in the 12th week for further expansions. We will contextualize this information then by discussing them through relevant research experiments and academic studies. In the next module, we shall explore the dynamic and intricate connection between the human body and digital technologies examining the same concept that links these domains. Thank you.