ARTICLE

The cyberself: the self-ing project goes online, symbolic interaction in the digital age

LAURA ROBINSON
University of California at Los Angeles, USA

Abstract

Juxtaposing symbolic interactionist and postmodern interpretations of cyberself-ing, I bring data to bear on the tensions between these two theoretical stances. I argue that postmodernist accounts are no longer tenable; such studies were based on multi-user domains (MUDs), but generalized to cyberspace. I examine the evolving internet population, which has reached a critical mass of the American population, to demonstrate that MUD users no longer constitute the majority of users. After substantiating this shift in the user base, I elucidate evidence that corroborates the countervailing thesis of 'socialized' online selves. I argue that using a symbolic interactionist perspective to frame the cyberself-ing project allows us to understand the creation of the cyber 'I,' 'me,' and digital 'generalized other,' as well as the dynamics of interactional cuing online.

Key words

Goffman • internet user population • Mead • postmodernism

Long before computer-mediated communication (CMC), symbolic interaction (SI) contested definitions of the self as bounded and immutable. SI approaches self-ing through the reflexive construction of the self through

interaction in the social world. Although the self is embodied, it is not bounded but constantly renegotiated. Yet, just as symbolic interactionist perspectives sought to overthrow concepts of the static self as a bounded whole, postmodern perspectives threatened symbolic interaction's conception of a master self created and maintained through interaction. I examine these two competing frameworks in light of definitions of the cyberself and the process of online self-ing. I find that in creating online selves, users do not seek to transcend the most fundamental aspects of their offline selves. Rather, users bring into being bodies, personas, and personalities framed according to the same categories that exist in the offline world.

    After presenting the arguments and evidence underpinning these two conflicting interpretations, I argue that early user populations account for the temptation to indulge in a postmodern perspective. My examination resolves tensions between these two accounts of self-ing by proving that the internet user base has radically changed since seminal postmodern accounts were written. Earlier studies of online self-ing claimed to be representative of identity in cyberspace (Turkle, 1995). However, they were based on multi-user domains (MUDs) that were populated by white, college-educated, technically proficient males. Today, this demographic group constitutes a much smaller percentage of the internet user base because the internet is growing to a more equitable gender split, as well as garnering a much lower percentage of users interested in participating in role-playing games.

    After completing this analysis, I continue my explication of symbolic interactionist cyberself-ing. I conclude that the symbolic interactionist framework is crucial to understanding the cyberself-ing process because the cyberself is formed and negotiated in the same manner as the offline self. Online, the 'I' and the 'me' still inform each other, albeit in a different medium using different expressions 'given' and 'given off' (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959). Finally, these digital interactions still require a Goffmanian analysis to understand interactional cuing both 'front stage' and 'backstage.'

INTRODUCING SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Symbolic interactionist perspectives challenge the western conception of the person as bounded and unique (Andersen, 1997) by claiming that the self is the product of interaction rather than an immutable entity. By asserting that the self is empirical rather than essential, symbolic interaction contests the popular idea of the bounded self that exists outside of social interaction as a distinctive whole that is set in contrast to other such wholes (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Cooley's concept of the 'looking-glass self' defines the self as the reflection generated by the 'generalized other' that is coupled with that

'generalized other's' judgment. In other words, our sense of self is really our perception of society's evaluation of us. In this process, through imagination we 'perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it' (Cooley, 1902: 17). The concept of the looking-glass self is based on a threefold process. First, the self imagines how it appears to others. Second, the self then imagines the other's judgment. Finally, the self develops an emotional response to that judgment. In Cooley's (1902: 184) own words, the looking-glass self consists of: 'The imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification'. In this way, the looking-glass self is the fruit of interaction; it is not static but a continual process of self-evaluation through the imagined eye of the other.

Although the self is generated out of interaction, Cooley (1902: 170) attributes the raw self with an innate sense that is not accorded to it by other symbolic interactionists such as Mead. For Cooley, the emotion of self-feeling is 'instinctive'. In contrast, while maintaining that the self emerges from interaction, Mead accords no instinctive attributes to the self. While Mead agrees with much of Cooley's view of the self defined by the other, he disagrees with James and Cooley's emphasis on self-feeling (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). In other words, Mead removes Cooley's belief in a biological core of self-feeling and replaces it with a self-ing process produced entirely through interaction. Mead (1934: 139) sees the self as the product of this process in which 'one does respond to that which he addresses to another and where that response of his own becomes a part of his conduct, where he not only hears himself but responds to himself'. The 'self-ing' of the person yields the 'I/me' couplet. This bifurcated entity exists both for itself and in itself simultaneously. The 'I' who results from the process of self-ing, then, acquires an awareness of itself as itself, at the same time that the self gains an awareness of the self as other, as the object of its own regard. Closely related to this concept is Mead's idea of reflexivity, which he (1934: 138–40) explains as follows: 'The individual experiences himself as (an object), not directly, but only indirectly from the particular standpoints of other members of the same social group.' In this sense, the self cannot be separated in experience from the 'generalized other'. For Mead, reflexivity consists of viewing oneself from the standpoint of the other, and this is the essence of the self-ing process. Further, Mead's concept of self is delineated by the 'I' and 'me' such that the creative 'I' is the individual's response to the 'me'. For Mead, the 'me' is representative of the social order or the 'generalized other.'

Goffman further transforms Mead's and Cooley's concepts in his extended metaphor of the self in dramaturgy (Lemert and Branaman, 1997).[1] Goffman

studies the self through 'mundane activity' to uncover the self-ing process that he describes as a dramatic production.

In a Meadian fashion, Goffman also sees the self as the process of dramatic interaction that produces multiples selves for multiple performances. In Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical studies, the self manages its interactional ventures strategically and performs in a manner calculated to project an image that other interactants will find credible. Through its performances, the self strives to convey an identity consistent with the expectations formed by the audience and with the situation, or stage, that frames the interaction. Self-ing occurs in the course of interaction via presentation of the self to selves projected by others. In order to navigate the social world, the self is called upon to collaborate with other selves in staging interactions both 'front stage' and 'backstage' (Goffman, 1959). These expressions and performances aid the self in constructing the kind of self-identity appropriate to the audience's expectations and the definition of the interactional situation. In an effort to conjure up this persona, the performer depends on two kinds of communications: deliberately deployed signs and expressions, often verbal in nature, and signs and symbols deployed without conscious deliberation, often nonverbal in nature (Goffman, 1959). While the first kind of communication counts as expressions 'given', the second kind of communication qualifies as expressions 'given off'. The former type of expression can be suited to the occasion and the aims of interaction; the latter type of expression derives its efficacy from its unpremeditated character because to the audience, who observes the expression, it seems genuine and sincere. This vision of the self fits nicely with the symbolic interaction self in that the performer's role is inseparable from the audience's anticipated response.[2]

In sum, through interaction, individuals interpret each other's language, gestures and actions as symbols; this interaction both reflects and constitutes the self (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). From this standpoint there is no biological self independent of society and interaction; the self has no immutable characteristics. Rather, the self internalizes the social world as part of the process of anticipating and interpreting the 'generalized other'. These processes are predicated on the notion of embodied self-ing and physical copresence because developing the 'I' and the 'me' traditionally assumes some coherence within the space–time continuum. With the advent of CMC, postmodern theorists make claims about cyberself-ing that challenged symbolic interaction. In the next sections, I examine these assertions and their illusory appeal.

CYBERSELF-ING: THE SELF-ING PROJECT GOES ONLINE

As I have established, the SI perspective grounds the production of the masterself in interaction. In contrast, according to postmodern views of the self, individuals cannot maintain a masterself that continually and reflexively

constitutes itself. These postmodern theories of self-ing seek both to delegitimate master codes and to dismiss meta-narratives; they express the 'impossibility of establishing any such underpinning for knowledge' (Rosenau, 1992: 6). Many of the most dystopic postmodern visions are not based on empirical evidence. Rather, they present highly futuristic virtual environments and other 'imaginal spaces' (Hillis, 1999), in which the self is liberated from Meadian socialization processes. Hillis (1999: viii) examines the 'promotional hype' promoting virtual environments (VEs) that predicts virtual venues in which the self cannot discriminate between real others and the self's exteriorized projections. This postmodern self would lose the sense of physical embodiment in relation to other embodied physically distinct beings. Furthermore, this self would regress into a state where the 'generalized other' cannot be recognized as such; the self would not develop the capacity to view itself through others' eyes, because it would not be presented with any being sufficiently distinguishable from itself. Expressions would no longer be 'given' or 'given off' either 'front' or 'back stage'. Thus, postmodern theorists argue that the rise of virtual reality environments ultimately contribute to the demise of the other-oriented self that Mead describes as an inevitable product of socialization.

Although Hillis (1999) assures us that there are no total VEs that reach into the core of the self as such, such postmodern projections are presented as the consequence of role playing in MUDs. Turkle's respondents speak of multiple selves freed from the corporeal bonds that engender unity offline such that they may simultaneously present unrelated, multiple selves in numerous virtual venues. Based on interviews with avid MUD users (MUDders), Turkle (1995) finds that cyberself-ing offers a 'fresh slate' for MUDders to create new online identities. Moreover, cyberspace may even provide space to work through unacknowledged or troubled parts of offline physical selves. Turkle (1995: 185) declares that, 'MUDS imply difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation. Such an experience of identity contradicts the Latin root of the word, idem, meaning "the same"'. Her work propagates one of the most revolutionary visions of virtual environments, the discarding of the physical body and the transcendence of the virtual self. Such utopian discourses on cyberculture share a disdain for the 'meat' of embodiment that encumbers human users in the offline world (Lupton, 1995). In theory, cyberspace allows the self to become distilled in a pure, clean uncontaminated relationship with computer technology, and the self is metamorphosed into 'bits and bytes flowing in the phosphor stream' (Clark, 1995: 124). Theorists point to William Gibson's influential novel *Neuromancer*, in which a bodiless existence frees the self from illness and ultimately death itself; the body is represented as an impediment to a desirable existence outside the bounds of place and time (Hillis, 1999). In cyberspace, life imitates art, in that MUDders

construct disembodied selves in role–playing environments. Stone's (1995: 21,165) 'adventure narrative' of 'discourse surfing' presents self-ing in MUDs that grows in number due to the sheer number of possibilities of selfhood on the internet in a flow of unbounded space.

By expanding the scope of choice, technologies of 'saturation' deepen the predicament of the reflexive self that is responsible for its own formation and evolution (Gergen, 1991).[3] As technologies of saturation, online environments leave the selection of selves to the user. From a postmodern perspective, these technologies present self-ing opportunities for an ephemeral self, without commitment to a masterself that houses an 'I,' or a 'me'. Further, separation between biologically grounded identities and their online representations creates the possibility of confusion, unintended misrepresentation and deliberate deception (Stone, 1995). Because particular self idioms are no longer subject to either the unity imposed by the body or the sanction of tradition and custom, the decentered self enjoys the liberty to create multiple online identities in various MUDs. In cyberspace, the self's virtual transcendence is rooted in the yearning to escape the confines of the 'lived–body' and the burdens of coherent self-ing in the offline world (Jauréguiberry, 2000).

ROLE PLAYING AND THE CREATION OF CYBERPERSONAS

In MUDs, multiple self-ing occurs largely through role playing. Once players become engrossed in the 'consensual hallucination' (Gibson, 1984) of the collective drama, they invent online personae. MUDders indulge their fantasies without fearing the repercussions that would ensue in the offline world because the range of acceptable behavior and expression in MUD environments far surpasses that in the offline world (Wertheim, 1999). In 'furry' MUDs, for example, users adopt animal surrogates and frolic with other animals; they may indulge their animal appetites in ways that would cause harm to their lives, were they in the offline world. In addition, by role playing, MUDders may adopt characters that express parts of the self that they have found necessary to suppress or efface in the offline world, given the force of the 'generalized other's' disapproval. Online, however, these users can invest MUD characters with traits that the offline society regards with contempt or disapproval (Wertheim, 1999).

Many MUD players testify to the reality of their virtual selves and describe online selves that are 'more real' than the selves they possess in the offline world. In interviews with avid MUDders, Turkle (1995: 185) chronicles how these users simultaneously manage many handles or cyberidentities. For example, a clerical worker describes her cyberself-ing: 'I'm not one thing, I'm many things. Each part gets to be more fully expressed in MUDs than in the real world.' Stone (1995) presents case studies of MUDs in which there are incidents of role playing where the self's online alter ego seems as 'real' as

the offline self that gave birth to it. In the famous case of 'Julie', a male psychiatrist impersonated a paraplegic woman online in order to gain the confidence of other women users. After developing a biography and expressive style for Julie, his offline adjunct self, Lewin, reported that Julie was taking on a distinctive personality. Thus, Lewin felt as though he were developing a 'parallel' self that was much more appealing to his online friends than his offline, biological self (Stone, 1995).

Nonetheless, Stone makes it clear that 'the virtual component of online interaction is not disembodied thinking, but a different way of conceptualizing a relationship to the body'; she terms this the 'legible body' that is 'discursive rather than physical' (in Chen, 1998: 30). Therefore, Lewin's experimentation with otherness did not produce a virtual self that could act spontaneously without the active intervention of the offline self; Lewin still sustained his own identity even when he was in character. Thus, immersion in an online character does not translate into an inability to maintain one's offline self as a distinctive entity. Rather, it points to tensions produced by the 'societal imperative' of having 'one primary persona or true identity' that is attached to a 'single physical body' in the offline world (Stone, 1995: 73).

RECONSTITUTION OF THE CYBERBODY

Thus, one of the most salient arguments for multiphrenic self-ing, liberation from the body, does not hold up to closer examination. Rather, the cyberself seeks re-embodiment as a means of identity signaling and as a medium of interaction. In order to participate in many MUDs, it is often necessary to claim a gender for one's character because many MUDs require players to write a self-description specifying the gender of the character they are playing (Nakamura, 2000). When these users create online selves through role playing, they often engender a 'signifying body' or 'simulated body' that resembles the types of physical bodies idealized in the offline world. Moreover, in MUDs, when users describe their virtual bodies, they often exaggerate the very markers of gender, race, and youth that they lack in the world of corporeal physicality (Chen, 1998). Male characters are constructed with hulking, muscled bodies, while female characters are given lithe bodies such that these cyberbodies appear 'masculine or feminine to an exaggerated degree' (Clark, 1995: 127).

Such signifying bodies hyperbolize physical gender markers, while simultaneously sustaining a reclaimed corporeality. The virtual construction of breasts and muscles compensates for the loss of materiality engendered by the virtualizing of the body. In addition to the cyberbody, users rely heavily on gender stereotypes in the absence of other identity markers. Thus, characters are created to act in rigidly gender-stereotyped ways. Male characters accentuate aggressiveness, while female characters acquire passive and diffident

demeanors. Further, the connection between the offline and online self remains in that many MUD players are preoccupied with sorting players according to gender and 'outing' female characters owned by males (Turkle, 1995) so that offline realities take precedence over online fantasies. Further, gender stereotypes are more prevalent in online MUDs than offline because, as Kendall's work indicates, 'the assumptions of gender, race, and class that individuals hold are reproduced into online interaction . . . online participants continue to understand identity in essentialized terms, grounded in a particular physical body' (Chen, 1998: 36).

Contrary to postmodern interpretations of disembodied self-ing, virtualizing the body frustrates the very transcendence that cyberculture promises. Indeed, far from neutralizing the social meanings ascribed to the physical body, virtual bodies often reinforce them (Balsalmo, 2000) because the systems of classification adopted in virtual environments often reproduce the cultural norms attached to bodies in the offline world (Lupton, 1995). Thus, in such self-ing efforts to escape the physical body, the cyberself defines itself in a disembodied cyberbody. The simulation of the corporeality of the body indicates that the creators of virtual bodies desire to preserve the body in some form, not to transcend it (O'Brien, 1999). In so doing, users adopt an interactional self that reflects conceptions of the 'I' and the 'me' in that they create a cyberbody to interact with the 'generalized other'.

Thus, in online role playing, identity performance should not be confused with identity fragmentation or even schizophrenia. In her analysis of cyberspace as a new spiritual space resembling medieval conceptions of the soul, Wertheim (1999: 250) critiques the postmodern view of the cyberself:

> Role playing at being a squirriloid or a Klingon, whatever its genuine value, is simply not an identity-changing experience. I can play any number of online characters without suffering fragmentation of my 'archived' self. 'I' – that is, my 'self' – can play any number of different personae online and off, but that does not mean I become fragmented. In every one of these situations, I am still me, unless I become a true split personality like Sybil.

Therefore, Wertheim argues, online environments do not offer choices of selfhood absent in the offline world. Rather, they allow us to explore new understandings of the mind–body duality that once dominated Western thought. Refuting Gibsonesque fantasies, she likens the disembodied, online self to the culturally embedded idea of Cartesian duality in which the true self is embodied 'spirit' or 'soul' in contrast to the physical body. According to her, multiple self-ing online is in no way different from the chameleon-like behavior individuals may exhibit in the offline world. Wertheim (1999: 266) argues that the temptation to indulge in multiple online selves is really a doomed 'cyber-immortality escape from mortality'. She also reminds us that

the corporeal body forces a type of cohesion even between dissonant self-identities because, online and offline, they are all housed in the same physically bounded, embodied form, causing them to act in unison much of the time. In Goffmanian terms, individuals give multiple performances for different audiences because rather than freeing us from our offline social identities, cyberspace provides venues in which to codify them (Halbert, 2000).

THE ILLUSORY TEMPTATION OF POSTMODERN APPROACHES

I have presented an overview of postmodern stances advocating exponential cyberself-ing, as well as some of the corresponding limitations. Other research[4] offers deeply theoretical critiques of these postmodern stances (Wynn and Katz, 1997). While these theoretical concerns are important, I believe the more fundamental flaw in postmodern interpretations of cyberself-ing lies in attempts to generalize from early studies of MUDs to cyberself-ing in general. Early internet researchers present their work as representative of cyberspace. Turkle (1995: 187) states 'as I discuss MUDS, it is important to keep in mind that they more generally characterize identity play in cyberspace'. Stone (1995: 36) generalizes even further by defining cyberself-ing as the 'fragmented' representation of 'the critters we ourselves are in the process of becoming, here at the close of the mechanical age'. Furthermore, these studies may have even been further inflated by other researchers: 'Despite the caveats in her work, as other researchers have used Turkle's (1995) arguments in their own mediations on cyberspace they have most often focused on her liberatory pronouncements regarding the adoption of virtual selves' (Kolko and Reid, 1998: 213).

Therefore, I assert that it is imperative to examine the shift in internet user populations that renders obsolete both the postmodern outlook and generalizations from it. Postmodern interpretations of cyberself-ing are no longer valid; they cannot be applied to the general internet population because they are based on early internet users invested in MUDs. Today, the user population is far different; it is no longer dominated by white, male gamers. Rather, there is a more equitable gender split and increased racial diversity. Moreover, the demographic shift in the user population was accompanied by drastically reduced interest in online role playing as a percentage of the total internet use. For these reasons, postmodern accounts of cyberself-ing cannot credibly be regarded as generalizable to newer internet populations who express preferences for different types of online activities.

Postmodern accounts of cyberself-ing largely take place before the internet reached a critical mass of the general American population. As I have shown, these early studies of the cyberself-ing were based largely on MUD environments that grew out of science fiction novels or games. MUDders described by

postmodern theorists such as Stone and Turkle composed a radically different user population than exists today. Although there was no systematic method of determining MUD demographics, it is believed that they roughly matched the total internet user population that was predominantly composed of white males (Chen, 1998). In terms of race, the default was whiteness if 'the description does not specifically designate racial/ethnic status' (Chen, 1998: 15). Regarding gender, Curtis (1993) found that 70 percent of MUDders were male, although other studies found the gender split even more profound for 'hardcore' users at 82 percent male and 18 percent female (Hoffman and Novak, 1995).

Kendall (1996) argues that in addition to being predominantly white and male, MUDders were, by and large, technically trained users who participated in role-playing activities online. According to Chen (1998: 7)

> Role playing gamers are generally young males who carry the stigma of being misfits. The stereotype of a gamer is one of a young male who is unsure of his social skills and thus escapes to a fantasy life in order to be fulfilled (Fine, 1983). In order to escape this stigma, most gamers claim to be more intelligent and creative than the general population. The MUD world is inhabited by the same inhabitants as the role playing community.

These MUDders often created multiple online selves to escape from offline realities with new online identities (Turkle, 1995). Regarding Turkle's studies of MUDs as therapeutic virtual spaces, Chen (1998: 15) explains that the lack of offline signifiers creates an environment that:

> . . . allows space for MUDders to project thoughts and feelings from their pasts. It is this projection that leads to intense experiences on MUDs as the situation leads to exaggerated likes and dislikes, and to idealization and demonization. These intense experiences allow the MUDder to grow psychologically while acting out different aspects of the self.

Thus, rather than breeding multiphrenic self-ing as a result of saturation, the internet was widely used by MUDders who some viewed as socially stigmatized. Attempting to work out their offline identities, these users created cyberselves resembling 'distributed systems' when they engaged with the online world (Turkle, 1995: 1). Much of the scholarship employing a postmodern approach was based on MUDders; therefore, the earlier literature on the internet reflected an internet population that is no longer dominant. Today, users go online for different reasons. Online identities are likely to be extensions of offline identities because 'for most people, internet use enhances, extends, and supplements what they do offline' (Rainie, 2004: xiii).

Data on the rapid growth of the internet in terms of the total American population confirms the shift in user population, rendering postmodern

accounts invalid for present internet users. According to The UCLA internet Report, 30 percent of the American households had access to the internet only seven years after it was launched, making it the 'fastest growing electronic technology in world history' (The UCLA internet Report, 2000: 5) By the year 2000, 66.9 percent of all Americans were online; this percentage stabilized at 72.3 percent and 71.1 percent in 2001 and 2002 (The UCLA internet Report, 2002). By this time, internet use had spread from the MUDders studied by Turkle and Stone to a critical mass of the population. Moreover, the report shows growth towards gender parity online. In 2000, 73.5 percent of men were online compared to 66 percent of women. In 2001, these numbers climbed to 74.3 percent for men and 70.8 percent for women, respectively; they declined slightly for both to 73.1 percent for men and to 69 percent for women in 2002 according to the report's subsequent annual findings. While racial diversity on the internet is still a digital divide concern,[5] racial diversity is far greater than it was in the MUDs described in postmodern literature (The UCLA internet Report, 2002).

Just as the internet user base evolved, so did the range of cyberactivities available to and preferred by users. Once the internet reached a critical mass of the population, online gaming was of interest to only 33 percent of users according to the 2000 UCLA internet Report.[6] In this same report, the percent of early adopters as a percentage of the total user population was low; only 15.8 percent of users had been online four or more years. Thus, the early role-playing populations studied by postmodern theorists were no longer a dominant percentage of total internet users. By the 2001 report, there was further decline in games as a percentage of total time spent online; very experienced users (defined as those with five or more years of internet experience in 2001) spent only 2.8 percent of their online time in gaming (The UCLA internet Report, 2001). By the 2002 report, the percentage of users who expressed an interest in playing games had dropped to 26.5 percent, although experienced users claimed that online gaming accounted for 4.1 percent of their time compared to 3.2 percent of time for new users with less than one year online (The UCLA internet Report, 2002). In 2004, Cole (The UCLA internet Report, 2004: 4) claimed that 'The "Geek–Nerd" Perception of the internet is Dead' and that the perception of the internet user as someone 'separate and alienated from mainstream society' is no longer credible.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND CYBERSELF-ING

Given the shift in user populations and types of internet activities, for most users the online self is an extension of the offline masterself. With this in mind, I now return to symbolic interaction anew to explicate online self-ing and identity signaling. While the norms of online interaction may be different from

their offline counterparts given the interactive limitations of CMC, the self-ing process remains the same. The cyberself is the emergent product of social interaction in which the self masters the ability to be both the subject and object of interaction. In this way, cyberself-ing creates the virtual 'I/me' couplet. Online, the homepage allows the 'I' to present the self to the cyberother; in fact, the very construction of the homepage presumes the expectation of the virtual 'generalized other'. In Goffmanian terms, the 'I' constructs the homepage with expressions given by choosing text, photos, and digital formatting with the other's reaction in mind. The 'I' solicits the other's gaze through links to email, tabs to post comments, hit counters, and membership in webrings. Each of these indicate the 'I's' expectation of the other's presence and eventual appraisal. Once the 'I' perceives the cyberother's reaction, this reflexive constitution produces the 'cyberme'.

The growth from the 'I' to the 'me' occurs through interaction. In early homepages, the 'I' could remain in isolation, unable to read the cyberother's reaction because there was no interactional space. There were no 'signals that inform senders that reception is taking place' (Miller, 1995: 2). Therefore, when homepages stand in isolation, there is no interaction in a Meadian or Goffmanian sense. However, today, homepages rarely stand in isolation as projections of the 'I'. Rather, they are imbedded in or transformed by other forms of CMC that facilitate the interaction necessary to self-ing. In virtual communities such as eBay, links to the 'all about me' page are embedded in interactional spaces called 'boards'. These links move users between textual interactions and spaces of identity construction; this is just one permutation of the homepage. In other forums, such as political discussion groups, users employ links or references to professional homepages to give credence to their own assertions. In these ways, the homepage continues to be an expression of the 'I' that anticipates the cyberother's reaction, thus creating the 'me'. When used to bolster manifestations of the 'I' in interactional settings, the homepage does not rest in isolation but becomes part of the self-ing process.

Furthermore, in web logs or 'blogs', as well as online diaries, virtual spaces enlarge the conception of the homepage with interactional space. Blogs allow the same presentation of the 'I' as do homepages, but they also expect the other to interact to the 'I' in the same virtual space. The blogger presents the 'I' both through constructing the page and maintaining dialogue with other 'I's' that post reactions and commentary. In blogging, each manifestation of the 'I' is predicated on the self-ing of other 'I's' who form the cyberother. The 'I' is constantly redefined as the 'me' in response to this interactional commentary. Offline self-ing is built on interrelated interactions that do not stand in isolation. In parallel fashion, blogging requires sequential interactions that inform each other, such that

interactional flows result from contributions from both bloggers and audiences that are predicated on each other. In Meadian terminology, this process of self-ing is the result of the collective construction of the cyber 'I' and 'me' with the cyberother.

IDENTITY SIGNALING IN THE COMPUTER-MEDIATED WORLD

In face-to-face social interaction, individuals engage with each other using any of their sensory modalities. However, online there are no physical interactional cues as such. At present, most computer-mediated communication now occurs through text-based exchanges. Online users employ text to send and receive signals that mimic the structures of expressions 'given' and 'given off' in the offline world. Since social actors must establish their identities online without relying on the embodied cues normally available in the offline world, attentiveness to primarily textual cues is necessary to read digital expressions 'given off'. In this way, the cyberself masters virtual cuing systems that lend themselves to a Goffmanian analysis.

Studying a Usenet newsgroup, an online forum geared towards the exchange of information, Donath (1999) explains how users substitute 'para-textual' cues for the non-discursive cues on which they would normally depend. Most of these identity cues are overt declarations concerning age, name and institutional affiliation. internet users read these expressions 'given' with an eye to expressions 'given off'. In Goffman's (1959: 7) own words:

> Knowing that the individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favorable to him, the others may divide what they witness into two parts; a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part in regard to which he seems to have little concern or control, being chiefly derived from the expressions he gives off.

In this way, email provides both expressions 'given' and 'given off'. For example, in a business forum, a user may post his or her job title as an expression 'given'. However, if the user does not use the email from the institution named, this may not send the appropriate expression 'given off'. By using an email associated with the institutional identity claimed by the expression 'given', the expression 'given off' matches and validates the expression 'given'. Email from a free account, such as Yahoo, may signal the possibility of identity deception because there is no proof of offline affiliation or identity. Furthermore, an AOL address immediately signals debutant or dilettante status to netizens (Donath, 1999). In contrast, a university.edu or other 'professional' email address both validates the user's offline status and offers external status validation. In this way, signature styles and email addresses are often used to determine the validity of expressions 'given'.

In terms of cyber interaction, we can draw from Goffman's extended metaphor of dramaturgy. Each time a user posts to a forum or chat room, he

conducts a performance. Goffman (1959: 22) defines a performance as 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers'. To be successful, the performance is 'molded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented'; further, the performer chooses to 'forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards' (Goffman, 1959: 35, 41). In this way, vocabulary, content and phrasing of the postings become identity performance; the goal of a performance is to reaffirm a community's shared moral values (Goffman, 1959). Online performance takes place though the language used in messages and postings that are rich sources of expressions 'given' and 'given off'. For the performance to be successful, the cyberperformer must become literate in terms of site or community language, as well as implicit and explicit shared values. Many Usenet participants employ phrases and abbreviations that are peculiar to their group (Donath, 1999). Participants can exploit these linguistic markers to establish both bona fide identities and uphold the group's sense of shared identity. For users to successfully maintain their membership in a community, they must perform self-identities that do not violate the context of community interaction; these may be read through screen names, member biographies, introductions and the contexts in which conversations take place (Halbert, 2000).

Sometimes performances fail. This is especially true when nonmembers, sometimes called trolls, attempt to use these cues to mimic the linguistic habits of real members (Donath, 1999). The cyberaudience is quick to sense tension over both correct identity signaling and identity deception. Because dissimulating cyberperformers can fake signature lines, without expending much time or effort, most audience members do not rely on them as reliable indicators of identity. Instead, the audience scrutinizes language and vocabulary as expressions 'given off'. For this reason, just as in offline interaction, identity signaling is based on interpretation. It takes a certain level of skill with expressions 'given off' to assume the identity of someone already well known to other members of the audience. Since the audience is well acquainted with the preoccupations and styles of the other member performers, an impostor faces significant challenges to maintain a false identity (O'Brien, 1999). While it is uncommon for participants to impersonate other users, it is common practice for Usenet participants to deceive other users as to their offline identities. In Goffmanian terms, their 'front stage' performance is unsuccessful in concealing truths from 'backstage'. When cyberperformers supply information about age, gender and even physical size (Donath, 1999), other audience members take pains to establish the veracity of identity information, distinguishing between trustworthy expressions 'given' and expressions 'given off' that afford the opportunity for dissimulation.

Finally, this discussion centers on interaction embodied by textual signaling. In addition to condensed expressions such as 'LOL' that encapsulate the physical into text bytes, text itself is now joined with a host of visual expressions 'given' and 'given off'. In both instant messaging (IM) and email, emoticons offer a plethora of symbols that, like 'LOL', reduce interactional signals to a single visual cue embedded in the text. For all such interactions, new expressions 'given' and 'given off' will develop, allowing us to take Goffmanian analysis of cyberself-ing further. In terms of 'front stage' and 'backstage', IM allows multiple conversations with multiple parties to occur at the same time. It is easy to create multiple 'backstages' that are invisible to other participants. In fact, 'invisible mode' is an option for Yahoo IM participants to use when they wish to disappear from 'front stage' while continuing to carry on as many 'backstage' interactions as they wish. Continuing with the metaphor of dramaturgy, participants may choose digital-themed backgrounds for both their 'front stages' and 'backstages' that allow for non-textual signaling. Finally, it is easy to use web cams to insert photos or video into IM interactions. Now visual cues, albeit primitive, may supplement text. Ironically, this may obviate the need for rich textual cues created to convey expressions 'given' and 'given off' in the absence of visual indicators. One thing is certain: as the internet continues to evolve, identity signaling will undoubtedly mature and create a new bag of tricks.

DISCUSSION

As my analysis indicates, postmodern studies capture only nascent internet self-ing based on role playing in MUDs during the early years of the internet. These studies are based on an internet population constituted largely of young technically proficient males who in the offline world may have endured social stigma, driving them to re-create themselves in online venues. These users no longer constitute a majority of the total internet population. Therefore, postmodern accounts of cyberself-ing do not prove convincing for today's internet users in light of changing trends in the internet user population and its online activities.

As I have concluded, the evidence corroborates the countervailing thesis of 'socialized' online selves drawing from the symbolic interactionist perspective. Like offline self-ing, cyberself-ing is rooted in interaction as understood by Mead (1934); the 'I,' the 'me' and the 'generalized other' inform each other as the core of the self-ing project. Offline cuing systems are redefined in online venues that preserve the dynamics of interactional cuing. Goffman's extended metaphor of dramaturgy, expressions 'given', and expressions 'given off' remain salient for the cyberself. Online expressions are still 'given' and 'given off' through text; 'front stages' and 'backstages' are critical to framing cyberinteractions. Thus, interaction in cyberspace perpetuates the same

self-ing that exists in the offline world. In closing, future research should continue our explorations of cyberself-ing as both CMC and internet populations evolve.

Notes

1 Some argue that Goffman's work is so distinctive that he should not be placed within symbolic interaction, while others situate Goffman firmly in the SI tradition.

2 It should be noted that in Goffman's later work, the self is not merely the product of interaction between the performer and audience, but rather is defined by organizational frameworks or structures in which the self is embedded. According to Fine (1993: 69–70), in Goffman's interaction order he understands both the 'order' and 'interaction' in which 'individuals negotiate the realities that are structured', and 'structures determine what actors can or will do'. In works such as *Stigma* and *Asylum*, Goffman explores both how the self is defined from without and how the self resists the definitions imposed by organizations (Fine, 1993). This is not to say that he abandons the symbolic interactionist perspective; rather Goffman examines the power of institutional forces on self-ing.

3 Gergen's first edition of *The Saturated Self* was published in 1991; he concentrated on technologies of saturation other than the internet. However, as Gergen's writing was published just before the dawn of internet communication, early internet theorists quickly extrapolated the concept of the saturated self and adapted it to the medium of the internet. Gergen's second edition of *The Saturated Self* makes this connection clear and explicitly defines the internet as a technology of saturation that engenders a saturated self.

4 In their critique of postmodern theories of cyberself-ing, Wynn and Katz (1997: 2) mention that these early studies are largely based on MUDs. However, they take issue with these postmodern interpretations on theoretical grounds, charging them with insufficient grounding limited to psychological and literary theories.

5 Conceptions of the digital divide are changing as gender parity is reached and diversity is growing in terms of internet access. Scholars now understand that the digital divide is not simply binary in terms of internet access. Rather, more nuanced distinctions are emerging such as users with little or several years of experience, as well as those who have dial-up as opposed to broadband (Lenhart and Horrigan 2003).

6 According to The UCLA internet Report (The UCLA Internet Report, 2000), the 10 most popular internet activities were surfing or browsing (81.7%), email (81.6%), finding hobby information (57.2%), reading news (56.6%), finding entertainment information (54.3%), buying online (51.7%), finding travel information (45.8%), using instant messaging (39.6%), finding medical information (36.6%) and playing games (33.0%). Figures indicate the percentage of users who engage in each activity.

References

Andersen, W. (1997) *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person*. New York: Penguin Putnam.

Balsamo, A. (2000) 'The Virtual Body in Cyberspace', in D. Bell and B. Kennedy, B. (eds) *The Cybercultures Reader*, pp. 489–503. London: Routledge.

Chen, N. (1998) 'Is that How You Look: Body-Image, Beauty Standards, and the Creation of Online Bodies', PhD prospectus, UCLA Department of Sociology.

Clark, N. (1995) 'Rear-View Mirrorshades: The Recursive Generation of the Cyberbody', in M. Featherstone and R. Burrows (eds) *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, pp. 113–34. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cooley, C.H. (1902) *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Curtis, P. (1993) 'Mudding: Social Phenomena in Text-Based Virtual Realities', URL (consulted Oct. 2004): http://www.eff.org/Net_culture/MOO_MUD_IRC/curtis_mudding.article

Donath, J. (1999) 'Identity and Deception in a Virtual Community', in M. Smith and P. Kollock (eds) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 29–59. London: Routledge.

Fine, G. (1983) *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Fine, G. (1993) 'The Sad Demise, Mysterious Disappearance, and Glorious Triumph of Symbolic Interactionism', *Annual Review of Sociology* 19: 61–87.

Gergen, K. (1991) *The Saturated Self*. New York: Basic Books.

Gibson, W. (1984) *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Publishing.

Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Halbert, C. (2000) 'The Presentation of the Self in Computer Mediated Communications: Managing and Challenging Gender Identity', PhD Dissertation, University of Kentucky.

Hillis, K. (1999) *Digital Sensations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hoffman, D, and Novak, T. (1995) 'internet Use in the United States: 1995 Baseline Estimates and Preliminary Market Segments', Project 2000 Working Paper, URL (Consulted Dec. 1998): www2000.ogsm.vanderbilt.edu/baseline/1995.internet.estimates.html

Holstein, J. and Gubrium, J. (2000) *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jauréguiberry, F. (2000) 'Le Moi, le soi et internet', *Sociologie et Sociétés* 32(2): 135–51.

Kendall, L. (1996) 'MUDder, I Hardly Knew er', in L. Cherny and R. Weise (eds) *Wired Women*, pp. 207–23. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.

Kolko, B. and Reid, E. (1998) 'Dissolution and Fragmentation: Problems in Online Communities', in S. Jones (ed.) *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, pp. 212–30. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lemert, C. and Branaman, A. (1997) *The Goffman Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Lenhart, A. and Horrigan, J. (2003) 'Re-Visualizing the Digital Divide as a Digital Spectrum', *IT & Society* 1(5): 23–39.

Lupton, D. (1995) 'The Embodied Computer/User', in M. Featherstone and R. Burrows (eds) *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, pp. 97–112. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mead, G.H. (1934) *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Miller, H. (1995) 'The Presentation of Self in Electronic Life: Goffman on the Internet', URL (consulted May 2001): http//:www.ntu.ac.uk/soc/psych/miller/goffman.htm

Nakamura, L. (2000) 'Race In/For Cyberspace', in D. Bell and B. Kennedy (eds) *The Cybercultures Reader*, pp. 712–21. London: Routledge.

O'Brien, J. (1999) 'Writing the Body: Gender Reproduction in Online Interaction', in M. Smith and P. Kollock (eds) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 29–59. London: Routledge.

Rainie, H.L. (2004) 'Forward', in P.N. Howard and S. Jones (eds) *Society Online: The internet in Context*, pp. xi–xiv. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Rosenau, P.M. (1992) *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Stone, A.R. (1995) *The War of Desire and Technology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

The UCLA internet Report (2000) 'Surveying the Digital Future', UCLA Center for Communication Policy, URL (consulted Oct. 2004): http://www.digitalcenter.org/pdf/internetReportYearOne.pdf

The UCLA internet Report (2001) 'The UCLA internet Report 2001 Surveying the Digital Future Year Two', UCLA Center for Communication Policy, URL (consulted Oct. 2004): http://www.digitalcenter.org/pdf/internetReportYearTwo.pdf

The UCLA internet Report (2002) 'The UCLA internet Report Surveying the Digital Future Year Three', UCLA Center for Communication Policy, URL (consulted Oct. 2004): http://www.digitalcenter.org/pdf/internetReportYearThree.pdf

The UCLA internet Report (2004) 'The Digital Future Report Surveying the Digital Future Year Four', USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, URL (consulted Oct. 2004): http://www.digitalcenter.org/downloads/DigitalFutureReport–Year4–2004.pdf

Turkle, S. (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the internet.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Wertheim, M. (1999) *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the internet.* New York: Norton.

Wynn, E. and Katz, J. (1997) 'Hyperbole over Cyberspace: Self-presentation and Social Boundaries in internet Home Pages and Discourse', *The Information Society: an International Journal* 13(4): 297–328.

LAURA ROBINSON's research examines comparative cultural use of new media. Her previous work has examined Brazilian, French, and American online communities in terms of online interaction and norm building, national and collective identities, and cultural discourse.

Address: Annenberg Center for Communication, University of Southern California, 734 West Adams Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA. [email: lrobinson@annenberg.edu; lauracr@ucla.edu]