2007

Mythesis.com : the irony of technology : an object relational approach to understanding the interplay of identity construction and the emergence of the "true self" through the privilege of anonymity on the Internet

Katherine Suzanne Sapp
Smith College

Recommended Citation

Katherine Suzanne Sapp
Mythesis.com: The Irony of
Technology. An Object
Relational Approach to
Understanding the Interplay
of Identity Construction and
the Emergence of the "True
Self" Through The Privilege
of Anonymity on the Internet

ABSTRACT

This was an exploratory study of the ways in which online social networks like Myspace.com can impact perceptions of the user in terms of self and others. Specifically, the focus was on how online experiences may have different levels of impact on these perceptions depending upon users' self identifying as having a concealable stigmatized identity based on sexual orientation or disability.

Research for this study was conducted through an online survey and was promoted using the classifieds posting forum on Myspace.com. There were 100 respondents who accepted the terms set forth in the Informed Consent. Seventy-six of these initial respondents completed the survey in its entirety. Participant responses reflect their experiences in five areas of interest: a) demographics, b) experiences growing up, c) current life experiences offline, d) active use of the Myspace network, and e) current life experiences online. Findings were filtered into categories based on self identified sexual orientation and disability status. Responses from these groups were then compared to their corresponding non-stigmatized identity group.

Analysis of the collected data showed that for individuals self identifying as having a concealable stigmatized identity, experiences growing up and in their current

offline lives, indicated increased levels of false self living than did the opposing non-stigmatized group. Data analysis also showed that in online activity, the ability to self construct personal profile identities provided those participants with stigmatized identities increased perceptions of control over how and when they could choose to self disclose their true self aspects often kept hidden in offline life.

MYTHESIS.COM: THE IRONY OF TECHNOLOGY. AN OBJECT RELATIONAL

APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE INTERPLAY OF IDENTITY

CONSTRUCTION AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE "TRUE SELF" THROUGH

THE PRIVILEGE OF ANONYMITY ON THE INTERNET

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Katherine Suzanne Sapp
Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I must thank my research advisor, Holly Simons, for her infinite patience with throughout the course of this experience and for her blind faith that I would in fact finish this project.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my family for their love and support throughout my journey at Smith. Their support of these endeavors has been amazing and their encouragement of me to follow my dreams is priceless. I would like to especially thank my grandparents without whom this experience would not have been possible.

I would like to recognize my large network of cheerleaders, who tried to help me maintain focus and direction throughout this process, but despite their best efforts often lost me to my procrastinating tendencies. However, their cheers never lost steam as these friends stuck by me throughout the year as well as in the fervor of the last month before the thesis deadline. Special thanks to my L.A. people, Nicole Young, Brion Phipps and Margaret Dickey who bore the brunt of my stress and frustration, as well as the Albert family who provided hugs in times of crisis and allowed me to take over their home with my many (many) piles of paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The open society, the unrestricted access to knowledge, the unplanned
and uninhibited association of men for its furtherance –
these are what may make a vast, complex, ever growing, ever changing,
ever more specialized and expert technological world,
nevertheless a world of human community.
                                                   -J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER,
                                                   Science and the Common Understanding, 1953

Within each of us lies an innate human need to belong and feel loved. This need

can be so strong that when it is not fulfilled by caregivers during childhood, neglected

individuals will often go to great lengths to find alternative groups and individuals who

can fulfill the void. As Object Relations theory believes that emotional needs can only

be met by other people, relationships with others are considered to be central in the

developmental process in order for individuals to accurately perceive and internalize

representations of others in the future (Berzoff, Flanagan & Hertz, 1996). However,

depending on a person's level of self worth and ability to form healthy attachments to

others this process of attempting to fill an emotional void may be gone about through

either adaptive or maladaptive means, leading to either a corrective experience for the

individual or to a potentially harmful and destructive relationship.

As computers and the Internet have reshaped the ways in which humans are able

to represent themselves to the world and connect with one another outside of the public

sphere, individuals lacking positive mirroring as children have been provided with a new

means of seeking out others for the purposes of healthy identification and encouragement

of true self aspects previously neglected by primary caregivers. A prominent means of facilitating this process is by joining an online social network like Myspace.com, which provides a large pool of new others who are accessible at the discretion of the user. As the Internet is accessible 24/7, users may log on or off of the network any time they like, thus making time and geographical location irrelevant in the process of seeking out new others for the purposes of object seeking and forming new relationships.

This study was an exploration of the ways in which online social networks like Myspace.com, are able to impact the perceptions of self and others, for the users who are registered with the network. Specifically, the focus of this study is on how online experiences may have different levels of impact on these perceptions depending upon users' self identification as with having or not having a concealable stigmatized identity.

Research of this quantitative study was conducted through a fixed online survey promoted through the use of the classified posting forums on the Myspace network. In promoting the study in this way, it was strictly made available to registered members of Myspace. There were 100 respondents who accepted the terms set forth in the Informed Consent, with 76 of these initial respondents completing the survey in its entirety. Participant responses reflect their experiences in five areas of interest: a) demographic information assessing for stigmatized identities, b) experiences growing up, c) current experiences in offline life, d) active use of the Myspace network, and e) current experiences in online life.

Findings were filtered into categories based on self identified sexual orientation and disability status, which compared traditionally judged stigmas in our society to the opposing non-stigmatized groups. The identity categories of sexual orientation and

disability are considered to carry concealable stigmas. For these purposes the stigmatized groups will be referred to as GLBTQ or disabled, and the non-stigmatized groups will be referred to as straight or not disabled. Analysis of the collected data showed that for individuals self identifying as having a concealable stigmatized identity, their experiences growing up and in their current offline lives carried greater restrictions to personal expression and increased levels of false self living than what appears to have been experienced by those participants with non-stigmatized identities. Visual analysis of the data also showed that in online activity, the ability to self construct personal profile identities provided those participants with stigmatized identities increased levels of control over how and when they could choose to self disclose the parts of themselves often kept hidden in offline life, and offered new possibilities for group identification and the formation of new relationships.

For all respondents, the Internet and use of Myspace.com appear to provide a positive environment for social interaction that is perceived by users, as a reality not entirely dissimilar to offline life. Myspace also appears to act as an extension of offline life that allows for increased ability to maintain long distance friendships, increased accessibility to seek out like minded people, and to provide an alternate sense of community that engages its members and obtains their loyalty to the site.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of how traditional understandings of psychodynamic theory, more specifically Object Relations Theory, can be interwoven into evolving clinical understandings of how online social networks like Myspace.com, may be helping people to gain a better sense of their True self aspects through the privilege of anonymous interactions. This literature review will focus on the following general areas: (a) the expansion of psychodynamic theory into Object Relations Theory; (b) D.W. Winnicott's concepts of the True and False selves; (c) the human need for group identification; (d) a historical overview of technological advances and their effects on society; (e) computer-mediated communication; (f) online identity construction and relationship formation and; (g) the idea of cybercommunity. These topics will be more clearly defined and discussed in their respective sections.

The purpose of this study is to: (a) examine the differences between online and offline identity constructions in aiding the development and emergence of the True Self and, (b) in evaluating these differences, compare the findings to traditional understandings of the emergence of the True Self from an object relational perspective in terms of mirroring and attachment.

The Evolution and Expansion of Psychodynamic Theory

Due to its broad applicability within the human experience, and complementary

4

nature to other theoretical constructs, psychodynamic theory has played an integral role in helping practicing clinicians to better understand the intrapsychic structure of a person in terms of past experiences and present reality (Goldstein, 2001). As Eda Goldstein (2001) explains, "it [psychodynamic theory] has provided practitioners with important insights into human motivation, needs, capacities, and problems and has played a major role in shaping social work practice from the 1920's to the present" (p. 3). With its flexible nature, psychodynamic theory takes into account a multitude of social and cultural factors that transcend traditional psychoanalytic understandings of character development centered around the childhood experience and the dynamics of the unconscious (Berzoff et al., 1996).

Sigmund Freud was the first to introduce a psychodynamic framework which focused primarily on what he conceptualized as sexual and aggressive drives, rooted in the human unconscious (Goldstein, 2001). He believed that when these unconscious drives were challenged by conscious understandings of social norms, the individual, or ego, was found to be in constant internal conflict as the unconscious and conscious are constant processes that interact with one another unbeknownst to the individual (Berzoff et al., 1996).

In the decades to follow, new schools of thought founded in Freudian theory and yet divergent in nature, led to changes in theoretical interpretation (Goldstein, 2001). The first of these new schools of thought was Ego Psychology which introduced the idea that issues of the mind supersede Freud's theory of the unconscious drives. This theory holds that the mind achieves certain tasks in accordance with developmental processes across the life cycle in dealings with the social and physical world (Berzoff et al., 1996).

With the ideas presented by Ego Psychology, a new opportunity was provided to clinicians who felt as though classic psychodynamic theory was too limited in its understanding of the human psyche (Goldstein, 2001). This has led to the development of new frameworks and treatment models that work to encompass the whole experience of a person, incorporating biological, sociocultural and psychological factors (biopsychosocial model) (Goldstein, 2001). Among these new frameworks in clinical thought is that of Object Relations theory.

Object Relations Theory

Object Relations theory refers to a person's internalized experience of self and his or her external interpersonal relationships (Goldstein, 2001). It explores the development of how people come to experience themselves as autonomous beings while simultaneously necessitating deep attachment to others (Berzoff et al., 1996). This ambivalent struggle between autonomy and the need for intimate attachment is part of an internal process that occurs unconsciously as individuals process the meaning and existence of relationships. This internal process can be even more powerful for individuals then what is experienced in their external world with lived relationships (Berzoff et al., 1996). Object relations theory examines how an individual currently interacts in interpersonal relationships, and how that practice has been shaped by internalized object relations with primary caregivers experienced in the infancy stages of psychological development (Berzoff et al., 1996). Thus, the term "object relations" refers both to the external object (like a mother) as well as the internal mental representation of that object, and the internal representations of the self (Berzoff et al., 1996).

The concept of the *object* manifests itself in different ways to represent all that an object can possibly mean to an individual in terms of others and the self (Goldstein, 2001). Generally speaking, an object is something outside of the self that is perceived, experienced, desired, feared, or rejected by the self (Berzoff et al., 1996). In accordance with this definition, the term "object" is to mean a person in the external world with whom the individual interacts and relates to (Goldstein, 2001), and can be a perception of that person as either the real or internalized image (Berzoff et al., 1996). Infants begin to construct images of themselves and others, otherwise known as *self and object representations*, by absorbing their experiences with those in their immediate environment. Once these representations have been formed, they will fundamentally affect the way in which individuals will continue to view themselves and others throughout the life cycle (Goldstein, 2001).

As an infant proceeds through the developmental process of object interpretation and internalization, he or she begins to understand the link between *affect*, or feeling state, with the experience of the external object (Goldstein, 2001). For example, if a child receives a smile from the mother for performing positive behavior, the child will make the connection that the behavior was good in the eyes of the mother. Conversely, if the child is met with an angry expression from the mother in response to a certain behavior, the child will make the connection that the behavior is bad (Goldstein, 2001).

There is then the idea of the *part-object,* which stems from the early stages of life wherein the infant is not able to recognize the mother as a whole person. Instead the infant views the mother in parts. She is a breast for nourishment, arms to rock the infant to sleep, a face that reflects to the infant approval or disapproval, and/or feeling states

connected to infant behavior (Goldstein, 2001). As the child develops, it is important for

healthy growth that the child achieves the ability to create a symbiotic union of his or her

separation of good and bad, in order to understand that good and bad experiences can be

associated with the same object. This integration helps to create a whole object

experience (Goldstein, 2001). If the child is not able to achieve this developmental

milestone of integrating part objects, his or her ability to develop accurate interpretations

of real and fantasied objects, and self and other representations may become distorted,

which may negatively impact the ability to develop a cohesive sense of self and the

ability to accurately perceive others (Goldstein, 2001).

As the object relations process unfolds, the next step in the individual's

psychological development is being able to distinguish the difference between *real* and

fantasied objects. The real object represents the objective characteristics of those in the

external world, whereas the fantasied object represents the subjective experiences of how

the individual has constructed the meaning of that object (Goldstein, 2001).

Another key component to Object Relations theory is that it is a relational model

looking closely at how an individual's needs are met or not met by a particular object,

like a caregiver (Berzoff et al., 1996). Because Object Relations theory believes that

emotional and physical needs can only be met by a person, relationships are placed at the

heart of the experience (Berzoff et al., 1996). In order for optimal development to occur,

needs must be met reinforce for the individual that he or she is unique, loved, and wholly

accepted for all of his or her self aspects, both good and bad. The individual must be

provided with a secure environment that promotes healthy attachment to a caregiver

allowing for connection and belonging, individuation and the feeling of being loved

(Berzoff et al., 1996). "In other words, what is 'outside' often gets 'inside' and shapes the way a person grows, thinks, and feels" (Berzoff et al., 1996, p.131).

The entity responsible for containing the aforementioned objects, representations, and affects, is the *ego* (Goldstein, 2001). However, theorists are at odds as to how it should be properly defined within the framework of Object Relations theory. Differences in definition are primarily between the American and British Schools of Object Relations theory and even within the same schools some theorists have been unable to agree on how the ego should be defined within the theory constructs (Goldstein, 2001).

In addition to the new perspectives offered by object relations theory on the need for human relatedness and internal and external object representations is the idea that mature dependence on others strikes the balance between infantile/total dependence on external objects and complete autonomy (Berzoff et al., 1996). Within the realm of the British School of Object Relations, neither extreme of dependence or autonomy is thought to be a healthy marker of psychological development. Whereas the American School of Object Relations promotes western ideals, constructed on patriarchal paradigms focused on male psychological development that hold autonomy as a positive marker of sound developmental growth and good mental health (Berzoff et al., 1996).

Clearly, there are discrepancies amongst object relations theorists in deciding upon a universal measurement of how to determine individual development (Westen, 1991). Instead, object relations theory is more of a compilation of ideas from various theorists, rather than a comprehensive theory of personality, whose principles can be used in conjunction with one another to create a more complete picture of an individual's intrapsychic structure (Westen, 1991).

Defenses

Based on the commonly held belief that the internalization of object representations are initially formed in the infancy and childhood stages of psychological development, object relations theorists popularly believe that it is the more primitive psychological defenses that re-enact themselves throughout the life process dependent on frustrations experienced in these early years (Goldstein, 2001), with particular attention paid to relational issues (Berzoff et al., 1996). Such primitive ego defenses, which subsist to stave off and cope with the frustrations and anxieties commonly experienced in relationships with others, include splitting, introjection, identification, idealization, projection, devaluation and denial (Berzoff et al., 1996).

Due to an infant's inability to incorporate part objects into a cohesive whole, the defense of *splitting* develops as a means of maintaining the separation between good and bad experiences with the primary caregiver (Berzoff et al., 1996). This is done because the infant is unable to tolerate the thought that the object on whom they are dependent can be both good and bad (Goldstein, 2001). Mastery is achieved when the infant is able to hold the external object as both good and bad. However, if the infant is unable to achieve this union between the good and bad part objects, this primitive defense can persist throughout the life cycle, acting to continue distorted perceptions of relationships with others (Goldstein, 2001).

Introjection appears before identification in early infant psychological development and consists of often frightening or all consuming images related to real or fantasied frustrations with others (Goldstein, 2001). Introjects accompany the part object experience of the infant often being compartmentalized into "good me" and "bad me"

self representations depending on whether or not the interaction with the environment is positive or negative (Goldstein, 2001). For example, if an infant is exposed to a negative image associated with the expression of a need, he or she may become terrified. As a result, the infant may introject a more comforting image that will help to self soothe in the time of need (Goldstein, 2001).

Identification is associated with the child's ability to distinguish his or her separateness from the primary caregiver and to employ the different roles that the care giving object has modeled during important interactions (Goldstein, 2001). In turn, as the child's identification with the care giving object becomes internalized he or she may repeat the actions of the caregiver when faced with similar circumstances in which the identification was learned (Goldstein, 2001).

As psychological development progresses and the child begins to better understand his or her connection to external objects, the use of defenses expands as well. Similarly to how the child takes in introjects through external experiences with others (Goldstein, 2001), he or she is also able to *project* internal parts of the self, normally bad or unwanted feelings, onto others (Berzoff et al., 1996). There are potential consequences to the use of projection. As the child expels disturbed or frightening feelings onto the object, the child may in turn now perceive that object as threatening (Goldstein, 2001). The build up of the child's internalized object relations is associated with the cyclical use of introjection and projection (Goldstein, 2001).

Idealization is an unconscious means of disavowing the self from painful feelings towards an external object. This defense comes into play when the child does not want to recognize these types of feelings, so in turn the painful feelings are suppressed so that the

11

object can be perceived as good (Berzoff et al., 1996). Idealization may also occur in terms of how individuals portray themselves to others. If individuals fear that they may be rejected by the object(s) for their core self, they may instead assume an idealized version of themselves that they believe the object will approve of in order to gain acceptance (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

Devaluation is the opposite of idealization, but is used as a defense for a similar purpose. It is used to rid the self of painful feelings as a means of rejecting the object of their desire before the object can reject them (Berzoff et al., 1996). Also much like idealization, devaluation keeps the self from truly connecting to genuine feelings (Berzoff et al., 1996).

Much like every other defense, *denial* is used to disavow the self of painful feelings. This is done by essentially not recognizing that these feelings exist so as to erase the threatening aspects of the external reality that facilitated these feelings in the first place (Berzoff et al., 1996).

Differing Schools of Thought

Both the British and American schools of object relations theory came to pass in response to a growing desire to bridge the gap between the mechanistic framework of classic Freudian theory that, in the opinion of more contemporary theorists, downplayed the importance of the caretaking and social environment (Goldstein, 2001). As a result, numerous theorists began taking closer examination of the infant/mother relationship. However, theorists differed on how far they were willing to move away from the structural framework put in place by Freud's classic psychoanalytical constructs, therein the two schools of thought diverged (Goldstein, 2001).

American theorists like, Rene Spitz, Edith Jacobson and Margaret Mahler were trained in classical psychoanalytic theory and held onto Freud's dual instinct and structural theory, but refocused their attention towards early developmental processes and the development of the internalized self- and object-representations. They went on to further examine how these early processes act to form the core of one's identity, personality traits and how they view themselves and others (Goldstein, 2001). They place careful consideration and emphasis on the importance of the child's process of individuation and separation from the caregiver. From a sociocultural perspective this concept is a largely a "Western, white middle class, male belief system of mental health. Autonomy and independence are highly valued and made synonymous with health and maturity" (Berzoff et al., 1996, p. 158). While the concept of autonomy is valued by theorists in the British school, it is not as heavily emphasized in their theoretical framework perhaps because western (United States) notions of independence are not as highly shared in Western European culture (Berzoff et al., 1996).

Contributions to the Field

Object relations theory has contributed significantly to the field of psychodynamic theory and has done much in helping to reshape the ways in which psychodynamically oriented treatment is put into practice (Goldstein, 2001). First, it provided clinicians with a new sense of permission to remove their veil of neutrality and replace it with a more empathic and involved approach to treatment. Treatment is allowed to be more flexible and individualized to the needs of the client and positive interactions with the client are encouraged in order to facilitate corrective experiences (Goldstein, 2001). This allows the gamut of possible treatment interventions to expand past the limited use of insight-

oriented treatment to include interventions that support individual growth by way of meeting previously neglected developmental needs. The commonly held understanding behind these new ideas of the client/therapist relationship was by in large due to the fact that especially early on in treatment the client may not be ready to tolerate confrontation and interpretation from the therapist (Goldstein, 2001).

The therapist as authoritarian in the client/therapist relationship is discouraged, with greater emphasis placed on the subjective experience of the individual rather than the objective stance of the therapist witnessing the individual's experience and individual strengths are given more credence in character development then were previously afforded by drive and structural theories (Goldstein, 2001). The use of transference in the client/therapist relationship is expanded to accommodate not only past relationships, but more current ones as well and the concept of counter transference holds greater permission for therapists to bring their own personalities to the treatment relationship. Ideas around resistance are extended in order to better examine a broader range of factors that may be interfering with the individual's struggles engaging in treatment, and there is greater appreciation afforded to the therapist's need to understand the individual's entire biopsychosocial situation (Goldstein, 2001).

Winnicott's Theory of the Self

While there have been a number of theorists who have contributed to the constructs of object relations theory, special emphasis for the purposes of this paper is being placed on the ideas set forth by Donald W. Winnicott, who introduced the idea of the "True" and "False" selves. This separation of the selves is a means to understanding how people conceptualize themselves from a personal core identity perspective, as well

14

as through their relationships with others. Winnicott theorizes that the self begins to reveal itself in infancy as soon as there appears to be any semblance of mental organization (Abram, 1996). However, he also believed that the self does not fully exist until an individual has developed the cognitive capacity to understand his or her own awareness, hence having a "sense" of self (Abram, 1996).

Winnicott expanded his theory on the self to look at the ways in which it can be expressed as either true or false. He theorized that the origin of an individual's true and false self development is located in the first external object relationship between the infant and primary caregiver (Abram, 1996). Winnicott emphasized that it is the role of the caregiver (as the primary external object for the infant) to encourage the infant's development of the true self by consistently validating spontaneous gestures made by the infant. This consistent validation helps to strengthen the infant's underdeveloped ego and to instill a sense of security within the infant's psyche that the caregiver appreciates all of the infant's unique aspects (Abram, 1996). He referred to this connection as ego-relatedness, wherein lies an emotional bond between two separate and yet intimately attached individuals, such as mother and child (Goldstein, 2001).

This consistent process of validation and attention to the needs of the infant was labeled by Winnicott as "good enough mothering" (Goldstein, 2001). It is important to note that there is not one single type of mother that Winnicott endorsed, nor did he believe that mothers had to be perfect in rearing their children, although he did have an idealized vision of what appropriate mothering should look like; sensitive to infant's emotional and physical needs, patient, consistent, and reliable (Goldstein, 2001).

15

Winnicott promoted true self living and felt that when people are acting out of the true self, which is at the core of the individual's personality, they "feel that their decisions, their thought, even their basic way of presenting themselves is grounded in who they are in the deepest sense; they feel as if they are in tune with the wellsprings of their personhood" (Berzoff et al., 1996, p.2). He also believed that, "Only the True self can be creative and only the True self can feel real. Whereas a true self feels real, the existence of a false self results in a feeling unreal or a sense of futility"(Abram, 1996, p.279). This statement by Winnicott has been interpreted by some (Abram, 1996), as a modern interpretation of William Shakespeare's time honored saying, "This above all: to thine own self be true. And it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

In contrast, the false self in identity formation occurs when the child responds to the needs and expectations of the caregiver, rather than the caregiver being responsive to the needs and wishes of the child (Abram, 1996). When acting on behalf of the false self, "people feel they are going along with others, denying themselves, doing what is expected or required, and missing out on what is personally meaningful" (Berzoff et al., 1996, p.2). In essence, the false self is a defense mechanism that protects the true self from conflicting with the external environment, "at the expense of its full expression" (Goldstein, 2001, p.77). In this way the false self can also be referred to as the "caretaker self" which acts to protect the true self at all costs (Abram, 1996). However, the ways in which the false self will defend are dependent on whatever defense mechanisms are most highly developed within a particular individual (Abram, 1996), which as previously described in this paper are dependent on early childhood psychological development.

Although the false self does live in some regards to protect the true self from pain, it often acts without knowledge that the true self even exists (Abram, 1996). Since these processes are more or less unconscious, false self organization can range in severity from healthy to pathological. It is in this way that an individual with a relatively high functioning intellect but living through a false self personality could potentially deceive the world about the unique true self aspects that make up their core identity (Abram, 1996). For example, "The world may observe [the] academic success of a high degree, and may find it hard to believe in the very real distress of the individual concerned, who feels 'phoney' the more he or she is successful" (Abram, 1996, p.279).

Between the poles of true and false selves lives a healthy false self that should be able to negotiate between the wants of the private self and the expectations of the world at large (Abram, 1996). Winnicott believes that the ability to compromise in this way is an indicator of sound psychological health. He also believed that in this sound state of health the individual should know how to effectively regulate his or her ability to compromise prior to surrendering true self ideals and becoming overly compliant to outside forces (Abram, 1996). This is because Winnicott associates compliance with false self living, connecting it with despair rather than hope, which is a signal of compromise (Abram, 1996).

The Self and Its Need to Belong

The term "self" has been used in several different contexts throughout this paper; however, for the purposes of this paper, it will be most commonly referred to as the definition of the individual from their subjective perspective (Abram, 1996). This term is complicated because of its multifaceted nature and variety of ways that it can be used in

addressing different aspects of human psychological composition (Elmers, Spears &

Doosje, 2002).

The self is composed of various identities that are acquired throughout the

stages of human development (Elmers et al., 2002). Winnicott placed the origin of an

individual's core or true self at the beginning of life (Abram, 1996). McKenna and Bargh

(2000) suggest that all people have a basic need to present this true self to the world and

for others to acknowledge its existence. As previously described, the true self is heavily

influenced by messages of approval and disapproval from its primary caregivers,

community and society (Phillips, 1988). It is believed that when an individual's true self

feels validated as being and doing good, the individual will feel encouraged to continue

the unique aspects of his or her core identity. If, however, the true self is not found to be

acceptable by important players in the individual's life, a false self will take shape that is

found to be acceptable, in order to protect the true self from disapproval and devaluation

(Phillips, 1988).

Starting in the earliest stages of infancy, individuals learn what is and is not

acceptable through the appraisals of their behaviors from the mother (Elmers et al.,

2002). Winnicott believed that the mother's face acts as the original mirror for baby, and

that it is her role to reflect to the baby the baby's own self (Phillips, 1988). These

reflections are in essence the mother's reactions to the infant's behaviors. As the mother

maintains consistent affective reactions to the infant, the infant will begin to develop a

sense of being (Phillips, 1988). This has been correlated with the beginnings of the

"True" or core self identity. The mother's recognition of the infant's behaviors tells the

child that he or she is unique, and that the mother is there to meet the needs of the child

(Berzoff et al., 1996). Consistent and positive mirroring assumes a flexible and genuine sense of attachment between the mother and infant that encourages the child to develop a sense of physical separateness from the mother while maintaining the psychological understanding that emotional bonds remain between the two of them (Berzoff et al., 1996).

Since the infant can only understand his or her feelings through reflections made by the mother, when she is unresponsive to the infant's behaviors the infant may become confused since it is not receiving the mirroring that is being sought to understand the feeling state (Phillips, 1988). Lack of a response is neglectful behavior on the part of the mother and may be representative of a narcissistic caregiver, wherein the child only sees how the mother feels and must become aware of what role, if any, the child plays in the mother's feeling state (Phillips, 1988). This may leave the infant feeling as though he or she does not exist (Berzoff et al., 1996). If this lack of mirroring persists, it can initiate the development of an unhealthy "False" self that suppresses its own needs in order to be responsive to the very being from who it is seeking validation (Phillips, 1988). Ultimately, an individual who develops this type of false self organization will become overly compliant to the needs of others, and any sense of being unique will be suppressed (Berzoff et al., 1996).

As the infant matures into childhood and beyond, the need for mirroring, appraisals for behaviors, and identification expands to include extended family, peer groups and others from his or her environment and society (Phillips, 1988). As the individual seeks out new "others" to identify with and to assume new roles or ways of being in relation to those others, the self must learn how to mediate its behavior within

the new social structure. Just as the mother once helped the infant to understand feelings, people come to know themselves through their interactions with others (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995).

Since most human interactions occur in group settings (small or large), it would make sense that individuals have many distinct selves that emerge in accordance with the group with which they are interacting (Hogg et al., 1995). Thus, individuals may conceptualize themselves with a variety of self concepts that present differently in specific situations (Hogg et al., 1995). Because of the need to define the self and find identification with others, some individuals will modify their behaviors in an effort to fit in. No matter how adaptive or maladaptive the group may be, individuals lacking a sense of belonging will sometimes adapt a false self persona in order to secure some semblance of societal acceptance (Hogg et al., 1995). This may be found to be particularly relevant for those individuals seeking to effect change in their existing self concept. Oftentimes, peers may have a difficult time accepting and validating an individual's new and emerging self aspects. This may in turn lead to suppression of the true self and reduced opportunity for these new aspects to become real and fully integrate themselves with the self (McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

Manifestations of the True Self Online

However, as technology has evolved, providing people with increased access to specialized groups and networks, it is believed by some researchers that individuals lacking adequate mirroring in their immediate communities for their true self aspects, will turn to the Internet and the use of online social networks in order to find groups that will help them to build, strengthen and integrate identity structure (McKenna & Bargh,

1998). This belief stems from the fact that the Internet now provides individuals with the opportunity to find like minded groups of individuals who actively seek out one another based on shared interests rather than what is available to them in their immediate communities. In seeking out these like others (new external objects) online, individuals can locate the support necessary to express that part of themselves for which they cannot find mirroring offline (McKenna & Bargh, 1998), and provide the them with new opportunities to successfully implement changes in their self concept (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). In being able to establish new relationships under the veil of relative anonymity, individuals can express new self aspects with less fear than what they experience in their offline world. If an individual is successful in finding validation and positive mirroring in online relationships, he or she is also likely to experience feelings of increased self worth and ego strength (McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

It is important to note that there is the potential for a loss of cohesiveness in an individual's sense of self if he or she is unable to integrate their online identity into their offline reality. When integration does not occur, a split may form wherein the individual experiences true self living in his or her online life, while maintaining a sense of false self living in offline life (McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

Stigmatized Identities

"Stigma is commonly defined as some characteristic individuals posses (or are believed to possess) that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context" (Smart & Wegner, 1999, p.474). Stigmatized identities come in many forms but can typically be categorized as either conspicuous or concealable. Frable (1993) made the distinction between concealable and conspicuous stigmatized identities, and explored

their differing psychological consequences on persons from each category (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

People with conspicuous stigmatized identities may be more likely to be able to find others who share their marginalized status due to the fact that conspicuous identities are normally signaled by gating features such as race/ethnicity or weight. For people with concealable stigmatized identities, such as people who are transgender or who have epilepsy, it may not be as easy to find others like them because outward appearances do not necessarily indicate that these identities are part of the individuals' makeup (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Due to this lack of clear mirrorring, a person with a concealable stigma may be more likely to feel isolated and different from the rest of society (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Further, because of the stigma, individuals may be afraid to take the initiative in disclosing their hidden self aspects because of the potential embarrassment that could occur from disclosing a stigmatized identity to others in the hopes of finding an object for mirroring (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). To compound embarrassment, concealable identities can be potentially harmful in professional and personal relationships due to societal devaluation or intolerance of the stigma (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

Some may wonder if the stigma is concealable, why don't the individuals simply try to remove that part of their identity so as to lessen their emotional pain (McKenna & Bargh, 1998)? Although many would like to be able to do this, it is unfortunately not that easy. In fact, the reverse appears more often to be true. Research suggests that the more individuals make efforts to conceal that part of them which is devalued by society, the more that aspect will remain on the forefront of their thoughts (McKenna & Bargh,

1998). What results is a vicious cycle wherein the individual afflicted with the stigma is making constant conscious efforts to hide the stigmatized self aspects from family, friends and society, while simultaneously increasing a sense of shame that there is good reason for a part of them to not be well received by others (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

As described previously, some researchers believe that the human need for attachment is so strong that for those individuals unable to find it in offline life, they may be better able to find alternative means of connecting by using the Internet to seek out others with similar issues or interests (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). It has really only been in the last 15 years that using the Internet for these purposes has been a possibility. With its 24 hour capabilities for global connectivity, the Internet provides people with the opportunity to communicate with others irrespective of time or place, far surpassing anything that could have even been conceptualized more than 20 years ago (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). For these reasons and more, researchers are becoming increasingly more interested in looking at how this rapidly evolving technology is benefiting and/or hindering sound human psychological growth.

Technology and Communication: A Historical Overview

Over the past two centuries a person's ability to communicate with others has evolved exponentially through the developments of the "telegraph, telephone, radio, motion pictures, television, and most recently the Internet" (Bargh & McKenna, 2004, p.575). Although these technologies have become more complex over time, they have all shared a basic purpose to enhance communication by way of eliminating obstacles created by the physical distances between people (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). However, in doing so, these inventions have also diminished the need for people to leave their

homes in order to share information with one another. It is in this way that technology has its most profound impact on society, insofar as how it affects the desire to and ways in which people are able to come together and communicate (Kollock & Smith, 1999).

The origin of mass media evolution is typically associated with the invention of Samuel Morse's telegraph in the mid 1800s which was able to give and receive messages through the use of long and short elements formed by sounds, marks or pulses, that represent letters, numbers and punctuation (www.Wikipedia.com). This technology was met with great resistance by the American public, as never before had a message been able to "travel faster than a human being could travel (that is by hand, horse or ship)" (Bargh & McKenna, 2004, p.575).

Telegraph technology was not mainstreamed until the invention of the telephone in the 1870s, replacing the use of Morse code with actual voice to voice communication. The telephone also engendered resistance due to societal fears that this new venue for communication would hurt interpersonal relationships and community involvement because it allowed people to communicate without having to meet in person (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).   As a result, its invention was frequently devalued as was stated in this internal memo from Western Union in 1876, "This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us."

The lessening of community involvement, however, was not truly recognized until the introduction of the radio, as people no longer had to leave their homes in order to hear the news or be entertained. Radio freed technology from the limitations of hard wired connections which was found to be particularly valuable in areas where wires

could not go, like more rural areas of the country and on ships (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). While the telegraph and telephone had made it possible to reach individuals at far distances, the radio's broadcast capabilities made it possible to reach thousands or possibly millions of individuals within its wave range (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

The fears of what effects evolving technology would have on society became more of a reality with the introduction of television in the 1950s. Television provided a more pronounced opportunity for individuals and families to enjoy entertainment from within the privacy of their homes (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). This replaced the past need to find entertainment through pubs and/or social clubs with passive non-social interaction (Williams, Cheung & Choi, 2000). It was due to this invention that researchers launched a more thorough examination of the natural consequences of individuals' diminished need for leaving the home to interact with their community (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

"The Internet combines, for the first time in history, many of these breakthrough features in a single communication medium" (Bargh & McKenna, 2004, p. 577). It was not until the late 1990s that the Internet was even considered to be a mass medium because it had not yet reached a critical mass of users. Generally speaking, critical mass is considered to have been achieved when it has been adopted as an innovation by approximately 16% of the population. However, standards are slightly different when dealing with the concept of what defines a mass media, wherein the general milestone tends to be achieved when the media is able to reach about 50,000,000 individuals (Kaye & Johnson, 1999). Figures from 2002 showed that more than 600,000,000 people worldwide had access to the Internet (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). However, it is

25

important to note that these figures are not spread equally throughout the global

population. The most concentrated area of Internet users can be found in more developed

nations, with 2001 estimates reporting that North America and Europe accounted for

higher populations of Internet users than anywhere else in the world (approximately 1 in

3 people in these regions were thought to have access to or be regular users of the

Internet) (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

As a mass media, the Internet provides a venue for person-to-person

communication, and operates at the global level for information sharing and research.

Most notably though, it is completely malleable to the needs of the individual user

whether they be commercial, business or personal, irrespective of that individual's time or

place in the world (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). However, the Internet is different from

previous methods of communication, like the telephone, radio, and television, in terms of

the privacy of its use and the relative anonymity it provides its users (Bargh & McKenna,

2004). Anonymity is defined as, "the desire to have control over the conditions under

which personal data are released" (Cho, LaRose, 1999). Psychological privacy is defined

as, "the control over release or retention of personal information to guard one's cognitions

and affects" (Cho, LaRose, 1999). Anonymity and psychological privacy are both

achieved through the users' ability to access the web at their discretion from remote sites

like their home, school, or office, with more control and immediacy of response not

readily achievable in real time (Amaichi-Hamburger, Wainapal & Fox, 2002).

Although ultimately some people welcomed the Internet and its plethora of

opportunities (Bargh & McKenna, 2004), others feared that it would be a mechanism for

increased social control and surveillance (Kollock & Smith, 1999). However, middle of the line observers tend to feel that the Internet

> ...will change almost every aspect of our lives - private, social, cultural, economic and political... because [they] deal with the very essence of human society: communication between people. Earlier technologies, from printing to the telegraph... have wrought big changes over time. But the social changes over the coming decades are likely to be much more extensive, and to happen much faster, than any in the past, because the technologies driving them are continuing to develop at a breakneck pace. More importantly they look as if together they will be as pervasive and ubiquitous as electricity. (Manasian, 2003, p. 4)

A Brief History of the Internet

When the Internet was first developed in the 1960s, it was designed to link the U.S. Defense Department computer networks with various other radio and satellite network systems (Wellman, 2004). Its purposes evolved in the 1980s with the introduction of the Ethernet, which linked local area networks at a single site with a shared network, also known as groupware (Wellman, 2004).

Early adopters of the Internet and other evolving technologies tended to be society's elite. Mostly white males, single, English speaking, from North America or Europe, either working professionals or students (Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia & Haythornthwaite, 1996). This was in many ways due to socioeconomic status and typically higher levels of education, thus making it easier to obtain and understand how to use these technologies (Kaye & Johnson, 1999). However, this all changed in the early 1990s when home computer sales erupted (Kollock & Smith, 1999), following the

mainstreaming of the Internet with the development of the World Wide Web (WWW)

(Kaye & Johnson, 1999), which expanded the capabilities of a single site area network to

connect with off site networks at the global level (Musch & Reips, 2000).

However, as the Internet has become more accessible to the masses and

embedded in every day life, researchers have seen a shift in the demographic population

using the Internet and participating in computer-mediated communication (CMC)

(Wellman, 2004). Although CMC helps to create an environment that is less restricted by

the boundaries of race, gender, or social status (Postmes, Lea & Spears, 2002), it appears

as though a socioeconomic gap persists for the working poor who may have more

difficulty affording home Internet access (Wellman, 2004).

How it works

The WWW exists on a web of *hypertext* documents. Hypertext is a computer

coding language that when compiled together is known as *hypertext markup language*

*(*HTML). It is used to create web pages (www.Wikipedia.com). These documents are

then able to be downloaded to various servers. There are millions of servers throughout

the Internet universe which are accessible through the use of client software referred to as

a *browser,* like Netscape or Internet Explorer (www.Wikipedia.com). A browser needs

to be installed to the hard drive of the user's computer in order for individual users to

access the information stored on the server. Information can then be located by way of

its unique *uniform resource locator* (URL), a type of web address (so to speak) that helps

to locate online information (www.Wikipedia.com). The next step in accessing the

desired information comes through the *hypertext transfer protocol* (HTTP), which is

coded in HTML (Musch & Reips, 2000). When placed in a certain formation, this

information creates the full URL address for the information that is being sought. For

example, the address for the popular Microsoft Network (MSN) home page is:

URL: http://www.msn.com.html

The Evolution of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

It is believed that the number one use of the Internet at home is for interpersonal

communication (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Communication between individuals via the

Internet is commonly known as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). Broadly

defined, CMC is "any form of data exchange across two or more networked computers"

(www.Wikipedia.com). More simply stated, CMC is any communication taking place

between two individuals through some type of computer-mediated format, like e-mail or

instant messaging.

Because of its extensive use and evolving capabilities for enhancing person to

person communication, CMC is becoming of increasing interest to researchers because of

preliminary observations that it may be altering interpersonal human behavior, cognitions

and perceptions (Kollock & Smith, 1999). Due to the asynchronous and relatively

anonymous nature of the Internet, some studies have raised concerns around the issues of

relationship formation, disinhibited online behaviors, cyberostracism, lying behavior,

identity construction, group behavior, information dissemination and the activation of

private/personal identities versus real time social identities (www.Wikipedia.com).

When a user is feeling deindividuated, they are more likely to be more disinhibited in

their online actions, "[they] are more willing than they would be in real life to exchange

hostilities, swap personal information, seek potentially threatening information, and

publish normally protected aspects of themselves" (Joinson, 1999, p. 433).

As a result of the increased ambiguity intrinsic to CMC, a greater role is placed on the goals and assumptions of the recipient, when interpreting the sender's message (Bargh, 2002). As recipients are responsible for message interpretation, it is not uncommon that messages can become skewed, leaving the reader confused as to what the meaning is behind the message. This may act to cause stress on an online relationship as a resolution may be difficult to find through further electronic messages. If the relationship is continued into the offline social realm, misinterpretations may be resolved through verbal communication (Wellman et al., 1996). However, because of the Internet's constant accessibility, there have also been many positive observations of CMC, as the facilitation supportive contact is quite prominent and takes place frequently between strangers and friends alike in online communication (Wellman et. al., 1996). "[Online social network] members tend to trust strangers, much as people gave rides to hitchhikers in the flower child days of the 1960s… Analogously, online requests for aid are read by people alone at their screens. Even if the request is to a newsgroup and not by personal email, as far as the recipient of the request knows, he or she is the only one who could provide aid. At the same time, online intervention will be observed by entire groups and will be positively rewarded by them. It is this visibility that may foster the kindness of strangers" (Wellman et al., 1996, p.223).

Some researchers believe that the negative and positive effects of online communication can be seen to stem from several areas. A key area of focus has been on the belief that CMC is an emotionally impoverished means of communication (Kollock & Smith, 1999). Non-verbal cues that are normally fundamental aspects of interpersonal communication are replaced with CMC substitutes like emoticons (☺), which are

typically seen as small pieces of clip art representative of a stylized facial expression (www.Wikipedia.com). However, mood and tone have also been found to be expressed through the use of color, varying web page or message layout designs, images, video, and/or sound (Kollock & Smith, 1999).

Despite the lack of verbal and physical cues, which could be seen as integral aspects to interpersonal interactions, some researchers assume a *social deterministic* view, that it is the personal motivations and goals of the user that will determine what impact the Internet and the use of CMC will play on his or her perceptions of Internet relationships (Bargh, 2002). Under the guise of social determinism it is believed that computer-mediated communication can have much of the same impact for people as do face to face social interactions (Bargh, 2002).

Other researchers offer a *technologically deterministic* view, believing that CMC is a limited means of human interaction insofar as that it does not offer opportunity to express non-verbal, physically observable emotional cues, thus restricting its capacity to be used as a means for socially rich information (Walther, 1996). From this standpoint, online communication is considered to have a "diminished bandwith" for the purposes of meaningful human interaction (Bargh, 2002), consequently resulting in inhibited interpersonal relations and decreased awareness of others (Walther, 1996).

The Psychological Effects of CMC

Some researchers believe that the negative and positive effects of online communication stem from several areas. A key area of focus has been on how CMC, an emotionally impoverished means of communication, can both act to disinhibit some user

behavior while concurrently helping to build the ego strength of others (Kollock & Smith, 1999).

Robert Kraut and colleagues (1998) have been credited with performing some of the first research experiments about the psychological effects of the Internet and CMC on users (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). In these initial experiments they found that Internet use negatively impacted real time social relationships with family and friends, causing depression and socially isolating users from their community. They raised concerns that extended Internet use could have enormously negative effects for community involvement and a person's psychological well being (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay & Scherlis, 1998).

Kraut and his colleagues did acknowledge that there were compelling counter arguments made by other researchers that the Internet could lead some people to create strong social relationships by freeing them from the constraints of geography, physical isolation, social stigma or alternative schedules (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Thus, one might infer that the Internet could be helpful for people looking for relationships based on common interests rather than what is typically found of convenient relationships in one's community (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

The media was quick to jump on Kraut's research in the late 1990s, rapidly spreading concerns that the Internet would have an even more profound negative impact on society than television had had in the 1950s (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). However, in a four year follow up study of Kraut's assertions, it was found that these findings had not persisted over time, and that in fact many Internet users had stronger relationships with family and friends, especially those who lived far away, than they had had prior to

implementing the use of CMC into their communicative process with one another (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). It was also found that greater use of the Internet had positive psychological effects on its users, and that the more hours the average user spent online, the more time they were also likely to spend with family and friends in face to face interactions. In fact, follow up findings found that the only real decrease associated with increased Internet use was in watching television and reading newspapers (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

Whether researchers believe that the Internet is a deficit or an asset to society at large, all seem to be in agreement that the nature of CMC is significantly different from real time communication (Bargh, 2002). Thus, some researchers have begun to look at how it appears as though some people are more comfortable communicating in the online realm versus face to face (Bargh, 2002). Preliminary hypotheses assumed that people considered to be introverts, who typically experience varying degrees of social anxiety and social isolation, would feel more comfortable in seeking out new relationships and communicating with others online. On the other hand, it was believed that extroverts would probably feel more comfortable in face to face interactions and/or would find this medium to complement their existing offline social networks (Bargh, 2002).

These hypotheses proved true in a study conducted by Amaichi-Hamburger et al. (2002), which showed empirical evidence that people considered to be introverts or to have a neurotic personality were more apt to locate the "real me" through online interactions, due to the privilege of anonymity that one can assume when communicating with others over the Internet. This study further supported the hypothesis that people who were more extroverted or had non-neurotic personalities were more likely to realize

33

their "real me" through traditional means of social interaction (Amaichi-Hamburger et al., 2002).

However, in a study performed by McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002), it was found that this hypothesis was not necessarily true, and that the personality categories of extrovert and introvert were not always correct indicators as to who would be more or less likely to turn to the Internet for the purpose of finding relationships and a sense of community (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002).

Online Identity Construction

In closer examination of individual motivations to join online social networks, it is important to take into account that nearly every detail of an online personal profile is the result of a conscious decision on the part of the author as to what they wish to share with readers (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Online identity construction provides a highly controlled framework wherein a user can choose whatever words and images they like to influence how others will see them (Vazire & Gosling, 2004). Thus, these personal profiles are built solely on identity claims that can be regarded as symbolic representations of the self in charge of its creation. These identity claims may be explicitly made through strong statements and dramatic images, or more subtley through varying use of color and choice of profile theme or background (Vazire & Gosling, 2004). However individuals choose to construct their online image, they are often "guided by the desire to make one's public [online] image equivalent to one's ideal self" (Baumeister, 1982, p.3).

As highly controlled as the construction of these profiles are, there is still some room for the author to leave unintentional markers that resemble non-verbal cues in real

time interactions. This is the "behavioral residue" of online communication (Vazire &

Gosling, 2004). Because online profiles can be written and re-written, it is possible for

the author of the page to correct mistakes prior to their being put on display to other

members of their online social network, a privilege not available in offline interactions

(Amaichi-Hamburger et al., 2002). Examples of online behavioral residue include things

like spelling errors and grammatical mistakes, broken hyperlinks, and/or inaccessible

images (Vazire & Gosling, 2004).

Virtual Groups

Not only do online social networks provide members with the opportunity to

search out like individuals, they also frequently provide them with the opportunity to

search out groups within the network that represent a sub-culture or special interest. In

this way, these networks are providing means of finding both individual and group

identification (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This is important as it has been described

previously in this chapter that human beings have an innate need to feel as though they

belong. Thus, those individuals who may have increased social anxiety related to a

concealable stigmatized identity may find it easier in locating like others online, which

offline can be a potentially embarrassing and harmful experience for the affected

individuals if they fear that they will not accepted by others for the hidden part of

themselves (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). It is for this reason that some researchers believe

that virtual groups, like those that can be found in networks like Myspace.com, may be

able to provide stigmatized individuals an unprecedented forum for mirroring with others

who share their identities (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

Myspace itself has over several million interest groups, ranging in topics from celebrity fan clubs to civil rights groups, school alumnae groups to groups celebrating the Myspace creator "Tom" (www.Myspace.com). It is the emphasis on shared interests in online social networking, rather than physical gating features like height or weight, that can be empowering for individuals with marginalized identities (Wellman et al., 1996) and provide a voice for otherwise silenced groups (Kim, 2006).

Ideas around the potential risks and benefits for people with marginalized identities joining virtual groups have shifted over the years. In the early 1990s researchers suggested that virtual groups could potentially create cyber communities with social and cultural homogenous interests (Spears & Lea, 1992). The danger here is that group members may experience a sense of depersonalization wherein they may begin to identify less as themselves and more as a member of a specific group. On the one hand, in the virtual world there are fewer social pressures in place which may provide a liberating experience for individuals lacking offline opportunities for group identification. On the other hand, online communities could also breed negative psychological consequences if group members become so enmeshed with the group that they lose a sense of autonomy and individuality (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 2002). More recent research has suggested that depersonalization of virtual group members may in fact increase intergroup differentiation (Postmes et al., 2002) due to the relative lack of social status characteristics that otherwise interfere in offline communication and relationship seeking (Wellman et al., 1996).

One of the key characteristics and privileges of participation in virtual groups is the ability of group members to maintain their anonymity if they so choose (McKenna &

Bargh, 1998). Research has shown that when people are able to remain anonymous in computer-mediated interactions, they tend to feel a greater sense of freedom in exposing the stigmatized part of themselves with less anxiety about possible social backlash (Bargh, 2002). It is the belief that in being able to more freely express themselves, these marginalized individuals will begin to integrate the stigmatized part of their identity into their, albeit often weak, existing self concept (Bargh, 2002). By being able to find an avenue for group identification and mirroring from like others, individuals with a stigmatized identity may be likely to strengthen their sense of self and feel less isolated and "different."   Through this process they can also learn how to more freely share feelings, learn from other's experiences, and gain emotional support not often experienced in their offline lives (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).   This corrective experience can be a self transformational process wherein an individual's participation in a group with like others contributes to positive changes in the person's self identity. This process is called "demarginalization" (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).   However, as increased self esteem and a greater sense of self may begin to exist for stigmatized individuals in their online life, they must be able to transfer the positive online experience into their offline social reality, in order for the new self aspects to become psychologically real (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

The observed psychological effects of virtual groups are comparable to those seen in the socialization process of real time human development, wherein a person develops individual and group identities through associations with family, peer groups, and acquaintance encounters (www.Wikipedia.org). When individuals experience the feeling that they "belong" to a group, one that they are responsible to and must help to maintain,

they can develop a life long sense of human connectedness and community (www.Wikipedia.org).

Online Relationship Formation

Social network software exists to put people in touch with one another by way of a sophisticated collaborative filtering system that connects people with similar interests or searching for friends using their name or email address (Wellman, 2004). By way of its ability to connect like minded individuals through various means of electronic pathways like bulletins, emails and instant messaging, OSNs like Myspace.com create an environment where users can develop a sense of community founded in relational ties that meet most of the criteria accounted for in offline relationships (Wellman et al., 1996). These ties are often referred to as "intimate secondary relationships," which are defined by frequent and reciprocal communication, but operate solely in one social domain (Wellman et al., 1996).

Although some researchers believe these ties to be pale in comparison to offline relationships (Wellman et al., 2001), Barbara McKenna et al. (2002) found, in a survey of 600 people, that a substantial number of respondents had developed what they considered to be a "close relationship" with someone they had met online (Bargh, McKenna, Fitzsimons, 2002). Her study also showed that when people involved in online relationships grew to like one other, they were more likely to project qualities representative of an ideal friend onto the other than was typically found in the control group of partners that met face to face (Bargh et al., 2002). Further, 50% of these respondents reported having taken their online relationship into their offline lives. In a two year follow up study, these researchers found that many of these online relationships

had persisted over time, despite whether or not they were taken into the "real world" and that these relationships remained just as stable as what is usual in traditional offline relationships (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

For reasons mentioned previously in this chapter around the release of social pressures in online social interactions, it is believed that the veil of anonymity invites people to speak more freely about their true self aspects then what is typical offline (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Kang (2000) states, "Cyberspace makes talking with strangers easier. The fundamental point of many cyber-realms, such as chat rooms, is to make new acquaintances. By contrast, in most urban settings, few environments encourage us to walk up to strangers and start chatting. In many cities, doing so would amount to a physical threat" (p. 1161).

"Cybercommunities"

The social network software that Myspace is built on allows users to bridge ties (within the boundaries of the Myspace network and bank of registered users) between their own partial networks and the networks of others, and to create intersecting links between otherwise disconnected groups (Wellman et al., 1996). This bridging of groups often begins to resemble a virtual village-like structure that imparts a new twist on traditional understandings of what it feels like to be part of a community (Kollock & Smith, 1999).

Conceptualizing an OSN or virtual group as a "cybercommunity" is a growing area of interest for many online researchers (Kollock & Smith, 1999). Classic definitions of community refer to a sociological group sharing a common environment affecting the identity of its members and their adhesion to one another. It is perceived to be a tightly

bound group within a larger society (www.Wikipedia.org). When this sense of community exists, it is thought that the community takes on a certain life of its own, and that its members foster trust in one another that facilitates an environment wherein its members feel free to share and learn from one another (www.Wikipedia.org). When perceived to be long lasting, many group members will hold a strong commitment to maintaining their group's cohesion and integrity (Wellman et al., 1996).

Online social networks also have norms and structures of their own that closely resemble the constructs of social norms observable in offline community life (Wellman et al., 1996). Much like real time communities, "Members [of online social networks] individually hold the collective personality of the whole. With sustained connections and continued conversations, participants in communities develop emotional bonds, intellectual pathways, enhanced linguistic abilities, and even a higher capacity for critical thinking and problem solving" (www.Wikipedia.org). With strong commitment and shared interests, virtual groups can provide strong holding environments that encourage and foster the formation of close relationships amongst its members (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

Research has shown that the aforementioned traditional characteristics of community, although somewhat different from offline communities, can ring true for online groups and communities as well (Kollock & Smith, 1999). For now, with the development of technologies like telephones, cars, and airplanes, human interaction has been able to spread far greater distances past a person's immediate neighborhood, allowing offline society to extend its definition of community past physical proximity to an individual's varying social networks the world over (Kollock & Smith, 1999).

Conclusion

The literature that has been reviewed here suggests that online social networks like Myspace.com, could act as new portals for realization of the True self. It is the belief that because of the anonymous nature of computer mediated communication and increased ability for idealized identity construction, online social networks allow users unprecedented opportunities to seek out and make connections with others not as readily available in their offline lives. As CMC and identity construction lend themselves to decreases in self regulation, or public self awareness, increased self focus and private awareness can occur (Joinson, 1999). This infers then that people may actually be living through their True selves online because it is their personal identity that is being activated rather than their public, social self. If this is true, then these theories suggest that the Internet is in fact a useful "laboratory" for conducting psychological research (Joinson, 1999).

These ideas are changing the landscape of traditional psychodynamic understandings of how mirroring and attachment can be found and received through computer-mediated communication and Internet relationships in online social networks. This area of research is just beginning to address the implications of how there could be a change in ideas for clinical practice, as the Internet and online communication rapidly increase their amount of enmeshment in our lives. More research is needed in order to better understand not only why people are being drawn to this medium in such mass, but also how people are making sense of their experiences internally and externally.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study explores whether or not the Internet and use of online social networks like Myspace.com activate a user's True and False selves differently in their lives online versus what has been developed throughout the user's developmental process and current life offline. This study was designed to a) examine the differences between online and offline identity constructions in aiding the development and emergence of the True Self, b) compare the findings to traditional understandings of the emergence of the True Self from an object relational perspective in terms of mirroring, attachment and individuation, c) seek to confirm or refute popular ideas about Internet use.

The intent of this research is to broaden the knowledge and understanding of how the rapid growth and increased use of the Internet (in this case specifically of the online social network, Myspace.com) may be acting to create a divide within an individual's sense of self when negotiating between the online and offline realms of social interaction or, conversely act to strengthen currently weak aspects of the ego. For example; in which life (offline or online) is the user living through the True self? Or will certain users be more likely to use online social networks to fulfill emotional needs not met in their offline lives? This study of online social networks may strengthen understanding of whether or not these divided lives act to fragment or repair individuals' understandings of self and others online and off.

Given the disparities between traditional understandings of Object Relations theory, and the emergence of the True self, and what current research suggests that online social networks provide, increased access to mirroring, but also increase the likelihood for depersonalization, it is important to look at how the privilege of anonymity in the online experience may in fact reshape the way in which individuals living through the False self are able to gain the necessary ego strength to individuate in their offline lives. This in turn results in greater opportunities for the emergence of the True Self in online social interactions.

To examine the activation of the True and False self through online identity construction in further detail, survey respondents were asked to answer a total of 129 questions covering five subject areas that are of interest to this study (Appendix A). These questions were structured to identify the state of the internalized object of study participants by a) surveying participants about their demographic information with increased focus on the effects of two stigmatized identities based on sexual orientation, or disability/mobility issues, both of which are considered to be concealable in nature, b) what their lives were like growing up, including relationships with caregivers, family and peers, c) participants' perceptions of their current lives offline, d) participants' active use of the Myspace network, and e) participants' perceptions of current experiences in their online lives. The full text of this questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

The method chosen to perform this quantitative study was a fixed Internet survey advertised to and disseminated amongst active members of the online social network Myspace.com. Recruitment for this study was accomplished through the use of the network itself.

Sample

This study surveyed a convenient sample composed of Internet users who are registered with the online social network, Myspace.com. One hundred respondents volunteered to participate in the current research. As research participants were not required to disclose information that they were uncomfortable sharing, some of the findings are inconsistent in the number of responses. From the responses that were collected, this sample appears to be skewed towards a single, white, middle class, heterosexual, non-disabled, female population with an average age of 26-30. Most participants report either having some college experience or having already obtained their Bachelor's degree. Most participants report being fully employed and the majority appear to live in urban settings. Further description of the demographic composition for this study can be found in Tables 1 - 8.

Table 1: Age

Under 18	18 – 21	22 - 25	26 - 30	31 – 35	36 – 40	41 - 50	51 - 60	61 - 70	71+
1	12	23	45	8	1	2	1	0	0

Table 2: Race/Ethnicity

White	Biracial/ Multiracial	Latino/a	Other	Asian	Asian Pacific Islander	Native American/ Alaskan Native	African American	Middle Eastern	South Asian
76	6	3	2	1	1	1	1	0	0

Table 3: Gender

Female	Male	Gender Queer
70	16	1

Table 4: Relationship Status

Single	In a Relationship	Married	Domestic Partnership	Divorced	Civil Union	Separated	Widowed
48.4%	30.1%	15.1%	3.2%	3.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 5: Community

City	Suburb/Town	Rural/Country
59.1%	31.2%	9.7%

Table 6: Education

Some High School	High School/GED	Some College	Associates Degree	Bachelors Degree	Some Graduate School	Masters Degree	Post Masters
3.2%	3.2%	25.8%	5.4%	26.9%	20.4%	8.6%	6.5%

Table 7: Employment

Unemployed	Student	Part Time Employment	Full Time Employment	Retired	Other
4.3%	31.2%	4.3%	58.1%	0.0%	2.2%

Table 8: Socioeconomic Status

Upper Class	Upper Middle Class	Middle Class	Lower Middle Class	Working Class	Poverty	Homeless
2.2%	17.2%	35.5%	26.9%	15.1%	3.2%	0.0%

Participants were solicited through a bulletin that was posted on the Myspace classifieds forum under the subject category of "Myspace Friends" in their "General" inquiries section.   A bulletin was posted in each of the 73 represented cities within the forum. There is at least one major city from each of the 50 United States listed in the forum. Although one can only post through city regions and not states, users will many times search the classifieds forum in the city that is closest to their geographical region.

The recruitment bulletin posted descriptive information about the survey using an abridged version of the informed consent statement from the actual survey (Appendix B). In addition, the bulletin was embedded with a hyperlink to the Mythesis.com profile page which provided more detailed information regarding the survey, as well as providing another hyperlink to the online survey.

Inclusion criteria for research participants were that they be 18 years of age or older, live within the United States, and be an active Myspace user. The term "user" refers to a person who uses a computer system and is a shortened reference to the term "username." A username refers to a name (a screen name or handle) used by an individual for the purposes of identity authentication (www.Wikipedia.org). Once authenticity has been established, the user then has access to the computer system. For the purposes of this paper, the term "user" implies that the individual is registered with the Myspace network. Being an "active user" implies that the registered individual is accessing the Myspace network on at least a weekly basis.

Nonprobability sampling is appropriate for this study because survey respondents participate on a voluntary basis (Kaye & Johnson, 1999). However, because this sample was surveyed from a subset of Internet users within a specific online social network, its sample is purposive. It is also important to keep in mind that its findings can only be generalized to the experience of Myspace users and not all Internet users (Kaye & Johnson, 1999).

The response rate of an online survey is difficult to calculate because it is unknown how many potential members of a sample view the recruitment posting for the study but choose not to participate (Kaye & Johnson, 1999). All that is known is the number of respondents who actually participate in the study. The online survey for this study, "Mythesis.com: A Look at Yourself Online and Off," was posted for approximately two weeks, acquiring a sample of 100 respondents, and over 200 views of the Mythesis.com online personal profile page. This sample of 100 survey respondents was drawn from a potential sample of 183,602,443 Myspace users (this figure is as of

June 13, 2007, but has an average daily growth of approximately 5,000 profiles).

Because respondents were not required to answer any questions with which they did not

feel comfortable, there was an initial response of 100 survey respondents who accepted

the terms of agreement, with 76 of those 100 respondents completing the questionnaire.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to know why some participants chose to abandon the

survey prior to its completion.

<center>*Research Tools and Data Collection*</center>

This study was conducted using an Internet survey made accessible to Myspace

users by way of a hyperlink that when pressed, directly linked study participants to the

survey on SurveyMonkey.com. A hyperlink is a navigation element on an online

document that allows the user immediate access to another document or web page on the

Internet (www.Wikipedia.com). The hyperlink redirecting participants to the survey was

located in several online sites; the Mythesis.com personal online profile page in the

Myspace network, as well as in the recruitment postings (see Appendix B).

Because this study was conducted through the use of the Internet, survey

respondents were able to access the study's profile page and survey link irrespective of

their time or place in the United States. Due to respondents being able to access online

surveys regardless of their location, Internet samples are likely to include a broader range

of participants, thereby granting the study greater heterogeneity within the sample

(Buchanan, 2000).

The survey was designed in a user friendly manner using HTML formatting

(language common to all computers), and with minimal graphics to minimize download

time and user frustration when accessing the survey's web page. Of the 129 questions

<center>47</center>

that were asked, 75 were statements posted in a matrix design that respondents answered using a four point rating scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." These 75 statements were used to address how a user perceives his or her life online and offline. Some examples of subjects covered in these statements were; their experiences growing up, discretion with information sharing online versus offline, ability to trust other people online versus offline, and social anxiety. The other 54 questions addressed relevant information (with drop down menus of potential answers), yes/no questions regarding participant's online personal profile construction, questions around the user's perceptions of the Internet and Myspace as fantasy or reality, and the participant's degree of honesty while answering the survey.

"Skip logic" was activated in several of the subject areas to eliminate unnecessary confusion by allowing survey respondents to skip questions not applicable to their lived experience. As an additional safeguard, a link was placed at the top of each page that allowed participants to exit the survey at any time if they no longer wished to participate. In turn, they were immediately redirected to the final page of the survey which thanked them for their interest in the study and provided them with a referral list of mental health resources for support (Appendix C) if they felt as though they needed it.

In the case of this study, using an Internet survey was beneficial because it allowed for data to be collected from a large number of people from a variety of backgrounds, many of whom would not have been accessible if not for the use of the Internet (Buchanan, 2000). The use of the Internet also provided this researcher with a faster response rate and less labor intensive data collection process than what would have been possible with a pencil and paper questionnaire (Krantz & Dalal, 2000). It also

allowed increased ability for research participants to access the survey from multiple points of entry (i.e. through the Mythesis profile page as well as the posted recruitment ad) (Krantz & Dalal, 2000).

<div align="center">*Ethics*</div>

Ethical clearance to conduct this research study was sought and obtained from the Human Subjects Review Board at the Smith College School for Social Work (Appendix D). This researcher was the primary handler of the data, and the data was exported electronically through email, to be coded by Marjorie Postal at Smith College SSW. Survey respondents were informed of these safeguards through the letter of Informed Consent located on the first page of the online survey (Appendix E).

Through privileges afforded by the Internet, survey respondents were able to participate in this study with complete anonymity. Outside of questions needed to compile demographic statistics, participants were not asked for any personally identifiable or contact information, such as their name or email address. Respondents had the ability to stop their participation in this study at any time if they desired to do so, and because of their anonymity they could do this without fear of being identified or questioned as to why they had chosen not to complete the questionnaire. As an additional feature protecting the anonymity of survey respondents, encryption was enabled through this online survey service, which ensures that participants cannot be tracked via an Internet tracking system, otherwise known as "cookies."

Being that this survey was conducted through a third party at www.SurveyMonkey.com, it is important to note that in this service's privacy policy it is stated that they "will not use the information collected from surveys in any way, shape, or

<div align="center">49</div>

form. In addition, any other material you provide us (including images, email addresses, etc.) will be held in the strictest confidence."

As a final safeguard in protecting the anonymity of survey participants, coding was used to protect any further identifiable information of survey respondents. In addition, all collected data will be stored in a locked file for a minimum of three years, and the online survey, and Myspace online profile page for "Mythesis.com: A Look at Yourself Online and Off," will be deleted from the Internet following the presentation and approval of this thesis in the summer of 2007.

As previously described, very real safeguards have been put in place to protect the physical anonymity of respondents such as any contact information or personally identifying information. However, the design and nature of this study being conducted on the Internet also acts to protect the psychological privacy of respondents since there is zero physical interaction between the researcher and respondent, thus eliminating opportunity for the disclosure of the respondent's affect or cognitions about the study or questions being asked.

In the literature, researchers are somewhat divided as to what the strengths and weaknesses of online anonymity are, and how it is perceived by Internet survey respondents. There are also questions about what implications this almost absolute anonymity may have for online research in the social sciences.

On the one hand, the privilege of anonymity holds many strengths. Some studies show that online anonymity may increase levels of self disclosure because Internet survey respondents are less likely to feel pressure to provide socially desirable responses to the questions being asked by the researchers (Buchanan, 2000). Online anonymity may also

provide a survey respondent with an increased sense of empowerment and control around how they will respond because they typically self select themselves to participate in the study by responding to online recruitment postings (Buchanan, 2000). This last statement has led to a shift in the thinking of Internet researchers who now tend to refer to their respondents as "participants" because respondents are assuming more responsibility in the facilitation of the survey, rather than the more classic researcher term of "subjects" who may be more purposefully chosen by the researchers and typically participate in research projects from controlled environments. Thus, for the purposes of this study all survey respondents are referred to as "participants" rather than "subjects."

However, there are also notable drawbacks to the use of Internet surveys that are important to take into account when reviewing the data collection. One such drawback is that although respondent self selection may be empowering and provide the participant with a sense of ownership over how they choose to respond, the participant's desire to actually complete the entire survey lies solely on their motivation and interest in the study (Buchanan, 2000). This is not so much a problem for the participant as it is for the researcher because it may contribute to increased outliers and incomplete data sets. This was a problem that was experienced by this researcher, as there were 100 initial responses to the survey on the Informed Consent page, with 76 responses on the final page of the survey. Because respondents were able to discontinue their participation with this survey at any time, and/or choose to skip questions that they felt uncomfortable answering, the number of responses per question varies throughout the data collection of this survey.

To explore the issue of anonymity further, it is important to look at how anonymity is perceived by survey respondents as either real or apparent. Per previous descriptions of the safeguards taken to ensure participant anonymity, the participant's sense of real anonymity was correct. However, there is also the sense of apparent anonymity that many computer users feel as real because there is little to no physical interactions that take place in online communication or transactions. In addition, many users feel as though they are using the computer as an "extension of the self" (Cho & LaRose, 1999), as they are accessing the Internet from remote sites like work or home which may provide a sense of safety and security that is not as readily felt when one is directly interacting with another individual. Participants may also be subject to distractions in their environment which could impede completion of the survey.

The idea of using the Internet as a laboratory is controversial because it deviates from the classic perceptions of laboratories as controlled environments. This researcher could not regulate the environmental control factors for this study due to the aforementioned factors of external variables like Internet connectivity and outside stimuli, which may or may not have impacted participants' ability to focus on the questions asked in the survey. Available literature suggests that this loss of environmental control could impact validity of the findings as it may lead to the increased possibility of multiple or dishonest answers, or survey incompletion on the part of the respondents (Buchanan, 2000).

As a result, there is a shift within the typical power imbalance of the relationship between researcher and study participant. This shift affords the participant far more control throughout their participation in the research process than what is usually found

in scientific research laboratories. There are different schools of thought as to what the ramifications could be without the researcher's presence during the study. As participants have more personal control throughout their process in the study, they may experience less pressure to provide socially desirable responses, empowerment from being able to self determine whether or not they want to complete the questionnaire, and self determination as to where and when they choose to engage in the study.

Some researchers believe that the aforementioned factors may result in more honest responses. More honest responses may in part be due to how perceived anonymity can lead to user deindividuation from their offline self, which may be described as disinhibited online behavior (Joinson, 1999). Deindividuation occurs from "reduced social presence and reduced social cues during computer mediated communication" (Joinson, 1999, p. 433). The concepts of deindividuation and disinhibited behaviors are key concepts to keep in mind when reviewing the data because as the privilege of anonymity in online interactions has been shown to reportedly reduce participant need to provide socially desirable answers, these answers have nonetheless been provided while the participant was in a deindividuated state. With this in mind, it is important to consider that personal motivations on the part of the study participant will play an important role in how they perceive the questions in front of them. Although it is has been discussed here that deindividuated behavior can have positive outcomes on research findings, it has also been linked to increased levels of hostility, aggression and decrease of self-regulation in how users believe that others perceive them and ultimately themselves (Joinson, 1999).

Informed Consent

The informed consent process was a good faith effort wherein when the survey participant pressed the "I ACCEPT" button, stating that they met the required criteria to participate in the study, they were essentially using a digital signature indicating that they understood the informed consent and terms of agreement addressed on the initial page of the survey. Participants were informed that their participation in this survey was completely voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Information regarding informed consent was posted in multiple sites, on the initial page of the survey, on the Mythesis.com online profile page, and an abridged version was provided on the recruitment bulletins. Further information regarding the Informed Consent can be found in Appendix E.

Researcher/Participant Relationship

Due to the physical disconnect in online research between researcher and study participant, Cho and LaRose make the recommendation that, "The credentials of the principal investigator or project manager should be available through a link to his or her personal web page, complete with a personal e-mail address. Personalization is important because assurance of confidentiality is not effective unless people trust it" (Cho & LaRose, 1999, p. 430). They state that by providing survey respondents with some direct link to the researcher, credibility is more easily attained which may encourage more honest disclosures and respondent follow through in completing the survey. In the spirit of information sharing, which is a community norm in "netiquette (Internet etiquette)," Cho and LaRose suggest that online researchers post summaries of their research and/or other pertinent information regarding the study, on their personal web page. This

reasoning contributed to the decision to create and maintain a Myspace personal profile page for the Mythesis.com study. In maintaining this page and continuously updating information about the progress of the study, interested parties are able to stay informed about how their participation has contributed to this area of research. It is the hope that in doing this within the constructs of the Myspace online community, this research project has become part of the community rather than an invasive outside presence, and that study participants will continue to nurture their interest in this project by revisiting the Mythesis profile page as they desire.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In evaluating the survey responses given by research participants regarding their

experiences growing up, assessment of their Internet use and answers regarding how they

perceive differences between their online and offline behaviors, five distinct identity

categories presented with similar responses.   Four of the five identity categories are

race/ethnicity, gender, disability, and sexual orientation. The fifth identity category is

representative of the average Myspace user who was found to be female, white,

heterosexual and not disabled. The other four identities are further explored by

separating participants into comparison groups according to their responses as self

identifying as either holding an identity traditionally seen as being stigmatized or non-

stigmatized. For example: in the category of sexual orientation the comparison groups

would be those participants identifying as GLBTQ versus those participants self

identified as straight. Analysis of the filtered responses goes even further in order to

break down the differences in responses between those participants with conspicuous

stigmatized identities, marked by physical gating features like race and gender, and those

participants with concealable stigmatized identities, like sexual orientation and disability.

For the purposes of this paper closer examination is paid to the responses

provided by participants self identified as having a concealable stigmatized identity. This

focus has been awarded to individuals identified as having a concealable stigma as

previous research suggests that there are critical differences between the psychological impacts of conspicuous and concealable identities on the human experience. It is believed that this impact may in part be due to the increased difficulties in finding positive mirroring that can be experienced for people with stigmatized self aspects.

The filters used in separating identity groups were created using a software filtering feature of the online service, www.surveymonkey.com, used to create the Internet survey for this research project. Filters were determined by agreement responses to how self identified sexual orientation as either "straight" or "gay/lesbian/bisexual/transsexual/pansexual/asexual/queer/questioning,"and whether or not they agreed with the statement "I have a disability."

The major findings for this study are broken down in accordance with the survey. These sections cover participant experiences growing up, their current experiences in their offline lives, active use of the Myspace online social network, and participant experiences of themselves and others in their online lives. Comparisons between participant responses will be addressed according to these sections.

When interpreting the visual analysis of the following findings, all valid and cumulative percents are representative of agreement responses to statements from the survey. Chi square analysis to locate significant findings was not possible for all of the inquiries on this survey due to some of the cross tabulations of responses not reaching the minimum needed number of five respondents in at least one of the chi square cells. Findings that were found to be significant through the use of chi square analysis are described in the text and can be found in the corresponding tables for each of the chapter subsections.

Descriptive Information Regarding the Sample Populations

Descriptive information regarding the concealable stigmatized identity categories

of sexual orientation and disability is provided first to show the number of participants

associated with each of the identity categories, and to build a general understanding of

psychological impact on participants based on the presence of societal prejudices.

Sexual Orientation

The following sets of data regard the responses received from study participants

according to self identified sexual orientation. Table 9 shows the demographic

breakdown of how participants self identified their sexual orientation. For the remainder

of this paper the self identified groups of bisexual, lesbian, queer, transsexual,

questioning, and other (as there were no participants identifying as gay, pansexual or

asexual), will be referred to with the popularly recognized acronym for what are

considered to be homosexual or "alternative" sexual orientations, GLBTQ.

Table 9: Sexual Orientation

Straight	Bisexual	Lesbian	Queer	Transsexual	Questioning	Other	Gay	Pansexual	Asexual
68	8	3	5	1	1	1	0	0	0

For those participants who are self identified as GLBTQ, visual analysis of the

data shows strikingly higher rates of agreement to the statements, "I have been

discriminated against based on my sexual orientation," "I often find myself hiding my

sexual orientation from others who do not share my identity," "Does your sexual

orientation discourage you from participating in social activities or in trying to make new

friends?," and "Do you feel as though your sexual orientation negatively impacts your

self esteem?," than what was found from the average Myspace user group and

participants identifying as straight. Similarly, lower agreement rates from GLBTQ

58

participants were found in regards to the statements, "I feel safe disclosing my sexual

orientation to others," and "I have resources for support in my community around issues

related to my sexual orientation." Refer to Table 10 for further statistical information.

Table 10: Experience Characteristics Based on Sexual Orientation

	I have been discriminated against based on my sexual orientation	I often find myself hiding my sexual orientation from others who do not share my identity	Does your sexual orientation discourage you from participating in social activities or in trying to make new friends?	Do you feel as though your sexual orientation negatively impacts your self esteem?	I feel safe disclosing my sexual orientation to others	I have resources for support in my community around issues related to my sexual orientation
GLBTQ	61.1%	68.5%	21.1%	36.8%	42.1%	84.2%
Straight	8.8%	4.5%	1.5%	0.0%	97.0%	93.8%
Avg. Myspace User	5.6%	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	97.2%	88.9%

Disability Status

The following sets of data regard the responses received from study participants

according to self identified disability. Of the 86 participants who provided a response to

this inquiry, 19 responded that they do have a disability while 67 responded that they

were not disabled. Of the 19 self identified disabled participants, 18 responded that their

disability is concealable. The remaining participant reported having a conspicuous

disability and needing a wheel chair to assist with mobility.

Of the 19 participants with a self identified disability, 31.6% report that their

disability is physical, 52.6% report having a mental disability, 21.1% report having an

emotional disability and 15.8% report having physical, emotional and mental disabilities.

The cumulative percentage of agreement responses for this question surpasses a 100%

total based on participant ability to choose more than one response to this question.

Most of the participants report that their disability does not necessitate special assistance to help with general functioning (93.8%), and half of the participants reported that their disability is manageable with the use of medication (50.0%). As mentioned previously, one participant reported needing a wheel chair to help with mobility, and one participant reported that they are homebound due to an emotional or mental health disorder.

Refer to Table 11 for further statistical descriptions of participant agreement response to statements regarding self perceptions and social support for the 19 self identified disabled study participants.

Table 11: Experience Characteristics Based on Disability

	Are you embarrassed by your disability?	Do you feel supported by the people in your every day life around issues related to your disability?	Does your disability discourage you from participating in social activities or in trying to make new friends?	Do you feel as though your disability has negatively impacted your sense of self esteem?
Yes	47.4%	47.4%	36.8%	63.2%
No	52.6%	52.6%	36.8%	21.1%
Sometimes	N/A	N/A	26.3%	N/A
Unsure	N/A	N/A	N/A	15.7%

Experiences Growing Up

Assessment of participant experiences during their childhoods lays an important foundation for understanding the early object relationships. As was described in the literature review, poor object relations with primary caregivers during childhood can lead to suppression of true self aspects, resulting in increased levels of false self living. The following section of the findings analyzes participant agreement responses to statements about feeling loved, encouraged, and taken care of as a child, and explores family dynamics and relationships with caregivers.

Sexual Orientation

Using a chi-square analysis, a statistically significant association was found between self identified sexual orientation and the response to the following statements about their experiences growing up; "Growing up I felt loved and taken care of by my caregivers," "Growing up I felt safe being whoever I wanted to be," "Growing up I felt encouraged to try new things and experiences," "I feel like my family accepts me for everything that I am," "There is much about me that I purposely do not tell my family," "I would say that I had a happy childhood," "I would say that I have a close relationship with my mother," and "Growing up I felt like I had to take care of my own needs because my caregivers did not." Refer to Table 12 for descriptive information regarding the significant findings of participant responses to the corresponding statements. These statistics represent the valid percents and chi square analyses of participants who agreed with the statement.

Table 12: Significant Findings for Experiences Growing Up Based on Sexual Orientation

	Straight	GLBTQ	Chi-Square
Growing up I felt loved and taken care of by my caregivers	92.4%	64.7%	$(\chi^2 (1, 83) = 9.03, p = .00)$
Growing up I felt safe being whoever I wanted to be	78.7%	35.3%	$(\chi^2 (1, 83) = 12.20, p = .00)$
Growing up I felt encouraged to try new things and experiences	89.4%	58.9%	$(\chi^2 (1, 83) = 9.01, p = .00)$
I feel like my family accepts me for everything that I am	80.3%	47.1%	$(\chi^2 (1, 83) = 7.70, p = .01)$
There is much about me that I purposely do not tell my family	40.9%	70.6%	$(\chi^2 (1, 83) = 4.78, p = .03)$
I would say that I had a happy childhood	84.9%	47.1%	$(\chi^2 (1, 83) = 10.94, p = .00)$
I would say that I have a close relationship with my mother	86.3%	58.9%	$(\chi^2 (1, 83) = 6.59, p = .01)$

Tabe 12 (Continued)	Straight	GLBTQ	Chi-Square
Growing up I felt like I had to take care of my own needs because my caregivers did not	21.3%	47.0%	(χ^2 (1, 83) = 4.64, p = .03)

It is of interest that such great disparities were found between the growing up experiences of self identified GLBTQ participants and those participants identifying as straight. These findings suggest that GLBTQ participants may have an increased likelihood to have experienced poor object relationships during their childhoods, in comparison to participants identifying as straight who on average appear to have felt more loved, safe and taken care of as children, resulting in stronger relationships with caregivers and family.

Disabled

Using a chi-square analysis no significant association was found among any of the statements regarding respondent experiences growing up and self identified disability. This may be indicative of the fact that it is unknown whether or not participants currently identifying as disabled had their disability while they were growing up. However in visual analysis of the data, there are disparities between the valid percents of the opposing identity categories in regards to the following statements; "Growing up I felt loved and taken care of by my caregivers," "I feel like my family accepts me for everything that I am," "There is much about me that I purposely do not tell my family," "I often criticize myself for not meeting the expectations set for me by my family," and "Growing up I was referred to as a 'problem child'."

Refer to Table 13 for descriptive information regarding data collection of the investigation of findings for experiences growing up that, although not statistically significant, did show disparities in valid percents.

Table 13: Significant Findings for Experiences Growing Up Based on Disability

	Disabled	Not Disabled
Growing up I felt loved and taken care of by my caregivers	73.7%	90.6%
I feel like my family accepts me for everything that I am	63.1%	76.6%
There is much about me that I purposely do not tell my family	57.9%	43.8%
Growing up I was referred to as a "problem child"	26.4%	12.5%

Of the 11 statements in this section of the survey, these 5 were the only ones that showed any disparities amongst the findings. Interestingly, the other 6 statements showed little to no difference in agreement responses which may indicate, that although both sexual orientation and disability are considered to be concealable stigmatized identities, when present in childhood could act as a negative force in early object relations. However, visual analysis of data suggests that it may not carry the same degree of secrecy, shame and difficulties with early caregivers that appear to have occurred for many of the GLBTQ participants.

Offline Life

Sexual Orientation

Using a chi-square analysis a statistically significant association was found between self identified sexual orientation and the response to the following statement

about participants' offline experiences "There are things about me that I don't feel comfortable sharing with the people I know offline." In visual analysis of the data it appears as though survey participants self identifying as GLBTQ may have difficulty with trusting people in their offline lives. Refer to Table 14 for descriptive information regarding the significant finding of participant responses to the corresponding statement.

Table 14: Significant Findings for Offline Life Based on Sexual Orientation

	Straight	GLBTQ	Chi Square
There are things about me that I don't feel comfortable sharing with the people I know offline	27.0%	56.3%	(χ^2 (1, 79) = 3.713, p = .05)

Using a chi-square analysis no significant association was found between self identified sexual orientation and the response to statements about their experiences in their current offline lives. Visual analysis of the data suggests that those participants who self identified as GLBTQ may be less outgoing, have lower levels of self esteem and have difficulty trusting people in their offline lives, than the comparison group of self identified straight participants. In addition, as opposed to straight participants, GLBTQ participants may be less likely to share all of their true self aspects with offline friends and family, and show an increased tendency to feel "trapped" in their offline lives. Also, a lower percentage of GLBTQ participants responded in agreement to the statement regarding the pressures of conformity to societal expectation than did those participants identifying as straight. Refer to Table 15 for descriptive information regarding the investigation of findings. This table shows the valid percent of participant agreement responses to the corresponding statements. Valid percents are separated into the self identified sexual orientation categories of "Straight" and "GLBTQ.

Table 15: Valid Percents for Offline Life Based on Sexual Orientation

	Straight	GLBTQ
I consider myself to be an outgoing person	71.9%	62.6%
I often feel lonely	51.5%	50.0%
I would say that I have good self esteem	79.7%	68.8%
It's easy for me to trust people offline	65.6%	50.0%
There are things about me that I know my offline friends and family would not accept if they knew about them	26.6%	50.0%
Sometimes I feel like I live a double life. One side of me does what is expected of me and the other lives life only for me	33.8%	52.9%

Based on self identified sexual orientation, this table (Table 15) shows disparate percentages between agreement responses for statements regarding acceptance by family and friends, and feelings of having to live a double life. These trends in the data suggest that participants identifying as GLBTQ may experience increased pressures for false self living in their offline lives, as opposed to those participants identifying as straight. However, in another statement looking at social pressures to conform to the norms of society, disparities were found that suggest more resistance from participants identifying as GLBTQ to feel the need to conform, then did participants identifying as straight (agreement rate to statement "I feel the need to conform to what is expected of me by society" GLBTQ 23.6%, straight 43.1%). There were also strong similarities between both groups around caring a great deal about how other people perceive them in their offline lives (GLBTQ 82.4%, straight 78.5%). This data is interesting in so far as those participants identifying as GLBTQ seem to feel more pressure to experience false self living within their immediate communities (friends and family), then they do in the rest of the world.

Similarities in agreement response rates were found in several areas of interest throughout this section of the survey. In terms of feeling as though participants were generally happy (GLBTQ 88.2%, straight 90.9%) and feeling as though they live a meaningful life (GLBTQ 82.3%, straight 84.4%), agreement responses were relatively high. This finding was pertinent to 4 of the 5 initially recognized identity categories (including stigmatized, non-stigmatized participants in the categories of gender, race/ethnicity, participants identifying as not disabled, sexual orientation, and the average Myspace user). The exception being those people self identifying as disabled, which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. However, contrary to these findings that most participants are generally happy in their offline lives, approximately half of the participants in both self identified sexual orientation categories also reported often feeling lonely (GLBTQ 50.0%, straight 51.5%).

Disabled

Using a chi-square analysis an association was found among self identified disability and the response to the following statements about participants' offline experiences; "It's difficult for me to talk to people face to face," "I often feel lonely," "I consciously isolate myself from other people," "I would say that I have good self esteem," "It is easy for me to meet new people offline," and "I am generally a happy person in my offline life." The significance of these findings indicates a relationship between lower levels of self esteem, increased feelings of loneliness, increased social anxiety, and conscious isolation from others, with those respondents self identifying as having a disability. Refer to Table 16 on the following page for descriptive information

66

regarding the significant findings of disabled and non-disabled participant responses to the corresponding statements about their current experiences in their offline lives.

Table 16: Significant Findings for Offline Life Based on Disability

	Disabled	Not Disabled	Chi Square
It's difficult for me to talk to people face to face	50.0%	16.1%	$(\chi^2 (1, 80) = 8.84, p = .00)$
I often feel lonely	83.4%	41.9%	
I consciously isolate myself from other people	61.1%	25.9%	$(\chi^2 (1, 80) = 7.78, p = .01)$
I would say that I have good self esteem	55.5%	83.9%	$(\chi^2 (1, 80) = 6.41, p = .01)$
I often feel trapped in my offline life	31.6%	12.5%	$(\chi^2 (1, 83) = 3.80, p = .05)$
It is easy for me to meet new people offline	33.3%	74.2%	$(\chi^2 (1, 80) = 10.24, p = .00)$
I care about what other people think of me	63.2%	84.1%	$(\chi^2 (1, 82) = 3.91, p = .05)$

Using a chi-square analysis no significant association was found between self identified disability and the agreement responses listed in Table 17. However, visual analysis of the valid percents suggests that participants who self identified as disabled may have increased levels of social anxiety, self criticism and difficulties in relationship formation, than did those participants identified as not having a disability. Self identified disabled participants may also experience increased feelings of being "trapped" in their offline lives and feeling as though they live double lives. Refer to Table 17 for descriptive information regarding the investigation of these findings.

Table 17: Valid Percents for Offline Life Based on Disability

	Disabled	Not Disabled
I consider myself to be an outgoing person	55.5%	74.1%
I find it difficult to find people like me offline	38.9%	25.8%
I always feel like people are judging me negatively in my offline life	28.0%	11.5%

Table 17 (Continued)	Disabled	Not Disabled
I often feel trapped in my offline life	31.6%	12.5%
Sometimes I feel like I live a double life. one side of me does what is expected of me and the other lives life only for me	47.4%	34.9%

Myspace Activity

The following sets of data regard the privacy settings used by study participants in allowing other registered Myspace members access to their personal profiles, as well as the lengths that they go to in protecting their online anonymity, and disclosing personal information to other Myspace users.

Sexual Orientation

Where N=80, 62.5% of participants self identifying as "GLBTQ" reported that they keep their privacy settings set to public access. This setting allows viewing access to the user's personal profile for all registered users of the Myspace network. The remaining 37.5% of GLBTQ respondents reported having their privacy settings set to private access. Private access only allows members of the user's direct network (their Myspace "friends") to view their personal profile page. For those participants self identifying as "straight," 54.7% reported having their profile set to public, with 45.3% having their personal profile privacy settings set to private. In visual analysis of the data it appears as though participants identifying as GLBTQ are less discriminate than those participants identifying as straight as to who they are willing to allow access to their personal profiles.

In response to the statement "I use my real name on Myspace," 81.3% of respondents self identifying as "GLBTQ" reported that they do use their real names when communicating with others online. Of the remaining GLBTQ respondents 12.5%

reported that they do not use their real names in online communication, and 6.3% responded that they only sometimes use their real names online. For those participants self identifying as "straight" 67.2% report using their real names online, 12.5% report that they do not use their real names, and 20.3% report only sometimes using their real names during online communication. Again, visual analysis of the data suggests less discretion in protecting online anonymity on the part of those participants identifying as GLBTQ.

Based on insufficient number of respondents needed to complete a chi square analysis, statistically significant findings were not available for the statement "I share details about myself on my profile that include; race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, relationship status, etc." However, visual analysis of the data indicates a striking disparity between the comparison groups of sexual orientation, wherein 96.9% of respondents self identifying as straight agreed with this statement, whereas only 68.8% of GLBTQ respondents agreed.

In response to the statement, "I post images of:" respondents were provided with four options; myself, my friends, other images, and/or no profile images. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one response for this statement. For those participants self identifying as GLBTQ, 93.8% report having posted images of themselves, 68.8% report having posted images of their friends, and 75.0% report having posted other images unrelated to their personal appearance. There were zero responses for participants not having posted images on their personal profile pages. For respondents identifying as straight, 100.0% report having posted images of themselves, 82.8% report having posted images of their friends, and 60.9% report having posted other images

unrelated to their personal appearance. There were no responses for not having posted images on their personal profile pages. It is interesting that those participants self identifying as GLBTQ seemed to have a higher likelihood than those participants identifying as straight, for posting images unrelated to their personal appearance. These findings suggest another means of disclosing personal information, described in the literature review as "behavioral residue" that may convey other aspects of the participants' personalities like sense of humor or social causes.

Generally speaking, the cumulative percentages for both self identified sexual orientation groups indicate that most participants have been registered members with the Myspace network for at least one year (GLBTQ 68.8%, straight 85.9%). In response to the question "How often do you log on?" the cumulative percentages of both groups indicated that they log onto the website at least once a day (GLBTQ 66.7%, straight 78.1%). These findings were typical of all survey participants, wherein more than 80% of survey participants report having been members of the Myspace network for at least 1 year, and state that they log onto the network at least once a day.

Predominantly, both self identified sexual orientation groups report that they use the Myspace network to keep in touch with old friends (GLBTQ 100.0%, straight 98.4%). Neither of these self identified groups indicated high levels of using Myspace in order to make new friends (GLBTQ 37.5%, straight 32.8%), although those participants identifying as straight did appear to use the network more frequently, than did those participants identifying as GLBTQ, for the purposes of dating and/or finding a serious relationship (GLBTQ 0.0%, straight 22.1%). However, visual analysis of the data did show a higher percentage of participants identifying as GLBTQ (56.3%) use Myspace for

70

the purposes of networking, than did those participants identifying as straight (29.7%). Since "networking" can be viewed as a broad term both professionally and personally, it is unclear as to how individual Myspace members define this term for themselves.

Again, these findings for participant relationship purposes in using the Myspace network were relatively equivalent across the board, although visual analysis of the data suggests that male participants, people of color, and participants identifying as disabled may have an increased likelihood to use Myspace for the purposes of making new friends, finding romantic relationships, and networking.

Both self identified sexual orientation groups indicate higher agreement response rates to the statement that they will only accept friend requests from people that they know in their offline lives as well (GLBTQ 68.8%, straight 78.1%). There was only one participant, self identified as straight, who reported that he will accept anyone as his friend. Cumulative agreement responses for the next statement, "I request other people to be my friend…" were similar to whom participants would accept friend requests from, wherein participants were most likely to agree with the statement "Only if I know them offline" (GLBTQ 93.8%, straight 87.5%).

Although percentages were low for both self identified groups, visual analysis of the data suggests that those participants identifying as GLBTQ (25.0%) were more likely to have more than one personal profile on the Myspace network, than were those participants identifying as straight (9.4%). Of these participants reporting that they have more than one personal profile, those participants identifying as GLBTQ (33.3%) appear to have a higher likelihood for one of their profiles to be one that they do not share with their offline family and friends, than those participants identifying as straight (13.0%).

71

Disabled

Where N=80, 83.3% of participants self identifying as disabled reported that they keep their privacy settings set to public access, with the remaining 16.7% reporting that their profiles are restricted to private settings.   For those participants self identifying as "Not Disabled," 48.4% reported having their profile set to public, with 51.6% having their personal profile privacy settings set to private. These findings suggest that those participants identifying as disabled may have an increased likelihood of being less discriminate in who they allow access to view their personal profiles over those participants self identifying as not disabled.

In response to the statement "I use my real name on Myspace," 66.7% of respondents self identifying as disabled reported that they do use their real names when communicating with others online. Of the remaining self identified disabled respondents, 22.2% reported that they do not use their real names in online communication, and 11.1% responded that they only sometimes use their real names online. These percents were similar to the responses provided by non-disabled participants as well.

With regards to the statement "I go to great lengths to hide my identity online," 5.6% of survey participants self identifying as disabled agreed with this statement, 83.3% disagreed and 11.1% report only sometimes going to great lengths to hide their identities online. For those participants identifying as not disabled, 3.2% agreed with this statement, 77.4% did not, and 19.4% reported sometimes going to great lengths to hide their identities online.

In regards to the statement, "I share details about myself on my profile that include; race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, relationship status, etc." valid percents were

similar for both disabled and non-disabled survey participants. For those respondents identifying as disabled 94.4% agreed with this statement, 5.6% report not sharing these demographic features on their personal profile. Non disabled survey respondents had a 90.3% agreement response rate to this statement, with the remaining 9.7% of this group report that they do not share these details.

The data from the aforementioned sections concerning disclosure of personally identifying information, may suggest relatively high levels of trust amongst Myspace users, as well as lowered concern in preserving online anonymity despite presence or lack of disability stigma.

In response to the statement, "I post images of," respondents were provided with four options; myself, my friends, other images, and/or no profile images. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one response for this statement. For those participants self identifying as disabled, 100.0% report having posted images of themselves, 60.0% report having posted images of their friends, and 80.0% report having posted other images unrelated to their personal appearance. There were no responses for not having posted images on their personal profile pages. For respondents identifying as not disabled, 98.4% report having posted images of themselves, 61.1% report having posted images of their friends, and 61.1% report having posted other images unrelated to their personal appearance. There were no responses for not having posted images on their personal profile pages. This data suggests that those participants identifying as disabled may have an increased likelihood in disclosing other aspects of their personality unrelated to their physical appearance, than do those participants identifying as not disabled.

In response to the inquiry "I accept friend requests from…" visual analysis of the data suggests that participants identifying as disabled seemed to have a higher likelihood to accept friend requests from other Myspace members, whom they do not know from their offline lives, than did those participants identified as not disabled (disabled 55.6%, not disabled 30.7%). Cumulative agreement responses for the next statement, "I request other people to be my friend…" were similar to who participants would accept friend requests from, wherein participants identifying as disabled (44.4%) were more likely to make friend requests of other Myspace members who seem "cool" based on their Myspace profiles, than were participants identified as not disabled (27.0%). Further analysis of relationship formation for disabled and non-disabled participants will be discussed later in this chapter.

Similar to the findings based on sexual orientation (where GLBTQ participants were more likely to have more than one Myspace profile), visual analysis of the data from the stigmatized disability group suggests that disabled participants (22.2%) were more likely to have more than one personal profile on the Myspace network, than were those participants identifying as not disabled (9.7%). Of these participants reporting that they have more than one personal profile, those participants identifying as disabled (30.0%) appear to have a higher likelihood for one of their profiles to be one that they do not share with their offline family and friends, than those participants identifying as not disabled (10.5%).

Sexual Orientation

In response to the question "Do you belong to any Myspace groups?" both self identified groups (GLBTQ and straight) indicated that at least half of their respondents did in fact belong to at least one Myspace group (GLBTQ 56.3%, straight 66.7%). Cumulative percentages of these agreement responses suggest that participants identifying as GLBTQ were more likely to belong to 1-3 groups, while those participants identifying as straight (66.8%) were more likely to belong to 3-5+ groups. However, visual analysis of the data suggest that GLBTQ participants (64.3%) found that these virtual groups are either difficult to find offline or sometimes difficult to find offline, whereas straight participants (54.3%) reported that these virtual groups are either ones that they can also find offline and/or sometimes find offline.

Disabled

In response to the question "Do you belong to any Myspace groups?" both self identified groups indicated that at least 60.0% of their respondents did in fact belong to at least one Myspace group (disabled 66.7%, not disabled 63.9%). Cumulative percentages of these agreement responses suggest that participants identifying as disabled (75.0%) were more likely to belong to 3-5+ groups, while those participants identifying as not disabled (59.1%) were more likely to belong to 1-3 groups. This differs from the findings from self identified sexual orientation, wherein visual analysis of the data suggested that it was more likely that the stigmatized GLBTQ group was found to belong to fewer groups, than did the non-stigmatized group of participants identifying as straight.

However, in response to the question, "Is it difficult to find these types of groups

offline?" both disabled and non-disabled participants reported similar agreement responses that these virtual groups are either ones that are difficult to find offline and/or sometimes difficult to find offline (disabled 64.3%, not disabled 64.5%).

Online Life

Based on number of respondents many of the inquiries in this section could not be run for significance. Thus, most of the findings that will be reported in this section are based on visual analysis of the valid and cumulative percents for agreement responses to the corresponding statements. It is important to note that many findings were consistent between all four of the identity comparison groups, wherein stigmatized groups tended to have similar agreement response rates with one another, as did the non-stigmatized groups. However, for the purposes of this paper, focus is placed on analyzing the findings for the concealable stigmatized identity categories for sexual orientation and disability, although general findings for all of the comparison groups will be referenced intermittently throughout this analysis.

Sexual Orientation

In regards to the following inquiries about truthful disclosure and perceptions of personal behavior in online identity construction, visual analysis of the data does not suggest great differences between agreement responses of the self identified sexual orientation categories. In response to the statement "I admit… not all of the information I've posted about me is completely truthful. I guess you could say that is an ideal version of who I am" (GLBTQ 6.7%, straight 8.2%), agreement responses indicate that participants perceive their online portrayals of self to be similar to their offline portrayals of self. However, in the following statement "I am the same person online and off"

visual analysis of the data suggests that those participants identifying as GLBTQ (80.0%) were less likely to agree with this statement then were those participants identifying as straight (95.1%). Additionally, in the final statement of the survey "The information I provided in this survey (is true)" visual analysis of the data suggests that respondents self identified as GLBTQ (66.7%) showed less agreement to the statement than did those participants identifying as straight (80.3%). These findings are interesting considering the high levels of agreement from participants self identified as GLBTQ about portraying themselves accurately on their profile pages, and yet not as truthfully when answering this survey.

Conversely in a statement regarding offline friends and family perceptions of survey respondents as being the same person online and off, those participants identifying as GLBTQ (71.4%) reported less agreement to this statement than did participants self identifying as straight (95.0%). These findings support the data that was described in the "Offline Lives" section for increased levels of false self living on the part of GLBTQ participants. In addition and perhaps due to increased levels of false self living in their offline lives, GLBTQ (53.4%) participants were more likely to feel a sense of control over personal disclosure based on being able to self construct their online identities than were those participants identifying as straight (40.9%).

In response to the statement, "I care a great deal about what other people think of me based on my online profile," both self identified groups reported low agreement responses to the statement (GLBTQ 21.4%, straight 19.6%), suggesting lowered inhibitions from offline life wherein both self identified groups showed high agreement responses to the statement "I care about what other people think of me" (GLBTQ 82.4%,

straight 78.5%). In the follow up statement to how much participants care about how people perceive them based on their personal profile, 26.7% of GLBTQ respondents and 39.3% of straight respondents report that their lack of caring is due to the fact that they will probably never meet many of the people that they meet online in their offline lives.

Visual analysis of the data suggests that for both self identified groups, their ability to trust other people online is no easier than it is for them to trust people offline (GLBTQ 6.7%, straight 11.5%). However, valid percents of participant responses indicate that those participants identifying as GLBTQ (20.0%) tend to reveal more personal information about themselves online, than those participants identifying as straight (11.4%). In addition, participants identifying as GLBTQ (26.7%) seem to be more likely than participants identifying as straight (9.9%) to disclose personal information that they agreed would likely surprise their offline family and friends.

Although previously described data suggests that both categories of participants believe that they portray accurate information about themselves online, only roughly half of participants from both categories agreed that other people disclose accurate information about themselves online (GLBTQ 46.7%, straight 59.0%). Interestingly enough, with approximately half of participants from both groups reporting agreement responses to the follow up statement "Nobody is completely truthful online," (GLBTQ 40.0%, straight 52.4%) support is provided to the preceding statement about others not portraying themselves accurately, but suggests contrary agreement to portraying accurate information about themselves online. As previously described, to support the perception that both self identified groups believe that they convey accurate information about themselves online, participants showed low agreement rates to being hesitant to including

physical gating features like race, height and weight, on their personal profiles (GLBTQ 0.0%, straight 9.9%).

In terms of online relationship formation, approximately one third of both self identified groups agreed with the statement "I believe that it is totally possible to make strong friendships online even if you never get to meet that person offline" (GLBTQ 26.7%, straight 38.9%). As previously described, data indicates that the majority of both self identified groups are primarily Myspace friends with people that they know in their offline lives as well, both groups report being satisfied with their current number of Myspace friends (GLBTQ 80.0%, straight 74.6%), assumed by this researcher to be people that they already know. However, there is indication that participants from both groups experience increased self esteem when their Myspace friends recognize them in their "Top 8" friends (GLBTQ 46.7%, straight 44.1%).

Neither group reported high levels of agreement to feeling insulted by having their profiles deleted by one of their Myspace friends (GLBTQ 20.0%, straight 13.6%), nor were there high percentages of agreement to feeling entitled to delete one of their Myspace friends if that friend made them angry (GLBTQ 14.3%, straight 31.6%). This may indicate that participants identifying as GLBTQ may be more reluctant than participants in the straight comparison group to delete their Myspace friends. However, roughly one third of participants from both self identified groups did agree that it is acceptable to block their Myspace friends from being able to access their personal profiles if a friend made them angry enough (GLBTQ 38.5%, straight 39.6%).

Visual analysis of the data suggests that neither self identified group showed high agreement responses to statements inquiring about increased self esteem based on the

number of times that their personal profile is viewed by other people (GLBTQ 6.7%, straight 8.5%). However, increases in self esteem do seem to be affected by receiving new profile comments from their Myspace friends (GLBTQ 33.7%, straight 40.7%). In addition, self esteem does not seem to be negatively impacted by the lack of comment reciprocity from Myspace friends (GLBTQ 13.4%, straight 22.1%).

Disabled

Again, based on the number of respondents in these self identified categories, many of the inquiries in this section could not be run for significance. Thus, the findings that will be reported in this section are based on suggested trends in the visual analysis of the valid and cumulative percents for agreement responses to the corresponding statements.

In regards to the following inquiries about truthful disclosure and perceptions of personal behavior in online identity construction, visual analysis of the data does not suggest great differences between agreement responses of the self identified disability categories. In response to the statement "I admit… not all of the information I've posted about me is completely truthful. I guess you could say that is an ideal version of who I am" (disabled 11.2%, not disabled 6.8%), agreement responses indicate that participants perceive their online portrayals of self to be similar to their offline portrayals of self. Further support of this statement can be found in the following statement "I am the same person online and off," wherein visual analysis of the data shows high agreement responses for both categories (disabled 94.5%, not disabled 91.4%). Although there is only a slight difference in agreement responses, in the inquiry regarding offline friends and family perceptions of survey respondents as the same person online and off, survey

participants identifying as disabled (83.3%) reported lower levels of agreement that their offline friends and family would believe that they are the same person offline and on, than did participants self identifying as not disabled (92.8%). However, in the final statement of the survey "The information I provided in this survey (is true)" visual analysis of the data suggests that respondents self identified as disabled (92.3%) showed more agreement towards having been truthful in taking this survey than did those participants identifying as not disabled (72.2%). These findings are interesting considering the high levels of agreement from participants self identified as not disabled about portraying themselves accurately on their profile pages, and yet not as truthfully when answering this survey. This may indicate more mischievous answers from non-disabled participants in comparison to disabled participants.

Visual analysis of the data suggests that those participants self identified as disabled (50.0%) were slightly more likely to feel a sense of control over how other people perceive them online based on being able to construct their online identities, than were those participants identifying as not disabled (41.3%). Although these percentages are relatively similar for both the stigmatized and non-stigmatized groups, it would make sense that disabled participants perceive themselves as having greater control over how others perceive them, due to their relative lack of control in offline life over how people may perceive them when made aware of their disabled stigma.

In response to the statement, "I care a great deal about what other people think of me based on my online profile," both self identified groups reported low agreement responses to the statement (disabled 22.2%, not disabled 19.3%), suggesting lowered inhibitions from offline life wherein both self identified groups showed higher agreement

responses to the statement "I care about what other people think of me" (disabled 63.2%, not disabled 84.1%). In the follow up statement to how much participants care about how people perceive them based on their personal profile, 44.5% of disabled respondents and 34.5% of non-disabled respondents report that their lack of caring is due to the fact that they will probably never meet many of the people that they meet online in their offline lives.

Visual analysis of the data suggests that for both self identified groups, their ability to trust other people online is no easier than it is for them to trust other people offline (disabled 11.2%, not disabled 10.3%) However, valid percents of participant responses indicate that those participants identifying as disabled (22.3%) tend to reveal more personal information about themselves online, than those participants identifying as not disabled (10.3%). In addition, participants identifying as disabled (22.2%) are more likely than participants identifying as straight (10.3%) to disclose personal information that they agreed would be likely to surprise their offline family and friends.

Although previously described data suggests that both categories of participants believe that they portray accurate information about themselves online, approximately half of participants from both categories agreed that other people do not disclose accurate information about themselves online (disabled 55.6%, not disabled 56.9%). Interestingly enough, both groups were split at 50.0% in their agreement responses to the follow up statement "Nobody is completely truthful online" (disabled 50.0%, not disabled 50.0%). These responses provide support to the preceding statement about others not portraying themselves accurately, but suggest contrary information to how participants report portraying accurate information about themselves online.

To support the perception that both self identified groups believe that they convey accurate information about themselves online, participants showed low agreement rates to being hesitant to including physical gating features like race, height and weight, on their personal profiles (disabled 11.2%, not disabled 6.9%).

In terms of online relationship formation, approximately half of those participants identifying as disabled (55.6%) agreed with the following statement "I believe that it is totally possible to make strong friendships online even if you never get to meet that person offline," while those participants identifying as not disabled were only in agreement with this statement about one third of the time (30.4%). As previously described data indicates that the majority of both self identified groups are primarily Myspace friends with people that they know in their offline lives as well, both groups report being satisfied with their current number of Myspace friends (disabled 72.2%, not disabled 76.8%), assumed to be people that they already know.

Neither group reported high levels of agreement to feeling insulted by having their profiles deleted by one of their Myspace friends (disabled 16.7%, not disabled 14.3%), nor were there high percentages of agreement to feeling entitled to delete one of their Myspace friends if that friend made the participant angry (disabled 29.4%, not disabled 27.8%). However, roughly one half of those participants identifying as disabled reported that they agree that it is acceptable to block their Myspace friends from being able to access their personal profiles if that friend made them angry enough, while only about one third of non-disabled participants agreed (disabled 55.5%, not disabled 34.0%).

Visual analysis of the data suggests that participants identifying as disabled were more likely to feel increased self esteem from receiving profile comments from friends

than were those participants identifying as not disabled (disabled 50.0%, not disabled 35.7%). In addition, for those participants identifying as disabled, self esteem seems to be only somewhat negatively impacted by the lack of comment reciprocity from Myspace friends, while participants identifying as not disabled did not seem to incur the same amount of narcissistic injury (disabled 27.8%, not disabled 17.9%).

Conclusion

Both the sexual orientation and disability comparison groups reported similar findings as to how participants perceive Myspace to be relatively similar to the dynamics they experience in their offline lives. Although both groups showed less than half of their respective respondents to be in agreement with the statement "I don't really think that there is a big difference between online life and offline life" (GLBTQ 46.7%, straight 33.9%, disabled 27.8%, not disabled 39.3%), there were relatively equal levels of increased agreement in the belief that Myspace is a mixture of fantasy and reality (GLBTQ 73.3%, straight 67.2%, disabled 72.2%, not disabled 67.2%). Of the remaining responses, participants from both groups were more likely to agree that Myspace is the same as their offline realities (GLBTQ 26.7%, straight 31.2%, disabled 27.8%, not disabled 31.0%), rather than categorizing Myspace as complete fantasy (GLBTQ 0.0%, straight 1.6%, disabled 0.0%, not disabled 1.7%).

Further analysis of this data will be explored in the discussion chapter of this paper. Findings will be compared based on how both of these self identified categories of sexual orientation and disability may be considered as concealable stigmatized identities. As the psychological impact of how early childhood experiences can effect a person's sense of self, and can be further compromised by also having a concealable stigmatized

identity was described in the literature review, the information that will be covered in the

discussion will address these findings in accordance with the ideas suggested by earlier

research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study was conceptualized through a psychodynamic lens of understanding

how past experiences effect the present reality of an individual's intrapsychic structure.

More specifically, analysis of the findings is assessed using an object relational

framework closely focused on the ideas presented by D.W. Winnicott's theory of the

True and False selves.   However, the analysis presented in this discussion chapter will go

beyond traditional understandings of the psychosocial forces at play in the development

of the self, as technological advances like the Internet could not have been imagined

when psychodynamic theory was first designed.

Concealable Stigmatized Identities

In this paper both GLBTQ sexual orientation and self identified disability are

considered to be concealable stigmatized identities, as sexual orientation is not

necessarily distinguishable as a physical gating feature like gender or race, and all but

one respondent identifying as disabled considered their disability to be concealable.

Focus on the psychological effects of concealable stigmas on participant object relations

has been chosen based on the fact that in adulthood these people often have the choice to

disclose the stigma at their discretion in both the offline and online worlds, whereas

people with conspicuous stigmatized identities have no control over the fact that their

stigma is a distinct part of their everyday presentation.

However, during childhood and in experiences growing up where internalized object relations and the emergence of the self as either true or false first appears, experiences between these two self identified categories of sexual orientation and disability vary greatly. It is important to keep in mind that although the findings for these concealable identities seemed to show similar trends, their degree of distinction emerges at different stages of the developmental life process.

As it is the believed that early childhood object relations play a large role in a person's ability to perceive and relate to others later on in life, these childhood experiences for individuals with concealable stigmatized identities may be very telling in trying to understand how and why these group participants came to use online social networks in order to meet different emotional and relational needs.

Psychological Impact of Concealable Stigma

There are very real differences in how persons with a socially stigmatized identity experience that stigma throughout the developmental life process based on its conspicuous or concealable nature. For those individuals with a conspicuous stigma mirroring, both positive and negative, is more easily available because the stigma is not something that can be easily avoided. For instance, prejudice regarding minority categories, based on race or gender, present themselves through others' assumption often made strictly on appearances. Thus, for those individuals with a conspicuous stigma there is often increased worry about how others will perceive them, versus the plight of the individual with a concealable stigma who may become consumed by the desire not to have assumptions based on their stigma thrust upon them (Smart & Wegner, 1999).

For individuals with the concealable stigma, the need to keep their stigma hidden can lead to significant social anxiety for fear that they will not be able to manage interactions with non-stigmatized individuals in such a way that the stigma will not emerge. This can cause severe mental preoccupation on the part of the individual with the concealable stigma as studies have shown that active thought suppression, for instance of a concealable stigma, often has the reverse result where what is trying to be suppressed will remain on the forefronts of the individual's thoughts (Smart & Wegner, 1999). "Unlike individuals with conspicuous stigmas who must cope with the real and anticipated reactions of others, those with concealable stigmas who attempt to pass as normal are saddled with preoccupation in the attempt to hide their stigmatizing condition" (Smart & Wegner, 1999, p.475). Frable, Platt, and Hoey (1998) found in this regard that people with concealable stigmas have lower self-esteem than do those with conspicuous stigmas (Smart & Wegner, 1999).

These aforementioned findings of lowered self esteem due to the concealable stigma, plays an important role in this researcher's assessment of the responses provided by participants self identifying as GLBTQ or disabled. While lowered levels of self esteem were evident for both stigmatized groups, this characteristic seems to have developed at different stages in participants lives due to the nature of the stigma.

Experiences Growing Up

Based on the assumptions of this researcher, in the eyes of family and friends during childhood, disabilities are often seen as acceptable aspects of a person's core identity due to medical model validation of the affliction and the individual's relative lack of control over their biological makeup. As this type of identity is not believed to be

a choice of the individual, growing up experiences in terms of relationships with caregivers and close friends seem to differ from those experiences of individuals who self identify as GLBTQ. Perhaps this is because of historic social misperceptions of sexual orientation as being a choice rather than an innate aspect of their true self.

In terms of experiences growing up, those participants self identified as GLBTQ showed statistically significant findings in a far more pronounced manner than any of the other stigmatized and non-stigmatized groups (both concealable and conspicuous). This was evidenced by the much lower agreement responses to statements such as "Growing up I felt safe being whoever I wanted to be," "I would say that I had a happy childhood," "I feel like my family accepts me for everything that I am," and "I would say that I have a close relationship with my mother." These findings indicate that throughout childhood GLBTQ participants may have not received adequate positive mirroring for their true self aspects, as many also did not agree with the statement in regards to having a close relationship with their mothers. Individuals learn in the earliest stages of infancy what is and is not found to be acceptable through the mirroring of affect and appraisals from the primary caregiver (Elmers et al., 2002), it may be assumed that based on the responses provided by GLBTQ participants many members of this group did not perceive their experiences in early object relations to include high levels of positive mirroring.

As a result, for GLBTQ participants this loss of opportunity for positive mirroring of true self aspects may have led to increased pressures to assume false self identities so as not to disrupt the homeostasis of early support systems. If this is what has occurred, the tenets set forth in Object Relations theory would lead this researcher to believe that for GLBTQ participants it is likely, based on childhood experiences, that an unhealthy

"False" self emerges that actively suppresses its own needs in order to be responsive to the people (family and primary caregivers) from who it is seeking validation (Phillips, 1988). Continuing with this theory, it may also be belived that individuals who develop this type of false self organization will become overly compliant to the needs of others, and any sense of being unique will be suppressed (Berzoff et al., 1996). However, as will be explored later in this discussion, it appears that the need to protect oneself through the defensive use of false self living carries over from childhood to adulthood in terms of continued need to protect the true self from devaluation by family and caregivers, but does not seem to be an active need in other areas of GLBTQ participants' lives. This may indicated a fragmented sense of self as GLBTQ participants appear to be conditioned to understand that there must be a split in self presentation between the true and false selves. On the one hand the false self is used as a protector, while the other lives life through the true self. This concept is important to keep in mind during later exploration of high agreement responses from GLBTQ participants to the statement, "I often feel as though I live a double life."

Compared to GLBTQ participants, study participants self identified as having a disability did not show findings that were quite as pronounced. This may in part be due to the aforementioned historical perceptions of disability related stigma, but may also be attributed to the fact that many respondents identifying as having a disability described their disability as being developmental or acquired during their life, rather than having been born with it. Despite not having knowledge of when disabilities emerged for those participants identifying with this stigma, it is important to note that visual analysis of the data for disabled participants is somewhat similar to that which was collected for GLBTQ

participants. This may indicate a general trend that study participants with a concealable stigma perceived less positive mirroring from early caregiver than what was experienced by the non-stigmatized comparison group.

Interestingly, there were additional similarities in GLBTQ and disabled participant responses regarding increased levels of secrecy regarding personal disclosure to family and friends, compared to the non-stigmatized comparison group. In addition, participants with concealable stigmatized identities appear most likely to be under the assumption that they were viewed as "problem" children by members of their primary support networks. This indicates a consensus from both groups that from an early age they recognized that there were aspects of their true selves that were met with resistance by the communities in which they grew up, or perhaps from internalized shame incurred as cognitive development from childhood into adolescence gave way to their realization that their stigmatized identity separated them from others and in being recognized as "different."

It should also be recognized that mirroring provided by peers during childhood can be very influential during the construction of early object relations. As children and adolescents, later identifying as GLBTQ, may be struggling with understanding their emerging stigmatized identity, they may be subject to negative mirroring from peers that conveys the message to them that GLBTQ sexual orientation is wrong or immoral. These messages can be conveyed through homophobic jokes or insults. For example, a common phrase used today by children and adolescents to describe something that they feel is unacceptable may be to say, "That's so gay!"

These findings for the increased likelihood of false self living amongst participants identifying with a concealable stigma become even more apparent when compared against the growing up experiences of the average Myspace user. This group tended to have the highest agreement responses to statements of feeling loved, appreciated and taken care of by early caregivers. This group also tended to have the lowest agreement responses to statements regarding tendencies to be very self critical and feeling unaccepted for their true self aspects. This would suggest then that the average Myspace user is more likely than those participants identifying with a stigma to have developed a stronger sense of self during childhood, marked by more secure attachments with caregivers and increased reflections of positive mirroring to encourage the development of the true self.

Offline Life

Just as statistically significant findings representative of poor self concept and false self living appeared to be most prominent for GLBTQ participants during childhood, findings in the assessment of current offline life indicate that poor self concept and difficulties with relationship formation emerge for disabled participants in adulthood. Responses from self identified disabled participants in this section of the survey showed the most statistically significant findings for the potential of false self living and poor sense of self than did any of the other recognized identity categories. Findings indicated that participants self identified as having a disability tend to experience very low levels of self esteem, and increased feelings of loneliness, conscious isolation from others and in being very self critical in their current offline lives. This increase in the sense of

pejorative separateness from others seems to lead towards increased levels of social anxiety, and difficulties with attachment and relationship formation in adulthood.

As seen in previous description regarding the psychological impact experienced by individuals with a concealable stigmatized identity during social interaction with non-stigmatized persons, the suggested trends of increased social anxiety in adulthood may be assumed to be in part due to individuals' preoccupation that their stigma will be discovered during social interactions (Smart & Wegner, 1999). This may indicate that as individuals who have self identified as having a disability mature past childhood, their level of shame regarding their stigma grows, consequently discouraging them from actively seeking out new relationships and social activities offline. It is the belief of this researcher that the increase of social anxiety for disabled participants may also coincide with separation from the previously accepting community in which they grew up. As findings showed that the majority of Myspace users are either attending college or have already received their Bachelor's degree, it would make sense that this could mean that participants did in fact separate from primary support groups in order to pursue higher education. This assumption supports the idea that in separating from family and friends already knowledgeable of the stigmatized identity, there would be anxiety about having to disclose a hidden aspect of self to new others, especially if an individual could "pass" as not possessing a stigma that could potentially allow others to see the individual as different.

Although findings point towards increased levels of false self living for participants identifying as disabled, this group showed high levels of agreement to the

93

statement "I am generally a happy person in my offline life." This contradiction suggests a split in self concept, which is another indication of living through a false self.

Supporting findings of false self living for GLBTQ participants during childhood, participants self identifying as GLBTQ showed consistent findings for continuing to hide true self aspects from family during adulthood. It is important to note though that there was a 20% decrease in this response between childhood and adulthood experiences. Again, this might be due to separation from family during adulthood, or from building ego strength by finding GLBTQ groups to identify with and experience positive mirroring from. Nonetheless, these findings suggest a continued sense of false self living for GLBTQ participants within their family systems.

To support the notion of continued false self living for GLBTQ participants is the higher agreement response (as opposed to the non-stigmatized comparison group) to the statement "Sometimes I feel like I live a double life." This finding is of particular interest as the statement was follow up to a previous statement, "I feel the need to conform to what is expected of me by society," which had a much lower agreement response. Perhaps this indicates a compartmentalization of false self living wherein GLBTQ participants have conditioned themselves to allow different aspects of self to present themselves in accordance with the group that they are around. For example; around family and friends the false self becomes activated in order to protect the true self from painful experiences resulting from devaluation by family members, whereas in other areas of offline life that defense is lessened by finding new groups where GLBTQ identity is a cultural norm.

The findings for this section of the survey revealed that participants self identified as having a disability appear to be the least discriminate in whom they allow access to view their personal profile, and in whom they choose to form online relationships with. This idea is grounded in the visual analysis of valid percents indicating that disabled participants were the most likely, of all the recognized identity groups, to have their profiles set to public access, which allows all registered users within the Myspace network to view their personal profile. This might suggest that participants self identified as disabled are actively seeking out new opportunities to be seen by others in the manner in which they would ideally like to be viewed.

Conversely participants fitting the criteria for the average Myspace user were found to have the highest rate, of all the recognized identity groups, to keep their personal profile set to private access wherein only their first degree friends are able to view their profile page. This may suggest that the average Myspace user is more frequently using this online social network as an extension of offline life to help maintain pre-existing offline relationships, rather than to seek out new relationships.

Participants identifying as GLBTQ were somewhat split in who they allow access to view their personal profile page. However, based on later findings it might be inferred that much like the average Myspace user, self identified GLBTQ participants are most often using the network to help maintain pre-existing offline relationships. This is evidenced by GLBTQ participant responses that suggest an increased tendency to use their real names in online interaction, and to mostly only accept friend requests from and make friend requests of people that they know from their offline lives. This indicates that

GLBTQ participants tend to use Myspace as an extension of offline social life rather than as a venue for seeking out new relationships with other Myspace users. As women tend to be viewed as placing more emphasis on the importance of relationship maintenance, it is of note that the similarities in the use of Myspace between participants identifying as GLBTQ and the average Myspace user may be the result of the shared gender identification, female. There may also be shared safety concerns around disclosing too much personal information to online strangers amongst female users as well.

Alternatively, participants self identified as disabled showed the highest agreement rates to the statement that they use the Myspace network to make new friends, and were the least discriminate in whom they would accept friend requests from and whom they would make friend requests of. Disabled participants also showed a strong likelihood to belong to 3-5+ virtual groups through the Myspace network, frequently reporting that these groups were somewhat difficult to find offline. This suggests an active search for like minded others in order to receive positive mirroring for true self aspects that may be considered taboo in offline life.

The findings from this section of the survey suggest that of all the initially defined identity categories, online social networks appear to have the greatest positive impact on disabled participants in helping to build ego strength, and seek out and form new relationships with others. As social anxiety was marked as a key characteristic for disabled participants in earlier discussion of current life experiences offline, it would appear as though increased personal control over identity construction and disclosure of personal information through the Myspace network may provide a less threatening environment for the purposes of social interaction.

Online Life

Analysis of the findings regarding GLBTQ participant responses according to their perceptions of life online indicated several contradictions of how accurately people perceive themselves as well as how people believe that other people perceive them. For example, GLBTQ and straight participants alike reported low levels of agreement to saying that they have constructed their online identity profiles to represent an ideal version of themselves. However, GLBTQ participants were also less likely to agree that they come across as the same person online as they do offline. These findings may indicate that GLBTQ participants perceive the identities that they have constructed for themselves to be the same as their internalized representations of self although they recognize that people online may perceive them differently than they would if they were to meet offline. Similarly, GLBTQ participants were more likely to agree that their friends and family would perceive them differently according to how they have represented themselves online.

Disparities presented themselves again in terms of how others' perceptions of study participants in online life compare to findings found of how they are perceived by others in offline life. Reports from offline life clearly showed that most study participants across the board cared a great deal about how other people perceive them in their offline lives, whereas in online life there was a significant drop in participant concern as to how they are perceived by others. These findings lend support to ideas discussed in the literature review that the perceived anonymity of the user in computer mediated communication and online interactions increases the likelihood for depersonalization and deindividuated behavior. This in turn creates an increased sense

97

that online social environments are less threatening and worthy of anxiety, than what may be experienced in offline life. Findings for both GLBTQ and disabled participants showed similar rates of agreement in response to this topic.

Additionally, of all the initially recognized identity categories, those participants identifying as disabled appear to have the highest rates of agreement to statements regarding increased ego strength and self esteem through their activity on Myspace. Additionally, disabled persons were the most likely to believe that it is possible to make strong friendships with the people that they have met online regardless of whether or not they ever meet that person face to face. As disabled participants were more likely to be socially anxious in offline social environments, the data for online life suggests that they may be some of the most outgoing users in the network. This indicates that online social networks like Myspace may provide an excellent setting for disabled users to practice social skills that can be integrated into their offline lives as well. However, the risk remains that disabled individuals could just as likely be resistant to leaving the safety of perceived anonymity provided by the Internet which could further divide a split sense of self worth between online and offline perceptions of self.

Myspace.com appears to have created a unique environment that encourages participants of all backgrounds to register with the network for the purposes of seeking out new others and in building new relationships amongst its users. In addition, this network has clearly fostered a sense of community amongst its members and provides its members with a previously unimaginable number of ways in which they can search out others with similar interests to their own.

It does not appear as though online social networks like Myspace.com will simply be a passing trend as the registered number of users on Myspace alone has doubled in the last year from roughly 90,700,000 users in July 2006, to 187,019,422 in June 2007 (this number retrieved June 28, 2007). The longitudinal impact of Myspace will not be known for several years to come, although it would make sense that this network and networks like it, are providing some sort of emotional support to complement their offline lives.

Implications for Future Research

As research shows that oppression is experienced by stigmatized individuals in vastly different ways, further study of how online social networks like Myspace.com can positively impact psychological perceptions of self and others is needed to better understand how evolving technology could possibly nurture corrective experiences for false self living that often occurs for oppressed groups. As the design for Object Relations theory was constructed in a time when prejudicial notions of race, gender, sexual orientation and disability were cultural norms, it is the belief of this researcher that further knowledge of the effects of online social network for stigmatized individuals could be better attained through the use of more culturally relevant theoretical frameworks. It is also the belief of this researcher that longitudinal and mixed-method studies are needed in order to better understand the implications of extended online network use and qualitative understandings of how users more descriptively understand their experiences between offline and online life.

References

Abram, J. (1996). *The Language of Winnicott: A dictionary and guide to understanding his work.* Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson.

Amichai-Hamburger, Y., Wainapel, G., Fox, S. (2002). "On the Internet no one knows I'm an introvert": Extroversion, neuroticism, and Internet interaction. *Cyber Psychology & Behavior. 5*(2), 125-128.

Bargh, J. (2002). Beyond simple truths: The human-Internet interaction. *Journal of Social Issues. 58*(1), 1-8.

Bargh, J., McKenna, K. (2004). The Internet and social life. *Annual Review Psychology. 55*, 573-590

Bargh, J, McKenna, K, & Fitzsimons, G. (2002). Can you see the real me? Activation and expression of the "true self" on the Internet. *Journal of Social Issues. 5*(1), 33-48.

Baumeister, R.F. (1982). A self-presentational view of social phenomena. *Psychological Bulletin*, *91*, 3-26.

Berzoff, J., Flanagan, L., & Hertz, P. (1996). *Inside out and outside in*. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson.

Buchanan, T. (2000). Potential of the Internet for personality research. In M.H. Birnbaum (Ed.), *Psychological experiments on the Internet* (pp 121-140). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Cho, H., LaRose, R. (1999). Privacy issues in Internet surveys. *Social Science Computer Review. 17*(4), 421-434.

Elmers, N., Spears, R., Doosje, B. (2002). Self and social identity. *Annual Review of Psychology. 53*, 161-186.

Goldstein, E. (2001). *Object relations theory and self psychology in social work practice*. New York, New York: The Free Press.

Hogg, M., Terry, D, White, K. (1995). A tale of two theories: A critical comparison of identity theory with social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly. 58*(4), 255-269.

Joinson, A. (1999). Social desirability, anonymity, and Internet-based questionnaires. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers. 31*(3), 433-438.

Kang, J. (2000). Cyber-race. *Harvard Law Review*. 113: 1130-1208.

Kaye, B., Johnson, T. (1999). Research methodology: Taming the cyber frontier. *Social Science Computer Review*. *17*(3), 323-337.

Kim, W. (2006). Trends in the uses of the Internet – 2006. *Journal of Object Technology*. *5*(2), 55-69.

Kollock, P., Smith, M. (Eds.) (1999). Communities in cyberspace. London: Routledge.

Krantz, J., & Dalal, R. (2000). Validity of web-based psychological research. In M.H. Birnbaum (Ed.), *Psychological experiments on the Internet* (pp. 34-60). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Kraut, R., Patterson, M., Lundmark, V., Kiesler, S., Mukopadhyay, T., Scherlis, W. (1998). Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being? *American Psychologist. 53*(9) 1017-1031.

McKenna, K., Bargh, J. (1998). Coming out in the age of the Internet: Identity "demarginalization" through virtual group participation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 75*(3), 681-694.

McKenna, K., Bargh, J. (2000). Plan 9 from cyberspace: The implications of the Internet for personality and social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review. 4*(1), 57-75.

McKenna, K., Green, A., Gleason, M. (2002). Relationship formation on the Internet: What's the big attraction? *Journal of Social Issues, 58*(1), 9-31.

Manasian, D. (2003). Digital dilemmas: A survey of the Internet society. *Economist.* Jan. 25: 1-26

Musch, J., Reips, U. (2000). A brief history of web experimenting. In M.H. Birnbaum (Ed.), *Psychological experiments on the Internet* (pp. 61-88). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Phillips, A. (1988). *Winnicott.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Postmes, T., Spears, R., Lea, M. (2002). Intergroup differentiation in computer-mediated communication: Effects of depersonalization. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research and Practice, 6*(1), 3-16.

Smart, L., Wegner, D. (1999). Covering up what can't be seen: Concealable stigma and mental control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 77*(3), 474-486.

Spears, R., Lea, M. (1992). Social influence and the influence of the social in computer-mediated communication. In M. Lea (Ed.) *Contexts of computer-mediated Communication* (pp. 30-65). Hemel-Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Vazire, S., Gosling, S., (2004). e-Perceptions: Personality impressions based on personal websites. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*(1), 123-132.

Walther, J. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research, 23*(1), 3-43.

Wellman, B., Salaff, J., Dimitrova, D., Garton, L., Gulia, M., Haythornthwaite, C. (1996). Computer networks as social networks: Collaborative work, telework, and virtual community. *Annual Review of Sociology, 22,* 213-238.

Wellman, B. (2004). The three ages of Internet studies: Ten, five and zero years ago. *New Media & Society. 6*(1), 123-129.

Westen, D. (1991). Social cognition and object relations. *Psychological Bulletin. 109*(3), 429-455.

Williams, K., Cheung, C., Choi, W. (2000). Cyberostracism: Effects of being ignored over the Internet. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 79*(5), 748-762.

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Survey Title: Mythesis.com: A Look at Yourself Offline and On

Instructions: The following questions ask for information about your age, where you live, what type of area you live in, your relationship status, education, employment status and income level, and where it is that you typically log on from. Please answer these questions truthfully. If for any reason you are uncomfortable in answering a question you may skip it and proceed to the next question.

Age: Under 18, 18-21, 22-25, 26-30, 31-35, 36-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, 71+
 If response is "under 18" skip logic will forward the respondent to the end of the survey.

Location: 50 states (listed in a drop down menu), U.S. Territories, I do not live in the United States. (*If respondent answers that they do not live in the United States, or that they live in the U.S. Territories, skip logic will forward them to the end of the survey.*)

I live in a…: Urban/City, Suburb/Town, Rural/Country

I have lived in this area: Practically my whole life, Most of my life, I've moved around a little bit, I move quite often, I find myself moving from place to place all the time

Relationship Status: Single, In a relationship, Married, Partnered, Civil Union, Separated, Divorced, Widowed

Education: No high school, Some high school, High school diploma/GED, Some college, Associates Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Some graduate school, Master's degree, Some Post Master's work, Doctorate

Employment Status: Unemployed, Student, Part time, Full time, Retired, Contract,

Socio-Economic Status: Upper class, Upper middle class, Middle class, Lower middle class, Working class, Poverty, Homeless

Race/Ethnicity:

The following questions ask for information regarding your race/ethnicity. Along with knowing how you identify in terms of race/ethnicity, I am interested in what your experience has been in relation to this identity. Please answer these questions truthfully.

If for any reason you are uncomfortable in answering a question you may skip it and proceed to the next question.

Race/Ethnicity: White (Non Hispanic), African American, Native American/Alaskan Native/First Nations, Asian, Latino/a, Biracial/Multiracial, Middle Eastern, South Asian, Asian Pacific Islander, Other (please specify)

4 point rating scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree"

- o   I live in a community that supports my ethnic/cultural values
- o   I live in a community where I feel discriminated against and/or judged because of my race/ethnicity
- o   I feel embarrassed by my race/ethnicity
- o   Generally, my friends and loved ones are of the same race/ethnicity as myself
- o   I feel more comfortable around people who share my racial/ethnic identity

Does your race/ethnicity discourage you from participating in social activities or in trying to make new friends? Yes, No, Sometimes

Do you feel as though your race/ethnicity has negatively impacted your sense of self esteem?   Yes, No, Unsure

Gender and Sexual Orientation:

The following questions ask for information regarding your preferred gender identity and sexual orientation. Along with knowing how you identify in terms of your preferred gender identity and sexual orientation, I am interested in what your experience has been in relation to this identity. Please answer these questions truthfully. If for any reason you are uncomfortable in answering a question you may skip it and proceed to the next question.

Gender: Female, Male, Transgender, Gender Queer, Intersexed, Other (please specify)

4 point rating scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree"

- o   I have been discriminated against based on my gender
- o   I feel safe disclosing my gender to other people
- o   I feel embarrassed by my gender
- o   I feel supported by my community around issues related to my gender
- o   My friends and family are aware of my gender preference
- o   My friends and family are accepting of my gender preference

Does your gender preference discourage you from participating in social activities or in trying to make new friends? Yes, No, Sometimes

Do you feel as though your gender preference has negatively impacted your sense of self esteem?   Yes, No, Unsure

Sexual Orientation: Straight, Gay, Lesbian, Queer, Bisexual, Pansexual, Transexual, Questioning, Asexual, Other (please specify)

- o   I have been discriminated against based on my sexual orientation
- o   I feel safe disclosing my sexual orientation to other people
- o   I often find myself hiding my sexual orientation from other people who do not share this type of identity
- o   I have resources for support in my community around issues related to my sexual orientation
- o   My friends and family are aware of my sexual orientation
- o   My friends and family are accepting of my sexual orientation

Does your sexual orientation discourage you from participating in social activities or in trying to make new friends? Yes, No, Sometimes

Do you feel as though your sexual orientation has negatively impacted your sense of self esteem?   Yes, No, Unsure

Disability and/or Mobility:

The following questions ask for information regarding any disabilities and/or issues with mobility that you may have. Along with knowing how you identify in terms of disability and/or mobility, I am interested in what your experience has been in relation to this identity. Please answer these questions truthfully. If for any reason you are uncomfortable in answering a question you may skip it and proceed to the next question.

I have a disability: Yes, No
If respondent answers "no" to this question skip logic will be used to forward respondent to the next section of the survey

My disability is… (Please check all that apply): Physical, Mental, Emotional, All of the above

My disability/disabilities are… (Please check all that apply): Developmental (Ex: ADHD, Dyslexia), Acquired (Ex: HIV+/AIDS, Multiple Sclerosis), I was born with my disability, I'm not sure how to categorize my disability

Does your disability impair your ability for independent mobility?   Yes, No

Mobility (Please check all that apply): Wheel chair bound, Reliant on special assistance (such as a nurse or other caregiver), Not reliant on special assistance, Homebound due to medical problems, Homebound due to a mental health or emotional disorder

Would you consider your disability to be concealable?   Yes, No

Are you embarrassed by this disability?   Yes, No

Do you feel supported by the people in your every day life around issues related to your disability?   Yes, No

Does your disability discourage you from participating in social activities or in trying to make new friends? Yes, No, Sometimes

Do you feel as though your disability has negatively impacted your sense of self esteem? Yes, No, Unsure

Growing Up…

The following statements ask for information regarding your experiences growing up. Please use the 4 pt. rating scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree," when responding to these statements. Please answer truthfully. If for any reason you are uncomfortable in responding to a particular statement you may skip it and proceed to the next statement.

4 point scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree"

- o Growing up I felt loved and taken care of by my parents/family/caregivers
- o Growing up I felt safe being whoever I wanted to be
- o Growing up I felt encouraged to try new things and experiences
- o I feel like my family accepts me for everything that I am
- o There is much about me that I purposely do not tell my family
- o I would say that I had a happy childhood
- o I would say that I feel like nothing I ever do is good enough for my family
- o I often criticize myself for not meeting the expectations set for me by my family
- o I would say that I have a close relationship with my mother (or whoever was most responsible for taking care of you when you were growing up)
- o Growing up I was referred to as a "problem child"
- o Growing up I felt like I had to take care of my own needs because my parents/caregivers did not

106

My Offline Life:

The following statements ask for information regarding your current experiences in your life "offline." Please use the 4 pt. rating scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree," when responding to these statements. Please answer truthfully. If for any reason you are uncomfortable in responding to a particular statement you may skip it and proceed to the next statement.

4 point rating scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree"

- o I consider myself to be an outgoing person
- o I am able to deal with my anxiety easily
- o Rejection can be hard but I am able to deal with it fairly easily
- o I am easily embarrassed
- o It's difficult for me to talk to people face to face
- o I often feel lonely
- o I tend to get my feelings hurt because I trust people too much
- o I consciously isolate myself from other people
- o I would say that I have good self esteem
- o It's easy for me to trust people offline
- o There are things about me that I know my offline friends and family would not accept if they knew about them
- o It is easy for me to meet new people offline
- o I find it difficult to find people like me offline
- o There are things about me that I don't feel comfortable sharing with the people I know offline
- o I always feel like people are judging me negatively in my offline life
- o I am generally a happy person in my offline life
- o I often feel trapped in my offline life
- o I'm a pretty self critical person. I put myself down a lot.
- o I feel like other people are constantly criticizing me.
- o I am able to accept criticism from someone without resenting them for giving it to me.
- o I feel as though I live a meaningful life.
- o I feel the need to conform to what is expected of me by society.
- o Sometimes I feel like I live a double life. One side of me does what is expected of me and the other lives life only for me.
- o I care about what other people think of me.
- o The higher other people think about me, the higher I think about myself.
- o I like being in control of the people around me. As long as I'm in control the world is a better place.
- o The world is pretty much black and white. Either people are good or they are bad. End of story.

- o I'm a big fan of denial. If I don't think about it then as far as I'm concerned it doesn't exist.
- o I tend to idolize people who I believe are most like me.

How deep does your Myspace love run?

The following questions ask for information in regards to your online activity with the Myspace website. Please answer truthfully. If for any reason you are uncomfortable in responding to a particular statement you may skip it and proceed to the next statement.

Is your Myspace profile set to: Public, Private

I use my real name on Myspace: Yes, No, Sometimes

I go to great lengths to hide my identity online: Yes, No, Sometimes

I post images of… (check all that apply):   Myself, My friends, Other images that have nothing to do with my personal appearance, I have not posted any images on my profile

I share details about myself on my profile that include; race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, relationship status, etc.:   Yes, No

How long have you been a Myspace member? 3 years, 2 years, 1 year, Less that 1 year, A couple of months, I just joined

How often do you log on? Once a day, A couple of times a day, Once a week, A couple of times a week, Once a month, Hardly ever

I use Myspace for (check all that apply):   Making new friends, Finding Activity Partners, Keeping in touch with old friends, Dating, To find a serious relationship, Networking, To promote my music, Other (please specify)

How many Myspace friends do you have (please check the number closest to the number of friends that you have online)? 0, Less than 10, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100, 110, 120, 130, 140, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, 210, 220, 230, 240, 250, 260, 270, 280, 290, 300, 310,320, 330, 340, 350, 360, 370, 380, 390, 400, 410, 420, 430, 440, 450, 460, 470, 480, 490, 500, 510, 520, 530, 540, 550, 560, 570, 580, 590, 600, 610, 620, 630, 640, 650, 660, 670, 680, 690, 700, 710, 720, 730, 740, 750, 760, 770, 780, 790, 800, 810, 820, 830, 840, 850, 860, 870, 880, 890, 900, 910, 920, 930, 940, 950, 960, 970, 980, 990, 1000, If you have more than 1000 friends please specify approximately how many friends you have in the space provided ____

I accept friend requests from: Only people that I know offline, I'll accept requests from people that I don't know as long as I like what they seem like on their profile, I'll accept anyone as my friend

I request other people to be my friend: Only if I know them offline as well, If I think that they seem like someone that I could be friends with, If they're hot, I request anyone and everyone to be my friend

How many Myspace profiles do you have? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, More than 10

If you have more than one profile on Myspace is one or more of them a profile(s) that you do not share with your offline family and friends?   Yes, No

Do you belong to any Myspace Groups?   Yes, No
If the answer to this question is "no" then skip logic will forward the respondent to the next set of questions

How many Myspace groups so you belong to?   0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, Other (please specify)

Is it difficult to find these types of group(s) offline?   Yes, No

My online life….

The following statements ask for information regarding your current experiences in your "online" life. Please use the 4 pt. rating scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree," when responding to these statements. Please answer truthfully. If for any reason you are uncomfortable in responding to a particular statement you may skip it and proceed to the next statement.

Rating Scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree

- o I admit... not all of the information I've posted about me is completely truthful. I guess you could say that it is an ideal version of who I am.
- o I am the same person online and off
- o My online profile is so different from who I am offline it's like I'm leading two different lives
- o My Myspace profile gives me a feeling of control over how other people are able to see me.
- o I am proud of who I am and believe that I have a good sense of self esteem
- o I care a great deal about what other people think of me based on my online profile.
- o It's easier not to care about what other people think of me based on my online profile because I'm probably never going to meet them in real life anyway.

- o It's easier for me to be who I am on the inside when people can't see what I look like on the outside.
- o It's easier for me to trust people online then offline
- o I reveal more personal information about myself online then off
- o My friends and family would be surprised by some of the stuff that I say about myself online
- o My friends and family would agree that I'm the same person online that I am offline
- o I generally believe that people put accurate information on their Myspace profile
- o Nobody is completely truthful online
- o I am hesitant to include too much information on my profile that describes what I look like because I'm afraid that people may not like me
- o I believe that it is totally possible to make strong friendships online even if you never get to meet that person offline
- o I frequently check to see how many people have viewed my profile
- o The more my profile is viewed the better I feel about myself.
- o It's a boost to my self esteem when I receive new profile comments from my friends
- o It is hurtful to me when people don't respond to my comments or bulletins
- o It is hurtful to me when people neglect to leave me a comment after I have them left them a comment
- o I am satisfied with the number of friends that I have online
- o It is my goal to have as many friends as possible on my Myspace profile, even if I don't know them all
- o I find it hurtful when people delete me as one of their Myspace friends
- o It makes me feel good when someone has listed me on their "Top 8"
- o Since joining Myspace I have noticed that I feel better about myself as a person
- o It is perfectly acceptable to delete one of your Myspace friends if they piss you off
- o I would totally block someone from my profile if they got me mad enough
- o Myspace is an excellent way to check up on (i.e. "stalk") girlfriends/boyfriends
- o Figuring out who to put on my "Top 8" is a difficult decision because I don't want to hurt any of my friends feelings
- o I don't really think that there is a big difference between online life and offline life

I would categorize Myspace as: Fantasy, Reality, A combination of both

Time to tell the truth, the information I provided in this survey is: The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, Mostly true, Kinda true, I may have lied a lot taking this survey

The End

Thank you for your participation in this survey. Your responses are greatly appreciated.

Please feel free to keep up with the progress of this study by adding me as a friend or just checking back to see what I've posted on my blog.

If you were redirected to this page prior to participating in this survey it is because you do not meet the criteria that I am looking for at this time, but I appreciate your interest in my study.

Appendix B

<u>Recruitment Posting</u>

Subject Heading: Do you love to Myspace? Research Participants Wanted

Message Posting:

Do you love to Myspace? Then you may be interested in participating in a research study, "Mythesis.com: A Look at Yourself Offline and On," that I am conducting that looks at the ways in which websites like Myspace.com influence how people perceive themselves and others, based on their life experiences and online personal profiles.

To participate in this study you must be over the age of 18, live in the United States and be an active Myspace user. As a participant in this study you will be asked to complete an online survey about your Myspace experience. This survey should take about 10-20 minutes to complete.

If you are interested in being a part of this important study or are interested in reading further information about this study, please click on the following link which will take you to the Mythesis.com profile. From there you will find further details about this study, as well as the link to the survey.

　　　http://www.myspace.com/mythesisdotcom

This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work.

Appendix C

Resources for Support

If you are in need of therapeutic services you may refer to these national hotline resources for help in this matter:

Help Finding a Therapist
1-800-THERAPIST (1-800-843-7274)

Mental Health InfoSource
1-800-447-4474

National Institute of Mental Health
1-888-ANXIETY (1-888-269-4389)

National Mental Health Association
1-800-969-6642

Gay & Lesbian National Hotline
1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

Appendix D

HSR Approval Letter

April 4, 2007

Katherine Sapp
5457 Kinston Avenue
Culver City, CA 90230

Dear Katherine,

Your second set of revisions has been reviewed and the revisions we suggested have been made. We have one problem with her questionnaire. You repeat as you introduce every section of the questionnaire "Please answer truthfully". This admonishment is a little insulting, assuming they have to be told to be truthful. It also won't do any good. People will answer as they answer, no matter what you say, and if some smart aleck wants to give false answers, he or she will do so anyway. Please delete that request from your questionnaire. You need not send everything back. Just send the corrected questionnaire to Laurie Wyman.

Assuming you will make this revision in the questionnaire, we are able to now give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Holly Simons, Research Advisor

Appendix E

Informed Consent

Investigator Name: Katherine Sapp
Advisor Name: Holly Simons
Project Title: Mythesis.com: The irony of technology. An object relational approach to understanding the interplay of identity construction and emergence of the "true self" through the privilege of anonymity on the internet.

Thank you for visiting this survey. I am conducting a research study that looks at the ways in which websites like Myspace.com influence how people perceive themselves and others, based on their personal profiles. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the thesis requirements for the Master of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work, and may be eligible for public presentation and possible publication.

As a participant in this study you will be asked to complete an online survey about your Myspace experience. This survey should take about 10-20 minutes to complete. This survey is composed of several topic areas that begin with questions regarding identity information, and moves on to ask questions about your past and current experiences in your offline and online lives. While taking this survey you are free to skip any of the questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

To participate in this study you must be over the age of 18, live in the United States and be an active Myspace user.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no cost to taking this survey and you will receive no financial benefit for your participation in this study. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to withdraw, all data describing you will be immediately destroyed. However, once you have completed this survey any information that you have provided will not be able to be deleted, because individual information will not be able to be located due to the anonymous nature of this study.

Strict confidentiality in this study will be maintained as consistent with Federal regulations and the mandates of the social work profession. Your identity will be protected, as this online survey does not ask you to disclose your full name or contact information. Confidentiality will further be protected by coding the information and storing the data in a locked file for a minimum of 3 years. The data may be used in other education activities as well as in the preparation for my Master's thesis. The results of this survey will be available in the summer of 2007 via the Smith College Main (Neilson) Library, Northampton, MA.

If you would like to continue with this survey please press the "I ACCEPT" button located beneath this notice. By pressing "I ACCEPT" you will be certifying that you are at least 18 years of age and meet the other requested criteria outlined above.

Thank you for your participation in this survey.