Effects of digital technology on identity

Identity is described as a sense of self, as being a consistent and unique person. (Fernald, 1997) Defining individual identity involves being aware of and understanding an individual's experiences, perceptions, feelings, sensations, images and memories. One's understanding and explanation of them, the choices and decisions a person makes, and the action they take in responding to changing conditions, needs, demands and challenges is another important aspect of identity. Beyond their mental and physical constitution, human beings consist of personal experiences, perceptions, feelings, images and memories (Dorscht, 1998). As digital technology is a vast area to cover, I will primarily focus on the internet and people's ability to connect with others.

Paul Magnarella, of the University of Florida proposes that, as societies become more complex and differentiated, due to technological developments, more specialists are needed, and social integration is becoming based on the interdependence of specialized functions (Magnarella, 1997). Modern humanity is adjusting to life within the global community. This has far reaching impact in how personal, social and cultural identities are formed and maintained. As the technology of the twenty-first century speeds up and expands access to information and virtual environments, constraints upon individuals to exclusively rely upon, and respond to their local physical environment is diminished (Jones, 1997).

The availability of information and technology has affected the development of individual and group identity. It is only very recently in the time line of human evolution, that individuals and members of society have been exposed to cultures, attitudes and ways of thinking that are not insulated.

There has been a great deal of attention paid to the development of self in this technological society. The volume and variety of relationships now available to the average person, through the Internet, at an interpersonal level, enables the individual an opportunity to construct a new self or identity for every occasion, with very little is expected in return (Eyck, 1998).

Sociology is the study of human behaviour in groups, and focuses on the influences of social relationships on attitudes and behaviour. In the Sociological Research Online Journal, Schroeder examines the social aspects of multi-user virtual reality. He states that there is stratification in cyber-space communities, with " insiders" and " outsiders" with different behaviours, roles, and statuses. Schroeder regards the possibilities for extending new opportunities and experiences in both the natural and social worlds as sociologically relevant (Schroeder, 1997). The way in which individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world, is fundamental to the topic of identity. Researchers have described control as an individual's " belief" that they could cause good or bad events. (Shapiro et al.) The schema theory is described as facts or experiences that are clustered around topics, which provide a frame of reference for individuals to draw upon when making judgments (Wresch, 1996). When an individual combines this schema with the way they selectively value the limited information allowed into their consciousness, it further defines one's sense of identity. One point proposed is, that by role-playing or testing scenarios in cyber-space, some people are better prepared to function in similar real life situations.

Another issue is that of gender switching on the web. Anthropologists describe gender as the cultural elaboration and meaning assigned to the

biological differentiation between the sexes (Haviland, 1997), in the sense that one's sex is biologically determined, but one's sexual identity is culturally assigned. In sociological terms, gender roles are expectations, regarding the proper behavior and activities, and attitudes of males and females. (Schaefer & Lamm, 1997: 37) In cyber-space you can assume multiple identities, change gender and explore different facets of your personality. Turkle quotes Jung, saying " Jung believed that for each of us, it is potentially most liberating to become acquainted with our dark side, as well as the other-gendered self, called anima in men and animus in women" (Turkle, 1995). In role-playing and gaming, such as the online fantasy game, Second Life. It may be seen as an exercise in fantasy, and a way to create and gain mastery over a persona the individual is in control of. Second Life is a free 3D virtual world where users can socialize, connect and create using free voice and text chat.

One definition of society is a fairly large number of people who live in the same territory, are relatively independent of people outside it, and participate in a common culture (Schaefer & Lamm, 1997). In cyber-space, people are forming virtual societies. A sense of familiarity and belonging is created, through interaction and virtual proximity. Participants in Second Life refer to their virtual communities as " cultures". Culture by definition is, " A set of rules or standards, shared by members of a society, which when acted on by the members produce behaviour that falls within a range of variation the members consider proper and acceptable" (Haviland, 1997). To deviate from the rules can result in punishment or expulsion from the culture. There are both " IC", in character, guidelines for behavior, and " OC" or out of

character codes to be followed. These people feel that they know each other. They interact both in and out of character and, in some cases have arranged meetings in the Real World.

Sherry Turkle (Turkle, 1995) puts forward the idea that computer mediated communications have saturated society with both alien and local cultures. Turkle points out that through such widespread social contact, we are adjusting to and assimilating other cultures beliefs and norms to such an extent that we as a society are being deprived of traditional social structures and norms.

In this information age, one may locate diverse friends, create an alternate identity and explore avenues of study and areas of culture that were never an option a generation ago (Turkle, 1995). Culture lag is defined as a period of maladjustment during which the non-material culture adapts to the material culture and foreign ideas are often viewed as threatening. (Schaefer & Lamm, 1997) This definition could be paraphrased by stating that some individuals suffer from a period of confusion while the previously non-technical culture is adapting to new technology. This techno-culture lag appears to be more problematic to those who have not had as much experience with the technical and Internet related fields, than for example, the average secondary school student. The modern teenager sees the Internet in much the same way the children of the 1960's took television for granted.

From a sociological view our individual culture provides us with a predisposed way of thinking and behaving when communicating. Our

vocabulary is affected by our culture, in that we tend to have more words or ways of expressing ourselves, relative to the degree of importance we attach to a given subject. (Haviland, 1997) The way in which we communicate also guides our thinking and behaviour. This can be a potential source of problems when communicating outside our own culture. Phrases and words that are intended to convey a particular meaning may be misinterpreted and cause embarrassment or offense to a person of a different culture. The absence of body language and gestures when communicating by computer, whether through email or chats, seems to be guiding communication to a more generic form and adding a whole new vocabulary of technological terminology.

Modern humanity is part of a networked society, whether directly or indirectly. Its views of the world, its cultures and individual identity are all being reshaped through the impact of the Internet in our lives. People have become cyber-chameleons, adjusting to whoever they are communicating with. This flexibility is characteristic of contemporary society. One generation ago, it was common for a person to be born, live, and die in one community, while being married to the same person and working in the same job. In today's society it is not unusual to change jobs, and move, remarry and adapt multiple times.

Societies suffer a cultural loss when they homogenize and streamline their identities in order to communicate and interact globally (Featherstone & Burrows, 1995). The modern self is bombarded with instantaneous images of far off peoples, events and cultures and distant happenings. This places the producers of this information in the position of becoming manufacturers of

reality (Eyck, 1998). It is more important than ever that the individual become aware of how to distinguish fantasy from reality and evaluate the information that is being served up to them (Balsalmo, 1996). The distribution of knowledge and power has made it more difficult for powerful social institutions to wield the power they once did. Knowledge is power, so perhaps to spread knowledge is to distribute power. One's awareness of choices and decisions, of action and responses, and understanding of what they indicate, and how they interact and relate is what finally comprises an image of oneself, an identity.