Who Are You When You're Online? the Digital Extended Self

Russell Belk, York University, Canada

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ABSTRACT
When we are online we communicate, shop, play, and represent ourselves differently than we do offline. If we extend our self via material possessions, do we also extend our virtual self via immaterial possessions? This paper outlines the changes that digitization brings and theoretical implications for updating the extended self.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT.
Most of us now spend hours each day online responding to e-mails, texting, downloading music, ordering books, updating our social media profiles, playing online games, composing blogs, and Googling. It is time we ask how our online personas change our sense of self. This paper offers a conceptualization of the extended self in a digital world.

One difference in online versus real world self representation is that we are disembodied and sometimes re-embodied through avatars online (Markham 1998). Turkle (1995) concluded that we are often different people online than we are in real life (RL). A decade ago most of these self representations were textual. Today we also use visual representations in MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games—Bryant and Akerman 2009; Wang, Zhao, and Bamossy 2009), virtual worlds such as Second Life (Blascovich and Bailenson 2011; Boellstorff 2008; Meadows 2008), social media such as Facebook and MySpace (Miller 2011), photo and video sharing sites such as Flickr and YouTube (Snickars and Vondereau 2010), and web pages (Schau and Gilly 2003). Although most participants in social media know each other offline (Boyd 2000), with visual portrayals of self we can dramatically recast ourselves. Photo manipulation, use of older photographs, and misstatements of age, marital status, and weight are common in online dating sites (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs 2006). And in virtual worlds we can choose animal avatars and style ourselves in a variety of fantastic ways. Another new phenomenon with social media is the “co-construction of self.” With the aid of feedback from friends and photos in which we are tagged (Mendelson and Papacharissi 2011; Walther, et al. 2008; Turkle 2011) we are often coached, shaped, and remodelled by peers. Drenton (forthcoming) found that in one month each of 13 teenage girls posted nearly 160 photos and provided 180 comments about each others’ appearance and clothing. They also shared their e-mail messages from boys and sometimes co-authored responses.

The anonymity and distance provided by the Internet also makes self disclosure easier and facilitates confidence that may be lacking in real life. As Turkle (2011) observes:

Online, the plain represented themselves as glamorous, the old as young, the young as older. Those of modest means wore elaborate virtual jewelry. In virtual space, the crippled walked without crutches, and the shy improved their chances as seducers (p. 158).

There is good evidence that people online become more self-confident, risk-taking, and outgoing than they are in RL (Markham 1998; Turkle 1995). Furthermore, changes in behavior initiated online often carry over into RL (Blascovich and Beilensen 2011). In addition, since we can maintain multiple avatars as well as participate in multiple online forums, games, virtual worlds, blogs, and so on, the Internet provides more opportunities to display multiple selves (Cocking 2008; Binark and Sütcü 2009)—something that the core self notion of Belk (1988) did not entertain. And in addition to presenting a virtual self, it is also possible for this virtual self to acquire virtual possessions, often in exchange for real effort and real money. Furthermore, formerly tangible possessions like letters, photographs, and books are increasingly replaced by intangible equivalents (Siddiqui and Turley 2006).

Many of our devices for communication, navigation, information seeking, entertainment, and computing have become sufficiently miniaturized that we not only carry them with us, but we feel lost without them. A smartphone allows us to contact others, surf the Internet, learn about our surroundings, get directions, play interactive games, get the latest news, read books, take and post photos and videos, and much more. As a result we are increasingly becoming cyborgs (cybernetic organisms) fused with the devices on which we rely (Richardson 2007).

What modifications are needed to the notion of the extended self in order to accommodate such digital developments? We need to recognize that self
can be plural rather than singular, even though there is still a drive for unification of these multiple selves. We need to better conceptualize how we maintain online and offline selves and how the two interact. Rather than simply extending ourselves via objects, there may be a fundamental change in incorporating these objects within ourselves—a process better conceptualized as the expanded self. Both extended self and expanded self also benefit from a more dispersed network of “friends” maintained through social media sites, online forums, and electronic communications. The Internet allows more ephemeral virtual selves and virtual possessions and also facilitates sharing tangible possessions. These phenomena may alter our sense of ownership (Belk 2010). Like the virtual corporation outsourcing its production and back office activity, as digital consumers we can outsource some of our memories to computers, hard disks, Internet search engines, cloud computing, and the like. Thus digital consumption affects the ways in which we can sustain our identities in a variety of ways. This paper outlines these developments and the changes to the notion of extended self needed to accommodate them.

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