Online Self and Discrepancy: Who We Are Online, Offline, and Hoping To Be

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Abstrak


Kata kunci: Online and online self, identitas, ideal self.

Background

As technology has become more and more important in our lives, it affects how individuals interact with one another. The development of telecommunication shortens the interactive distance between people from other regions [Dede, 1990]. For example, at the old time, it would have taken so many effort just to stay in contact from other city; now, not only people from other cities, individuals can intensively communicate with others from other countries. This convenience is a luxury that the previous eras did not have. However, as time goes, this luxury evolves into a necessity.

The significance of telecommunication technology, as it is so needed by modern society, has diversified and grown in complexions [Sreberny, 2006; Pye, 2015]. It evolves from mail to email and SMS, from telephone to video-call. The hardware and software involved are also more sophisticated. However, from all the transformations there were, the most important one lays in the utility of those medias that each targeted different kind of needs [Van Dijck, 2013]. In this case, the purpose of using phone-call is different than the purpose of using SMS or emails, different from playing online games, and it will also differ from the use of social media such Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LINE, etc.

Although utility speaking, online games and social media aren’t essential or urgent for human life, the demand for social media has never been higher [Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Hanna et al, 2011]. The high demand of game for
pleasure and enjoyment is quite different from social media; that is said to emerge from individuals' basic need to connect with other people, both for social and power motive. At the same time, this high demand also causes competition between the games and social medias themselves. In this case, to survive in the market, each of those many games and social medias has to offer some sort of competitive advantages that make them unique and more appealing to the users. Hence, at the end of the day, these differences cause users to need more than one of them. For example, one can need Instagram for sharing their pictures, Twitters for sharing their thoughts, and Tinder to find dates.

At a glance, this cyber technology seems like a good deal. However, many believe that isn’t the case [Noam, 2005; Wainer et al, 2008]. First, the more games and social medias one individual needs would mean that he/she spends more time online to attend them all. When that happens, individual faces the possibility of them neglecting the more important things in their daily life, such school. This happens in many cases where students spend so much time playing online game that they skip schools [Chappell et al, 2006; Rehbijn & Mößle, 2013]. And even though they do not skip schools, social media can cost students their study and homework time, which means, lower academic performance.

The second problem lays in the lenience and anonymity the cyber technology offers. Unlike the real world that is limited by space and time, the cyber world (online) is fast growing and seems unlimited. Cyber world isn’t as controlled and supervised as the real world. And one of the most important aspects of cyber world is that although one can be there, one isn’t really there. It is really possible for individuals to remain anonymous in the cyber world, and as easy as they can remain anonymous, they can also become someone else.

Anonymity is a problem on its own. For example, Zimbardo’s experiments [1969] proved that when individuals remain anonymous, or when they are using another identity that isn’t their own; they can be aggressive. In this case, these individuals would sense some security over the consequences of their actions. In the cyber world, this can causes cyber-bullying that will affect not only the online-self of their victims, but also the real world selves.

As stated before, along with anonymity, people online can pretend to be whoever they want to be. The same sense of security and comfort seem to push people to behave as they please. Of course, this isn’t necessarily a problem, because self-expression is actually needed by individuals in their identity making. However, when this goes too far, or too different from oneself in the real world where they actually live and interact, individuals may be facing an identity conflict. And this conflict caused by that discrepancy can affect one’s wellness, especially, when one of those is significantly more similar to the person they want to be. Hence, the main hypothesis is that the online self can be different from the offline self.

The second hypothesis is whether one of the selves is more preferable to individuals. Because, if the online and offline self are too different, and the offline self of them is more similar to the ideal self, one will have to make a decision. At one side, one can be more like their online-self in the real world; at the other side, one can choose to be more alive in the cyber world. If individuals choose the later, it could suggest that they would tend to withdraw themselves from more and more real social activity [Kraut et al, 1998; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010]. That, again, will cost them their real social skills, time, and real life opportunity to be a better individual. In another word, these individuals can be poorly adjusted in their real world. Given that, the next question to
be answered from this study is that why individuals need to have two different selves.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The participants of this study are student adolescents. The total valid participant for this study is $N = 87$, $\bar{x} = 18.06$ years old, and $SD = 2.41$. Most of the participants are from an online community.

**Design and Measures**

The design of this study is quantitative survey. The data gathering process were done using online questionnaires. The main information assessed by the questionnaires were their ideal self, online-self, and real or offline-self. The construct used to assess these selves is based on Big-5 personality inventory [McCrae & Costa, 1997; Gosling et al, 2003]. For example, in ideal self, participants were asked how much would they like to be adventurous. Then compared to how they love to try new online trends and how daring they are in real life. Additional information asked to the participants is their perception toward both the cyber (online) world and their real (offline) world, what they think of social media and cyber world, and how much time they spend and activity they do online. This includes, which world they feel more comfortable with, whether social medias are important, and why they spend that much time online. All the questions were asked in 6-degrees Likert’s scale.

**Procedure**

The data gathering was done by random sampling. The link of the online questionnaires was sent to multiple online groups and data gathering period were open for 3days. The average time needed to finish the questionnaire is 10-15minutes.

**Result**

The majority of the participants, or 63.2%, spend over six hours a day online. The total of 21.8% spend around 3-6 hours a day online, 13.8% spend around 1-3 hours a day online, and 1.1 spend less than 1 hour a day. The participants are mostly students, both high school and college, however, there were no significant difference between the two groups regarding the time they spent online. Consistent with the time they spent online, the participants’ attitudes were also positive toward social media and online games. That is $\bar{x} = 4.0, sd = 0.8$, from 1—6 for unfavourable (wasting time, bothering, boring) to favourable (fun, entertaining, important).

Regarding their perception toward online and offline world, participants tend to slightly prefer the online to the offline world. In general from ranged from 1—6 for offline and online; $\bar{x} = 3.49, sd = 1.22$. Participants most significantly feel that the online world provides more freedom of opinion, self-expression, and acceptance; which scored $\bar{x} = 4.03, sd = 1.77$; $\bar{x} = 3.71, sd = 1.81$; $\bar{x} = 3.64, sd = 1.66$ respectively.
However, they also feel that the quality of friendship is perceived better in offline world, $\bar{x} = 2.95$, $sd = 1.78$.

Participants were also asked if they think their online selves differ from the real/offline self. The $\bar{x} = 3.54$, $sd = 1.74$, they admitted that they behave quite differently online and offline. Their online selves are seen as the slightly preferable self, with $\bar{x} = 3.33$, $sd = 1.86$.

 Concerning the real differences between the ideal self and real online-offline self, the comparison is listed as the table below [table 1]. As stated previously, this study uses the Big-5 model to assess the how participants see themselves, in real life, online, and ideally. Wilcoxon Singed Rank Test was done and it is concluded that the differences are significant between the offline and online self, except for one dimension, the openness to experience ($\alpha = 5\%$). The online self and ideal self are also significantly different except for agreeableness and reversed neuroticism dimensions. Between offline self and the ideal self the differences are significant for all dimensions of Big-5. These results validate the main hypothesis, that the offline and online self will differ with each other ($p < 0.05$).

These results are also supported by the Spearman Rho correlation between each of the Big-5 dimensions between the offline and online self. The only significant correlation was found in the extraversion dimension ($Rho = 0.224$, $p = 0.037$). It suggests that the more extroverted individuals in real life, they would be in the cyber too.

The different degrees of Big-5 dimensions are summarized as seen in table 2.

For the second hypothesis, stating that one of either online or offline selves will be more similar to ideal self. This would be answered from the following table (Table 3).

This table shows that overall, the offline self has no significant correlation with the ideal self except from the openness to experience dimension. However, the online self’s Big-5 dimensions have significant correlations with those of ideal self; except from the reversed neuroticism dimension which insignificantly correlated, and consciousness dimension which significantly correlated negatively. This means, except for the consciousness and reversed neuroticism dimension, the ideal self tends to be more similar with the online self.

**Discussion**

Based on the results shown in the previous section, although it’s not from all the dimensions, it is conclusive that the online self is different than the offline self. To be more specific, the participants’ online self is more conscious than the offline self. Which means, the online self is shown to be someone who is more discipline, obedience, and driven. The participants are also more agreeable online than offline. From the extroverted and reversed neuroticism dimensions, the offline self is shown to score higher. Which means, the offline self is more extroverted and emotionally stable compared to the online self.

At some point, these results seem to be counter-intuitive. Generally, it would be easier to assume that individuals tend to lack discipline nor ambitions while they would like to argue and behave negatively toward other people online. However, as often as we found those arguments, most people don’t argue online. In media socials, for example, most it is more often
to find post with so many likes and positive comments than negative disproving ones. Why would that happen?

The explanation lays with the nature of the cyber technology itself. In social media, games, or sites like YouTube, when individuals disagree or dislike something, they could just ignore it. Hence, when individuals can choose what to see or do online, they would have fewer disagreements because there’s nothing to disagree to begin with. At the same time, individuals’ need for likes or hearts online can be a symptom of their consciousness. In this case, what they do would be thoughtful to that need.

These differences tend to happen because of the anonymity the cyber technology provides. Individuals would always have some sort of ideal image they want to be. This ideal self is important because it will act as guidance toward individuals behaviour. In another words, this ideal self will help individuals shape their real self. However, given a condition such cyber technology in which they can be anonymous, individual can easily pretend to be that ideal-self without having to put an effort for it. And because individuals feel secure and comfortable to be whoever they want, they can act appropriately according to their ideal self, and that would explain why the online self tend to be more similar to ideal-self and preferable.

Given the previous result and supported by the time individuals spend online; it seems to lead to a more pressing matter. Just like explained in the early part of this paper, this condition is crucial because most of the participants spend the same amount of time to be online as they do school, or even more. In this case, if it continues to go on at this rate, individuals’ wellness will be in jeopardy.

In conclusion, it is definitive that both online and offline self are different with the tendency that online self is more similar to the ideal self. It will make it harder for individuals to distance themselves from the excessive use of cyber technology. The future research is hoped to elaborate this more empirically includes assessing the risk and side-effect of it.

References


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