PRESENTING THE SELF IN CYBERSPACE: IDENTITY PLAY IN MOOS

Andrea Chester

Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January, 2004

Department of Psychology
The University of Melbourne
Abstract

The use of the Internet has increased exponentially over the last decade. Individuals across all continents are progressively engaging in cyberspace interactions at work, in education, and for leisure. These online interactions, unconstrained by the limitations of corporeal reality, offer the potential for unique presentations of the self. The general aim of the research described in this thesis was to examine self-presentation in cyberspace. The research focused on MOOs, multi-user, text-based, user-extensible online environments, as a likely site for identity experimentation and play in cyberspace. Two studies are described. In the first quantitative study, 75 university students logged on to the front page of a social MOO where they selected a screen name, chose their gender, and provided a character description. As hypothesised, self-presentations were more likely to be based on actual identity rather than hoped for or feared selves. Contrary to expectation, little evidence was found of gender play. Self-presentations were typically positively biased and results suggested that players also perceived themselves more positively in the online context. Although sex and age were generally unrelated to self-presentation strategies, previous online experience, ethnicity, and personality profiles helped to explain self-presentation behaviour. A qualitative study of a further 20 students in an educational MOO explored players’ understanding of their initial self-presentation choices and their management of these self-presentations over a 12-week period. Findings from the second study were consistent with the results from the first quantitative study and confirmed a strong desire for authentic self-presentation. Despite this emphasis on authenticity, the intention to play with identity was manifest in the form of selective self-disclosure, fantasy play, and exaggeration of traits. Participants also reported behaving in less inhibited
ways online. A low incidence of gender play was noted. The overt identity play assumed by the cyberspace literature was not found in either study. Rather self-presentation in the online context appears to be governed by essentially similar processes to those that shape self-presentation in the offline world. The implications of the findings for teaching and learning, particularly for educators who want to use MOOs for identity experimentation, are discussed.
This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies, and appendices.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am especially grateful to my supervisor Di Bretherton for her tireless encouragement, wisdom, breadth of experience, and collegial spirit. My sincere thanks also to Rob Hall whose experience and skills in statistical analysis, data visualisation, and all-round support were always offered promptly with unsurpassed warmth, humour, boundless enthusiasm, and generosity. Without these two people I am certain this thesis would never have been written.

I am grateful to the Psychology and Disability Department at RMIT University who provided me with study leave to complete this thesis. I am especially grateful to Gillian Gwynne, with whom I developed and taught the course on which this thesis was based and Mex Butler who introduced me, with her contagious enthusiasm and impressive technical knowledge, to the delights of MOOing. My thanks also to Yoshimasa Awaji, who generously allows us to use his MOO for our teaching.

I owe much to the students whose stories are contained in this thesis and to all the students with whom I have explored cyberspace.

Thanks finally to my family and friends for their support, patience, and many hours of unpaid babysitting. I am especially grateful to James who unselfishly put his own writing on hold for many years so I could work on this research. And to my children who have only ever known me as a mummy who was “working on her fesis”. I look forward now to having a little more time to play...
# Table of Contents

Abstract i
Declaration iii
Acknowledgements iv
Table of Contents v
List of Tables xi
List of Figures xii

**Forward** 1

**Chapter 1. Self-presentation theory** 4
1.1 Beginning the research: Searching for a theory 4
1.2 Self-presentation, Goffman, and the dramaturgical approach 6
   1.2.1 Giving and giving off information 6
   1.2.2 Front of stage and backstage regions 7
1.3 Psychological perspectives 9
1.4 Self-presentation: Measurement and theory 10
   1.4.1 Impression monitoring 12
   1.4.2 Impression motivation 14
   1.4.3 Impression construction 16
      1.4.3.1 Self-concept, self-disclosure, and deceptive self-presentations 16
      1.4.3.2 Desired and undesired identity images 23
      1.4.3.3 Target values, norms and roles 27
1.5 Postmodernism and self-presentation 31

**Chapter 2. Identity play** 36
2.1 What is play? 36
2.2 Pretend play in childhood 37
2.3 The therapeutic nature of play and the playful nature of therapy 40
2.4 Identity experimentation in adolescence 41
   2.4.1 Erikson’s psychosocial moratorium 42
      2.4.1.1 Public identity play and signification 43
      2.4.1.2 Negative identity play 43
2.4.2 Marcia’s identity statuses 45
2.5 Flow and deep play 48

**Chapter 3. Cyberspace** 51
3.1 Definitions 51
   3.1.1 Cyberspace and the Internet 51
   3.1.2 Internet usage 53
3.1.3 Terminology: “real” versus “virtual” 54
3.2 Forms of CMC: Interaction spaces within cyberspace
  3.2.1 Homepages and weblogs 55
  3.2.2 Email 56
  3.2.3 Newsgroups 58
  3.2.4 Chat 58
  3.2.5 MUDs and MOOs 60
3.3 The characteristics of CMC
  3.3.1 Telepresence 65
  3.3.2 Temporality 68
  3.3.3 Anonymity 69
  3.3.4 Ephemerality 70
3.5 Social psychological theories of online behaviour
  3.5.1 Cues filtered out approaches to CMC
    3.5.1.1 Social presence theory 72
    3.5.1.2 Reduced social cues theory 74
    3.5.1.3 The social information processing model 76
  3.5.2 The social identity explanation of deindividuation effects (SIDE) 78

Chapter 4. Self-presentation in cyberspace 80
4.1 Self-presentation online: Anecdotal evidence 80
4.2 Self-presentation in Internet interaction spaces 82
  4.2.1 Homepages and weblogs 82
  4.2.2 Email 86
  4.2.3 Newsgroups 88
  4.3.4 Chat 92
    4.3.4.1 Screen names 93
    4.3.4.2 Character descriptions and gender choice 97
    4.3.4.3 Negotiating a disembodied identity online and playing
    with possible selves 98
    4.3.4.4 Presenting the “true” self 100
    4.3.4.5 Deceptive self-presentations 101

Chapter 5. Researching identity play in MOOs 104
5.1 The demographics of MOO users 105
5.2 MOOs as identity laboratories 105
5.3 The metaphor of play in MOOs 107
5.4 Desired identity images: wish fulfilment in MOOs 111
5.5 Undesired identity images: Acting out the feared self 114
5.6 Personality and identity play 115
5.7 CMC experience and identity play 115
5.8 Distributed and multiple identities 116
5.9 Online gender play 118
  5.9.1 Communicating gender online 119
5.9.2 Motivation for gender swapping
5.9.3 Effects of gender swapping
5.9.4 Prevalence of gender swapping in MOOs
5.9.5 Attitudes towards gender swapping
5.9.6 Online gender swapping and gender identity
5.10 The relationship between the player and the character
5.11 Researching MOOs
  5.11.1 Ethical issues
  5.11.2 Validity of data collected online
  5.11.3 Research methodologies

Chapter 6. Study One: Quantitative

6.1 Rationale
  6.1.1 Summary of hypotheses and research questions
6.2 Method
  6.2.1 Participants
  6.2.2 Measures
    6.2.2.1 Offline identity
    6.2.2.2 Desired and undesired identity images
    6.2.2.3 Offline semantic differential
    6.2.2.4 Gender Identity
    6.2.2.5 Personality traits
    6.2.2.6 MOO self-presentation measures
  6.2.3 Procedure
    6.2.3.1 Procedure for MOO constructs
  6.2.4 Methodology
  6.2.5 Data coding and analysis
    6.2.5.1 Presentation of offline identity in the MOO description
    6.2.5.2 Content analysis of SST and virtual character descriptions
    6.2.5.3 Significance testing and effect size
6.3 Results
  6.3.1 Demographics
    6.3.1.1 Response rates: A comparison of completers and non-completers
    6.3.1.2 Representativeness of the sample
    6.3.1.3 CMC experience
    6.3.1.4 Gender identity
    6.3.1.5 Personality
  6.3.2 Online and offline identity: Analysis of the semantic space
  6.3.3 The screen names
  6.3.4 Presenting the self online: Quantitative analysis
    6.3.4.1 Self-concept, desired identities, and undesired
identities online 179
6.3.4.2 Importance and desirability of SST items online 182
6.3.5 Presenting the self online: Content analysis 184
  6.3.5.1 Gender choice 184
  6.3.5.2 Comparison of SST items and MOO descriptions.
      6.3.5.2.1 The physical self 189
      6.3.5.2.2 The social self 191
      6.3.5.2.3 The reflective self 192
  6.3.5.3 Comparison of desired identity images and MOO
descriptions 197
  6.3.5.4 The ideal MOO impression 198
6.3.6 Playful responses 201
6.3.7 Identity clusters revisited 203
6.4 Discussion 204
  6.4.1 Pseudonymity: The screen name as self-presentation 206
  6.4.2 Presenting the self-concept: Revealing and concealing
      identity online 209
      6.4.2.1 The physical self: Age, sex and appearance online 211
      6.4.2.2 The social self: Social identity online 214
      6.4.2.3 The reflective self: Personality and cognitive
      attributes online 214
      6.4.2.4 Self-presentation strategies 216
  6.4.3 Presenting the ideal self 219
  6.4.4 Becoming the ideal self 222
  6.4.5 The undesired self 223
  6.4.6 Online gender swapping 224
  6.4.7 The effect of personality on self-presentation 226
  6.4.8 The effect of CMC experience on self-presentation online 228
  6.4.9 Offline and online selves: The same or separate? 229
  6.4.10 Generalisability and limitations of the study 230
      6.4.10.1 Sample representativeness 230
      6.4.10.2 Demand characteristics 232

Chapter 7. Study Two: Qualitative 235
7.1 Rationale 235
  7.1.1 Educational MOOs 236
  7.1.2 Identity play in educational MOOs 239
  7.1.3 Ethical considerations 241
7.2 Method 242
  7.2.1 Participants 242
  7.2.2 Data 243
  7.2.3 Procedure 244
  7.2.4 The course 245
7.2.5 The MOO

7.3 Results

7.3.1 Analysis process

7.3.2 Demographic data

7.3.2.1 Previous CMC and MOO experience

7.3.2.2 Participation in the group: Time spent in the MOO

7.3.3 Choosing a screen name

7.3.3.1 Using existing screen names

7.3.3.2 Adapting offline nicknames

7.3.3.3 Creating new screen names

7.3.4 Constructing an online identity

7.3.4.1 The real me

7.3.4.2 The ideal me

7.3.4.3 The exaggerated me

7.3.4.4 The concealed me

7.3.4.5 The fantastical and unique me

7.3.4.6 Conceptualisation of online identity

7.3.5 Online identity attributes

7.3.5.1 Physical appearance

7.3.5.2 Gender

7.3.5.3 Age

7.3.5.4 Ethnicity

7.3.6 The dorm room as self-presentation

7.3.7 Playing it out

7.3.7.1 Self-presentation in the MOO

7.3.7.2 Signification

7.3.7.3 Emotional responses

7.3.7.4 Relationships with other players

7.3.8 Reflections on the self-presentation process

7.4 Discussion

7.4.1 Choosing a screen name

7.4.2 The development and presentation of the MOO character

7.4.3 The relationship between on and offline selves

7.4.4 Signification and the face-to-face meeting

7.4.5 Limitations of the study
7.4.5.1 Using assessable material as research data 328
7.4.5.2 Improving the quality of data 329

Chapter 8. General discussion 332
8.1 What is identity play in cyberspace? 334
  8.1.1 Screen names and identity play 334
  8.1.2 Gender choice and identity play 335
  8.1.3 Character descriptions and identity play 336
    8.1.3.1 Authentic self-presentation 336
    8.1.3.2 Playful self-presentation 337
  8.1.4 Room descriptions and identity play 340
  8.1.5 Predicting play 341
  8.1.6 Self-descriptions as performance 343
8.2 Self-presentation and postmodernism: A return to the essentialist self 344
8.3 Educational implications 348
8.4 Limitations and directions for future research 350
  8.4.1 Generalisability 350
  8.4.2 Future research 353
    8.4.2.1 Self-monitoring 353
    8.4.2.2 Self-presentational norms 355
    8.4.2.3 Self-presentation and impression formation 355
    8.4.2.4 The therapeutic potential of life on the screen 356
    8.4.2.5 Doing MOO research: Methodological considerations 358
8.5 Concluding comments 359

References 363

Appendices
Appendix A: The Identity Questionnaire A-1
Appendix B: Study 1 - Plain language statement and consent form A-8
Appendix C: Identity coding manual A-12
Appendix D: Study 2 - Plain language statement and consent form A-15
Appendix E: QSR N6 Index tree A-18
### LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1.1</td>
<td>Stages and Sub-Component Processes of Self-Presentation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.1</td>
<td>Defining Criteria of Marcia’s Ego Identity Statuses</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1</td>
<td>Distinguishing Characteristics of the Major CMC Interaction Spaces</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>Bechar-Israeli’s (1996) Classification of Screen Names in IRC (N = 231)</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.1</td>
<td>Character Genders Available on LambdaMOO</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.1</td>
<td>Summary of Variables and Measures</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.2</td>
<td>Inter-Rater Agreement for Judgement of Consistency between SST and MOO Description</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.3</td>
<td>Mean and Minimal Levels of Experience for each Online Domain (N = 74)</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.4</td>
<td>NEO Sub-Scale Scores for the Present Sample (N = 75) Compared with Norms</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.5</td>
<td>Results of t-Tests Comparing Offline and Online Semantic Differential Ratings</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.6</td>
<td>Participant Characteristics on Demographic and Personality Variables by Cluster</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.7</td>
<td>Percentage of Participants Using each Screen Name Category (N = 75)</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.8</td>
<td>Means and Standard Deviations of Importance Ratings Associated with each Self-Statement Test Item Number (N = 75)</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.9</td>
<td>Summary of Empirically Supported Relationships between Independent and Dependent Variables</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.10</td>
<td>Mean Number of Identity Sub-categories Presented in SST and MOO Descriptions</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.11</td>
<td>Percentage of Participants Who Referred to Reflective Sub-categories at Least Once in MOO Description (N = 75)</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.12</td>
<td>Percentage of Participants Who Referred to Identity Sub-categories at Least Once in MOO Description and Ideal MOO Impression (N = 70)</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.13</td>
<td>Comparison of Screen Name Categories Used in the MOO and IRC Studies</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.1</td>
<td>Program and Examples of Activities for Synchronous MOO Meetings</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.2</td>
<td>Participant Demographics</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**LIST OF FIGURES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>A visual model of the relationships between independent and dependent variables in Study One.</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>CMC synchronous experience as a function of offline sex.</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Percentage of female and male participants in each ASRS sex role category.</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>MDS configuration of offline semantic differential.</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>MDS configuration of online semantic differential.</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Dendogram for hierarchical cluster and analysis of participants on offline semantic differential responses using Ward’s method.</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Boxplots of semantic differential scores for each cluster.</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>Scatterplot of Neuroticism and Extraversion scores by identity cluster.</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>Scatterplot of Agreeableness and Extraversion scores by identity cluster.</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>Gendered categorisation of screen name by sex of player.</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>Gendered categorisation of screen names by gender identity of player.</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>Identity referential frame profiles for offline SST and online descriptions.</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Iterative process of content analysis used in the second study.</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FORWARD

March 2, 2003, 7:50 pm

I am about to meet my undergraduate psychology class for the first time. I check my PowerPoint presentation and make sure the outline for tonight’s class is there. I turn the data projector on and off. To my relief it works. I pick up the hat full of stars that we use to separate people into pairs and make sure there is two of every colour. I put the hat back on the table. I look down at my tracksuit pants and slippers. When I look back up at the computer screen the students have started to arrive. We are ready to begin...

In 1993, I started teaching a course on the psychology of cyberspace. Together with our students, my colleagues and I began to examine the psychology of what Sherry Turkle (1995) has described as “life on the screen”. Taking a constructivist approach, in which emphasis is placed on building up contextualised knowledge, our aim has been to develop an experiential understanding of psychological phenomena online. Each of us, staff and students, are known by self-selected pseudonyms or screen names and we have no face-to-face contact until the end of semester debriefing. Our experiences in this pseudonymous community - of person perception, relationship development, and group dynamics – become the content of the course.

Beginning first with a conferencing system and then later moving to a MOO, I began to notice some behavioural patterns. Although all students were provided with a pseudonymous environment without obvious physical markers such as gender, ethnicity, and age, students varied in the extent to which they altered attributes online. Some acted out aspects that were deliberately different to their offline self. As one student commented, “Here’s
my chance to act out a part quite alien to me.” Others seemed to make slight exaggerations or concealments in order to present “the person I dream of being”. Some developed complex, elaborate, and often fantastical personas, whereas many were at pains to accurately present their offline identity. I watched my own struggles too, to variously conceal and reveal my gender, to assert my authority as the teacher, and my attempts to hide a lack of technical skill. My experiences led to the central question of this thesis: how do people present themselves online?

I became particularly interested in how users make choices about their initial presentation online. What aspects of the offline self does one take when one goes online? What aspects does one leave behind? How are presentations of self negotiated and maintained over time? Who are the most playful online users, the ones who most frequently exploit the potential of the medium?

When I began this thesis these sorts of questions were gaining increasing attention in the popular media, but accounts were often sensationalistic, focusing on the potential to manipulate relationships. A new body of literature on psychology and cyberspace was just beginning to emerge. Sherry Turkle’s (1995) book, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, led the way for a steady increase in interest over the ensuing decade. In the 1990s only a handful articles or books on the psychology of the Internet were published. In the three years since 2000, the number has exceeded 100.

I begin this thesis with my story in order to contextualise the research that follows: my teaching has shaped the questions that I have asked, the methodologies I adopted, and the sense I make of the findings. I continue therefore to use the first person throughout the thesis. This decision is consistent with recommendations in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001). Contrary to traditional psychological practice, writers are now encouraged to avoid conventional, third person references to “the experimenter” and instead use personal pronouns. My
decision to actively locate myself in the writing is also consistent with the mixed methodology of the research. The thesis incorporates a qualitative component in which subjective experience is given priority.
CHAPTER 1
SELF-PRESENTATION THEORY

When an individual appears in presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his interests to activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey.

Erving Goffman (1959) pp.15-16

Chapter overview

In this chapter I explain self-presentation, the framework on which this thesis is based. The theory of self-presentation, developed primarily to explain impression monitoring in face-to-face interactions, is based on Goffman’s dramaturgical approach. The chapter begins with a brief examination of Goffman’s sociological work on self-presentation. I then turn to a psychological analysis of self-presentation, drawing particularly on the work of Mark Leary. Leary’s conceptual work on self-presentation, together with relevant research, is discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the similarities between self-presentation and postmodern conceptualisations of the self.

1.1 Beginning the research: Searching for a theory

I began this research by looking for a theory of identity to ground my work. Apart from the inherent complexity involved in the construct itself, I soon found that the literature is bogged down in a confusion of terminology. The term “self” alone is used in at least five different ways within the social science literature: the self is used to refer to the person, to personality, to the decision maker or executive agent, as well as to the experiencing subject, as in William James’ “I”, and to self beliefs or James’ “me” (Leary & Tangney, 2003). It is the final sense in
which I was most interested, but even here a profusion of terms exists. Words such as identity, self-concept, the self, and self-identity are used, but often vaguely defined or used in contradictory ways, with meanings varying considerably between authors. When differentiated, self-concept is often used to refer to an individualised and private sense of self-definition, including personality and physical characteristics, abilities, achievements, and preferences. Identity, in contrast, is frequently aligned with the notion of social role. Breakwell (1992), for example, defined identity as the internalisation of packages of actions and thoughts expected of the occupant of particular social positions. Other writers have attempted to integrate these two positions, highlighting the "private and public triangulation" of the construct (Schlenker & Weigold, 1989). Deaux (1992), for example, has argued that self-definition is achieved through social context; she therefore prefers identity as the more inclusive term. Given the lack of clarity in the literature, I use both terms interchangeably throughout this thesis to refer to an individual’s self-definition.

In addition to problems with terminology, the history of identity is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing on psychology and sociology, as well as philosophy. Any theoretical thread may therefore have foundations in one or all of these disciplines. On several occasions similar ideas appear to have developed simultaneously in different disciplines. This breadth makes following the path of any one theoretical aspect a complex process.

The process of selecting a theoretical position therefore took considerable time and the journey led me through a range of theories including self-identification theory, self-enhancement theory, self-verification theory, self-discrepancy theory, possible selves, and social identity theory. The perspective, however, that emerged as the most suitable was self-presentation theory. This theory is alluded to repeatedly, although rarely empirically tested, in the cyberspace literature. It
was a particularly appropriate framework for the present research because its variables are operationalisable in the online context and its central concepts are consistent with the postmodern ideas of multiplicity and a contextualised self that have characterised cyberspace.

1.2 Self-presentation, Goffman, and the dramaturgical approach

The first systematic study of self-presentation was developed by Erving Goffman (1959) in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Appropriating metaphors from the theatre, such as actor, role, props, and audience, Goffman’s dramaturgical approach built on symbolic interactionism, a school of sociological thought, originating in the work of Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead, that argued identity was culturally constructed.

1.2.1 Giving and giving off information

In describing everyday interactions, Goffman (1959) distinguished between two ways of expressing information: information that is given and information that is given off. Information that is given is the conscious content of communication, the voluntary, symbolic actions that are mutually understood. For example, a person who describes their anger is giving information about their emotional state. In talking about their anger, however, the person also gives off information, through para-verbal characteristics such as tone, volume, and rate of speech, the choice of words, their accent, and non-verbal cues. While information that is given is considered to be within the actor’s control, information that is given off is perceived by the audience to be unintentionally communicated (Kendon, 1988).
Goffman described the processes of giving and giving off information as performance, a face-to-face interaction in which situation and roles are defined, facilitating smooth social interaction.

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. (Goffman, 1959, p.28)

According to Goffman (1959), motivation for such performance is ubiquitous; nearly every social interaction is an act of self-presentation.

1.2.2 Front of stage and backstage regions

Developing the metaphor of the actor, Goffman (1959) compared the front and back of stage regions. The front region, where the performance takes place, is governed by norms of politeness and decorum. Back-stage, in comparison is a place where normal front region role demands and norms do not apply. "Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo his speaking lines, and step out of character." (Goffman, 1959, p.115) Backstage, people prepare themselves for the performance, often rehearsing their role. Behaviour is less formal and more playful backstage; differences in status are less pronounced. Relationships that occur in the backstage region are more intimate than those that take place front of stage (Collins, 1988). Backstage areas are sometimes characterised, not just by suspension of front-stage norms, but also by flagrant violation of them. Leary (1995) cited examples of backstage behaviour that would shock people in
the front region, such as doctors joking about their patients and teachers using language that would surprise their students.

For Goffman the front and back of stage were physical as well as psychological spaces (Collins, 1988). One’s home, particularly the bedroom, is a physical backstage place where preparations for self-presentations take place. Clothes are chosen, make-up is applied; the body is groomed for performance. Bathrooms, public and private, are “self-presentational repair shops”, where people can check their appearance and make physical adjustments to improve their front of stage presentation (Leary, 1995). Psychologically these backstage places offer a place to compose oneself and prepare mentally. In an embarrassing or upsetting situation people, when people are struggling to maintain a desirable image, they will often remove themselves from the front of stage to a backstage area (Leary, 1995).

Although Goffman initiated the use of the term self-presentation and highlighted the importance of everyday interactions for study, his focus was primarily the ways actors negotiate definitions of interactions; the processes actors use to create impressions of themselves in the minds of others was of secondary importance (Jones & Pittman, 1980). As a sociologist, Goffman’s focus was interpersonal rather than intrapsychic. He described a self created through interaction and imputed by observers, rather than the presentation of a pre-existing, private and individual identity. For Goffman (1959), identity was “a product of a scene that comes off ... not a cause of it” (p.252). It wasn’t until social psychologists became interested in self-presentation theory that the intrapsychic and motivational dimensions of self-presentation were examined in detail. In integrating intrapersonal and interpersonal variables, social psychologists have
described self-presentation as a complex “interplay between the private self and interpersonal setting” (Leary, 1993, p.129).

1.3 Psychological perspectives

Since Goffman first described his theory a number of psychologists have further explicated self-presentation. Roy Baumeister, Edward Jones, Barry Schlenker, and Mark Leary have all written extensively about self-presentation and the scope of their work is broad. In an early review, Baumeister (1982a) emphasised the breadth of self-presentation explanations, citing evidence to suggest that self-presentational motives were relevant to a wide range of social behaviours including giving and receiving help, conformity, aggression, attitude expression and change, responses to evaluation, reactance, self-serving attributions, task performance, ingratiation, and emotion. Despite its breadth of application, however, the field has been slow to develop a coherent theoretical framework. Several factors have probably impeded progress. First, from an historical perspective, self-presentation has been advanced more often as a challenge to other social psychological theories, such as an alternative explanation to dissonance theory, rather than as a theory in its own right (Baumeister, 1986; Jones & Pittman, 1980). Second, the concept continues to be plagued by connotations of superficiality, deceit, and manipulation, rendering it somewhat of a “black sheep in the social psychological family” (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000, p.200). Third, self-presentation is, as Goffman described it, ubiquitous in nature. Even when our primary goal is not self-presentation, we rarely intentionally behave in ways that will create disadvantageous impressions; behaviour is therefore usually shaped by self-presentation concerns (Leary, 1995). Its application to virtually every social interaction makes distilling the critical variables and developing a meaningful theory difficult.
One researcher who has been instrumental in the development of self-presentation theory is Mark Leary. Leary has researched and written about self-presentation since the 1980s, exploring the interaction between self-presentation and a range of variables including leadership and health risk. His major research focus, however, has been social anxiety. In this area his analysis has linked social anxiety to an actor’s perceived inability to achieve satisfactory impressions in meaningful interactions (Leary, 2001). As well as using self-presentation to better understand psychological distress, Leary has been at the forefront of theory building. His single most comprehensive work on self-presentation is his book, *Self-Presentation: Impression Management and Interpersonal Behaviour* (Leary, 1995). In this work, as in many of the social psychological writings on self-presentation, Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor has been retained through the use of terms such as performance, audience, props, and role. However, Leary has added a uniquely psychological analysis, including chapters on intrapsychic dimensions such as self-presentation motivation and the private self.

### 1.4 Self-presentation: measurement and theory

Self-presentation is “the control of information about self” (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000, p.201). It is the process by which an individual communicates the kind of person they are and the characteristics they possess to influence the impressions that others form (Leary, 1995). Although the terms are sometimes used synonymously, self-presentation and impression management describe distinguishable processes. Impression management encompasses any goal-directed activity of controlling the impressions that others form. Impression management includes manipulating the impressions of objects, ideas, events, and other people. Rowatt (1998), for example, has argued that people engage in impression management for significant others who find themselves in
embarrassing or socially awkward situations. Self-presentation is therefore best understood as a sub-set of impression management, referring only to acts that relate to controlling impressions formed of oneself (Leary, 1993).

The most common research paradigm used to examine self-presentation involves testing individuals first privately and then in a public context. Changes in behaviour between the first and second condition are seen as evidence of self-presentation concerns. This approach has been widely used in the research and many of the laboratory-based studies cited in this chapter have relied on this technique. The paradigm is, however, limited in two ways. First, the extent to which the private condition can really be considered private if participants are aware the experimenter will access the information has been questioned (Baumeister, 1982a). “Private” information can itself become a form of self-presentation to the experimenter-audience. Second, demonstrating differences between private and public behaviour does not prove that self-presentation was necessarily the cause or that purely intrapsychic processes did not contribute (Baumeister & Tice, 1986). More recently, other methods have been trialled, such as the use of journals to record self-presentation motivations and behaviour (e.g., Nezlek & Leary, 2002).

In an effort to synthesise the wide range of variables that affect self-presentation, Leary (1993; see also Leary & Kowalski, 1990) conceptualised a three-stage model explaining how and why people manage their public presentations (see Table 1.1). According to this model, self-presentation involves three discrete processes: impression monitoring, impression motivation, and impression construction.
Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages and Sub-Component Processes of Self-Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impression Monitoring</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antecedents:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dramaturgical awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impression Motivation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antecedents:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Goal-relevance of impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Value of desired goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discrepancy between desired and current image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-presentational goals:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Playing to the audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Claiming an identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-esteem maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impression Construction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antecedents:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Desired and undesired identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Target values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Role and normative constraints</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**1.4.1 Impression monitoring**

In order to engage in self-presentation behaviour, one must, in the first place, have some awareness of the image that one is creating. This perception is known as dramaturgical awareness (Leary, 1993, 1995). Dramaturgical awareness varies
from complete lack of attention to how one is being perceived, known as impression oblivion, through to a state in which all thoughts centre on the impressions of others, known as impression focus.

Most of the time dramaturgical awareness operates somewhere in between the extremes of impression oblivion and impression focus, although individual differences in self-monitoring exist (Snyder, 1987). Dramaturgical awareness is, however, best conceptualised as a shifting agenda, altering between foreground and background modes (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). Impression monitoring moves to the foreground when it is situationally salient, such as a job interview or first date, when difficulties achieving a self-presentational goal are anticipated, such as when one expects to perform poorly, or when actors find their situational scripts no longer appropriate. Leary (1993) described the latter, disrupted form of exchange as derailed interactions, exchanges that generally involve some degree of social embarrassment, call attention to the social status of individuals and how they are being perceived, and involve loss of face. In these circumstances, obstacles in the self-presentation process shift awareness of one’s image to the foreground, increasing dramaturgical awareness (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000).

At other times impression-monitoring agendas operate in the background, conserving cognitive resources, much like a computer program that is open, but minimised (Schlenker, 2003). Self-presentational concerns are implicit in all social interactions; impression monitoring is therefore never absent when we are in the presence of others, as Goffman suggested, only backgrounded in awareness.
1.4.2 Impression motivation

The second stage, impression motivation, describes the variables that motivate self-presentational behaviour. These range from cost-benefit analyses to dispositional factors. According to Leary (1993), impression motivation is determined by the extent to which the desired impression will contribute to the attainment of a goal, the value of that goal, and the discrepancy that exists between the image the actor wishes others to hold and the image the audience already holds. Goals include social or material advantage, self-knowledge, and self-esteem maintenance.

When the goal is social or material advantage, self-presentation is referred to as strategic self-presentation or playing to the audience (Baumeister & Tice, 1986). Appropriating a cost-benefit analysis, strategic self-presentation enhances the probability of obtaining desired outcomes and avoiding undesired ones (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In an early theoretical work on self-presentation, Jones and Pittman (1980) described five classes of strategic self-presentation, each distinguished by the impression sought: ingratiation (impression of likeability), self-promotion (impression of competence), exemplification (impression of worthiness), intimidation (impression of danger), and supplication (impression of helplessness). Strategic self-presentation is therefore not always pleasing to the audience; it may at times deliberately evoke feelings of fear or pity. An actor may intentionally attempt to create an impression of fallibility, hostility, or even stupidity (Schneider, 1981) and audiences may be shocked, embarrassed, and annoyed.

Empirical work has examined the priorities given to these strategic self-presentational approaches. In a field study of everyday self-presentations Nezlek and Leary (2002) reported the most commonly occurring self-presentation motive was a desire to be seen as likable. Being seen as competent, ethical, and
attractive were also sources of motivation, occurring in that order. Another study conducted by Leary and reported in his text *Self-presentation: Impression Management and Interpersonal Behaviour*, surveyed American university students’ perceptions of highly desirable impressions (Leary 1995). The most desirable impressions mirrored those hypothesised by Jones and Pittman (1980). The impressions most sought involved ingratiation (being seen as friendly, fun, outgoing, funny, easy to talk to), self-promotion (being seen as intelligent), exemplification (being seen as sincere, caring). Being perceived as attractive was also considered important.

Self-presentation may be motivated not just by a desire to be seen by others in a particular way, but also by a desire to see oneself in a particular light. Individuals attempt “to learn the truth about self by pursuing diagnostic information” (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992, p.138). For example, a new PhD graduate may introduce herself as Dr not so much to impress others as to try on her new and unfamiliar role. This motive is variously referred to as *self-expression*, *identity striving*, or *claiming an identity* (Baumeister & Tice, 1986; Gollwitzer, 1986; Greenwald & Beckler, 1985; Leary, 1995).

Whether the audience is oneself or others, self-presentation is typically described as a conscious performance, however several writers have implied that self-presentation can operate at a preconscious or even unconscious level. Leary (1995), for example, referred to such behaviour as non-conscious self-presentation and stated “people’s behaviours are sometimes affected by self-presentational motives even though they are not consciously thinking about others’ impressions at the time and even though they may deny that self-presentation entered into their behaviour at all.” (p.61) DePaulo (1992) also noted that much non-verbal behaviour is not easily controllable and is presented
without conscious awareness. These aspects are, to use Goffman’s terminology, “given off”.

The idea that self-presentation might not always be intentional helps to explain elements of behaviour, such as grooming, that people perform automatically (Leary, 1995). Indeed Schlenker and Weigold (1992) have argued that most self-presentation is probably automatic, habitual behaviour triggered by contextual cues. Asking people about their self-presentational intention is thus only likely to provide part of the picture. The typical research paradigm in contrast, which compares private and public behaviour, although limited in other ways, acknowledges that any changes to behaviour in public may be the result of either conscious or unconscious processes.

Whereas the second stage of the model addresses the question of why people engage in self-presentation, the third stage, impression construction, explains how people engage in self-presentation and it is this stage that is the focus of the thesis. In this phase of the model, the constituents that shape the presented image are described, including intrapsychic and interpersonal variables.

1.4.3 Impression construction

According to Leary (1993, 1995), the content of the presented image is determined by a transactional process involving five intrapersonal and interpersonal factors. At the intrapersonal level, the self that is presented is derived from current self-concept as well as desired and undesired identity images.

1.4.3.1 Self-concept, self-disclosure, and deceptive self-presentations

An individual’s self-concept or identity is their answer to the question, “Who am I?” (Blasi, 1988), “the set of beliefs that a person holds about him- or herself”
(Leary, 1995, p.159). These beliefs are central to self-presentation, because impression construction often involves a conscious attempt to reveal our self-concept to others (Leary, 1995). The more central a trait in our self-concept, the more “chronically accessible” it is and the more likely it is to be a part of our conscious awareness or phenomenal self (Markus, Crane, Bernstein, & Siladi, 1982). The more likely it is to be presented in a range of situations (Schlenker, 1986).

Much self-presentation behaviour derives from a desire to have others see and validate us as we see ourselves and therefore involves deliberate disclosure of information, both verbally and non-verbally, about our personality, attitudes, and abilities (DePaulo, 1992; Leary, 1993). Self-presentation of the self-concept is referred to as authentic self-presentation (Schlenker, 2003). Authenticity is often characteristic of self-descriptions, such as are made verbally in face-to-face interactions (Leary, 1995). Much social interaction relies on authentic self-presentation. “In any social group, general wellbeing depends on people being able to count on one another to do what they say they will do and to be what they claim to be.” (Schlenker, 2003, p.501)

Because we often want others to know us as we really believe we are, but time is limited, self-presentation frequently involves "purposefully editing and selectively presenting information about oneself that is essentially true" (Leary, 1995, p.140). In order to communicate this often complex information efficiently, the process frequently involves “the overcommunication of some facts and the under-communication of others” (Goffman, 1959, p.126). Despite the central role that editing and exclusion play in everyday self-presentation few studies have explicitly examined these processes (Leary, 1995). Research on self-disclosure,
however, which is defined as what individuals reveal about themselves to others verbally (Dindia, 2000)\(^1\), sheds some light on how these processes operate.

In a dialectical analysis of self-disclosure, Dindia (2000) argued that self-disclosure is characterised by contradictory impulses. Self-disclosure is essential for relationship development, but exposing vulnerabilities is not without risk. A tension exists therefore between revealing and concealing the self, between giving and excluding information. “In deciding whether to disclose information regarding self, an individual confronts the contradictory dilemma of protecting self by restricting disclosure and of striving to be open by confiding in the other.” (Dindia, 2000, p.154) Presenting vulnerable aspects of identity is therefore generally approached with caution and self-disclosure is typically selective.

Two variables thought to impact on the process of self-disclosure are sex and liking. Although it is commonly believed the women self-disclose more than men, a meta-analysis of both self-report and observational studies has indicated this difference is only small (Dindia, 2002). This sex difference is moderated, however, by sex of the target audience. Women disclose more to women than men disclose to either women or men. Sex cannot therefore be used to predict self-disclosure across sex of partners.

Other research has suggested that self-disclosure is a product of liking. A meta-analysis by Collins and Miller (1994) revealed we disclose more to those we like. The effect size was smaller for experimental than correlational studies, but nevertheless significant, indicating that liking causes self-disclosure. Although this finding implies that self-disclosure increases as

\(^1\) Although self-disclosure is typically defined in terms of verbal communication, the concept can be extended to text-based communication.
relationships develop and we come to like others more, intimate self-disclosure has also been noted between strangers. The “passing stranger” effect describes the high level of self-disclosure that is sometimes noted between relative strangers. Rubin (1975) who examined the reciprocity of such self-disclosures, argued that the absence of the vulnerability and accountability that characterise many ongoing relationships may account for this greater openness with strangers. Intimate self-disclosure is also particularly likely as a reciprocal response to an interlocutor’s self-disclosure (Rubin, 1975).

Leary et al. (1994), in a self-report study, examined the effect of familiarity on self-presentational concerns. Self-presentational concerns were lower in more familiar relationships than in interactions with less familiar others. However, this finding was only true for same-sex relationships; in interactions with the opposite sex, self-presentation concerns increased with familiarity. This finding underscores the importance of both actor and audience gender as a potentially important variable in self-presentational behaviour.

Self-presentation therefore often involves accurate self-disclosure, particularly when the actor likes their interlocutor. Research has demonstrated that people prefer social contexts in which they can present aspects consistent with their sense of self (Snyder & Gangestad, 1982). Self-presentations that are perceived by the actor as justifiably representative of identity are, in turn, more likely to be internalised (Schlenker & Trudeau, 1990).

Although authentic self-presentations involve essentially accurate representations of self-concept, they appear to require as much skill as deceptive self-presentation (Schlenker, 2003). There are several common self-presentational tactics used to control the impressions that others form (Leary, 1995). Some of these are verbal, such as self-descriptions and public attributions for behaviour. Others are non-verbal such as emotional expression, physical appearance, and
gestures. In addition, the physical environment can be used for self-presentational goals (Leary, 1995). This includes the use of (a) sets, relatively permanent aspects of the environment, such as the size and colour scheme of rooms, (b) props, objects displayed to effect impressions, and (c) lighting, which can be used to create an ambience just like theatre lighting.

These tactics are often used to present the self-concept. The believability of the performance is crucial. If a self-presentation is perceived as deceptive the actor will lose face.

If others do not regard the images that people project as reasonably accurate constructions of reality, they will be dismissed as manipulative, deceptive, or deluded. Furthermore, most people find it anxiety producing to project and maintain public images that they know are not true. Because of these considerations, people project truly deceptive self-presentations only in rare instances. (Leary, 1995, p.5)

Clearly, however, there are times when deceptive impressions are presented. Deception ranges along a continuum from putting one’s best foot forward to pretending to be someone completely different (Buss & Briggs, 1984). People not only want to see themselves in positive terms, but they want others to share this impression. One way to achieve this is to make self-enhancing presentations, in which positive, socially desirable characteristics are emphasised (Schlenker, 2003). In the more extreme cases of pretence, such as presenting an incongruent personality trait, there is evidence to suggest that people typically exaggerate the characteristics they are attempting to present (DePaulo, 1992). Deceptive presentations of gender, such as in cases of female impersonation and some
instances of cross-dressing, often involve exaggeration of sex-stereotyped characteristics (Bullough & Bullough, 1993; DePaulo, 1992).

The kind of attributes presented in deceptive self-presentations varies with contextual cues. For example, socially undesirable characteristics might be portrayed in order to induce pity in an audience. Focusing on socially desirable characteristics, however, Buss and Briggs (1984) generated a list of six classes of self-presentational deceptions. They argued that when people engage in pretence in their self-presentations, the major areas about which they lie are: (a) social traits, such as warmth, pleasantness, sincerity, and modesty; (b) social ability including knowledge and sophistication; (c) motivation, such as dedication and ability to work to deadlines; (d) ability, for example, intelligence or talent in the particular field signalled by the context; (e) status, such as possessing financial, familial or vocational importance; and (f) morality, including being honest and loyal.

Little work exists on how long deceptive self-presentations can be maintained, however as Schlenker (2003) has noted, keeping up a façade for a limited period such as an hour might be relatively easy, but sustaining a deceptive self-presentation over days or weeks may be difficult, require considerable effort, and as a result, be unenjoyable.

Several variables have been hypothesised to affect deceptive self-presentation, including the perceived seriousness of the deception, the likelihood the deception will be detected, and the incentives for deception, such as economic rewards (Buss & Briggs, 1984) or enhanced self-esteem (Schlenker, Weigold, & Hallam, 1990). Research has also linked pretence with depth of relationship; as pretence is difficult to sustain over extended periods of time, deception is more likely to occur early on and in superficial relationships (Buss & Briggs, 1984; DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). In a series of studies, Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell
demonstrated that participants presented themselves in more self-enhancing ways in front of strangers than in the presence of friends. In these studies the strangers were people with whom the participant had no expectation of future interaction. Studies of this sort leave unanswered questions about self-presentation in contexts where the audience are strangers, but there is a probability of future contact, as is often the case in the early stages of group formation.

Cultural and individual differences exist in the acceptance and prevalence of deceptive self-presentation. Classifying presentation of an image that is inconsistent with one’s identity as deceptive or an act of pretence typifies individualistic, Western cultural emphases on consistency and lack of hypocrisy (Triandis, 1995). Acknowledgement and exploration of this cultural difference appears, however, to be missing from the self-presentation literature. At the level of individual differences, personality traits, such as public self-awareness, have been hypothesised to predict the presentation of images discrepant with self-concept (Buss & Briggs, 1984). People high on public self-awareness think more about those aspects of themselves that are public, such as their appearance and behaviour and are more concerned with managing the impressions they make than are those who are low on this dimension (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991; Leary, 1995).

Several studies have reported sex differences in deceptive self-presentation, but these differences relate to quality rather than quantity. Although the total number of self-presentational lies does not vary between women and men, qualitative differences between the sexes have been reported (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Feldman, Forrest, & Happ, 2002). Men’s self-presentational lies tend to be more self-promoting than women’s lies. That is men’s lies are more likely to be told for the liar’s advantage such as deception.
used for personal gain or to save face. Women, in contrast use more other-oriented lies, than men. Women’s deceptive self-presentations are more likely to involve lies told to protect or enhance other people than men’s self-presentations. Women’s other-orientation is particularly strong when interacting with other women (DePaulo et al., 1996).

Lying about one’s achievements is clearly an act of deception, however, deceptive self-presentation often involves more subtle tactics such as exclusion and evasion. Exclusionary self-presentation tactics involve editing out or concealing particular information from self-presentations. "Just as important as what people say about themselves to others is what they could say about themselves, but don’t." (Leary, 1995, p.18) Evasive self-presentation occurs when one avoids situations in which particular self-relevant information may be revealed (Leary, 1995). Leary suggests that these approaches are probably the most common ways of dealing with conflicts between our desire for authentic self-presentation and our desire to create particular impressions. A series of studies by Leary and colleagues (see Leary, 1995) indicated that rather than present an image discrepant with self-concept or risk presenting an authentic self that might be rejected by others, people withhold self-relevant information that is inconsistent with the impression they seek to create. Self-presentation is therefore often a combination of revealing and concealing. As Goffman (1959) said, “the performance of an individual accentuates certain matters and conceals others”. (p.67)

1.4.3.2 Desired and undesired identity images

The content of the presented image is not simply constructed from who we think we are, but also from future selves. Self-presentation can also amount to experimentation, a kind of “trying on for size” (Baumeister, 1982a), behaving in a
way that is consistent with a self not yet attained, playing with the presentation of future selves. The concept of future selves is derived from the work of Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius (1986) on "possible selves". Possible selves are defined as

individuals’ perceived potential. They include those selves that individuals could become, would like to become, or are afraid of becoming, including the selves that are hoped for - the successful and accomplished professional self, the witty, creative self, or the loved and admired self - and the selves that are dreaded - the blundering pseudointellectual self or the 'bag lady' self (Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal, & Nurius, 1986, p.99).

In the context of self-presentation Schlenker (1985) described these future selves as desired and undesired identity images. The desired identity image is what a person “would like to be and thinks he or she really can be, at least at his or her best” (Schlenker, 1985, p.74). An individual views their desired identities as achievable ideals, however the composite image is generally unattainable. Desired identity contains the internalised, idealised parent, culturally sanctioned accomplishments and personal memories and images of “the good me” (Ogilvie, 1987). An undesired identity image, in contrast, is that which the person does not want to be. The undesired identity is more experientially based than desired identity, including memories of embarrassing and frightening events (Ogilvie, 1987). It also includes undesirable traits and circumstances witnessed in others as well as socially unacceptable impulses that have not been acted out (Ogilvie, 1987, p.380).

These possible selves serve, not only as an evaluative basis for current identity, but also act as a source of motivation. Higgins (1987) noted how
perceived discrepancies between actual and ideal self-images produce emotional consequences. Rogers (1961) further proposed that these states of incongruence motivate therapeutic change. Against this backdrop, possible selves theorists have argued that identity is constructed through the acquisition or resistance of these selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Pin & Turndoff, 1990; Tice, 1992) and these possible selves influence the identities that are presented. “Whether people are selectively avoiding or approaching a possible self, they draw on this dynamic self-knowledge to form a basis of a variety of self-protective, self-monitoring, and self-presentation strategies” (Cantor et al., 1986, p.109).

Although an individual's universe of selves is relatively stable, the significance of a specific desired or undesired identity image is context dependent (Markus & Kunda, 1986). In general, however, hoped for selves are more salient than feared selves: they were thought about more often, considered more likely to transpire in the future, and are reported with four times the frequency of feared selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Self-presentation suggests that presented images are generally biased in favour of these desired identities compared to undesired images (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Self-presentation is therefore often a process of experimentation with desired selves. Successful presentations are signified by others or as Goffman (1963) argued, face is imputed, and through this process of validation the presented image is internalised and incorporated into the self-concept.

Although the impact of desired selves for self-presentation seems obvious, the influence of undesired or feared selves should not be underestimated. Feared selves have been noted as a significant source of motivation. Satisfaction is shaped more by discrepancies between feared and current self than the difference between hoped for and current self (Ogilvie, 1987). Life satisfaction is
therefore better described as the distance from what we fear becoming rather than proximity to what we hope to be.

One of the most common and least threatening ways in which we try on possible selves is at a cognitive level, mentally rehearsing scenarios, imagining outcomes, trying out different possibilities, easily undoing and replaying (Cantor et al., 1986). The advantages of this cognitive process are its ease and speed as well as its lack of repercussions. When experimenting cognitively with a possible self, “one can easily and quickly undo it and try out another one. Moreover, objects and situations that are not easily available in reality are always at our disposal at the level of symbolic representation” (Nuttin, 1984, p.12). The disadvantage of cognitive simulation of possible selves is that it lacks signification, the importance process in which presentations are validated by others.

Public self-presentations are more likely to impact on identity than identity experiments carried out in the imagination. Tice (1992), for example, asked participants to act as if they were either emotionally stable or emotionally volatile. Compared to those who performed the behaviour privately, participants who acted publicly were more likely to incorporate the presented trait into a description of their “true self”. Schlenker, Dlugolecki, and Doherty (1994) also demonstrated a relationship between public self-presentation and identity. Presenting a sociable image increased both self-appraisals on that dimension as well as sociable behaviour in another situation. Studies in this area suggest that the crucial factor underlying identity change is the public nature of the commitment. The research also highlights that self-presentation not only affects immediate self-descriptions, but also has the potential for longer-term impact, generalising to other situations.
In addition to these intrapersonal variables, two interpersonal factors have been hypothesised to play a role in the process of impression construction: target values and constraints surrounding roles and norms.

1.4.3.3 Target values, norms and roles

Self-presentations are not simply reflections of an individual’s identity and possible selves. Self-presentation is a transactional process (Schlenker, 2003) and therefore also involves the audience as well as the social context. Self-presentations are adapted to the perceived values of the target audience (Leary, 1993). Although this might sometimes involve behaving in socially undesirable ways as noted above, for the most part actors attempt to present themselves favourably, as attractive, likable, and competent. Beyond these generic considerations, actors respond to specific values and preferences of the target audience. In addition, impressions are shaped by norm and role constraints.

Two types of self-presentational norms exist (Leary, 1995). Norms can be prescriptive, specifying impressions that ought to be conveyed, such as the norms that dictate solemnity at a funeral. Or norms can be restrictive, limiting self-presentations within parameters, but without specifying the precise impression that should be communicated. For example, norms proscribe certain behaviours in a public street, such as talking loudly to oneself, but do not prescribe how one ought to behave.

Some self-presentational norms are context independent in that they apply in a range of social situations. Other norms, however, are context specific applying only to a particular situation or to members of specific groups (Leary, 1995). Context independent self-presentation norms reflect the values of the culture and violation of these norms generally creates an impression of rudeness, dysfunction, or deviance (Leary, 1995). Leary (1995) noted that many such
context-independent norms exist, but suggested that the most common included consistency, decorum, self-presentational matching, and civil attention.

*Consistency* in self-presentation has been highlighted as particularly valued by individualistic cultures (Triandis, 1995). In these cultures, inconsistency is typically associated with weakness, hypocrisy, unreliability, and even mental instability (Leary, 1995). Hence the emphasis on self-representational authenticity and rejection of deception in individualistic cultures noted above. Leary (1995) hypothesised that two forms of consistency are expected: consistency between beliefs and behaviour and consistency in behaviour over time (Leary, 1995). Although a high level of consistency in either of these areas might be considered inflexible and even boring, Leary (1995) has suggested that we nevertheless value this characteristic. Inconsistency can occur between a range of different types of information such as self-descriptions; material possessions; attitude statements; public attributions; nonverbal behaviour, including physical appearance, gestures, emotional expressions, and movements; as well as social and institutional associations. Consistency in others reinforces the reassuring belief that we can predict their behaviour.

A second context independent self-presentational norm is *decorum* which stipulates that behaviour conform to established standards, such as not offending others or appearing rude. Polite, socially appropriate behaviour is generally a response to this norm. Violation of this norm can lead to negative evaluation and even rejection (Leary, 1995).

A third self-presentational norm is *modesty*. According to Leary (1995) self-aggrandising presentations are negatively evaluated. Typically therefore, positive attributes and accomplishments are downplayed slightly if others are aware of these already. Only when we think the audience has no prior knowledge do we make a positive self-presentation. Modesty involves not only
downplaying accomplishments, but using a relatively low level of meaning in language. Self-deprecating presentations, however, are not always viewed as modest.

The norm of modesty is mediated by a fourth norm, *self-presentation matching*. This refers to the tendency to reciprocate the level of self-disclosure (the depth of disclosure norm) as well as the positivity of others’ self-presentations (the self-presentational positivity norm). Reciprocity of self-disclosure is reported amongst intimates and strangers (Dindia, 2002). However, Leary (1995) has suggested that the depth of disclosure norm operates differently depending on the nature of the relationship. In single interactions between strangers the norm can produce an immediate disclosure at a similar level of intimacy. The norm can also operate, however, over time in ongoing relationships so that a self-disclosure may not necessarily be reciprocated immediately, but may occur some time later.

The norm of civil attention "dictates that people appear to be at least minimally involved in social encounters" (Leary, 1995, p.75). Even when we are not interested, this norm prescribes that we present an image of engagement. Goffman (1967) referred to this pretence as "affected involvement". At times, however, non-verbal behaviour can betray lack of interest. "Side-involvements, such as leafing through a magazine" are signs that attention has diminished (Goffman, 1967, p.127). On the other hand there are certain situations in which we are expected not to pay attention. We are taught not to stare at people with disabilities or eavesdrop on personal conversations. Leary (1995) called this norm the norm of civil inattention and it operates in most public spaces where we learn to conceal our interest in strangers.

In addition to these generic norms, there are certain self-presentational norms that apply to specific situations. Our behaviour is guided by specific self-
presentational norms in a wide range of social situations from getting married to attending a funeral, from using a public toilet to having a PhD conferred. These norms are also overlayed by gender and cultural conventions determining appropriate behaviour.

Finally, social roles often prescribe specific behaviours. For example, it is often said that teachers need not only be fair in their assessment, but to be seen to be fair. Teachers therefore might engage in self-presentational behaviour to ensure their audience is aware that they possess the integrity and impartiality prescribed by their role.

Nezlek and Leary (2002) tested the validity of this three-stage model of self-presentation in a study using participants’ records of self-presentation in everyday interactions. Measures of individual difference related to impression motivation and impression construction, such as public self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-presentational style, were administered. Impression motivation and impression construction emerged as distinct factors in the analysis, highlighting these two stages as separable in the process of self-presentation.

Leary’s theory of self-presentation\(^2\) provides operationalisable variables that permit predictions to be made about self-presentation in any given context. The processes that affect impression monitoring, motivation, and construction are

\(^2\) Although many writers loosely refer to the concept of self-presentation as a theory, Leary chose to describe his three-stage conceptualisation as a model. The model explains why and how we seek to manage the impressions that others have of us. Leary’s model meets the requirements of a theory, in that it is “a set of concepts used to define and/or explain some phenomenon” (Silverman, 2002, p.77). Accordingly, I refer to Leary’s (1993) model as self-presentation theory throughout this thesis.
both intrapersonal and interpersonal in nature. This interplay of factors has strong empirical support. A wide range of studies support the individual subcomponent processes. In addition, the Nezlek and Leary (2002) study offers support for the validity of the broader conceptual structure of the theory.

The research on self-presentation theory is however characterised by two limitations. First, most of the research has focused on face-to-face interactions. Nezlek and Leary (2002), for example, excluded telephone interactions from their study of everyday self-presentation because the processes of self-presentation on the phone were considered “sufficiently different” from face-to-face communication. The extent to which the theory can be applied to mediated forms of communication is an important, and as yet largely untested, question for the generalisability of self-presentation theory.

Second, most studies, with the exception of Nezlek and Leary’s (2002) field study, have been laboratory-based. More than 40 years has elapsed since the publication of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which Goffman advocated everyday interaction as a viable and important topic for research. It is ironic that over this period so little of the self-presentational research has observed the presentation of self in everyday life (Nezlek & Leary, 2002).

1.5 Postmodernism and self-presentation

Self-presentation theory resonates with many contemporary themes in the identity literature. One of the most obvious is the postmodern idea of a plural, contextually constructed self. Identity in a postmodern world has been described as self-presentation; identity is “a matter of impression management, during which identity displays are employed to gain acceptance from others who often
have little knowledge of one’s social background or accomplishments” (Côté, 1996, p.163).

Postmodernism rejected the coherent, essentialist identity described by modernism. The essentialist tradition, which has driven Western psychology and provides a fundamental premise grounding many of its core concepts and practices (Bohan, 2002), described a self with a unified, knowable core.

Individuals possessed a basic personality or character, and in most normal relationships this essential self was made known. One who fails to be true to himself or herself is a superficial sham, possible neurotic (trying desperately to be somebody else) or downright dishonest. (Gergen, 1991, p.83)

According to postmodern writers, however, the idea of an essential or core self is a myth. Instead identity is seen as fragmented and multiple. Without a core or unifying entity, identities are contextually created, existing only in interaction.

Responsible for this shift in identity is a complex confluence of factors, including the domination of mass media and computer-mediated communication in everyday life (Elliot, 2001; Gergen, 1996). Technological improvements, from the post and television through to CMC, have increased our potential social relationships and saturate us with identity possibilities. As Ken Gergen (1991) explained,

A century ago, social relationships were largely confined to the distance of an easy walk. Most were conducted in person, within small communities: family, neighbors, townspeople... For much of the world’s population, especially the industrialised West, the small face-to-face community is vanishing into the pages of history... Through the technologies of the century, the number and
variety of relationship in which we are engaged, potential frequency of contact, expressed intensity of relationship, and endurance through time all are steadily increasing. As this increase becomes extreme we reach a state of social saturation. (p.61)

Communication technologies expose us to new and more varied types of relationships than in the past. Mobile phones, laptops, and wireless Internet connections create unprecedented accessibility. According to Gergen (1991, 1996), the relationships made possible by technological change are disrupted and often short-term. Emotions remain heightened, without time to normalise. The mediated quality of many of these relationships facilitates a kind of transference that produces a heightened sense of intimacy. “People come to feel more deeply and express themselves more fully in an increasing number of relationships.” (Walther, 1996, p.66) The effect of this social saturation, according to Gergen, is the creation of fragmented, multiple, and disparate identities, a montage.

In an important sense, as social saturation proceeds we become pastiches, imitative assemblages of each other. In memory we carry others' patterns of being with us ... Each of us become the other, a representative, or a replacement. To put it more broadly, as the century had progressed selves have become increasingly populated with the character of others. (Gergen, 1991, p.71)

Gergen (1991) argued that this saturation produces a “multiphrenic condition”, an experience of unbounded multiplicity. We appear as unified, coherent identities to others, but achieving commitment amidst the disparate
voices of the self is difficult. Multiple selves lie latent, ready to be realised given the right conditions.

Other writers have made comparable arguments. Anthony Elliott (2001) has made a similar analysis of the impact of technology on identity. According to Elliott (2001), postmodern identity is defined by a narcissistic preoccupation with appearance. Slick media images are internalised, creating an identity regulated by image and style. Fantasy is accorded unprecedented importance; psychosis is viewed as liberating and subversive. Together these characteristics produce a tension between confusion and possibility, between disillusionment and desire.

Robert Jay Lifton (1993) also provided an analysis similar to Gergen’s (1991) description of postmodern social saturation. Lifton labelled the condition “omni-access” and agreed that a new multiple and fluid identity has emerged in response. "Without quite realising it we are evolving a sense of self appropriate to the restlessness and flux of our time." (Lifton, 1993, p. 1) Lifton coined the term “protean self” to describe the emergent identity, a multiple and fluid self that changes over time and across context. Unlike Gergen (1993) who argued that fragmentation leaves us without coherence, Lifton (1993) maintained that the protean self is a recognition of both complexity and ambiguity, of fluidity and groundedness, a juggling act between a desire for coherence and consistency on the one hand and self-presentational demands on the other.

The quintessential space for expression of postmodern identity, a space defined by fragmentation, multiplicity and ambiguity, is cyberspace. This is a place of unlimited self-presentational possibilities, a “significant social laboratory for experimenting with constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life.” (Turkle, 1996, p.170)
Chapter summary

The focus of this chapter was self-presentation theory, the ways in which people seek to control the impressions that others form of them. The three self-presentational processes theorised by Leary (1993) are impression monitoring, impression motivation, and impression construction. Although the theory is well supported, much of the research has been laboratory-based, with little research conducted on self-presentation as it occurs in the field. Nevertheless it is a theory that resonates with postmodern notions of identity and play.
CHAPTER 2

IDENTITY PLAY

All play requires the players to understand that what is done is not what it appears to be.

Catherine Garvey (1990), p.7.

Chapter overview

Identity is developed in childhood and adolescence through playful interaction. This chapter describes some fundamental aspects of play. The features of pretend play in childhood are discussed and aspects of identity play in adolescence are examined. Interrelationships between play and therapy are raised and the concept of deep play or flow, particularly relevant to adult play, is introduced.

2.1 What is play?

In his classic text on play and culture, Johan Huizinga (1955) defined play as

an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to the rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or mutual utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm.... A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action. (p.132)

Most play theorists agree that play is a voluntarily chosen, pleasurable activity, requiring active participation. It is undertaken for its intrinsic value. The enjoyment of play comes from the process, rather than its results. As Caillois
(1980) said, “play is an end in itself” (p.167). Although these features characterise a range of activities that we might participate in as adults, the literature on play has dealt almost exclusively with play in childhood.

Childhood play fulfils four primary functions: biological, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural (O’Connor, 2000). Biologically, arousal theories have described play as a process used to regulate arousal. Play allows the child to regulate arousal and facilitates relaxation by focusing attention (Ellis, 1973). At an intrapersonal level play fosters cognitive development. The symbolic nature of play also allows children to master conflicts. Psychoanalytic theories in particular have emphasised the mastery and wish-fulfilment of childhood play (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Singer, 1995). Play facilitates the development of a sense of mastery of stressful or traumatic events over which the child may have little control in reality and provides opportunities to act out desires. Play allows us to disclose our secrets while simultaneously distancing ourselves from them. Interpersonally, play facilitates social skills. Finally, at a sociocultural level play enables children to rehearse roles that are culturally appropriate.

2.2 Pretend play in childhood

Children begin to engage in pretend or fantasy play from around the age of two years. Two features typically characterise pretend play (Dockett & Fleer, 1999). First, pretend play in childhood is episodic in nature. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the initial orientating phase, the child enters the play frame and roles, rules, and processes are negotiated. Second, play is symbolic. It involves pretending, that is treating objects, people, and ideas as if they were something else. Catherine Garvey (1990) defined this fantasy element of play as the “voluntary transformation of the Here and Now, the You and Me, and the This or That” (p.82). When we play, things are not what they appear to be. This
aspect of play is crucial. “It is this nonliteral attitude that allows play to be buffered from its consequences; in effect it permits play to be play.” (Garvey, 1990, p. 7)

The power of imaginary play derives from its position between reality and fantasy. Bits of the everyday world are the elements of play, however, they are also vehicles for imagination (Meares, 1992). Straddling the two worlds, pretend play permits the player’s desires to see “the light of day and enter into the human community without directly overthrowing or directly tampering with the everyday order of normative expectations” (Sutton-Smith & Kelly-Byrne, 1984, p.319). Separated from the everyday world, the play world is a safe place to explore desires. Jerome Singer (1994) described the play arena as a miniature world, wherein we can “take our unfulfilled intentions or goals or confront the vicissitudes of our daily life and reduce them mentally to forms we can manipulate” (p.203). In this miniature world, the role or the event can be played and replayed, done and undone. The other people involved in the play also occupy a space that is both in reality and imagination. “It is necessary, at least in terms of the field of play, that the other is both real and illusory at the same time.” (Meares, 1992, p.37)

Cognitive theorists, such as Piaget, have explained play as a developmental process whereby the child takes a pro-active role in shaping their own knowledge. Piaget (1951) argued that children construct their knowledge as they explore, interact with, and manipulate their world, processes in which play has an integral role. Play therefore facilitates the child’s learning about themselves and their world. Supporting Piaget’s assumption, correlational research has suggested several advantages associated with pretend play, including greater creativity, flexibility, verbal fluency, patience, real life problem-solving, and role-taking (Peterson, 1996).
According to Piaget, children move from functional play, in which the concern is primarily with the acquisition and mastery of motor skills to symbolic or pretend play, which involves the representation of people and objects and relies on a child’s ability to distinguish the real and mental worlds, a differentiation considered essential for later cognitive and social functioning (Dockett & Fleer, 1999). Finally, according to Piaget, children engage in games-with-rules, games with mutually agreed upon or predetermined rules involving competition.

Piaget’s second phase, symbolic or pretend play, has been viewed as particularly important for the development of identity. It is through this type of play that “to a large extent, a sense of self is generated” (Meares, 1992, p.5). Pretend play allows the child to try on different roles, act out possible selves, and develop scripts for real and potential experiences (Singer, 1995). Through this experience of agency, a child is “beginning to formulate some sense of individual identities and showing a kind of looking ahead to what they might be … expressing a first anticipation of identity and selfhood” (Singer, 1995, p.192).

All play takes place within a psychological frame. The play frame designates the actions occurring within the frame as play and separates play from the rest of everyday life. Like a picture frame that signals to the viewer not to use the same perceptions in interpreting the picture within the frame as would be used to interpret the wall on which it hangs, the play frame signals a shift in perception from reality (Bateson, 1976). The play frame is communicated both by messages within the frame, such as negotiations of roles and rules, as well as messages outside the play frame, known as metacommunication, such as “this is play” or “let’s pretend”. Both these types of communication establish the frame of the play and certain expectations about its process. When children engage in imaginary play they understand that what transpires within the frame is play (Dockett & Fleer, 1999). In imaginary play, children move in and out of the play
frame, in and out of their roles, negotiating rules and goals.

2.3 The therapeutic nature of play and the playful nature of therapy

Donald Winnicott (1971) saw play as therapeutic, concluding that “playing is itself a therapy” (p.50). It is not surprising therefore that play is often used in therapy, particularly with children. Play therapy is defined as the use of play to help children prevent or resolve psychological problems and achieve optimal functioning (O’Connor, 2000). What makes play particularly therapeutic? First, play allows children to master conflicts, providing a safe space in which traumatic events can be played and replayed until a satisfactory outcome is achieved. This aspect of pretend play is widely used in play therapy (O’Connor, 2000). Second, the duality of play and the flexible nature of the play frame permits the child to be both actor and observer, allowing the child to reflect on and learn from play. Third, role-play enables children to experiment with new behaviours and emotions (Gitlin-Weiner, 1998).

Adult psychotherapy can also be seen as a type of play. Many forms of therapy have the features of play (Ackerman, 1998). Therapy is marked by uncertainty and contains fantasy, facilitating the exploration of roles and risk taking. In addition, it exists in a place outside everyday experience and has its own spatial and temporal frame (Bateson, 1976). Some forms of psychotherapy, particularly psychoanalytic therapy, actively invite transference, an opportunity to pretend, to rework, to re-enact within the safety of the therapeutic frame.

Sometimes play is defined in terms of what it is not. One of the things that play is typically seen not to be is work. Contrasting play and work in this way leads to a series of consequences for the way play is understood: If work is serious and important, then play is trivial and insignificant; if work is
productive, then play is unproductive and inconsequential; if work is encouraged, then play is to be avoided; if work is for adults, then play is for children (Bowman, 1987). Children are expected to play. “To be a child is to play.” (Bretherton, 1983, p.2) In contrast, adult play has become institutionalized. Fairly stringent guidelines determine who is permitted to play, how play may be conducted, and when and where play is permissible (Garvey, 1990). One of the institutionalised periods of play, where play, and in particular identity play experimentation, is sanctioned in Western culture, is during adolescence.

2.4 Identity experimentation in adolescence

Erik Erikson was one of the first psychologists to acknowledge the importance of a playful period, a space for experimentation, in the development of identity. Erikson (1959) described the growth of a healthy personality in terms of eight stages that extend throughout the life cycle. The theory is epigenetic in that it describes identity development as a progressive differentiation. Each stage is “systematically related to all others ... and exists in some form before ‘its’ decisive and critical time normally arrives” (Erikson, 1959, p.53). The resolution of each stage-specific crisis provides the building blocks for subsequent stages.

For Erikson, the main work of identity formation takes place in adolescence. Erikson (1968) labelled the normative crisis between school age and young adulthood identity versus identity confusion. In keeping with the epigenetic nature of his life stage model, however, the process of identity formation was conceptualised as existing in phases both before and after this crisis. More specifically Erikson described the process as one of increasing differentiation, beginning in the individuation of the infant. Throughout childhood “tentative crystallisations” occur, providing momentary senses of self-knowledge (Erikson, 1959, p.115). In childhood the twin processes of introjection (the internalisation of
parental demands), and identification with significant others, developed in part through the pretend play discussed above, prepare the individual for the adolescent task of identity formation. It is when the usefulness of these childhood identifications ends that the process of identity formation begins. The optimal resolution of this crisis, according to Erikson, (1968) is “a sense of well-being ... a feeling of being at home in one’s body, a sense of ‘knowing where one is going,’ and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count” (p.165). Identity for Erikson was therefore a belief about who one is, both physically and psychologically, together with a certainty that significant others perceive one similarly.

2.4.1 Erikson’s psychosocial moratorium

Although Erikson (1959) specified adolescence as the period of identity development, its precise timing was considered to be a product of both individual readiness and societal pressures; considerable variation was noted in duration, intensity, and the ritualised practices of this period. Erikson (1968) conceptualised the time between the end of childhood and the development of a coherent sense of self as an intermediary period; a moratorium distinguished by “a delay of adult commitments, and yet it is not only a delay. It is a period that is characterized by a selective permissiveness on the part of society and of provocative playfulness on the part of youth.” (p.157)

It is a time, when adolescents are expected to resist identity consolidation and are actively encouraged to explore and play with identity, a time of “free role experimentation” (Erikson, 1959). During this period of questioning about values, career and relationships, self-presentations are shaped by possible selves, as adolescents try on different identities. What is deferred during the moratorium is not experiences, but their consequences (Turkle, 1996).

42
The identity moratorium that Erikson described has resonances with the self-presentational concept of claiming an identity. Self-presentation allows us to internalise new roles and shape our self-concept (Leary, 1995). The individual tries on identities and presents these both to self to see how well they fit, as well as to others for signification. The more possible selves an adolescent imagines for themselves, the more experimentation they undertake (Dunkel & Anthis, 2001).

2.4.1.1 Public identity play and signification

When adolescents engage publicly in identity play, others provide feedback, or to use Leary’s (1995) term, signification. The audience authenticates the presentation, confirms its believability and this feedback impacts on the beliefs we have about ourselves. Identities are of little value until they are signified, "recognised and validated by others" (Vaughan & Hogg, 2002, p.102). Erikson considered this process of confirmation central to identity development. For Erikson (1968), “the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him” (p.22). Identity is therefore constructed through acceptance by others. Research has underscored the importance of public identity play for identity development. Identity development within sport subcultures, for example, is based on signification of individuals’ status and membership (Donelly & Young, 2001) and delinquent males almost always perform their delinquent acts in a publicly verifiable way (Emler & Reicher, 1995, as cited in Vaughan & Hogg, 2002).

2.4.1.2 Negative identity play

Although the identity moratorium often involves moving towards socially desirable roles, the identity that is claimed may involve rejection of those roles that family and society offer as desirable and instead, identification with values
that have been presented as most undesirable or dangerous. Examples include the rejection of parental occupational choice, repudiation of class, race, or cultural identity, and the adoption of criminal behaviours. Erikson (1959) suggested that the perceived inevitability of failing to achieve a socially desirable identity could result in an impulse towards a socially undesirable, more easily attained, identity. Unable to make effective use of the moratorium process,

it is easier to derive a sense of identity out of total identification with that which one is least supposed to be than to struggle for a feeling of reality in acceptable roles which are unattainable with the patient’s inner means. (Erikson, 1959, p.132)

When socially sanctioned roles and values seem impossible to achieve, energy may be diverted to establishing a unique identity through negative identifications.

Erikson used the term negative identity in a second sense to represent those aspects that are rejected in the formation of identity. Erikson maintained that in the process of fashioning an identity we reject other possibilities. Repudiation of what we do not wish to be or fear becoming (our feared selves) is therefore as important as identification with what we seek to become. Like Jung’s notion of the shadow, Erikson (1975, as cited in Stevens, 1983) described the negative identity as a repressed self, buried in the unconscious, surfacing in our dreams and projections on to outgroups. This is why our sense of identity can so easily be threatened by those perceived to be fundamentally different to us and why such threats can produce strong emotional, even violent, responses (Stevens, 1983).
Erikson (1968) suggested that the psychosocial moratorium was institutionalised in most societies, with identity play or experimentation normalised through prolonged education, travel, and even delinquency. Not all identity play in adolescence is however acted out publicly. Much of the necessary experimentation, which Erikson categorised as not only playful, but daring, takes place at a cognitive level, “in fantasy and introspection” (Erikson, 1959, p.117). Such fantasies, he argued, are often considered regressive, judged by society as "irrelevant, unnecessary, or irrational", but are as crucial to development as children’s spontaneous play (Erikson, 1968, p.164). Remaining in the realm of fantasy, the risk associated with the experimentation is diminished, but so too is the possibility for signification.

2.4.2 Marcia’s identity statuses

Erikson’s model of identity formation has been expanded, operationalised, and validated by James Marcia (1993a). Based on empirical work, Marcia explored the ways in which adolescents establish their identities. In his theory of ego identity status, Marcia distinguished two dimensions of identity: exploration of alternatives and commitment. The presence or absence of these two dimensions combines to produce four identity statuses (see Table 2.1).

The first variable, exploration of alternatives, often referred to as crisis, is characterised by serious questioning of values, plans, and goals adopted in childhood and early adolescence (Marcia, 1993a). The second variable, called commitment, refers to the individual's concern for personal coherence and direction and the ability to make a resolute decision.
Table 2.1
*Defining Criteria of Marcia’s Ego Identity Statuses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Identity status</th>
<th>Moratorium</th>
<th>Foreclosure</th>
<th>Identity diffusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploration of alternatives</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>In process</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>Present or absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Present but vague</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Absent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Marcia described identity achievement as the hallmark of mature development, giving the individual a sense of continuity and providing the essence that underpins and organises all experiences (Schachter, 2002). Identity achievement was conceptualised as best achieved by active exploration of choices leading to commitment. Identity moratorium was viewed as a valuable stage in the process of identity achievement.

Marcia (1993a) defined identity moratorium as a period of active exploration of self, together with a struggle to achieve a coherent direction in the world. Like Erikson, Marcia argued this exploration need not be acted out, but could take place at a cognitive level. Marcia (1993a) agreed with Erikson’s description of an institutionalised moratorium, and argued that its length increases “in proportion to the complexity of technological demand and the wealth of the society” (p. 20). Some evidence supports this hypothesis. An extended moratorium, for example, has been associated with students who undertake tertiary education (Heaven,
2001). However, the contrary argument has also been made. According to Turkle (1996), the high cost of university education and the threat of sexually communicable diseases have inhibited the moratorium phase, producing early commitment.

Even when identity achievement is reached in late adolescence, subsequent moratorium-achievement (MAMA) cycles are still possible throughout adulthood (Marcia, 1993b). Indeed the very processes of identity construction set in place the framework for future identity development, as Marcia (1993a) argued in the following passage:

Individuals who construct their identity, modifying or rejecting some conferred elements, also possess a sense of having participated in a self-initiated and self-directed process. They know not only who they are, they know how they became to be that, and that they had a hand in the becoming. Furthermore, they have developed skills useful in the adaptive process of further self-construction and self-definition. (p. 8)

Other writers have suggested that in industrialised nations, where career and lifestyle change is achieved relatively easily, the MAMA pattern, involving reassessment of one’s values and beliefs leading to a stronger sense of commitment to goals, is common (Wallace, 1999). The moratorium is viewed as a functional phase throughout adulthood. Holidays are an example of a time of moratorium from professional and social commitments (Turkle, 1996). Vacations are a period during which adults are permitted to play and experiment with identity. The increasing participation of adults in risky and extreme sports (Cohen, 1993) may also be a reflection of this cycling through the moratorium phase and a desire for a play well into adulthood.
For both Erikson and Marcia, the hallmark of mature development and evidence that the psychosocial identity crisis had been resolved satisfactorily, was the emergence of a committed identity. More recently, however, the pre-eminence of identity achievement and the construction of identity based on personal and material achievement has been challenged. Rather, an emerging focus on identity moratorium has been noted, along with emphasis on the managed presentation of identity (Côté, 1996) and theatrical play with identity (Kellner, 1992). Identity play is therefore increasingly seen as an inherent part of contemporary adult life.

2.5 Flow and deep play

Marcia acknowledged that identity play could be part of a developmental cycle continuing throughout adulthood and postmodern writers have argued that the identity moratorium is now a feature of adult experience. However, few theorists or researchers have explicitly examined identity play in adulthood. The work that does exist on play in adulthood has tended to focus on games, gambling, and aggression. The games typically discussed are finite games, such as chess or tennis, with fixed rules, played for the purpose of winning. In contrast, infinite games, games without rules or with dynamic rules, for which the purpose is continual play, are rarely discussed.

Two writers that have examined adult play are Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1997) and Diane Ackerman (1999). Csikszentmihalyi (1997) defined flow experiences as exceptional experiences that occur when attention is completely focused on the act, action becomes effortless and our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour are in harmony. According to Csikszentmihalyi, games in which rules, goals, and behaviour are circumscribed and clear are particularly conducive to flow; the player responds without questioning these parameters.
Flow arises from a combination of arousal and control. It involves being active, focused, involved, strong, and satisfied. Flow provides the optimal context for growth; “flow acts as a magnet for learning” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.33). The object, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is to create an activity that is challenging enough to fully involve the person’s skills without being insurmountable. In this state, time is distorted and self-consciousness disappears because one is fully focused on the task.

Ackerman (1999), in her book *Deep Play*, described a similar state. Ackerman characterised the experience of deep play as a dimension of adult play, an attempt to feel whole, an “ecstatic…. intense and transcendent” form of play. Although Ackerman (1999) defined deep play in terms of mood rather than activity, she noted that some forms of activity facilitate it particularly well, especially “remote, silent, and floaty environments” (p.12), all of which promote an altered perception of one’s physical body. For Ackerman, deep play is separated from cultural conventions and preconceptions. One “chooses to wipe the mental slate clean, chooses to be naïve and wholly open to the world, as one once was as a child” (Ackerman, 1999, p.20). And in that moment, one becomes, according to Ackerman, an idealized version of oneself.

*Chapter summary*

Children, adolescents, and adults play. Regardless of age, play is an intrinsically rewarding, focused, active endeavour that takes place in a space separate from, but part of the everyday world. Within this space the rules of everyday interaction are renegotiated. These features of play provide its therapeutic potential and it is these same features of therapy that make therapy a playful activity. Unlike the socially sanctioned pretend play of childhood and identity play of adolescence, adult play is more circumscribed. Cyberspace,
however, provides unprecedented opportunities for pretence and identity experimentation. Part of, but separated from the everyday world, cyberspace offers unique chances for adults to play.
Who we are, what we know, and how we think, are all being changed as we move from a print-based society to a computer-based world. We are becoming different people.


Chapter overview

Everyday hundreds of millions of people around the world go online. They connect to the Internet from work, school, university, home, and public computers. They send email, search for information, read discussion boards, use instant messaging, play games, and shop.

This chapter begins with a brief explanation of the phenomenon of cyberspace and an outline of the people who use it. Five major domains of online communication are described: home pages and weblogs, email, newsgroups, chat, and MOOs. The characteristics of these domains or interaction spaces are discussed, and a set of criteria to categorise the spaces is developed. The chapter concludes by considering three major theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC) used to explain the social psychological dimensions of “life on the screen”.

3.1 Definitions

3.1.1 Cyberspace and the Internet

William Gibson first coined the word cyberspace in his 1984 science fiction novel Neuromancer. Derived from the term "cybernetics", Gibson (1984) used the word to describe the space that exists within computer networks,
a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation ... A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding... (p.67)

The term cyberspace is now commonly used to refer to the computer-mediated connections that enable and promote communication between people, without a need to share geographical locations or time zones. The “space” in cyberspace is, as Gibson described it, an intellectual rather than physical construct. This multidimensional virtual space is thus a purely conceptual place without physical location, dependent on a "state of mind shared by people communicating using digital representations of language and sensory experience" (Whittle, 1997, p.10).

The most common form of access to cyberspace is via the Internet or information superhighway, a decentralised "network of networks" which facilitates the rapid transmission of large amounts of information along links or “highways” (Seabrook, 1997). What we now know as the Internet originated in the early 1970s as a way to connect computers across North America in the Defense Department’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). This network, known as the ARPAnet, was used by computer scientists to send and receive email. In the early 1980s, ARPAnet was superseded by the Internet and was significantly expanded as increasing numbers of researchers, academics, and non-academics began, not only to log on, but construct their own social spaces (Rheingold, 1995).
3.1.2 Internet usage

Although any figure of Internet use is likely to be almost instantly superseded, estimates suggest that the growth in Internet usage has been exponential. In 1995, the estimated number of Internet users was 16 million (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). In 2002, the number had risen to nearly 650 million (Global Reach, 2003). In 2000, new hosts (machines that host web pages) were being created at the rate of more than one each second (Rutkowski, 2000). Recent statistics, however, suggest that the rapid growth may be slowing. Longitudinal research for example, surveying more than 2000 American households, has reported that Internet access in North America stabilised between 2001 to 2002, with slightly more than 70% of Americans using the Internet (UCLA Center of Communication Policy (CCP), 2003). During that period however, both home access and number of hours online increased (UCLA CCP, 2003). At least in the American context therefore the number of people going online has plateaued and usage has changed.

Data from the UCLA Internet Project provide demographics of online users that are otherwise difficult to estimate. Use, according to the Internet Project, is highest amongst those under 35 years; more than 80% of respondents in the 19-34 age range reported using the Internet (UCLA CCP, 2003). For many years anecdotal evidence suggested that the Internet was primarily a toy for the boys, with few women online. Those women who did participate were welcomed with attention, often unwanted. In 2003, the gender gap in Internet use had narrowed, with men having only a marginally greater presence online; 73.1% of American males and 69.0% of American females are online (UCLA CCP, 2003). Internet use is no longer male dominated. Part of the reason for this change has been the increasing accessibility of Internet publishing, meaning creators no longer require advanced technical skills. For example, it is now possible to create a
homepage or set up and moderate a discussion board relatively easily. As it was primarily men who held these advanced skills, this has created a more equitable climate online. Even so inequities still exist in the control of what happens on the net, with roles such as system administrator more often filled by men than women (Herring, 2001).

Initially the Internet was a product of and for the white, developed world. In its infancy, more than 90% of users were located in North America (Warschauer, 2000). Considerable change has been noted in this area. In 2003, non-English speakers constituted 63.8% of users (Global Reach, 2003). Internet penetration is now high in many South-East Asian countries, including Singapore and Taiwan, where more than 50% of the population are active Internet users (Cyberatlas, 2003). Large increases in Internet use have been recorded in other non-English speaking countries. The number of Internet users in China, for example, more than doubled between 2001 and 2003 (Greenspan, 2003c). Nevertheless it is estimated that about two-thirds of Internet content is still in English (World Lingo, 2002), even though less than 10% of the world’s population use the language (Kuttan & Peters, 2003). In addition, access is far from equitable, determined primarily by financial and geographical factors (Holderness, 1998). A large proportion of the world’s population is still without access to phone lines. In Australia there is more than one phone for every two people. In India, that ratio is closer to 1:50 (Kuttan & Peters, 2003). Even with reliable infrastructure, the cost of the equipment required to log on to the net is prohibitively expensive for many of the world’s population.

3.1.3 Terminology: “real” versus “virtual”

One of the central threads of this thesis is the relationship between the real and virtual, a comparison of everyday identity and its expressions online via the
Internet. Comparison of the real and virtual raises the dilemma of how to refer to these two worlds. The term “real life” is problematic as it implies interactions online are less “real” than those that occur face-to-face. This idea is deeply offensive to some users of CMC who perceive their experiences and relationships online as being as real as those that take place offline. As one participant in Sherry Turkle’s (1996) research said in reference to his online persona, “this is more real than my real life” (p.157). It is also a problematic stance to take as a researcher, for in privileging the offline world one is likely to miss important data.

To talk about real life as distinct from the online world is also to artificially separate the two, when, as one online user put it “RL [real life] is just one more window, and it’s not usually my best one” (Turkle, 1996, p.159). For these reasons I have avoided the term “real”. Instead, I use the term offline to refer to in person, face-to-face interactions and other manifestations of “life on the screen”.

3.2 Forms of CMC: Interaction spaces within cyberspace

Originally used for email interaction, the increase in students and non-academic users in the 1980s saw a change in the function of CMC from a pragmatic, research-based form of communication to a dynamic and social forum, changes which contributed to the current popularity of the Internet. The term cyberspace now includes a wide range of manifestations, including, but not limited to, five major interaction spaces: home pages and weblogs, email, newsgroups, chat, and MOOs.

3.2.1 Homepages and weblogs

Homepages allow people, groups, and organizations to publish information on the Internet. Like a billboard or personal advertisement, homepages are a sort
of “one-sided introduction” (Wynn & Katz, 1997). The content of homepages varies from personal to professional and the display of information ranges from text-based to graphics and animation, from lists of information to invitations to interact with the author and the material. Homepages also vary in size, from stand alone, single screens to “multilayered hypertext trails” (Arnold & Miller, 1999). It is estimated that 10% of Internet users have their own homepage (Döring, 2002).

Weblogs, or blogs as they are commonly called, are also primarily a one-way communication in the form of a public online journal. Weblog software allows the blogger to record thoughts, opinions, and feelings in a chronological order, automatically displaying newer items at the top of the page. Weblogs are typically updated regularly, often daily. Some weblogs are interactive, including images and sounds, as well as hyperlinks to and reviews of other sites, and comments from others. The focus of weblogs is unashamedly personal. Ernest (2003) for example, in a “how-to” article on blogging, advised bloggers to keep their entries personal; “You are the most qualified person to write your blog, because blogging is all about personal expression.” (p.61) As of June 2003 it was estimated that up to 2.9 million users, or approximately 2 percent of Internet users had their own weblog (Greenspan, 2003a).

3.2.2 Email

Email is one of the most frequent online activities. Nearly 90% of those with Internet access use the Internet to send and receive email or use instant messaging (UCLA CCP, 2003). Email is an asynchronous form of computer-mediated communication permitting text-based communication between users who are often temporally and/or geographically distant (or sometimes just in the next room). One-to-one and one-to-many email is now commonplace within a
wide range of institutions as a resource efficient way to communicate. Empirical studies suggest that email is the preferred method of communication in business (Greenspan, 2003b) and anecdotal evidence suggests that personal email is increasingly supplementing the use of letters and phone calls in familial and social relationships.

Email is a hybrid medium, bringing together aspects of both written and verbal communication. As a text-based mode of communication, there are obvious commonalities with letter writing in the potential to edit and reflectively compose and format (Thomson & Murachver, 2001). However, unlike much letter writing, email often takes a spontaneous and informal tone, making it more similar to telephone conversation. Although email is text-based, images and sounds can be sent as attachments.

Using group mailing lists, emails can be sent simultaneously to several users. Another way to email multiple users is via a LISTSERV. LISTSERVS are email-based discussion lists to which users subscribe, facilitating communication between potentially large groups of people. A message sent to the list is distributed, either automatically or via a moderator, to all subscribers. The first large list to emerge in the late 1970s was SF-LOVERS, a list of ARPA researchers interested in public discussion about science-fiction (Rheingold, 1995). Tens of thousands of public LISTSERVS now exist, covering a range of topics from organic gardening to gothic history. LISTSERVS vary in size, with some of the large lists having more than 10,000 subscribers. Some LISTSERVS are set up as mailing lists enabling two-way communication between people with similar interests, whereas others function as one-way moderated communication, distributing invited contributions in an edited format.
3.2.3 Newsgroups

Newsgroups are used to manage multiple public conversations on specific themes. They are asynchronous online discussions permitting text-based message exchange between multiple users on topics of interest. USENET News lists tens of thousands of newsgroups, covering topics as diverse as mushrooms, gambling, and feminism. Users can read contributions to newsgroups without actively participating, a practice known as lurking, or they can contribute to the discussion. Communication in newsgroups is organised in threaded discussions; comments and responses are shown ordered generally by subject and chronology. In this way, many different threads are often represented. Unlike email, which is private, newsgroups are in the public domain. Unlike LISTSERVS, many newsgroups do not require one to subscribe before reading and participating.

3.2.4 Chat

Chat is a form of real time text-based interaction. Chat enhanced the many-to-many communication potential of LISTSERVS and newsgroups with the spontaneity of real time interaction. Synchronous interaction online takes place using dedicated software. One of the best known is IRC (Internet Relay Chat). IRC users communicate on “channels”, or chat rooms, using screen names or handles. It is estimated that on Efnet, one of the oldest and largest IRC servers, there are often more than 12,000 channels and thousands of users at any one time (Caraballo & Lo, 2000). Channels exist for as long as users are present and any user can open a channel. Some channels therefore tend to be relatively permanent, whereas others last only for a short period. Channel names tend to reflect the general nature of users and/or their interests, e.g., #teenchat or #40 plus.
Instant messaging is a relatively recent form of chat. Users subscribe to an instant messaging program and set up a contact or buddy list of other subscribers with whom they wish to communicate. Instant messaging allows the user to track when those people log on and off the Internet. When people on the contact list are online at the same time, messages can be exchanged in real time.

Although chat is similar in many ways to face-to-face conversation, two characteristics in particular distinguish chat from offline interactions. First, the linear flow of chat generally appears disjointed, as users often engage in multiple conversations. Even when only two users are online, the conversation may simultaneously contain several threads. Second, users can send private messages to others in the system even if they are not currently logged onto the same channel. In the offline world, engaging in two or more conversations at once would not only be difficult to achieve, it would generally be considered rude. In chat, however, it appears so typical of interactions as to be a norm. Regular users become skilled at maintaining more than one interaction and reading the threads in conversations.

In the absence of visual cues, chat users have adapted text to recreate the intimacy and playfulness of interactions. Asterisks are used to signify non-verbal behaviour, such as hugging (*hug*). Combinations of characters are used as shorthand for common phrases, such as BRB (be right back) and emotional expressions, such as ROFL (rolls on floor laughing). Emoticons, combinations of keyboard characters, are also used to represent facial expressions such as :-) to indicate happiness or ;-} to represent a wink. These abbreviations, now numbering in the thousands, are commonly found throughout all forms of online
communication.¹

3.2.5 MUDs and MOOs

MUDs (Multi-User Domains) are network-accessible virtual environments that allow both private one-to-one interactions as well as many-to-many synchronous communication. They are cross-platform, have low-bandwidth requirements, and users have a choice of software for connecting to them. Like chat, MUDs can host a large number of players at any one time; it is possible, on some of the larger MUDs, to find up to 100 users simultaneously logged on. Unlike chat, MUDs provide users with a virtual environment described entirely in text. Players use commands to interact with and add to the environment.

The first MUD, designed in 1979 and described as a multi-user "adventuring" program, was based on the face-to-face role-playing game "Dungeons and Dragons". There are now hundreds of MUD-type environments and estimates suggest that more than 30% of users play these types of games (UCLA CCP, 2003). Although many are still concerned with adventure-style game playing of the "hack and slay" variety, several offshoots of MUDs have emerged. One of these, known as a MOO (MUD, Object-Oriented), is a type of virtual community that focuses on interaction, creation, socializing, and often education.² One of the most popular social MOOs is LambdaMOO, designed by Pavel Curtis in the 1990s. Unlike the role-playing games from which they emerged, MOOs are not goal oriented; there is no beginning or end and no concept of winning, although the term “player” is still used to refer to MOO users.

Several classes of MOO users typically exist, each distinguished by their

¹ Although widely used, some cultural variations exist in emoticons. Japanese emoticons, for example, distinguish between a regular smiley ^_^ and a girl smiley ^=^, acknowledging the cultural norm for women to smile without showing one’s teeth (Wong, 2000).
² Unless specifically referring to game playing MUDs, the generic term MOO will be used to refer to synchronous multi-user virtual environments.
privileges. MOO *players* can navigate around the space and interact with other users. *Builders* have the additional ability to build objects in the MOO including rooms. In some MOOs every player has builder rights. In others the rights are earned. The most powerful players in the MOO are administrators, often called *wizards*, who oversee the running of the MOO.

MOOs are similar to chat in many ways, however, the uniqueness of MOOs lies partly in the metaphor of space upon which they are based. MOO programs allow users to navigate their spaces. They

provide access to a shared database of 'rooms', 'exits' and other objects. Users browse and manipulate the database from 'inside' the rooms, seeing only those objects that are in the same room and moving between rooms mostly via the exits that connect them. MUDs are thus a kind of virtual reality, an electronically-represented 'place' that users can visit. (Curtis & Nichols, 1993, Introduction)

The metaphor of space employed in MOOs helps to create a sense of familiarity as many MOOs are based on physical spaces with which players are already familiar. LambdaMOO, for example, is said to be based on Curtis’s own house. The metaphor of space also increases the experience of immersion. MOOs offer a textual virtual reality, "the experience of being in a virtual world" (Rheingold, 1995, p.46).

MOOs allow players to communicate in a range of ways. As well as talking, whispering (talking privately to someone in the same room), and paging (talking privately to someone who is in another part of the MOO), MOO players are also able to communicate non-verbally through the *emote* command. Using this command a player can laugh out loud, give a hug, thwack, or sulk in a corner.
MOO behaviours are typed in the third person. For example if a character Tiger wishes to hug Flemmex, she types

: hugs Flemmex

On her, screen as well as the screens of all other players present in the room, will appear the text:

Tiger hugs Flemmex

The emote command helps to create a sense of proxemics (Sempsey, 1997). Sitting next to another player on a couch helps create a sense of space, but in actuality, unlimited numbers of people can be present in any one space in the MOO. A player can behave in any way possible in the offline world and more. Unconstrained by corporeal reality, behaviour in MOOs is limited only by one’s imagination.

MOO players can also interact with their environment by getting, moving, giving, and examining objects. Notes can be read, chocolates can be eaten, and chairs can be sat on. In addition, MOOs are user-extensible: as well as navigating the spaces and moving and using objects, users with builder privileges can create objects, such as a box of chocolates from which other players can eat, or a plump leather couch upon which other players can sit. Players can also build spaces within the MOO. Each object, including rooms, is described so that when others look at it they see its description. When I connect to LambdaMOO for example, I first enter the Coat Closet and I see the following:

The Coat Closet is a dark, cramped space. It appears to be very crowded in
here; you keep bumping into what feels like coats, boots, and other people (apparently sleeping). One useful thing that you've discovered in your bumbling about is a metal doorknob set at waist level into what might be a door.

I type out and leaving the closet I enter the Living Room.

It is very bright, open, and airy here, with large plate-glass windows looking southward over the pool to the gardens beyond. On the north wall, there is a rough stonework fireplace. The east and west walls are almost completely covered with large, well-stocked bookcases. An exit in the northwest corner leads to the kitchen and, in a more northerly direction, to the entrance hall. The door into the coat closet is at the north end of the east wall, and at the south end is a sliding glass door leading out onto a wooden deck. There are two sets of couches, one clustered around the fireplace and one with a view out the windows.

You see Welcome Poster, a fireplace, Cockatoo, the living room couch, Helpful Person Finder, The Birthday Machine, a map of LambdaHouse, and lag meter here.

In many MOOs players have their own home. This home base is often set as the arrival point for the player when they log on. These home bases are sometimes modelled on rooms from the player’s offline world, or an idealized space (Kendall, 2002; Turkle, 1995). Although these homes are viewed as private spaces and the owners can set the properties to restrict access, players often welcome visitors. As well as decorating their rooms, players can also set the exit messages that are displayed when players enter and leave.

Although the social and educational nature of MOOs distinguishes them from role-playing MUDs, many MOOs retain an element of role or identity play,
encouraging players to use a screen name. MOOs also require users to provide a
text description of their character that is available to other players. Players are
also typically required to set their gender. Setting one’s gender establishes the
pronouns used to refer to the character. For example, if gender is set to neuter,
the character will be referred to as “it”.

Character descriptions are typically written in the third person and often
include a physical description. Players can read another person’s description or
check the player’s gender at any time. When I type look Atticus19 on
LambdaMOO, for example, I learn that Atticus19 is

A being with passion for life. A deep thinker. A dreamer who believes that
dreams create reality. Atticus19 smiles warmly at you. Lets talk :) Dressed
in an elegant blue velvet smoking jacket with silk cravat. Black pants
garnish this athletic body finished off with a pair of incongruous orange
socks and Doc Martens.
He is awake and looks alert.

Like chat, a transcript of MOO interactions is typically composed of multiple
threads and reading a log of a MOO conversation is qualitatively different to
being present during the interaction. As Elizabeth Reid (1994) concluded, “MUD
interaction is not designed for an audience uninvolved in its production. This
interaction is not intended to be read as an artefact, but to be experienced
subjectively.” (Chapter 1, Making Sense of Each Other section, para. 6) In
response, some researchers have begun to develop empirically grounded
processes for analysing online texts (see, for example, Herring’s (2003) computer-
mediated discourse analysis).

The most recent offshoots of MOOs to emerge have been described as Virtual
Places (White, 2001) or meta-worlds (Wallace, 1999). Using a graphical interface, these virtual spaces reduce the reliance on text that is inherent to MOOing. Players in these meta-worlds use graphical representations of identities known as avatars that can be manipulated in three-dimensional space. Participants in these communities can choose from a standard range of avatars, such as cartoon characters and animals, create their own, or appropriate avatars created by others. Avatars can move around the virtual space, communicate through speech bubbles, express emotion, and gesture. Two of the popular and well-known examples of meta-worlds are WorldsAway and The Palace. The majority of MOOs, however, like most of the interaction spaces described above, remain primarily text-based.

3.3 The characteristics of CMC

These five forms of communication technology differ on four dimensions: the degree to which telepresence is experienced, the opportunities for communication in real time, the possibilities for the user to remain anonymous, and the probability that the interaction will be recorded. Each of these dimensions has potential impact on social psychological processes, including self-presentation.

3.3.1 Telepresence

Communication technologies vary in the extent to which the user feels present in the mediated environment rather than in the immediate physical space, a feature known as telepresence (Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 1996; Steuer, 1992). Although provided with limited, primarily visual stimuli, some users experience aspects of cyberspace as "real", entering into Gibson’s “consensual hallucination”. Telepresence is described by users as a feeling of being there or
present, a sense of being able to “project myself into the reality being created and sustained” (Roberts et al., 1996, p.8). Jonathon Steuer (1992) hypothesized that three variables facilitate a sense of telepresence: vividness, interactivity, and the presence of others.

Vividness refers to the breath and depth of sensory information available to the user. Telepresence is increased with both depth and breadth of sensory stimulation; the more information we perceive in a range of senses and the sharper the resolution of that information, the more complex our perception of the situation and the more present we feel ourselves to be (Steuer, 1992). Text-based communication, like email, discussion boards, chat, and MOOs, are therefore theoretically low on this dimension compared to virtual reality that uses images, sound, and animation, stimulating a range of senses. However, the contrary position has also been argued, namely that low levels of sensory stimulation can actually enhance telepresence. This “less is more” approach posits that imagination is used to fill in the missing information (Jacobson, 2002). Interviews with IRC and MOO users have confirmed that, despite low levels of vividness, many experience a strong sense of telepresence (Roberts et al., 1996).

Telepresence is also affected by the interactivity of the media - the extent to which the user can manipulate and modify the environment (Wood & Smith, 2001). Interactivity of media is dependent on three characteristics: the speed with which the user can effect changes to the environment; the range of manipulation that is possible; and mapping, or the relationship between offline and online actions (Steuer, 1992). Higher levels of interactivity produce greater perceptions of realism. Commands that effect automatic change, for example a MOO command that allows a user to create a sheet of butcher’s paper that can be written in and read by the group or a box of chocolates that can be offered to others, heighten the user’s sense of immersion. The more effect users can have on
their environment further contributes to immersion, as does the extent to which actions online mirror actions in the real world. Homepage authors can create their own space online, determining a range of features, however, MOOs exemplify interactivity, with their emphasis on user manipulation, interaction, and extensibility of the virtual environment.

As well as these media-related variables, telepresence is also facilitated by interactivity with other players or, at a minimal level, their perceived presence (Steuer, 1992). The five interaction spaces described above vary on this dimension, ranging from the implied, but potential mass audience of a homepage, through one-to-one email or private chat, to the possibility of communicating with large audiences on bulletin boards or the simultaneous presence of vast numbers of people on the more popular MOOs and chat channels. CMC communication provides access to a mass audience, previously available to only a privileged few through broadcasting and newspapers. But it combines this access with the intimacy and interaction of a telephone conversation (Burnett & Marshall, 2003). Telepresence is enhanced by important relationships (Roberts et al., 1996), but importance online is not necessarily determined in offline terms. The use of real names as opposed to screen names, for example, does not appear to affect telepresence (Towell & Towell, 1997).

The number of people with which one can communicate in an interactional space and the extent to which users can lurk have possible impact on front/backstage distinctions. The potentially large audiences of newsgroups, chat, and MOOs signal a front of stage frame, whereas emails and private chat may be regarded often as backstage behaviour. Homepages and weblogs, with their often hidden audience, can be characterised as primarily backstage places for self-expression and self-creation. This distinction is not, however, a simple one, because many users are physically located in a backstage region (often their
home) when they interact online.

3.3.2 Temporality

Electronic communication media also vary in their synchronicity or temporality. Synchronous communication, like online chat, is conducted in real time, with players temporally co-present. Synchronous communication is sometimes described as “same time/same place” communication. Asynchronous communication, described as “anytime/anywhere” communication, does not rely on the users being online at the same time. A contribution to a newsgroup, for example, might be read by other users a day, a week, or five years after it was originally posted.

The effect of temporal co-presence on interaction has not been extensively researched, although Sternberg (1998) has argued, based on her online research, that synchronous communication is more conversational and intense than asynchronous interactions. Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright, and Rosenbaum-Tamari (1997) have argued that synchronicity is associated with “flow experiences”, a state of total absorption and a lack of awareness of time passing. Synchronicity can therefore contribute to telepresence.

Advances in technology and the speed of network connections are blurring distinctions between synchronous and asynchronous communications (Joinson, 2003). Synchronous communication can be used asynchronously: instant messaging and MOO windows, for example, can be left open for hours or even days, enabling users to stay logged on and interact asynchronously. Conversely, some asynchronous communication is acquiring features of synchronous CMC. An email, for instance, can be received almost as soon as it is sent, producing a sense of immediacy.

Nevertheless, the obligation to reply immediately is less for asynchronous
than synchronous forms of CMC. According to Joinson (2003), the intensity of this obligation is an important psychological variable. When the imperative for an immediate reply is reduced, the cognitive demands of the interaction are lessened, allowing greater focus on the content of the response and on self-presentational concerns. Asynchronous communication therefore appears to permit greater opportunities for reflective self-presentation. Joseph Walther (1996) has argued that this potential for “planned discourse”, for the thoughtful and reflective composition of one’s presentation adds to the intimacy often experienced in asynchronous CMC.

MOOs allow for both “planned discourse” and more spontaneous exchange by incorporating both asynchronous and synchronous communication. Players describe both themselves and the objects they own, in particular their home. These are a form of asynchronous communication. Players can reflect for as long as they like before setting these descriptions and once they are set, they can be edited easily. Many MOOs also incorporate their own email system, known as MOOmail, as well as providing whiteboard-type facilities for asynchronous discussions. Most of the interaction in MOOs, however, takes place in real time.

3.3.3 Anonymity

Communication technologies can also be distinguished by their potential for anonymity. Online communication exists on a continuum. At one end is identifiability, where users are identified by the use of their real name, by features of their email address, or even through photographs. At the other end of the continuum is the possibility of being completely untraceable online. This latter end of the continuum includes online invisibility. It is possible, for example, to lurk on a discussion board, reading the contributions without anyone, except the system administrators, knowing you have been there (Suler,
Most communication, however, falls somewhere between these extremes, in a state of visual anonymity, where those who are communicating do not see each other, but have access to some identifying data (Joinson, 2003). This middle ground includes pseudonymity, a common practice in chat and MOOs. This is a kind of managed anonymity in which the user chooses a screen name. As Donath (1999) noted, pseudonyms, although often untraceable to the real-life person, nevertheless can acquire a reputation. Anonymity overlaps with invisibility, but they are not the same thing. It is possible, for example, to reveal aspects of identity while still remaining physically invisible (Suler, 2003).

### 3.3.4 Ephemerality

Finally, CMC interaction spaces vary in their ephemeral nature. In some modes of communication, such as email and newsgroups, a record of interaction exists. Emails that are sent and received can be kept indefinitely. Newsgroup postings can also be archived and stored, permitting a search by user name or topic. It is possible therefore to locate the entire collection of newsgroup posts made by a particular user. This facility challenges the commonly held conception of discussion boards as private. According to Donath (1999), the impact of this permanent record of asynchronous discussions may permit more complex impression formation processes as more information is known about the individual. This may in turn enhance online relationships. Alternatively, awareness of the public nature of one’s contributions may increase impression monitoring and give rise to a practice of multiple pseudonyms (Donath, 1999).

Ephemerality and synchronicity are inherently related. Asynchronous communication provides a potentially permanent record. In contrast, synchronous CMC is not routinely recorded. Instant messaging systems provide easy click on options to log interactions and there are facilities to log MOO
sessions, but logging is not automatically done and has to be deliberately selected. When a user joins a chat channel or enters a space in a MOO, they see only the conversation from that point and generally, when they leave, no permanent record remains. Synchronous communication is therefore typically not recorded, except for research purposes.

Comparison of the five CMC interaction spaces across the dimensions described above highlights the similarities between chat and MOOing (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

*Distinguishing Characteristics of the Major CMC Interaction Spaces*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction space</th>
<th>Characteristics of CMC</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telepresence</td>
<td>Temporality</td>
<td>Anonymity</td>
<td>Ephemerality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vividness</td>
<td>Interactivity</td>
<td>Presence of others</td>
<td>Asynchronous</td>
<td>Generally low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homepages and blogs Email</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Imagined audience</td>
<td>Asynchronous</td>
<td>Generally low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsgroups</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Many-many</td>
<td>Asynchronous</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Many-many</td>
<td>Synchronous</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOOs</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Many-many</td>
<td>Synchronous and asynchronous</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlike the other forms of CMC, chat and MOOs have the potential for private as well as public synchronous, ephemeral communication. They both allow for high levels of anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. The primary distinguishing features of MOOs are the high level of interactivity allowing users to manipulate their own space and the textual descriptions of physical place,
which increases vividness and a sense of embodiment. Both of these together create the potential for a relatively high level of telepresence. This combination of features present in MOOs offers a fertile ground for the playful presentation of identity.

3.5 Social psychological theories of online behaviour

Since the 1970s a range of theories have been developed to explain the social psychological aspects of CMC. Two of the major theoretical positions are the cues filtered out approach and the SIDE model.

3.5.1 Cues filtered out approaches to CMC

The cues filtered out approach to CMC encompasses several theories that describe CMC as an attenuated form of communication. These theories begin with the assumption that compared to face-to-face communication CMC lacks important cues. The three best-known examples of the cues filtered out perspective are social presence theory, the reduced social cues theory, and the social information processing approach.

3.5.1.1 Social presence theory

Developed by the Communications Studies Group in Britain in the 1970s, social presence theory described communication media as varying in social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1994). Social presence is defined as the sense of immediacy, warmth, and intimacy present during an interaction, the feeling that one’s interlocutors are engaged in the communication exchange. Although the theory of social presence was originally designed to explain audio and video teleconferencing, it has been appropriated to explain CMC.
According to social presence theory the extent to which the actor perceives a communication as personal is dependent on the number of channels of communication (visual, auditory, tactile) available in the medium. Just as Steuer (1992) argued that telepresence, or the belief that one is present in an environment, was dependent on bandwidth or sensory breadth, social presence theory argued that awareness of others’ presence and hence the intimacy of the communication, is dependent on the number of cues available to the user. Face-to-face communication, which provides visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and taste stimulation, was taken as the standard against which communication media were evaluated. In particular the visual channel was considered central to the perception of social presence. The visual channel is used to convey nonverbal cues, and it is through these cues that social, interpersonal information is conveyed. Without this visual information, it was argued, social presence is diminished and communication is perceived as impersonal.

Short et al. (1976) argued that social presence was a function of the medium itself. This proposition led to the conclusion that low bandwidth communications, such as many CMC interaction spaces, produce low social presence, regardless of the content of the communication or the relationship between the actors. Social presence theory is used to predict that CMC interactions, particularly those entirely text-based, without any audio or video channels, like most MOOs, result in low social presence and little concern with how one is perceived by others.

At least one early study indicated that users rank CMC relatively low in social presence compared to other communication such as the telephone (Rice, 1993). However, other tests of social presence theory have failed to replicate these results (Watt, Lea, & Spears, 2002).
3.5.1.2 Reduced social cues theory

The reduced social cues approach begins with a similar premise to social presence theory: mediated communication is an impoverished form of communication. The best-known exponent of this approach is Sara Kiesler, who, with her colleagues at Carnegie-Mellon University, developed the approach in the 1980s.

Rather than talking about social presence, Kiesler’s central argument was that CMC interactions are characterised by reduced social context cues. Social context cues are defined as those variables that frame the situation and the interlocutors’ roles within it (Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994). These variables are important because they shape the way individuals interpret the interaction and allow people to adjust their behaviour accordingly. Sproull and Kiesler (1986) argued that there are three important types of cues that shape perception of social context: geographic, organisational, and situational. Geographic cues help define the person in time and place. Organisational cues, such as a job title, provide information about status. Finally, situational variables include cues about sex, ethnicity, and age.

In face-to-face interaction these cues are derived from both static and dynamic sources (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Static cues arise from aspects of the physical environment, and include the set, props, and lighting that Leary (1995) described as important self-presentational tools. Static cues also include the actor’s appearance, such as their clothing and make-up. Dynamic cues are communicated nonverbally and fluctuate during the interaction. They include facial and paralinguistic behaviour as well as gaze and touch.

Social context cues affect self-presentational concerns in the following ways:
when social context cues are strong, behavior tends to be relatively other-focused, differentiated, and controlled. When social context cues are weak, people’s feelings of anonymity tend to produce relatively self-centred and unregulated behavior. That is people become relatively unconcerned with making a good appearance. (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986, pp.1498-1499)

In other words the reduced social cues theory conceptualises CMC as low in dramaturgical awareness; concerns with how one is perceived are reduced online. The anonymity, reduced self-regulation, and reduced self-awareness associated with CMC are seen to be responsible for beneficial effects such as increased equity and at the same time, liabilities such as antisocial behaviour. Disinhibition produces both social or benign as well as antisocial or toxic effects (Suler, 2003). As Howard Rheingold (1995) explained,

the same lack of social feedback that lowers inhibitions enough to promote self-disclosure among groups of people can also lower inhibitions enough for individuals to disrupt those groups and sometimes tear the delicate fabric of trust that has been carefully woven over months of conversation among disembodied strangers. (p. 185)

Kiesler conducted a range of studies, most focusing on email, in which support was reported for the reduced social cues theory (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Attempts to replicate the findings or extend the cues filtered out theories have, however, not always been successful. A meta-analysis by Walther et al. (1994), for example, noted that flaming, an example of antisocial disinhibition online, occurred infrequently. One of the particular problems for the reduced social cues theory has been predicting when effects are likely to be benign and when they
are likely to be toxic. The social information processing model has attempted to address this question.

3.5.1.3 The social information processing model

This model, developed by Joe Walther (1996) is also premised on the attenuated nature of CMC and acknowledges that CMC limits social information to a single textual channel. However, according to the social information processing account, as essentially social beings we are driven by a need for association and connection, regardless of the communication mode. This strong desire for affiliation has led users to adapt online communication methods, compensating for the lack of social context cues. Although the narrow bandwidth of many CMC interaction spaces may deny non-verbal cues, we adapt to the medium and use textual cues to form impressions of others. These textual adaptations can convey similar social information to that presented verbally, but the exchange takes longer online.

CMC can therefore be as relational as face-to-face interactions; all that is required is sufficient time and message exchange as well as the anticipation of future interaction. Apparent support for the impersonal, disinhibited nature of CMC may therefore be a research artefact, a product of the artificial time-limitations placed on online interactions in experimental studies (Walther et al., 1994). Given sufficient time and an expectation of future interaction, people not only develop relationships that are as personal as those offline, they often develop relationships that are more socially desirable and intimate. This phenomenon has become known as the hyperpersonal nature of CMC (Walther, 1996). This hyperpersonal quality has been demonstrated by Walther (1996), who reported positive associations between anticipation of future CMC interaction
and a range of variables including affection, perceived similarity to one’s interlocutors, openness, and calmness.

Walther (1996) theorized that several elements of the communication process contribute to the hyperpersonal potential of CMC, including aspects related to the sender and receiver. The sender, or actor, is afforded unique opportunities for selective self-presentation in text-based CMC. Compared to non-verbal communication, the actor is generally better able to control verbal behaviour (Walther, 1996). When this is the only information communicated, as in a text-based MOO, the actor has a chance to optimise self-presentation.

The information that one gives about oneself is more selective, malleable, and subject to self-censorship in CMC than it is in FtF [face-to-face] interaction because only verbal and linguistic cues - those that are most at our discretion and control – are our displays. (Walther, 1996, p.20)

The absence of visual cues affords a relatively high level of control over self-presentation. The absence of these cues also allows actors to focus all their attention on the single channel of communication. In the offline world, attending to nonverbal cues can be cognitively demanding. As well as thinking about our verbal communication, we might simultaneously be attempting to “hold in one’s waist, nod, smile, remember to ‘look interested’, and so on” (Walther, 1996, p.42). Without this additional cognitive load, the actor is free online to focus entirely on verbal behaviour and linguistic self-presentation.

Walther’s argument suggests that CMC self-presentation is often optimised. In addition, receivers, under certain conditions, are more likely to form idealised perceptions of their interlocutors (Walther, 1996). Receivers use the limited cues available to them, such as typographical errors or misspellings, overattributing
characteristics to these minimal cues (Lea & Spears, 1992). Any idealized impressions created are likely to be further enhanced through a process of behavioural confirmation. Research on self-fulfilling prophecies has demonstrated that our expectations about others determine our responses towards them. Our responses to others in turn shape their behaviour (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Using research from other reduced cue media, such as the telephone, Walther (1996) has argued that this process is magnified online.

3.5.2 The social identity explanation of deindividuation effects (SIDE)

SIDE offers an alternative account of the seemingly contradictory effects, benign and toxic, of CMC. SIDE takes as its framework social identity and self-categorisation theories and explains online behaviour in terms of the shifting salience of social identity. This shift is referred to as depersonalisation.

CMC has typically been described as producing a state of deindividuation. Deindividuation is defined as a psychological state characterised by low awareness of self and individuality resulting in disinhibited behaviour (Postmes, n.d.). Deindividuation is thought to arise from conditions of visual anonymity, lowered sense of responsibility, altered sense of time, and the novelty of the situation. All of these are potential features of CMC interaction spaces (Joinson, 2003).

Unlike deindividuation, depersonalisation refers not to a loss of self-awareness, but a shift from personal to social identity (Watt et al., 2002). According to self-categorisation theory, when group membership is salient, intragroup similarities are exaggerated, as are intergroup differences, resulting in a range of psychological effects including adherence to group norms, stereotyping of outgroup members, intragroup cohesiveness, empathy, altruism and other social influence processes (Watt et al., 2002). This effect is
strengthened online because the visual anonymity of most CMC makes it easier to exaggerate in-group similarities and out-group differences (Joinson, 2003).

A growing number of studies support this model. Research by Spears, Lea, and Lee (1990) on CMC groups demonstrated that attitudes were significantly more polarized towards the group for participants in a depersonalised (visually anonymous and high group salience) condition compared to a physically copresent low group salience condition. When group membership is salient in anonymous CMC groups, normative behaviour increases (Watt et al., 2002). The SIDE approach can therefore account for both the so-called benign and toxic effects of CMC.

Chapter summary

In this chapter I have argued that the Internet is not a monolithic medium; rather it is best conceptualised as comprised of a range of interaction spaces, each characterised by some common as well as some unique features. Each of these spaces has implications for self-presentation. Several theories explaining the social psychological processes that influence self-presentation online were discussed. Research relevant to each type of interaction space is presented in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4
SELF-PRESENTATION IN CYBERSPACE

The Internet is an identity laboratory, overflowing with props, audiences, and players for our personal experiments.

Patricia Wallace (1999), p.48

Chapter overview

In Neuromancer Gibson described the offline world as a “meatworld” in which physical bodies were prisons of flesh. The consensual hallucination of cyberspace in contrast offers the chance to transcend the physical self, providing unique opportunities for self-presentational experimentation. Like Patricia Wallace, whose quotation opens this chapter, numerous writers have described cyberspace as a place to experience multiple and idealized identities (e.g., Murray, 2000; Reid, 1994; Turkle, 1995). Unconstrained by our corporeal reality, we are free to change gender, age, and ethnicity. The rhetoric suggests that online our self-presentation is limited only by imagination. But what is the reality? How do people present themselves online? This chapter examines research on self-presentation in a range of interaction spaces including homepages, email, newsgroups, and chat, describing the ways that people present themselves on the Internet.

4.1 Self-presentation online: Anecdotal evidence

Stories of identity play in cyberspace abound. Some of the most sensational reports about the Internet are those that deal with self-presentational deception. One of the best known stories was reported by Steve Silberman in 1997. A journalist for Wired, Silberman took on the female screen name “Rose” in a chat channel to explore what it might be like to be a
woman online. Silberman planned to simply observe people’s response to Rose, but soon found himself drawn into a private conversation with Adam. Over four nights the two men grew increasingly more intimate and Silberman (1997) became aware that his “‘experiment’ was getting out of control”.

I liked this guy. I felt that if I’d met Adam offline, we might have been buddies. There was one little problem – the one Adam was unburdening his cares to, and showing his heart to, was named Rose, not Steve.

When Adam pressed Rose to meet face-to-face, Silberman admitted his deception. “I erased Rose’s screen name that night and have never gone online with a female screen name again” (Silberman, 1997).

Even more complex, partly because of the time period over which it extended is The Case of the Electronic Lover originally published by Lindsy van Gelder (1991) in Ms Magazine. The story concerned Alex, a middle-aged New York psychiatrist, who, in the early 1980s entered a chat channel using the handle “Shrink Inc.”. According to various accounts, Alex was surprised when women began interacting with him with more intimacy and vulnerability than he was used to in his professional practice and he realized that his gender-neutral handle had been misinterpreted as female. Excited by his discovery of the hyperpersonal nature of CMC and the new potential for helping people as a woman, Alex established a female character, Joan Greene. Joan emerged on chat with a carefully wrought history. Her boyfriend had been killed in a car accident in which she herself was paralysed, disfigured, and lost her ability to speak. Not only did she find it difficult to get around, but the facial disfigurement caused by the accident left her embarrassed. Alex constructed a perfect excuse to avoid face-to-face meetings.

Over the course of several years Joan underwent a gradual transformation, from suicidal recluse to socially confident woman. Her
journey was inspiring for others. Over a period of three years she set up a women’s discussion group and encouraged women to work on a range of psychological problems. Joan was bisexual and, van Gelder (1991) suggested, after establishing a relationship it was common for her to become sexually aggressive, culminating in netsex with several women.

Finally Alex attempted to kill Joan off. However, when he began this process by hospitalising her with a life-threatening illness, the enormity of responses led Alex to organize her recovery. At this stage Alex began using his screen character to meet women offline. Joan began introducing women to Alex and in one case cited by van Gelder (1991), an offline sexual relationship developed.

Despite the wealth of anecdotal stories, of men pretending to be women and of people creating fictitious characters that seem real to others, there is relatively little research examining these phenomena in cyberspace. Bridget Murray (2000), in an overview of psychological knowledge about online identity, referred to the paucity of empirical data, claiming that "formal knowledge about the medium’s effects on personal identity is scarce--studies to date have focused more on the Internet’s seductive qualities and its influence on relationships" (p.1). Adam Joinson (2003) agreed, noting that “there has been little research into either the prevalence or impact of identity manipulation online” (p.98)

The number of studies on self-presentation online is however growing. In the rest of this chapter research on self-presentation is examined in the following CMC interaction spaces: homepages, email, newsgroups, and chat.

4.2 Self-presentation in Internet interaction spaces

4.2.1 Homepages and weblogs

Homepages provide obvious opportunities for conscious self-presentation. Authors of homepages can carefully craft their image backstage, making
choices about how to best “give” information through text, graphics and sound and animation, as well as which information to omit, all before revealing the public presentation. Most homepage researchers conclude that homepages illustrate self-presentational processes. In particular, researchers have pointed to the use of homepages to claim an identity. In a review of research on homepages, Döring (2002), for example, concluded that the collage-style approach of homepages could be read as “meaningful self-construction”. (p.11)

Hugh Miller (1995), who has been examining homepage self-presentation for nearly a decade, has identified several typical approaches to self-presentation on homepages. At one extreme are self-promoting homepages, referred to by Miller as “cool style” homepages, in which the aim is to present a particularly skilled, interesting, or unique image. Commonplace information, of the type often included on personal homepages, is omitted or included in an ironic subversion of the paradigm. Impression management appears to be an overt motivation in such pages. At the other end of the self-presentational continuum are homepages that simply present the things the creator likes with links to favourite web sites, making little reference to the author. Despite the lack of explicit self-description in this latter style of homepage, Miller argued, “a self emerges all the same” (p.6). The author’s identity is implied in the same way that we infer an impression of the writer of any piece of text, through the words that are chosen, the emphases that are used and the associations made. Some of these may be deliberately chosen or given, by the author, however, other elements of the homepage are beyond the author’s control; they are information “given off”.

When Patricia Wallace (1999) concluded that “we decide exactly what to say and how to say it and which personality traits we want to feature” (p.36) in homepages, she was therefore only partly correct. Just as in offline interactions, information leaks out unconsciously. The style, structure, and
language used, as well as the extent to which the owner follows established homepage norms, all contribute to the impressions that others form. In a gendered analysis of academics’ homepages for example, Arnold and Miller (1999) found that men were more likely than women to flout the conventional structure, avoiding the usual headings such as “academic CV” and “author’s profile”. In this way, the homepages gave off information about the author’s gendered experiences of academic identity in the offline world.

According to Miller (1995), each of the different homepage styles has analogies in the real world. The family homepage, presenting the “corporate identity of the family”, for example, is akin to the annual circular that some families send with their Christmas cards. Miller’s point is that although the “expressive resources” are different in CMC, we utilize our experiences from other media, such as face-to-face, text, and video, to guide our self-presentation online. Self-presentation in homepages is not therefore qualitatively different to self-presentation in offline interactions. The identity that is presented, and the processes that are used to present it, are essentially similar. Whether this means that the expressive resources of homepages are not rich enough to allow the emergence of unique online selves or that we have just not developed our ability to exploit them is still unanswered (Miller & Arnold, 2003).

Wynn and Katz (1997) agree that homepage and offline self-presentation operate in similar ways. They described homepages as “attempts to integrate the individual, make a personal statement of identity, and show in a stable, replicable way what the individual stands for and what is deemed important” (Wynne & Katz, 1997, The Personal Homepage as Presentation of an Integrated Self section, para. 3). Other researchers concur that the majority of homepages are “reliable, unaltered self-presentations” (Döring, 2002). This depiction echoes Leary’s (1995, p.140) description of self-presentation as a process often involving “purposefully editing and selectively presenting
information about oneself that is essentially true”. It is not surprising therefore that the self-expressive motivation of self-presentation has been noted as particularly applicable to homepage creation. The presentation of personal information on homepages is correlated with the author’s perception of the homepage as a vehicle for self-expression (Papacharissi, 2002).

Although self-presentation in homepages therefore appears similar to self-presentation in offline interactions, at least three features of homepages distinguish them from other forms of offline communicative interaction. First, homepages provide authors with the opportunity to produce media content for a previously inaccessible mass audience (Burnett & Marshall, 2003). Second, this potential mass audience is unknown. Miller (1995, p.3) noted that the point of a homepage is to communicate; “they are intended to be read by others”. But the audience of the homepage may not be the one for which it was created (Wynn & Katz, 1997). Even though authors can track hits to their homepage and invite messages in their guest book, authors do not necessarily know who the visitors were. Because the audience is mostly anonymous and potentially diverse, Wallace (1999) has argued homepage creators often incorporate elements from both their private and their public lives, aiming for “an integrated and holistic self-presentation” (p.33). Other researchers agree that the diverse audience imagined by homepage creators raises self-presentation dilemmas (Döring, 2002). Perhaps this is why the self-expressive component of homepages has developed so strongly. Although presented publicly, personal homepage self-presentation is likely to be motivated more by a desire for self-knowledge than any social or material goal.

Third, the one-way nature of homepage communication means that an author’s self-presentation is rarely signified by others. Although most creators include their email address, feedback is seldom received and hence there are few opportunities to adjust the presented image (Sherman, 2001). It is not
surprising therefore, that discrepancies exist between the way homepage authors think they present themselves and the impressions that others form of them. Homepage creators imagine the impression they create through their homepage to be more positive, that they are presented as more likable, and have more in common with their audience, than is actually the case (Sherman et al., 2001).

Like homepages, weblogs are essentially one-way communication, although interaction is invited by many bloggers. The volume of information included in weblogs offers a more complex self-presentation than most home pages, and the expressly personal quality of blogs appears to be motivated by a desire for identity expression. Although blogging is an increasingly popular mode of CMC, little research has as yet been dedicated to the practice. Potential questions about the self-presentational and therapeutic nature of blogs provide fertile ground for future research.

4.2.2 Email

Despite its proliferation, only a small number of studies have examined the role of self-presentation in email. One of the few studies in this area analysed the ways audiences construct impressions via email (Lea & Spears, 1992). Participants were shown a series of emails and asked to form an impression of the sender. Paralinguistic cues, such as misspelling, typing mistakes, and exclamation marks, were included in the messages. Results revealed that impressions varied with the type of paralinguistic cue, leading the authors to conclude that the cues were used in sophisticated ways to form elaborate impressions of each sender (Lea & Spears, 1992). Senders with spelling errors in their message for example, were rated as less competent and likable than those without errors. Contrary to prediction, CMC experience did not mediate impression formation, suggesting that attention to linguistic cues may be appropriated from other contexts such as letter writing rather than
learned directly through experience with email. Like homepages, our use of email as a self-presentational forum is therefore probably a product of our offline experiences.

In a second study, Lea and Spears (1992) tested the SIDE model by manipulating visual anonymity and analysed the effect of paralanguage on impression formation in groups that were either visually anonymous or physically copresent. Results supported the SIDE approach. Under conditions of visual anonymity, when group salience was high, participants perceived paralinguistic cues more positively, compared to when group salience was minimised.

Other experimental research has examined the ways in which gender is presented in email communication. Emails written by females have been found to contain more personal information, references to emotion, and self-derogatory statements than emails written by males (Thomson & Murachver, 2001). Readers are sensitive to these cues, correctly detecting the gender of the sender, even when the content of the message is gender-neutral (Thomson & Murachver, 2001).

A potentially interesting, but unresearched area for research in asynchronous CMC is the mailing list and in particular introductory messages. When participants join a mailing list they are often invited to post a message introducing themselves to other subscribers. This message serves as an obvious self-presentational statement. In an effort to create a positive first impression, users might give this statement careful consideration, however the problem is that

many people are new at this self-presentation mode and in this content they have no model to follow. The result is a bizarre mixture of first impressions that range from the brief and highly professional to heart-rending personal confessional (Wallace, 1999, p.30).
The introductory message creates a self-presentational dilemma. The contributor wants to present a positive first impression, and they can guess at the target audience’s values, but the normative constraints are unknown. Unlike introductions in a first tutorial where a sense of appropriate self-presentation is built up by listening to others, the new subscriber does not have the benefit of these models. Reading contributions to the list may help give a flavour for the norms of behaviour in the group, but standards for an introductory self-presentation may still remain unclear. Other interaction spaces, such as MOOs, alleviate this problem by making introductions, written in the form of character descriptions, accessible to all players.

4.2.3 Newsgroups

Whereas little research exists on self-presentation by email, identity construction in newsgroups has been well researched. One of the earliest studies was conducted by David Myers in the late 1980s. Myers set up his own bulletin board and collected data over a three-month period. Using surveys, an online forum, and private online interviews, Myers (1987a) concluded that the process of creating an online self begins with the selection of a screen name. The second step that Myers noted was establishing a context for that character to act within. For less experienced users this process was a passive one, consisting of learning the technical structures and commands as well as the rules and values specific to that community. For more experienced users with an established online personality the process was more active, taking the form of shaping the community to make it suitable for their character. Of particular note was Myers’ finding that bulletin boards promote high levels of honest and open self-disclosure.

Following this early research, most of the research on newsgroups has been ethnographic in nature, following single or multiple newsgroups over several
months. A typical example is a study by Jason Rutter and Greg Smith (2000) who examined self-presentation amongst the users of a general, social newsgroup called RumCom.local. Messages posted over a six-month period were analysed. Unlike most of the studies of this form of CMC however, Rutter and Smith supplemented the online data with information obtained by telephone and face-to-face interviews, as well as observations of face-to-face weekend meetings.

Stability of self-presentation was noted as a particular feature of .local and this characteristic of the group contributed to a strong sense of community (Rutter & Smith, 2000). The presentation of coherent, consistent selves “allows members to understand the nature of their online relationships, assess the validity of information offered to them by others, and place in context comments and actions of other posters.” (p.3) Like Myers’ (1987a) early finding of open communication online, the users of RumCom.local disclosed rich and personal details of their lives in the newsgroup. These details included geographical location, health, age, work, children, and relationship status, but of particular importance were physical descriptions. Rutter and Smith (2000) noted that users were curious about the physical appearance of others; they often created mental images of those they interacted with and the face-to-face meetings provided opportunities to test the accuracy of these images. Matching bodies to identities was reported to be easy for participants, presumably because the users had revealed aspects of themselves online.

But the users of .local did not simply engage in overt self-disclosure; impressions were managed by deliberately concealing information in public discussions. Posters made use of chat systems and email as well as the telephone and Rutter and Smith (2000) noted that these more private forms of communication functioned as back regions, providing users with a space to disclose personal information. The difficulty for Rutter and Smith was in estimating the extent of these private networks as they were deliberately
hidden from public scrutiny.

This segmenting of identity has been hypothesized as a natural consequence of newsgroups. With their focus on specific areas, newsgroups offer opportunities to dissociate identities, to “divvy up and present our self-representations into packets of various sizes and content”, revealing and concealing aspects as the participant sees fit (Suler, 2002, p.455). In this way, newsgroups can function as a backstage area for subscribers who imagine they are rehearsing privately. Of course, they can never be sure whether the audience for whom they are preparing is lurking, watching the rehearsal (Kendall, 2002).

As well as deliberately revealing and concealing aspects of identity, .local users also made transtextual references, alluding to music, television programs, and artefacts that linked them to other users in a shared cultural background. These references, as a type of information that is given off, also served to present the author in the same way that a favourite site homepage communicates one’s identity.

Rutter and Smith (2000) argue that these techniques of biographical display, information management, and transtextual reference were employed by .local users to present themselves. Their analysis highlights the importance of two aspects of self-presentation theory in newsgroups: the relatively accurate presentation of self-concept and the role of the self-presentational norm of consistency. These two findings have been replicated by other researchers. Nancy Baym (1995), for example, reached similar conclusions in her analysis of rec.arts.tv.soaps. Baym described a large newsgroup of several thousand members who, in their discussion of the socio-emotional realism of soap operas, revealed highly personal details. This intimacy was fostered, Baym argues by a strong restrictive self-presentational norm proscribing inaccurate presentations of identity.

Deceptive self-presentations have, however, been noted in newsgroups by
several researchers. Judith Donath (1999) for example, drew attention to the practice of trolling in her analysis of contributions to Usenet newsgroups. Trolling involves deceptively presenting oneself to deliberately inflame discussion. This type of deception has costly repercussions for newsgroups, where trust may be lost as a consequence (Donath, 1999). Paul Baker (2001) documented a notable troll in alt.tv.melrose-place. When footage of a gay kiss was cut from an episode of the TV program Melrose Place, the question of censorship was raised in the newsgroup. A new user, Macho-Joe, posted at this time. Macho Joe presented a “hyper-gendered stereotype” of masculinity and homophobia. “Oh BARF!!!! Last thing I want to see – a couple of *fags* making out on prime time!” His posts incited strong emotional responses (Baker, 2001).

Baker (2001) described how this deceptive presentation was as much the result of a collaborative narrative as it was the creation of a single user. In a private email to Baker, Macho Joe admitted that the self-presentation arose from his boredom with the newsgroup. The politically correct reactions to his initial post fuelled his extreme strategic self-presentation even more. “To an extent it was their labeling of Joe as ‘stupid’, ‘uneducated’, and ‘trailer-trash’ which led Joe to take on these traits: he simply gave his audience what they expected. Even Joe’s denial of his homosexuality was interpreted as repression.” (Baker, 2001, p.16) Baker’s example illustrates features of self-presentation discussed in Chapter 1. Macho Joe played to the audience and his identity presentation was intimately related to their response. Macho Joe only continued to exist because other members of the group signified his identity claims. His behaviour may also represent experimentation with undesired identity images, as it transpired that Macho Joe was also a benign contributor to homosexual-oriented newsgroups.

Trolling, like flaming, can be explained as disinhibited behaviour online. As noted in Chapter 3, many forms of online communication are
characterized by the conditions that produce deindividuation in everyday life: visual anonymity, lowered sense of responsibility, altered sense of time, and the novelty of the situation for newbies (new users) are all possible contributors to de-individuation (Joinson, 2003). However, research on the SIDE model has indicated that deindividuation is not a necessarily corollary of online interaction. Research by Lea and Spears (1992) has demonstrated that priming participants to think of themselves as a member of the online group encourages the formation of more positive impressions of other group members. In these situations, trolling and flaming are less likely.

Other research has examined the presentation of gender in newsgroups. A comparison of male and female use of pseudonyms on discussion boards found that compared to men, women were four times as likely to mask their gender, choosing either a gender-neutral or male screen name (Jaffe, Lee, Huang, & Oshagan, 1995). This result is consistent with anecdotal evidence presented by Wallace (1999) from system administrators. Mabry (2001), who analysed the gender content of 3000 messages from 30 newsgroups, also concluded that women were less likely to reveal their gender by using their real names, but were more likely than men to present their gender either directly or indirectly in the message content.

4.3.4 Chat

Although chat is used for academic and organisational purposes, particularly when brainstorming is required, it arose as a way to play with communication (Rheingold, 1995) and this playful spirit still characterises much of chat today. One of the most obviously playful features of chat is the use of a screen name or pseudonym, or what is typically referred to on chat as a nick or handle.
4.3.4.1 Screen names

When someone joins a chat channel or logs on to instant messaging they are identified by their screen name. The aim of the screen name is, according to Bechar-Israeli (1996), to convey something of one’s identity and at the same time to tempt others to converse. Screen names, like offline names, have the potential to both reveal and conceal aspects of our identity (Bechar-Israeli, 1996). But, unlike our offline names, which are usually given to us, screen names are names that users choose for themselves.

Whether the name chosen is the same as that used in other communication environments is immaterial. Even when the name is superficially the same, it has one important difference: It has indeed, in its new incarnation, been chosen by its owner. (Myers, 1987b, p.239)

In this choice, screen names offer an obvious opportunity for impression-construction. Screen names provide a way to emphasise aspects of identity that might normally be observed, such as gender, age, and ethnicity or be inferred through interaction, such as occupation, hobbies, and status (Waskul & Douglass, 1997). However, unconstrained by physical reality, chat users can also employ screen names to conceal, modify, or fabricate any of these elements.

The UCLA Internet Report examined the prevalence of screen names amongst Internet users and reported that multiple screen names were common, with users maintaining on average 2.2 different names (UCLA CCP, 2003). This trend was noted amongst all age groups, although the practice was most popular for users under 18 years and those between 25 and 34 years. The adoption of multiple names was common. Most users nevertheless experienced these different screen names as the same identity. A smaller proportion, 14%, described each of their online names as having a different
personality. Users under 18 years were most likely to report this experience, with 17.8% of young users admitting to multiple online identities. Unfortunately, the authors examined neither the ways in which these multiple identities were considered different from each other nor the respondents’ motivations for using separate identities.

The use of multiple identities may be explained by a MAMA pattern, a cycling through identity moratorium and achievement phases. Multiple personalities were reported most frequently by adolescents, the peak period for identity exploration. Experience of multiple personalities was generally low in other age groups, with the exception of adulthood. This period from the 30s into the 40s marks a time when mid-life questioning might prompt another MAMA cycle. Identity exploration in this stage is often constrained by work and family commitments. Online, however “we can re-enter that moratorium state every night, experimenting with identities we never got around to when we were in our teens, or that were off limits for logistical reasons or the basic laws of physics.” (Wallace, 1999, p.48) Unlike the MAMA cycle in the offline world, the repercussions online are reduced. We can simply log off if the experimentation becomes uncomfortable (Wallace, 1999).

Although screen names are relatively easy to change, early writing on online communities noted the stability and integrity of screen names on IRC channels. “You can be reasonably certain that the person you communicate with today under a specific nickname is the same one who used the nickname yesterday” (Rheingold, 1995, p.176). Research on the use of screen names in chat has also failed to support the picture of people engaged in uncommitted experimentation, cycling through identities. Bechar-Israeli (1996) found that people tend to keep screen names and identities for extended periods, suggesting, that on IRC channels, as in the offline world, “people prefer the social attributes of a permanent, recognized identity” (Introduction, para. 12). Screen names are the means by which users are recognised online and they
become part of the user’s "personality and reputation" in chat (Bechar-Israeli, 1996). These findings suggest that any identity experimentation that does occur through screen names is likely to be long term rather than fleeting.

Over a period of 12 months, Bechar-Israeli (1996), adopting a role of covert participant-observer, recorded screen names used on four IRC channels. Preliminary analyses revealed that users were almost equally divided in their use of either single words (55%) e.g., “froggy”, “Elvis”, or more complex combinations or phrases for their screen names (45%) e.g., “shydude”, “itsMe”. Bechar-Israeli (1996) distinguished between the two groups, concluding that users in the latter group “choose to play with language and its possibilities”. He hypothesised that this playfulness with language, with its words and sounds, was of major importance in the formation of screen names. Bechar-Israeli provided a series of examples to illustrate how certain screen names encourage playful interaction. For example, he cited a male using the nick “HollyCow”.

His name attracted a lot of attention the moment he entered the channel, and people started playing with his name. One person commented: "let's butcher him" and <HollyCow> responded: "you can't butcher me.... im holy!!!". In the meantime other people on the channel already started fantasizing about the juicy steaks they will make from the holy cow.

(Playing with nicknames on IRC, para. 1)

In the second stage of the analysis, Bechar-Israeli examined his hypothesis about the playful nature of language in more detail, developing a comprehensive classification system. The system was refined to six broad categories. Screen names with reference to more than one category were multiply coded. The percentage of screen names in each of these categories is presented in Table 4.1.
Table 4.1

*Bechar-Israeli's (1996) Classification of Screen Names in IRC (N = 231)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage of screen names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Screen names related to the self</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology or medium-related screen names</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen names related to objects, flora and fauna</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play on words or sounds</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real name</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen names from literature, TV, films, fairytales</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen names related to sex and provocation</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A small number of participants chose to use their real name as their screen name. More than 90% of users, however, created a different screen name. Some of these screen names alluded to technology or the medium, that is, they used computer and software names or commented on the anonymity of the medium e.g., “pentium”, “unknown”. Others related to animate and inanimate elements e.g., “BMW”, “tulip”. Some identified with figures from literature, film, and history e.g., “Elvis”, “rainman”. Contrary to Bechar-Israeli's (1996) original hypothesis, only a small proportion demonstrated a playfulness with words or sounds e.g., “BeaMeUp” and “myTboy”.

The most frequently occurring category, however, describing nearly 50% of screen names, related to offline identity, e.g., “handsome”, “baddady”. Bechar-Israeli (1996) described this category as including references to character traits, physical appearance, current state, profession and hobbies, age groups, geographical place, and relationships with others. The assumption, however, that these references reflect elements of offline identity
is problematic. “Medoctor”, for example, which Bechar-Israeli (1996)
classified as "indicating the person's profession", may be just as fantastical as
“Elvis”. Although not playful in a linguistic sense, as self-presentational
statements they may have been. Interviews were conducted with some users,
but it is not clear whether users validated these real identity references.

4.3.4.2 Character descriptions and gender choice

In addition to the use of screen names, some chat provides the option to
construct impressions through profiles or descriptions. For example, Pinky on
#cafe, describes herself as a Blackjack dealer from Louisiana and lists her
hobbies as "readin, gamblin, joggin, my kids, writin stories, playin on my
computer..."

In his analysis of self-presentation online Bechar-Israeli (1996) focused on
information that is given. “When interacting via computer, only one type of
information is provided: information a person wishes to give, whether factual
or fiction. A situation such as this enables one to play identity games rich in
fantasy” (Bechar-Israeli, 1996, Nicks in IRC identity games, para. 5) Although
Pinky had the opportunity to actively decide what to include and also what to
omit in her description, like a homepage author, she also tells us about herself
through the information that is given off - the way she writes and language
she uses.

Like the research from newsgroups, research on gender in chat suggests
that even when players swap their gender online, they give off clues to their
offline gender. Dresser (2000), for example, using screen names in
synchronous chat in a graduate education class found that even when women
changed gender in this class, they adopted stereotypically feminine
behaviour.
Negotiating a disembodied identity online and playing with possible selves

Screen names and profiles are the first steps in presenting and negotiating identity online. Sociologists Dennis Waskul and Mark Douglass (1997) examined this process of negotiation in a study of "cyberselves". Data were collected through participant observation of IRC channels, an e-survey distributed to 300 IRC users, and open-ended interviews (presumably online although this is not stated) with a convenience sample of 17. From this data, the authors concluded that cyberselves, defined as the meaning of identity that emerges online, arise in similar ways to other selves: through presentation, negotiation, and signification. According to Waskul and Douglass (1997), the construction of cyberselves is not necessarily a conscious process; as in the offline world, identity online evolves over time, through ongoing interaction with others. Just as Miller (1995) argued with respect to homepages, online self-presentation in chat is shaped by offline experiences. Unlike offline identities however, cyberselves cannot be fixed to a physical body or a specific location. In the pseudonymity of online chat environments any identity is possible; "categories of personhood - race, gender, socioeconomic status, age, physical appearance - all become pure labels, symbols to think and interact with, not within" (p.388).

The physical body has traditionally been considered an essential aspect of identity. Baumeister (1997) for example, stated "it is undeniably true that the self begins with body... Understanding of selfhood begins with awareness of one’s body, the body continues to be an important basis of selfhood throughout life" (p.192). In cyberspace, however, identity is no longer tied to any physical form, and this distinction, according to Waskul and Douglass (1997), means that cyberselves are always different to identities presented offline. Cyberselves are fundamentally "disembodied". This freedom from physical reality gives licence to self-select attributes. But this very freedom from our physical body makes impression formation difficult. Questions
about age, sex and location, typically abbreviated to “asl?”, are frequently asked in first meetings online. Wallace (1999) has argued that our unremitting interest in these attributes online reflects how heavily the process of impression formation in the physical world relies on this information. Until we can place people on these dimensions, she argued, social interaction is often awkward. This emphasis might change, however, as people become more used to developing relationships that exist in cyberspace, without any offline component.

Even though participants may be concerned with corporeal attributes, identity experimentation is still a part of chat. Informants in the research by Waskul and Douglass (1997) described the anonymity of IRC as allowing them to engage in behaviour ranging from expressing oneself a little more freely to trying out possible selves and playing out fantasies. Walther (1996) has described CMC as permitting communicators to “express themselves in ways more revealing of their self-perceptions, or self-ideals, than they might otherwise” (Walther, 1996, p.43). Research by Lawson (1997, as cited in Lawson, 2000) supported the notion of acting out desired identity images online. Using a Q-sort methodology Lawson measured changes in real, ideal, and virtual identity over a six-week period. Similarity between ideal and virtual identity increased with exposure to synchronous CMC. These results imply that users play out ideal selves in chat, at least in the short term.

Interesting questions remain about whether this play is maintained over time or whether people revert back to presentations of actual identity in the long term. The implications for identity in the offline world and the therapeutic potential of this play are also unclear, although research on the presentation of stigmatized identities online suggests that online behaviour can have positive effects in the offline world (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). This finding is consistent with self-presentation research that has indicated behaviour performed publicly can impact on identity.
4.3.4.4 Presenting the “true” self

Other research indicates that synchronous CMC provides opportunities to be who one really believes one is. In a series of experiments Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) observed the presentation of the true self in chat. Compared to the actual self, defined as those characteristics the individual believes she possesses and presents to others, the true self is comprised of those characteristics she possesses and would like to present, but does not. Results confirmed that the true self was more accessible after online chat than offline interaction. In contrast, the actual self was more accessible than the true self after face-to-face interaction. Further research suggested these more accessible characteristics were also more likely to be presented; successful presentation of the true self was more likely in the CMC condition than in face-to-face interaction (Bargh et al., 2002).

Several researchers have noted the tendency for people to become more open online than they are offline (Frankel & Siang, 1999; Joinson, 2001; Myers, 1987a). In a series of studies, Joinson (2003) demonstrated that self-disclosure was higher for participants interacting online compared to those working face-to-face. Adding a video link to synchronous CMC interaction reduced self-disclosure to the level reported in face-to-face interaction. Joinson (2001) concluded that self-disclosure was facilitated online by visual anonymity and noted that this hyperpersonal exchange was possible even when the interaction was short-term and without any expectation of future interaction or offline meeting. The experience is analogous to the “strangers on a train” phenomenon described in Chapter 1.

Nevertheless, even when people do attempt to accurately reflect their self-concept, the disembodied nature of online selves means that the presentation will always be contextually dependent. Waskul and Douglass (1997) underscored this point in their analysis of cyberselves which they defined as
situated performances that exist at the surface of a communicated knife-edge present. In short, a cyberself is always whatever is passing for a self at the moment in an electronic-computer-mediated context. (p.387)

The pseudonymity of chat thus presents a paradox for participants. All self-presentations are potentially specious. Despite this underlying knowledge, however, users tacitly agree to "forget about the person behind the persona and rely on the individual's word as an accurate representation of self" (Waskul & Douglass, 1997, p.389). The difference between on and offline selves, Waskul and Douglass (1997) have argued, is "utterly nonexistent" (p.389).

This is a strong claim that does not sit easily with anecdotal evidence of the prevalence of requests for asl identifying information. The claim is also contradicted by evidence from the researchers' own informants. For example, one informant reflected, "I don't know if people are as they claim to be". For this informant the distinction between online and offline identity is a very meaningful one. Not only is there a difference between what “people are” and what they “claim to be”, but offline identity appears to be privileged as the more “real” identity. This concern, echoed by several other informants quoted in the article, suggests that for these users the embodied person behind the text is far from forgotten.

4.3.4.5 Deceptive self-presentations

The belief that people misrepresent themselves in chat is commonly held. Few studies, however, have expressly examined deceptive self-presentations in this domain. In one of the few quantitative studies on the topic, Cornwell and Lundgreen (2001) reported that people were more likely to misrepresent their age and physical characteristics on chat than in offline interactions, although as Joinson (2003) noted, this probably reflects the “degrees of
freedom” afforded in online communication. In the physical world aspects of physical appearance and age are given off; for the most part outside the presenter’s control. Perhaps people misrepresent themselves in these areas online simply because they can, not because they particularly wish to experiment or play with these facets of identity.

Chapter summary

Metaphors from the offline world are often used to describe the different interaction spaces of CMC (Burnett & Marshall, 2003). Homepages are likened to personal advertisements, weblogs to a public journal. The metaphor of the post is often applied to email. Newsgroups are likened to a discussion or conversation. A metaphor of a pub or café is used to describe chat. Research on each of these dimensions suggests that the principles of self-presentation outlined in Chapter 1 can be applied online. In homepages, newsgroups, and chat in particular there is strong evidence to suggest that users engage in self-presentation strategies and audiences form impressions based on information that is both given and given off. Despite the differences between these interaction spaces self-presentation theory nevertheless appears to be a useful tool for exploring and explaining online behaviour.

Studies indicate that the self-presentation processes and outcomes online draw on fundamental offline experiences. Some researchers, however, go further to argue that the disembodied nature of online interaction creates fundamental differences, allowing people to more fully express their self-concept as well as act out idealised selves and present other deceptive images. These experiences are likely to be heightened in MOOs, the CMC interaction space that I consider in Chapter 5. Anonymity is high in MOOs, as are interactivity and vividness. In MOOs, the player is not only disembodied, but encouraged to play with that disembodyment. The metaphor often used to describe MOOs is a fantasy world (Burnett & Marshall, 2003). How then do
participants play with identity in these “fantasy worlds”? 
CHAPTER 5
RESEARCHING IDENTITY PLAY IN MOOS

You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever. You can just be whoever you want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be.

MOO player, as cited in Turkle, (1996) p.184

Chapter overview

In an essay on the relationship between the embodied self and place, Beth Kolko (2001) described travel as an exercise in self-presentation.

Do I want to blend in? Will I make myself less a target for exploitation if I look like a native? Do I try to dress like the photos in the tourism books? For what local slang should I prepare? Or do I embrace my role as outsider and wear the visitor status proudly? ... When we journey from home, we pack a bag that, we hope contains what is necessary for us to masquerade, as outsider or insider, in this new place. Whether it is an attempt to sand down the sharp edges that mark us as different, or a determined and more exaggerated display of who we are “back home,” the decision of how to self-present while on the road is a fabulous puzzle. (p.253)

When we cross the border to the online world, we make similar choices, some conscious, others less so. In MOOs these self-presentational decisions are played out in a range of ways: through the initial choice of screen name and gender, through one’s character and room description, as well as in interaction with others. In this section of the thesis I examine the literature that has explored these
forms of impression construction in MOOs.

5.1 The demographics of MOO users

Previous research on MOO users presents a demographic picture of some variability, nevertheless, some broad parameters can be drawn. Reported ages of social and role-playing MOO users have ranged from 13 to 74, but means typically lie in the 20s (Kendall, 2002; Roberts & Parks, 1999; Sempsey & Johnston, 2000).

Despite the gender equity now noted amongst Internet users (UCLA CCP, 2003) MOO users are typically male, although the proportion of females in social MOO samples has ranged from 30% (Kendall, 2002; Sempsey & Johnston, 2000) to nearly 50% (Roberts & Parks, 1999). Ethnicity has generally not been reported in studies of MOOs, however, Kendall (2002) estimated that 99% of players in the social MOO she investigated had English as a first language.

5.2 MOOs as identity laboratories

Like the other domains described previously, MOOs provide obvious opportunities for self-presentation. The combination of features that characterise MOOs, - visual anonymity, high interactivity, synchronicity, and ephemerality – however, create an especially fertile ground for identity experimentation. Compared to face-to-face groups, MOOs are perceived by players as permitting more self-discovery and expressiveness and creating an atmosphere of acceptance (Sempsey & Johnston, 2000), making them likely spaces in which to observe identity play.

MOOs have been described as workshops, laboratories, theatres, and fantasy worlds for identity exploration. The presentation of identity in MOOs has been likened to collective writing, performance, and masquerade. Underpinning all of
these metaphors is the widely held belief that MOOs hold unprecedented potential for identity play. This description of MOOs permeates the literature. For example, Sherry Turkle (1995), one of the major contributors to the psychological analysis of identity online described MOOs as “a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life” (p.180). In this online interaction space players become “masters of self-presentation and self-creation. The very notion of an inner, ‘true self’ is called into question” (Turkle, 1994, p.164).

MOOs, it appears, are the quintessential place for the exploration of the fragmented, malleable, and multiple selves that we have been told populate our postmodern world. MOOs have become “objects to think with”, objects through which to rethink and reconstruct identity (Bruckman, 1993; Turkle, 1995). For Turkle, the MOO player is not only the author-creator of the game, but of herself. Brenda Danet (1996) agreed, describing as "verbal puppetry" the playful manipulation of personae by an online user whose own identity and existence is "for all intents and purposes irrelevant”. Elizabeth Reid (1994) observed the boundless fluidity of MOOs, in which the player is dynamic and limited only by imagination.

The player is the most problematic of all virtual entities, for his or her virtual manifestation has no constant identity. MUD characters need not be of any fixed gender or appearance, but may evolve, mutate, morph, over time and at the whim of their creator. (Chapter 3, para. 1)

These conceptualisations are based on the assumption of attenuation that underlies the cues filtered out approaches to CMC. It is because MOOs are text-based and therefore lack visual cues, that identity experimentation is possible in
ways that are, if not impossible, then are often very difficult to achieve in the offline world.

5.3 The metaphor of play in MOOs

MOO interactions have all the qualities of play described in Chapter 2. They are, for the most part, voluntarily chosen, intrinsically pleasurable, and rely on active participation. Earlier I introduced the concepts of flow and deep play, both of which have been used to explain states of intense focus and decreased self-consciousness. Ackerman (1999) identified contexts particularly conducive to this experience, especially “remote, silent, and floaty environments” (p.12). Although Ackerman did not make the connection, her descriptions bring to mind experiences of being logged on late at night, where the computer screen is the only light in a silent, dark room. In such an environment it is easy to lose track of time and become so completely absorbed in the interaction that one feels present in the communication and distance from the physical context. Internet communities rely on active involvement: “Cyberspace requires one of the more intense kinds of engagement; in the cyberspace of virtual worlds, experience is defined by taking action, including deciding explicitly who you are, or who you want to say you are.” (Kolko, 2001, p.213) These characteristics of deep play are synonymous with the experience of telepresence, the sense, now widely documented, of being “there” when interacting online.

Like the role-play of childhood, identity experimentation in MOOs is frequently conceptualised as taking place in a relatively safe space. The high level of anonymity that characterises MOOs contributes to this sense of safety. In the offline world, our self-presentations are constrained by the impressions that others already have of us. Radically inconsistent self-presentations contravene expected norms of self-presentational consistency and accuracy. If the self-
presentation is not convincing and is deemed deceptive by the audience, it will not be signified and we risk embarrassment. Online however, these limitations are absent or less constraining. “We can simply disconnect if things get too hot and the consequences get out of hand” (Wallace, 1999, p.48). The putative anonymity of MOOs provides a freedom for reinvention. As Curtis (1997) argued,

it is this guarantee of privacy that makes players’ self-presentation so important and, in a sense, successful. Players can only be known by what they explicitly project and are not ‘locked into’ any factors beyond their easy control, such as personal appearance, race, etc. (p.9)

The anonymity of MOOs allows players to fashion their self-presentation unconstrained by reality. Online play operates, like all play, “in the subjunctive mode of possibility and experimentation” (Danet et al., 1997, Playfulness in Computer-Mediated Communication section, para. 8). However, unlike daydreams of possible selves, which remain in fantasy, MOO identity play is like a child’s make-believe game, simultaneously separated from, but nonetheless part of real life, “both real and illusory at the same time” (Meares, 1992, p.37).

It is connection to the everyday world that makes identity play in MOO such a powerful idea. MOO players do, after all, interact with other real people. In contrast to purely cognitive manipulations of identity, identity play in MOOs is public behaviour, signified by a real audience. Often removed from our other day-to-day interactions, however, this audience and its significations can be quarantined, safely compartmentalized so that the identity play need not necessarily disrupt offline life.

Danet et al. (1997) have argued that CMC play is product of several related
characteristics, including ephemerality, speed, and interactivity, all of which were noted in Chapter 3 as particularly characteristic of MOO communication. The text-based nature of CMC also encourages linguistic playfulness. The need to type what we would ordinarily communicate verbally or non-verbally, “calls attention to the communicating means employed in formulating the message. The reduced transparency of language heightens meta-linguistic awareness, and leads us to treat words as objects and to play with them.” (Danet et al., 2001, Stylization, “Orality” and Performance section, para. 2). Writing becomes performance. Its attributes - speed and eloquence - accord status (Dery, 1996; Rheingold, 1995). This playfulness was noted by Bechar-Israeli (1996) in the example of Hollycow, but it is even more likely to take place in text-based MOOs because players use language to interact with their environment, to move around, and to manipulate objects. In their introduction to MOOing for students, Jan Rune Holmevik and Cynthia Haynes (2000) highlighted this point, advising students to “let your creative juices flow... the way you use language to create images and illusions is really what MOOing is all about.” (p.48)

Identity experimentation in MOOs is sanctioned by a play frame that contextualises MOO interaction. When children engage in imaginary play they understand that what transpires within the frame is play (Dockett & Fleer, 1999). MOO users also understand that the frame of their interactions means that people are free to play with self-presentation. An important cue that one has entered the play frame is the use of a screen name. Screen names announce “one’s willingness to play. They are a kind of mini-ritual in which, each time participants log on, they declare their entrance into the state of play” (Bechar-Israeli, 1996, Summary and Discussion section, para. 3). Character descriptions, the selection of gender, and the opportunity to construct one’s own home space also signal a world in which identity play is possible. They are all features of a
liminal space similar to the orienting phase of pretend play in childhood.

Although identity play is talked about frequently in the CMC literature, the concept is rarely defined or operationalised. Typically it refers to the presentation of aspects of self that are not presented in the offline world. The continuum is one of real/not real. At one end are authentic self-presentations, representations intentionally designed to communicate the player’s offline identity. At the other end of this continuum were masquerades, presentations of idealized and fantastical images. In between these extremes are exaggerations and concealments, various shades of pretence or deception. The placement of self-presentational acts on this continuum appears to be influenced by the player as well as the context. On some MOOs, such as those based on Anne McCaffrey’s *Pern* books, the frame explicitly stipulates character play; talk about the offline world is prohibited (Bruckman, 1993). However, even in MOOs with a primarily social focus, players acknowledge the possibility that self-presentations may not be accurate representations of the person’s offline identity (Kendall, 2002).

In imaginary play, children move in and out of the play frame, signalling its presence through metacommunication. The same type of movement is possible online, with players slipping in and out of character. One of my own students, who used an elaborately conceived animal identity online, sometimes signalled his movement outside the play frame explicitly, by saying, “I want to talk to you as Keith for a minute”. Identity play online is therefore sanctioned by and takes place within a play frame. That frame, however, is not necessarily a single boundary. Danet et al. (1997), in an analysis of an IRC party, found evidence of five nested frames. The *performance frame*, in which participants signalled their technical competence was nested within a *pretend frame*, in which participants simulated the kinds of behaviour typical of a party. The pretend frame was nested within a *party frame*, which reduced accountability. These frames were all
nested within the *IRC frame* and this frame within *real life*. Danet et al. (1997) noted how participants moved in and out of frames just as children do when engaged in pretend play.

Research by Talamo and Ligorio (2001) suggested that even within the play frame, self-presentation is constrained by roles. In their study of the use of avatars in an educational meta-world, the majority of students (62%) cycled through avatars, trying on different images and monitoring how the presentation affected others’ impressions. A smaller proportion of students (10%) took a situated approach, choosing an avatar appropriate to different contexts. In the true spirit of postmodern multiplicity, the frame permitted these types of self-presentational experimentation. In contrast, however, the majority of staff (80%) favoured consistent self-presentation through the use of a permanent avatar. These participants wanted to be recognised by their screen image. This research indicates that although MOOs hold the potential for fluid, multiple, and playful self-presentations, roles within the community are important in shaping self-presentational choices.

5.4 Desired identity images: wish fulfilment in MOOs

For Ackerman (1999) the state of deep play brings with it an idealised self. To what extent does the MOO environment facilitate the emergence of an idealised self? The play frame of MOOs provides obvious opportunities to act out desired identity images. Character descriptions frequently contain features of exaggerated social desirability (Curtis, 1997; Reid, 1994). This self-presentation practice may be a natural compensatory result of condensing and distilling information into a narrow bandwidth (Reid, 1994). However, it might also be, like pretend play in childhood, part wish-fulfilment. Curtis (1997) observed that wish-fulfilment was common in MOO character descriptions. “I cannot count the
number of ‘mysterious, but unmistakably powerful’ figures I have seen wandering around in LambdaMOO. Many players, it seems, are taking advantage of the MUD to emulate various attractive characters from fiction.” (p.8) Other writers have noted how the use of screen names in educational MOOs allows students to “out’ a formerly hidden or inhibited self through language” (Romano, 1999, p.254).

Idealised self-presentations have been observed not just in MOO character descriptions, but also in the ways that participants play out their characters over time. On the basis of observations and face-to-face interviews with more than 200 MOO users, Sherry Turkle (1995) concluded that desired identity images are an important component of MOO interactions. Turkle described an active MOOer, Stewart, who lived out his ideal self online. With an offline life constrained by physical health problems, this player used MOOs to participate in a broader social and romantic world. Logging on for more than 40 hours each week, Stewart created a world in which to present his ideal self. In the same way that Myers (1987a) argued bulletin board users shape their context to make it appropriate for their character, Stewart crafted a home in the MOO for his idealised self. He named his home on one MOO, “the home beneath the silver moon” and described it as an elegant, romantic place: “There are books, a roaring fire, cognac, a cherry mantel ‘covered with pictures of … friends from around the world. You look up … and through the immense skylight you see a breathtaking view of the night sky. The moon is always full … and its light fills the room with a warm glow”. (Turkle, 1996, p.163) The image is one of intimacy and of social and romantic proficiency. Online Stewart achieved more success in these areas than he had known in face-to-face interactions and he acknowledged that the character was an improved version of his offline self (Turkle, 1996).

Both the conscious and unconscious presentation of ideal identity images in
MOOs have similarities to psychotherapeutic, particularly psychodynamic, processes (Turkle, 1996). Online experimentation with ideal selves and self-disclosure are facilitated by the anonymity of MOOs and norms that prescribe active participation. So too in therapy, experimentation is encouraged. The compassionate neutrality of the psychoanalytic therapist facilitates transference, the acting out of feelings and fantasies that are the unfinished business of earlier relationships and the norm of free association encourages active, uncensored participation. Just as in therapy, online experimentation has the potential to help the individual work through unresolved issues. Turkle (1996) noted that this constructive use of MOOs emerges when players are able to integrate online and offline identities, applying the lessons learned online in their offline world to “work through” psychological problems. Other MOO players signify successful self-presentations and when this validated identity is internalised, benefits accrue outside the MOO. Turkle (1996) described this use of the MOO as a kind of psychosocial moratorium, identity experimentation free from commitment.

In contrast to this constructive outcome, other players “act out” unresolved difficulties, repetitively playing out past relationships, but without insight into how their online behaviour is connected to the offline world. Stewart, for example, with all his success online, was unable to transfer that knowledge to other contexts.

Stewart cannot learn from his character Achilles’ experiences and social success because they are too different from the things of which he believes ‘himself’ capable. Despite his efforts to turn Achilles into Stewart, Stewart has ‘split off’ his strengths and sees them as possible only for Achilles in the MUD. (Turkle, 1996, p.168)
Playing out this idealized self therefore had little impact for Stewart beyond the MOO.

5.5 Undesired identity images: Acting out the feared self

Research on possible selves has suggested that hoped for selves are more salient than feared selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Nevertheless the motivational role of feared selves has been noted (Ogilvie, 1987). The online world, with its anonymity and reduced repercussions, offers an obvious place to act out feared selves. In describing play Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1984) commented that its disguised nature allows us to

say the opposite of what we mean in order to mean the opposite of what we say... Being weak we (child or adult) play at being powerful in order both to disguise that we feel weak and yet to reveal to any other that weakness is our problem.” (p. 319)

The play frame and visual anonymity of MOOs can facilitate disinhibition and also allow players to distance themselves from the character enough to reveal their fears. Macho-Joe, the homophobic persona on alt.tv.melrose-place (Baker, 2001), may represent a feared self. Although Macho Joe described the acting out of the character as a bit of fun, it is possible that the newsgroup provided a relatively safe place to act out an undesired self.

Turkle (1996) identified this pattern of behaviour in MOOs when she described personae that represent aspects of players “that they hate or fear or perhaps have not ever consciously confronted before” (p.164). Turkle (1995) cited a male player who, reacting against an over-controlling parent, sought control over his own life as an adult. Without realizing the significance of it at the time,
this same person created a character on the MOO that was the antithesis of his offline identity, a passive person who let others take the initiative. His passive character provided an opportunity to play out an undesired self and gave unconscious respite from his constant assertion of control in the offline world.

5.6 Personality and identity play

The ethnographic nature of much MOO research has meant that personality correlates of identity play have not been well quantified. One of the few studies to consider the role of personality in identity play in MOOs was conducted by Roberts and Parks (1999). In this research, participants who were gender swapping were compared with those who no longer gender swapped and those who had never gender swapped on measures of extraversion, shyness, and neuroticism. None of these variables was related to gender swapping behaviour.

Roberts and Parks’ (1999) study considered three obvious dimensions of personality, however other domains measured by Big Five personality scales such as the NEO (Costa & McCrae, 1992) might also be related to general impression construction online. The Openness to Experience domain, for example, provides a measure of imagination, creativity, preference for variety, and intellectual curiosity, all of which might be considered correlates of identity experimentation online. The study by Roberts and Parks was limited to gender play and it is unclear whether the results can be generalised to other forms of identity construction. Given that the study was the only one of its kind, more research is needed, as the authors themselves acknowledge, to determine the role of personality in self-presentation in MOOs.

5.7 CMC experience and identity play

It has been suggested that the extent to which MOO players engage in
authentic self-presentation online is a function of their online experience. Curtis (1997), for example, noted that players who began with a developed character description rarely continued to play out that character. “Most players appear to tire of such an effort quickly and simply interact with the others more-or-less straightforwardly, at least to the degree that one does in normal discourse.” (p.8) One of the reasons for dropping characters as time goes on is that the roles, often derived from works of fiction, don’t make sense in the context of the MOO (Curtis, 1997). But players also change their perception of the medium with experience. Roberts et al. (1996) noted that identity play decreased over time as players came to see the MOO as a tool for communication rather than a virtual reality for expressing different facets of identity.

5.8 Distributed and multiple identities

Observations of identity playfulness in MOOs have led writers to conclude that MOOs challenge the very concept of identity. Turkle (1995) has been one of the most vocal exponents of the argument that MOOs realise a postmodern conceptualisation of identity as fragmented, situationally constructed, and multiple. The metaphor of the window is central to Turkle’s (1995) argument. Many MOOers keep MOO windows open, moving in and out of MOOs and the offline world as easily as a child moves in and out of the play frame. One MOO user explained how he used windows to switch between work and MOO, giving the impression of being singularly focused. It is easy to appear to be 100 percent active when really you’re switching back and forth, too. You can say something when I’m editing C++ code, and I can look back and reply to it after I start the compile, and to you it looks like I was right here the whole time (Kendall, 2002, p.26).
When you enter a room in a MOO you see not only a description of the room, but also a list of all players present in the room. This physicality heightens the sense that players are present in a space even if they are working in other windows. Research suggests that online contexts develop their own rich set of norms and practices (Reid, 1994). Unlike the norm of civil attention in the offline world, the Internet operates on a norm of multi-tasking and peripheral participation. It is acceptable behaviour to engage in multiple conversations, interacting simultaneously in more than one MOO and to follow the interaction, but move in and out of active participation (Curtis, 1997; Wong, 2000).

Turkle (1996) has argued that the capacity to move between windows and juggle multiple tasks has important implications for identity.

The self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings, something that people experience when, for example, one wakes up as a lover, makes breakfast as a mother, and drives to work as a lawyer. The life practice of windows is of a distributed self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time. (p.160)

This notion of the distributed self raises a range of issues. The distributed self is exposed to an increased number of social interactions, allowing us to “maximise our social relationships by interspersing them in our more mundane and methodical activities” (Wong, 2000, p.196). But simultaneous exposure to multiple audiences creates self-presentation dilemmas. When numerous audiences exist, to whom is the self presented? This question has particular salience online because many users play characters on more than one MOO. The practice of playing different characters on different MOOs has been widely reported (Kendall, 2002; Sempsey, 1997; Taylor, 1999). Turkle (1996) used the
example of a male who played four different characters in three different MOOs including a flirtatious woman, a macho male, and a gender-neutral rabbit. In a study of avatars in meta-worlds, Taylor (1999) noted that two online personae were common amongst her informants and many informants had more.

One of the most obvious aspects of corporeal reality that can be played with online is gender, a construct that has received considerable attention in both the theoretical and research literature.

5.9 Online gender play

Cyberspace provides the potential for “unmarked” interaction and so offers opportunities to challenge existing categories such as age, sex, and ethnicity. However, the most frequently asked initial questions online are still concerned with age, sex and ethnicity, questions that seek to contextualise the player in embodied ways. Although cyberspace has been touted as a new frontier where one can move beyond the constraints of physical reality, anecdotal evidence suggests that users continue to categorise self and others using familiar schemas. The tendency is to “(re)impose a meaningful order by mapping the space with known categories of distinction” (O’Brien, 1999, p.87). Age, sex, and ethnicity (measured in part by one’s location) are, for the most part, immediately apparent in our offline interactions and they are the primary categories used in person perception (O’Brien, 1999). Of the three, gender is the attribute that has been most frequently discussed in the literature. It is also the only attribute of the three that is consistently offered as a property for players to set for themselves in MOOs.\footnote{For a discussion of why ethnicity is not regularly included as a property that players can set for themselves in MOOs, see Kolko (2000).}
5.9.1 Communicating gender online

Gender swapping refers to the practice of presenting an online gender different to one’s biological sex. Men may present as women; women may present as men; or one can choose from a range of non-binary categories including gender neutral, plural, and indeterminate options. Gender is often signalled in the screen name and character description as well as through interaction in all the interaction spaces, but gender play is particularly relevant to a discussion of MOOs because in MOOs players are required to set their gender when they first log on as their character. Unlike gender in the offline world, gender in MOOs is consciously chosen and can be altered easily through a single text command.

Most MOOs offer players a wide choice of genders from which to choose including neuter, plural, and Spivak. One’s chosen gender is accessible to other players, both in the character description and in the pronouns that are used to refer to that character. Each gender has its own set of pronouns, meaning that gender affects the way the character is presented linguistically online. As an example, the genders available on LambdaMOO, together with their pronouns, are listed in Table 5.1 below. The uses of these pronouns are illustrated through the standard sentence, “I read my book myself”.

In both the offline and online worlds, gender is information that is given as well as given off. In MOOs, players give (or conceal) information about gender through their choice of gender and character description. Players also give off information through their language. Women, for example, use more neutral and affectionate verbs than men (Cherny, 1994). They are also more likely to align themselves with other participants, expressing support, apologising, and qualifying comments, whereas men are more likely to present an adversarial
Table 5.1

*Character Genders Available on LambdaMOO*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>She, her, hers, herself</td>
<td>She reads her book herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>He, him, his, himself</td>
<td>He reads his book himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuter</td>
<td>It, its, itself</td>
<td>It reads its book itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>They, them, their, theirs, themselves</td>
<td>They read their book themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spivak</td>
<td>E, em, eir, eirs, eirself</td>
<td>E reads eir book eirself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Either</td>
<td>S/he, him/her, his/her, (him/her)self</td>
<td>S/he read his/her book him/herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal</td>
<td>We, us, our, ours, ourselves</td>
<td>We read our book ourselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splat</td>
<td>e, h*, h<em>s, h</em>sself</td>
<td>e reads h<em>s book h</em>sself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egotistical</td>
<td>I, me, my, mine, myself</td>
<td>I read the book myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>You, your, yours, yourself</td>
<td>You read your book yourself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Per, per, pers, perself</td>
<td>Per reads pers book perself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from “Text as mask: Gender and identity on the Internet” by B. Danet, 1996.

discourse, including asserting opinions and swearing (Herring, 2001). Women are more likely to emote smiles and laughter than men; men are more likely to insult and injure than women (Herring, 2001). These gender cues are often given off repeatedly in online interactions. Herring (2001) estimates that in chat gender is signalled as frequently as every three lines of text, implying that gender deception would be difficult to sustain over extended periods.

Discourse analyses therefore suggest that successfully swapping gender is hard work. Many first-hand accounts attest to this, describing the experience as disorienting and demanding. Elizabeth Reid (1994), for example, described her own experience of gender swapping as “stressful and bewildering”. Without the usual, often unconscious, internalised gender-specific rules of communication, Reid (1994) said she felt “rudderless, unable to negotiate the most simple of
social interactions” (Ungrounding Gender section, para. 12).

5.9.2 Motivation for gender swapping

Given the effort that gender swapping entails, why do people bother? Most writers agree that the motivation for online gender swapping is different for males and females. Curtis (1997) noted that some males swap gender to deceive others. However, he also suggested that males present themselves as female out of curiosity, a desire to see what it “feels like to be perceived as female in a community” (p.7). Reid (1994) agreed that “the chance to swim unfamiliar waters…. to see how the other half lives” is a powerful source of motivation for gender swapping. Turkle (1995) described the same motivation in a male informant who used a female character for nearly 12 months. “I wanted to know more about women’s experiences, and not just from reading about them…. I wanted to see what the difference felt like. I wanted to experiment with the other side.”

For Turkle’s (1995) informant, the female character offered an opportunity to present aspects of his identity that he found difficult to express as a male. Roberts and Parks (1999) confirmed the importance of this source of motivation in a large sample of more than 400 MOO players. Amongst those who had gender swapped, the largest group cited curiosity about gender as the major motivating factor. Of those who no longer swapped gender online, nearly one-fifth (18%) said their curiosity had been satisfied. In addition to curiosity, Joinson (2003) has suggested that for some men the motivation to gender swap might come from a desire to provide a role model for women in the offline world. Alex’s persona, Joan Greene, appears to have operated at least in part in this way, offering an inspiring example to many women online.

The primary motivation for women to conceal or swap their gender is
attention, or rather lack of it. Probably because female characters are less common than male characters in MOOs, female characters attract attention. That attention is often sexual. However, just as damaging according to Bruckman (1993) is the unsolicited help frequently offered to female characters. Other players often seem to assume that female characters require help, however, as one woman quoted by Bruckman commented, “People offering me help to solve puzzles *I* wrote are not going to get far” (p.3).

Concealing gender for women is therefore often experienced as liberating. Sherry Turkle (1995) said of the first time she played a male character in a MOO, “I finally experienced that permission to move freely I had always imagined to be the birthright of men” (p.211) Sexual advances were less common and she found those that continued, less threatening. She responded more assertively. As a male, Turkle was treated differently by others and she behaved differently.

Finally, for both women and men online gender swapping may be motivated by a desire to experiment sexually. Reid (1994) suggested that the special treatment male players extend to female characters is motivated by romantic and sexual exploration. Men pretending to be women can have lesbian sex with women online. And some men playing female characters are “taking advantage of the perfect safety of the MUD situation to see how it feels to approach other men” (Curtis, 1997, p.7)

5.9.3 Effects of gender swapping

Despite the putative safety often attributed to identity play online, gender swapping relies not just on cognitive skill; it also carries potential psychological risk. Turkle (1995) cited the example of a male playing a female character who described gender swapping as an uncomfortable, but valuable experience, facilitating the learning that arises from “hard times”. “Playing this woman”, he
said, “lets me see what I have in my psychological repertoire, what is hard and what is easy for me. And I can also see how some of the things that work when you’re a man just backfire when you’re a woman.” (Turkle, 1995, p.214) At its best, gender swapping offers opportunities for insight into one’s own identity and increased empathy for others. Nevertheless, it is clear from a range of studies that online gender swapping does not automatically lead to a deconstruction of gender for players. In fact the opportunity to swap genders appears, in many cases, to emphasise differences between femininity and masculinity, reinforcing gender as a dichotomous construct (Kendall, 2002; O’Brien, 1999).

5.9.4 Prevalence of gender swapping in MOOs

Online gender swapping has occupied considerable attention in the literature, however, the prevalence of the practice has been difficult to determine. Many writers have simply assumed that gender play is common. Cherny (1994), for example, stated that “the users of MOOS experiment with gender a lot” without providing any evidence to support the statement (Gender Research in MOOs section, para. 2). Traditionally the incidence of gender swapping has been estimated by beginning with the assumption that the majority of users are male. As the number of female and male screen names are often about equal, it is generally concluded that at least some of the female-presenting players in MOOs are really male.

Few studies have however validated these assumptions. One of the few systematic studies of online gender swapping by Roberts and Parks (1999) surveyed more than 400 MOO users and found no sex differences in gender swapping behaviour. Their self-report research also revealed relatively low levels of gender swapping in social MOOs. Of the participants in social MOOs, only
40% had tried gender swapping. Predictably gender swapping in role-playing MOOs, where players are expected to play out a role, was more common. Nearly 60% of participants in these types of MOOs reported having swapped gender. Even in role-playing MOOs therefore, a sizable proportion of players had never experimented with gender swapping. No age differences were reported.

Despite the breadth of gender choice available in MOOs, research suggests that players who swap their gender generally choose the conventional categories of female and male. Roberts and Parks (1999) reported that the vast majority of players (80%) swapped between female and male genders. Danet (1996) also found that male and female choices were the most popular in two of the most widely populated MOOs. In both LambdaMOO and MediaMOO male characters outnumbered any other gender category, with approximately 50% of players choosing a male gender. In LambdaMOO a further 30% of the 7000 players chose a female gender and only 16% were neuter. In MediaMOO, a MOO established by Amy Bruckman to build a community for media researchers, the ratio of female to neuter characters was reversed, with more neuter than female characters (28% and 20% respectively), which may reflect the perceived value of gender-neutrality in a professional context. Only a small proportion of players in each MOO adopted other gender categories.

5.9.5 Attitudes towards gender swapping

Attitudes towards gender swapping vary within the online community. Those who accept the practice typically see it as a legitimate behaviour within the MOO frame; it is after all just part of the game. It is also viewed by some as a form of “gender activism”, an explicit provocation to reflect on the socially constructed nature of gender (Roberts, 2001). Those who reject gender swapping generally do so because it is perceived as a dishonest and deceptive self-presentation.
Attitudes have also changed over time. Turkle (1995) observed that attitudes towards widely publicised cases of gender swapping have changed over the last two decades. In the early 1980s the Alex/Joan case was disturbing because of its gender swapping. By the 1990s, the outrage had shifted to concerns that Alex had used Joan to have lesbian sex with women online. Today, the most shocking aspect of the story is that Alex used Joan to find dates for him. Gender swapping is no longer shocking; what disturbs us, according to Turkle (1995), is the possibility that online deception might spread into the offline world.

5.9.6 Online gender swapping and gender identity

A possible, but unresearched predictor of online gender swapping is gender identity. Gender identity refers to an individual’s perceptions of their femininity and masculinity. Although gender has been culturally defined in terms of these binary opposites, Sandra Bem (1974) proposed four categories of gender identity: feminine, masculine, androgynous (the integration of both femininity and masculinity) and undifferentiated. It is possible that gender identity impacts on the presentation of gender online. Roberts (2001), in a qualitative analysis of reasons for gender swapping in MOOs, noted that some players are motivated by a desire to express their gender identity. Despite this hypothesised connection, the relationship remains untested.

5.10 The relationship between the player and the character

Much of the writing about identity and cyberspace has focused on the impact of online self-presentation for offline identity. As Kendall (2002) noted, “The identities that people bring to their cyberspace interactions matter less in these stories than the new lessons of self they carry with them from their online interactions.” (p.10) In other words, rather than focus on the liminal space that
exists when a player prepares to enter an online area, the emphasis has been on crossing back, the journey from cyberspace back to the offline world. Given this interest in the ways online selves impact on the offline world, it is surprising that relatively little empirical work has examined in detail the ways users conceptualise the relationship between their offline and online selves. In a context where self-presentations can be fluid, multiple, and unconstrained by physical reality, how are these presentations understood?

Turkle’s (1995) description of Stewart implied a separation of Achilles, the online character, from his offline self, meaning that lessons learned online were not transferred to the offline world. Other players talk about the character as an entity separate from the person, who, as one informant in Taylor’s (1999) research on meta-worlds described it, “have a mind of their own and grow in unexpected ways” (p.6). Another group of players slide between references to their character and their offline self. Distinguishing between a “real” self and constructed persona in such cases can be problematic. Slippages exist, “places where persona and self merge, places where the multiple personae join to comprise what the individual thinks of as his or her authentic self” (Turkle, 1995, pp.185-186).

Roberts (2001) who conducted a qualitative analysis of interview data collected from 58 MOO users, noted considerable variation in the extent to which players identified with their MOO character. Some players did not identify with their character at all. Others saw their character as representing aspects of their identity and many identified strongly with their MOO character, viewing their online and offline selves as the same. This latter group rejected the idea that they were playing a “character”. Roberts (2001) also noted changes in the relationship over time. Some players observed that their character became more like their offline identity with time, leading to a closer identification. And others observed
the obverse relationship: over time their offline identity took on the qualities of their MOO character. The variables underpinning these two different directions of influence were not, however, examined in Roberts’ analysis.

The peculiar way in which one emotes in MOOs may encourage a separation of self from character. Talking about one’s character in the third person and seeing one’s character on the screen referred to in the third person can be initially disorienting. Instead of typing I pass Flemmex the bag of grapes, I type

:passes Flemmex the bag of grapes

and on the screen I see

Tiger passes Flemmex the bag of grapes

This linguistic anomaly effectively shifts the focus from actor to observer of self. This unique effect which allows the MOO player to simultaneously act and watch oneself act may contribute to the separation of online and offline selves.

5.11 Researching MOOs

5.11.1 Ethical issues

Joe Walther (2001) has described the Internet as offering “new vantage points from which to observe conventional behavior, views of new kinds of behavior, and new tools with which to observe it all.” (Walther, 2001, p.1) These new behaviours and new research methods raise a series of ethical issues, some of which are similar to the issues confronted by researchers in other media and some of which are unique to the online context.

Attention to the ethics of Internet research has grown steadily over the last 10
years. For example, an entire issue of *The Information Society* was dedicated to the topic in 1996. Since then guidelines for ethical research on the Internet have been developed by several bodies including the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and the American Psychological Association (Kraut et al., 2003).\(^2\) In addition, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) together with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) produced a report that provides recommendations to the Institutional Review Boards in the USA who provides approval for academic and institutional research. This report, authored by Frankel and Siang (1999), sets out two major ethical issues for Internet researchers: informed consent and confidentiality.

Informed consent recognises the integrity and autonomy of research participants. Informed consent is an integral, but often complex component of research in offline investigations. Online, the issues may be further complicated by a range of factors including distinctions between public and private spaces, the potential for pseudonymous and anonymous communication, and easy accessibility of data (Frankel & Siang, 1999).

The question of whether Internet data constitutes public or private material is a hotly debated topic amongst Internet researchers. Some researchers maintain that much Internet data are in the public domain; anyone can access archived newsgroup communications or join many MOOs as a guest. Research using this type of data does not constitute human subject research and therefore does not require informed consent. Researchers who take this position have argued that Internet research is analogous to recording a conversation in a public park; people may not expect to have their public behaviour recorded, but the potential exists (Jacobson, 1999a; Walther, 2001).

---

\(^2\) The Australian Psychological Society has not yet produced any similar guidelines.
Other commentators have suggested that Internet researchers need to consider not just the accessibility of information, but also users’ perceptions of privacy (King, 1996; Kraut et al., 2003). Although some groups may exist in the public domain, members may perceive their interactions as private conversations where lurkers may not be as noticeable as they would in an offline setting. According to Walther (2001), however, debates about access to Internet data are misdirected; rather the emphasis ought to be on educating Internet users about the “vulnerability of Internet postings to scrutiny” (p.3).

Some MOOs have been proactive in posting ethical requirements for researchers on their log in screen. LambdaMOO, for example, has a notice posted to researchers and journalists requiring that before quoting any material from the MOO, permission be granted from the participants involved. The stages of obtaining informed consent, however, conveying information about the project, ensuring the information is understood, and obtaining voluntary agreement, may be complicated when the procedure is conducted online (Frankel & Siang, 1999). The pseudonymity of research participants means that the precise characteristics of Internet samples are not always known and the possibility that at risk groups may respond can add further complexity to plain language statements. In offline research, informed consent is indicated by a signature. No standardised online consent form exists, but Frankel and Siang (1999) question whether the typical process of clicking on a box can be considered equivalent to a signature. Reid (1996) has also suggested the disinhibition associated with CMC may encourage participants to give consent and even disclose information that may come to harm them. Reid (1996) noted that her own study of a MOO for sexual abuse survivors, in which she examined how the group dealt with an intruder, probably contributed to a crisis of trust. Although participants willingly volunteered for the research, in retrospect Reid believed that the intrusion
“might have been quickly overcome had it not been for the decision to invite further public scrutiny and personal exposure through participation in my research project” (p.172)

Principles of privacy and confidentiality are designed to minimize harmful effects and ensure that identifying information is not disseminated without authority (Frankel & Siang, 1999; Reid, 1996). A key issue is how research participants should be referred to. Some researchers argue that screen names can be used because, like any pseudonym, they hide the person’s “real” identity. Danet et al. (1997) do not see any ethical dilemma in using informants’ screen names. They liken the screen name to a disguise worn to a masked ball. The mask, through its creativity and expressiveness draws attention to itself and at the same time hides identity. They argue therefore that screen names are simultaneously a “form of online plumage” and a way to disguise offline identity. Other researchers have debated this issue, arguing that screen names do not provide anonymity. Several writers have argued that screen names have a similar function to offline names (Bechar-Israeli, 1998; Brem, 2002; Bruckman, 2001; Kendall, 2002). Active Internet users may use the same screen name across different communities, be well known by that name, and be concerned about its reputation. For these reasons it has been argued that screen names should be treated in the same way as real names in the reporting of data.

Internet researchers have dealt with the problem of confidentiality in a range of ways. Some common practices are, however, emerging. For example, identity is commonly protected by assigning pseudonyms and not revealing the real names of the online communities in which data was collected. Jacobson (1999b) used both strategies in a study of impression formation in which he asked students to interact with specified members of a MOO and then describe their impressions. Although the practice of assigning pseudonyms has the advantage
of protecting the identity of participants, it has the disadvantage of obscuring the meaning of the original screen name. And in some cases the meaning of the original screen name is central to the research. In order to deal with this problem Jacobson (1999b) had a panel select pseudonyms that reflected the imagery of the original screen name. Kendall (2002) used a similar approach in her analysis of a MOO, however in some cases participants supplied their own pseudonyms.

Turkle (1995) also used the same strategies, although as her work entailed the psychological analysis of personal details, she took added steps to protect her participants, changing any identifying and personal information, striving nevertheless to “invent a disguise that captures what seem to me to be the crucial variables of life history” (p.324).

The practice of assigning pseudonyms and changing details is similar to the approach used in other types of social research and its limitations also apply online. One disadvantage of such strategies is that even when the flavour of the issue is retained, altering details compromises accuracy and adds barriers to replication. Bruckman (2001) gives the example from her own doctoral research of not revealing information about a participant even though it would have provided a richer description, because the participant was a high profile member of the group and easily identifiable.

Many writers agree that assigning pseudonyms is an imperfect solution online because if the community is one whose interactions are archived online then searchability of Internet archives means that the original author can easily be traced (Frankel & Siang, 1999; Kendall, 2002; King, 1996; Walther, 2001). In addition, despite the use of pseudonyms, in-group members can probably identify each other (Bruckman, 2001; Kendall, 2002). The latter problem is not unique to Internet–based research, but might occur in any group where the members know each other reasonably well. Online, however, interactions
recording the guessing game of matching pseudonyms to players could be used by a third party to trace identities. In Kendall’s (2002) research, participants posted a key in the MOO to the pseudonyms she had assigned. Only after Kendall pointed out that this might identify players to outsiders was the object removed.

In an attempt to formulate some principles to guide Internet researchers, Bruckman (2001) proposed some guidelines for the use of screen names in published accounts of Internet research. Her guidelines include a continuum of disguise on which four points are identified. At one end of the continuum is *no disguise*. At this level names are used with permission, protecting the copyright of the author. Details that might be harmful to the author, if revealed, should be omitted. Next is a position of *light disguise*. At this level the group is named, but identifying details such as screen name and other information are changed. Verbatim quotes may be used, even if they could be used to identify the author, but sensitive details are removed. At this level, Bruckman (2001) argues, insiders may be able to identify each other and an outsider, with a little effort, can probably work out who is who. *Moderate disguise* is a compromise position, incorporating elements of light and heavy disguise, depending on the particular risk associated with the specific research. Jacobson’s (1999b) study, with its use of pseudonyms and false online community names, would fall into this category. The greatest protection is afforded by *heavy disguise*. At this level the group’s name as well as all identifying details of individuals are changed. Pseudonyms are used and some false details may be introduced. Verbatim quotes are not used if a search could link the quotes to the author. In a heavily disguised account, identification would be almost impossible, except by the individual participant. Sensitive details may therefore be revealed. Turkle’s (1995) research is a good illustration of this category.
As Bruckman (1999) has noted, an inverse relationship often exists between protection of participants and accuracy. The more participants’ identities are protected, the more accuracy and replicability may be compromised. The level of disguise used is dictated by the risk associated with the study.

5.11.2 Validity of data collected online

A second issue related to online research concerns data validity. The NIH and AAAS report notes that validity of online data is threatened because the pseudonymity and anonymity of the Internet mean that it is “quite easy to mislead others about one’s geographical location, gender, or race” (Frankel & Siang, 1999, p.4). As Internet research has grown, concerns about the question of validity have also increased, although as Walther (2001) has noted, the question is not unique to online research. Questions about validity of data must be addressed whenever self-completed questionnaires are used, or for example, when interviews are conducted over the telephone.

Although commentators appear particularly concerned with the question of misrepresentation, the extent to which research participants misrepresent themselves online is probably inflated in public opinion (Walther, 2001). The question has also received relatively little empirical attention. Kratz and Dalal (2000), however, reviewed all studies that compared Internet-based and offline data and concluded that the data were strikingly similar, which suggests that misrepresentations, if they do occur, have little impact on results.

One way that researchers have dealt with the potential threat to validity is to meet research participants face-to-face. Turkle (1995), for example, only analysed data from participants she met face-to-face. Whether researchers collect data offline is also a product of the questions they seek to answer. Turkle’s decision to interview participants was in part a response of her focus: the relationship
between the on and offline worlds. Other researchers, with a focus on how online behaviour is understood justify their collection of data entirely online. Taylor (1999) for example, noted that emphasising online rather than offline identity in her data collection allowed the complexity of her subject to emerge in a richer way. Meeting face-to-face does allow a researcher to check some general demographic details such as sex, but it does not prevent the participant engaging in self-presentational practices. Meeting face-to-face does not ensure that one has access to the “real” person. And when the “real” identity one is interested in is the one presented online, then offline triangulation is unwarranted.

5.11.3 Research methodologies

MOO research has been primarily qualitative. As a broad approach, qualitative methodology allows for a deep understanding of social phenomena (Silverman, 2002). Qualitative approaches to research are based on constructivist knowledge claims, sympathetic with the postmodern principles described in Chapter 1, including beliefs that individual experience has multiple meanings and these meanings are social and cultural constructions (Creswell, 2003). This broad methodology therefore fits well with the claims about life on the screen described in this chapter. Qualitative approaches, which were used in the early studies of MOOs, allowed researchers to build up an understanding of participants’ experiences in MOOs.

Much of the research on MOOs has been ethnographic (Reid, 1994; Taylor, 1999; Turkle, 1995). Ethnography has been defined as a qualitative approach to research in which the researcher immerses themselves in a cultural group for a prolonged period and makes observations of member behaviour (Bryman, 2001; Creswell, 2003) Ethnography also often incorporates interviews for clarification or to examine issues that are not directly observable (Bryman, 2001). In most
MOO research participant observation has been supplemented by interviews conducted online (Reid, 1994; Taylor, 1999) or face-to-face (Turkle, 1995). This mixed-method approach permits some of the disadvantages of either observation or interviewing alone to be overcome. Nevertheless, overt observation always carries the risk that participants alter their behaviour as a result of being observed. In particular, observation increases awareness of inconsistencies between behaviour and values, which might lead to behavioural change (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). In the online context this might mean self-presentational behaviour and identity play are altered.

Although the majority of studies on MOOs have been qualitative, researchers have more recently begun to ask quantitative questions about MOO users (e.g., Roberts & Parks, 1999). Now that more is understood about behaviour in MOOs and the social norms that govern this behaviour, it seems appropriate to seek quantification of some of the themes that emerged from earlier research.

Chapter summary

Considerable qualitative data has now accumulated to suggest that MOOs are sites of playful identity experimentation. In contrast to the literature on asynchronous CMC which has reported a strong trend towards authentic self-presentation, MOO research has drawn a picture of multiple, idealised, and experimental identities. The play, which occurs primarily as gender swapping and the presentation of idealised and undesired or feared selves, appears similar in nature to that engaged in during adolescence; indeed the high proportion of young adults using MOOs and the particular characteristics of the interaction space makes them a likely arena for identity experimentation.

Researching MOOs requires attention to a range of ethical issues, some of
which are unique to the online context. Issues concern informed consent and privacy and confidentiality, all of which have been discussed in this chapter. Research participants have not always been treated ethically online, but increasing attention is being paid to the development of principles to guide online researchers in these areas.

MOO research has to date been dominated by ethnographic methodologies. These ethnographic studies have supported the application of self-presentation theory to MOO behaviour. Writers draw freely on self-presentation principles and Goffman’s early work is frequently cited. No work, however, has as yet quantified self-presentation in MOOs.
STUDY 1: QUANTITATIVE

6.1 Rationale

The theory tested in this thesis is self-presentation theory. It was originally developed by the sociologist Erving Goffman and later adapted by a range of social psychologists including Mark Leary. It has been used to explain a wide range of social behaviours and it has recently been used to explain online behaviour in a small number of qualitative studies, but it has not been tested quantitatively in this context.

Self-presentation refers to the control of self-related information. The theory, as described by Leary (1995), indicates that self-presentational behaviour is determined by both dispositional and contextual factors. According to self-presentation theory, any image that is communicated is a product of the actor’s self-concept and possible selves, as well as the norms and role constraints operating in the context and the perceived values of the target. In particular, self-presentation theory states that people are often concerned with authentic self-presentation, presenting their self-concept to others. Most of the time our self-presentation centres on ensuring others see us as we see ourselves. When we present ourselves in this way it is the central, or chronically accessible, aspects of identity that are most likely to be revealed.

If this theory, developed to explain behaviour in face-to-face interaction has validity in the online context, then it would be expected that the independent variables, namely identity and possible selves (desired and undesired identity images) influence the dependent variable, which in this case is the self-presentational behaviour observed in a MOO. Self-presentation research conducted in face-to-face contexts predicts that of self-concept and possible selves, self-concept will be the most significant predictor of online
self-presentation and the most central aspects of self-concept will be presented more often than those less central. Research, again from face-to-face contexts, also suggests that desired identity images are more likely to be presented publicly than undesired identity images.

The following hypotheses were therefore generated:

*Hypothesis 1:* Self-concept will be presented more frequently in a MOO than desired identity images.

*Hypothesis 2:* Desired identity images will be presented more frequently in a MOO than undesired identity images.

*Hypothesis 3:* Self-concept items rated as central will be presented more frequently in a MOO than self-concept items rated as less central.

Although actors often downplay positive attributes and accomplishments slightly if others are aware of these already, positive self-presentations are used when the audience has no prior knowledge of the actor, as is the case when a player first enters a MOO. In addition, the cyberspace literature has emphasised the prevalence of socially desirable self-presentations. Therefore it was further hypothesised that positive self-concept items would be presented more frequently online than negative or neutral items.

*Hypothesis 4:* Self-concept items rated as positive will be presented more frequently in a MOO than self-concept items rated as neutral or negative.

Although self-presentation theory predicts the pre-eminence of self-concept in self-presentational behaviour, there are situations that provoke deceptive self-presentations. MOOs particularly are conducive to deceptive
self-presentations. The disembodied nature of online interaction means that aspects of identity impossible or very difficult to alter in the offline world, such as sex, age, ethnicity, and aspects of physical appearance, can be manipulated relatively easily. Gender, for example, can be set by a simple series of keystrokes in a MOO. In addition, the pseudonymity of MOO interaction means that certain self-presentational lies are less likely to be detected than in the offline world.

The initial self-presentational acts in a MOO distinguish them as especially likely to produce deceptive self-presentations. First, deception is more likely early on in relationships (Buss & Briggs, 1984; DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Tice et al., 1995). Maintaining a self-presentation that is discrepant with one’s self-concept requires considerable skill. One would therefore predict that a character description made upon first entering the community would be the performance most likely to be marked by pretence. Second, MOOs have already been characterised as places for wish-fulfilment, acting out idealised selves (Bruckman, 1993; Curtis, 1997; Turkle, 1995), and gender swapping (Roberts & Parks, 1999; Turkle, 1995).

MOOs appear therefore to be inherently playful places when it comes to self-presentation; MOOs offer self-presentational opportunities rarely afforded in face-to-face experience. One of the aims of this first quantitative study was therefore to quantify the two most commonly described types of identity play: the presentation of possible selves and gender swapping.

According to Leary’s (1995) theory of self-presentation, identity construction is also influenced by target values. In the present study participants were players logging on to a new MOO for the first time. Given that they had not interacted with any other users of the MOO they were unlikely to have a clear perception of target values. Nevertheless I was interested in whether, in their first moments in the MOO, participants would have a sense of how they wanted to be perceived. And I wondered how
closely this ideal impression would match the presented identity.

*Research question 1:* What patterns exist in ideal impressions? To what extent do ideal impressions predict presented identities?

Research on the effect of CMC experience suggests that identity play decreases with time, that is, the longer people use MOOs, the more likely they are to make authentic self-presentations. It was therefore hypothesised that MOO experience would mediate the relationships predicted in the first two hypotheses.

*Hypothesis 5:* People with little previous MOO experience will present desired and undesired identity images more frequently than those with extensive previous MOO experience.

In order to get a better picture of the kind of person who plays with identity online two research questions were formulated. One concerned the degree to which the presentation of identity, desired identity images, and undesired identity images online can be predicted by personality traits.

Another research question was related to online gender swapping. Gender swapping has been flagged as a particularly prevalent form of identity play in cyberspace. Although several studies have examined the ways in which gender is played out through discourse online (e.g., Cherny, 1994; Kendall, 2002) and some work has examined possible motivations for swapping gender online (e.g., Roberts & Parks, 1999; Turkle, 1995), few studies have reported predictors of online gender play. A research question was therefore designed to explore the relationship between gender identity and online gender presentation.
Research question 2: How do personality traits impact on the presentation of identity, desired identity images, and undesired identity images in a MOO?

Research question 3: How does gender identity impact on the presentation of gender in a MOO?

Screen names offer an obvious way to present aspects of self-concept and possible selves. Little research has, however, examined screen names explicitly. The classification system adopted by Bechar-Israeli (1996) was developed to categorise chat screen names. Its application to MOOs has not yet been tested. A further aim of the present study was therefore to examine the types of screen names that are used in social MOOs and to explore the screen name as a self-presentational tool, particularly in the expression of gender.

Research Question 4: What types of screen names are adopted in a social MOO? How is gender revealed and concealed through the use of screen names?

The focus of the first study was therefore the offline predictors of online self-presentation: self-concept, possible selves, ideal impressions, CMC experience, personality, and gender identity. One further research question was included to examine self-perception as opposed to self-presentation online. This question was designed to compare offline and online identity and explore the impact of online self-perceptions on online self-presentation.

Research Question 5: In what ways are online ratings of self similar and different to offline ratings of self? How are online ratings of self related to online self-presentation?
The relationships between the independent and dependent variables described above are presented in Figure 6.1. Tentative relationships explored by the research questions are represented with a dotted line.

![Diagram of relationships between variables](image)

**Figure 6.1.** A visual model of the relationships between independent and dependent variables in Study One.

### 6.1.1 Summary of hypotheses and research questions

The hypotheses and research questions are summarised below.

**Hypothesis 1:** Self-concept will be presented more frequently in a MOO than desired identity images.

**Hypothesis 2:** Desired identity images will be presented more frequently in a MOO than undesired identity images.
Hypothesis 3: Self-concept items rated as central will be presented more frequently in a MOO than self-concept items rated as less central.

Hypothesis 4: Self-concept items rated as positive will be presented more frequently in a MOO than self-concept items rated as neutral or negative.

Hypothesis 5: People with little previous MOO experience will present desired and undesired identity images more frequently than those with extensive previous MOO experience.

Research question 1: What patterns exist in ideal impressions? To what extent do ideal impressions predict presented identities?

Research question 2: How do personality traits impact on the presentation of identity, desired identity images, and undesired identity images in a MOO?

Research question 3: How does gender identity impact on the presentation of gender in a MOO?

Research Question 4: What types of screen names are adopted in a social MOO? How is gender revealed and concealed through the use of screen names?

Research Question 5: In what ways are online ratings of self similar and different to offline ratings of self? How are online ratings of self related to online self-presentation?

The emphasis in the first quantitative study was impression construction. The hypotheses and research questions outlined above were designed to address the impact of self-concept, possible selves, CMC experience, personality, and gender identity on self-presentation behaviour as users log onto a social MOO for the first time.

6.2 Method

6.2.1 Participants

Participants were 75 (54 females and 21 males) undergraduate University students. Ages ranged from 18 to 54 years ($M = 21.35, SD = 5.32$). The majority
of participants were born in Australia (67%). One quarter were born in South-East Asia (27%). The remaining 6% were born in Europe and India. Nearly all participants (95%) spoke English as a first language. The sample was a convenience sample, selected for its accessibility.

6.2.2 Measures

Aspects of offline identity were recorded on six pencil and paper measures presented together as The Identity Questionnaire (Appendix A). The six measures included quantitative and qualitative descriptions of offline identity, measures of desired and undesired selves, a test of gender identity, and a personality scale. Demographic information was also collected, including sex, age, and ethnicity. Previous online experience was measured separately for email, newsgroups, chat, and MOOs. Participants noted their experience in each interactional space on a five-point Likert scale ranging from no experience to extensive experience.

6.2.2.1 Offline identity

The measure of offline identity was a modified version of Kuhn and McPartland’s (1954) Twenty Statements Test (TST). The TST is a free-response measure of identity, generally consisting of 20 self-statements beginning "I am ..." to which respondents are typically instructed to answer “as if you were giving it to yourself”. The benefit of the TST is that it provides rich, freely elicited data in a quantifiable form (Rees & Nicholson, 1994). Several modifications were made to the original TST. To avoid confusion, the modified version is referred to as the Self-Statements Test (SST).

Following advice from Bochner (1994) who recommended reducing the number of self-statements to avoid repetition, the TST was modified in the present study to include only 10 items. Decreasing the number of statements required has the additional advantage of reducing discrepancies in output
between participants, for although instructions ask for a specific number of responses, the number of responses sometimes varies. Given that simply converting scores to percentages is not always appropriate (Wylie, 1974), finding ways to increase quantitative consistency of output is considered important.

In contrast to the typical instructions asking respondents to imagine they are giving the response to themselves, instructions on the SST asked respondents to imagine they were describing themselves to someone who wished to know them well. This change acknowledged the self-presentational nature of any self-report measure of identity. The instructions were designed to take the focus away from presenting to the experimenter and to refocus on meaningful aspects of identity. Participants were instructed to write their responses as they occurred and to be as honest as possible.

Items on the SST may vary in their salience or importance to the respondent's identity. In the present study this was determined by self-assessment. Gordon (1968) used this technique, asking respondents to rank TST items in order of importance. A pilot test for the present study indicated, however, that respondents had difficulty ranking each item at a separate level, finding such decisions artificial. A four-level scale was preferred. Participants therefore rated the centrality or importance of SST items to their identity by scoring each item from 4 (most central) to 1 (least central).

As well as ranking responses, evaluative coding was also used. This procedure of classifying how desirable each item is to the respondent is usually carried out by the researcher (e.g., Jones, Sensenig, & Haley, 1974). Although the valence can be reasonably inferred for many items, problems of interpretation can, however, arise for more ambiguous responses. To avoid this problem respondents in the present study were asked to indicate the desirability of each item using the following categories: positive, negative and neutral.
Psychometric properties of the TST are adequate. Test-retest reliability ranges from .38 to .85, similar in magnitude to the correlations reported for personality tests, however stability is in part a product of the time interval between testing and the identity changes participants have undergone between tests (Spitzer, Couch, & Stratton, 1973). Compared to fixed-response measures of identity, the TST has been reported to have higher face validity (Spitzer & Parker, 1976). With respect to criterion validity, the TST compares favourably to other identity measures (Spitzer et al., 1973).

6.2.2.2 Desired and undesired identity images

Similar ten-statement procedures were used to gather data on desired identity images, what one would like to be, and undesired identity images, what one would not like to be. Open-ended approaches have been widely used to elicit possible selves (Oyserman & Fryberg, in press), typically providing several paragraphs explaining what possible selves are as well as offering examples (e.g., Cross & Markus, 1991). In the present case instructions were condensed due to the length of the entire questionnaire. Participants were simply instructed to imagine the person they would like to become in the future (desired identity images) and would not like to be (undesired identity images) and asked to generate 10 items for each. Participants were encouraged to include items that seemed likely to transpire as well as those that seemed unlikely. None of these items were rated for desirability or centrality, however participants were instructed to indicate all items they thought were reasonably likely to transpire.

Although widely used, the psychometric properties of open-ended measures of possible selves have not been reported.

6.2.2.3 Offline semantic differential

The semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) is a
reactive technique that was originally devised to distil the meaning of a large number of different concepts into a small number of dimensions. Pairs of bi-
polar adjectives, usually presented on a 7-point continuum, are used to
determine a “semantic space”, which can measure attitudes towards any concept from a cheese cracker to one’s ideal self. Regardless of the concept, ratings on the bi-polar adjectives tend to correlate and three dominant dimensions have been identified: (a) the evaluative factor includes pairs such as good-bad and beautiful-ugly and generally accounts for the majority of the variance extracted; (b) potency, concerned with power, includes pairs such as strong-weak, serious-humorous and masculine-feminine; and (c) activity, concerned with quickness and excitement, which includes pairs such as fast-slow (Osgood, 1976). These three dimensions have been replicated in many studies (Heise, 1970).

This type of scale, which can be completed relatively quickly, has, like the TST, been widely employed as a measure of identity (Hattie, 1992; Wylie, 1974). It has been used to measure changes in identity over time (Ellis-Hill & Horn, 2000) and across different contexts (Metcalf, 1987). It has also been used to examine different senses of identity, such as actual and ideal self (O’Leary, Page, & Kaczmarek, 2000) and as a measure of self-presentation (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991).

As the semantic differential was not created specifically for identity measurement, however, Wylie (1974) recommended that the broad range of adjecival descriptions used by Osgood and colleagues be refined to include only those relevant to the construct of identity. The 12 adjective pairs used in the current study were selected from the reference scales suggested by Osgood & Suci (1969) and the checklist correlates of the NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992). They were chosen for their particular applicability across both offline and online contexts and their relevance to self-presentation. The pairs were randomly sorted and counterbalanced with
respect to positive and negative dimensions. Participants were instructed to rate themselves on all adjective pairs.

Although the semantic differential has been used to measure identity in other studies and its psychometric properties have been described as adequate (e.g., Rathus & Siegel, 1976) identifying the psychometric properties of the measure with accuracy is not possible because the adjective pairs vary between studies and in many cases the precise adjectives used have not been reported (Hattie, 1992). Some research has suggested that the semantic differential is perceived by respondents as less accurate than open-ended measures such as the TST (Spitzer & Parker, 1976), nevertheless its quantitative nature offers advantages in the measurement of identity.

6.2.2.4 Gender Identity

Gender identity was measured using the Australian version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory, the Australian Sex Role Scale (ASRS), developed by Antill, Cunningham, Russell, and Thompson (1981). Devised as a culturally-relevant tool for use in the Australian context, the ASRS provides a series of 50 descriptors. Ten descriptors measure feminine positive traits (e.g., patient, responsible), 10 feminine negative (e.g., dependent, nervous), 10 masculine positive (e.g., confident, strong), 10 masculine negative (e.g., aggressive, sarcastic), and 10 gender-neutral traits. The latter are included to measure socially desirable responding, 5 positive (e.g., interesting, logical) and 5 negative (e.g., tense, silly) as well as distract the respondent from the purpose of the scale. Respondents indicate how true each item is of them on a 7-point Likert scale from never or almost never true to always or almost always true. Feminine, masculine, and social desirability scores are calculated separately and respondents' gender identity can be categorised as feminine (high feminine - low masculine scores), masculine (high masculine - low feminine scores), undifferentiated (low - low) or androgynous (high - high).
Previous research has demonstrated the validity and reliability of the measure (Antill et al., 1981; Marsh & Myers, 1986; Ricciardelli & Williams, 1995).

6.2.2.5 Personality traits

Quantitative data on key personality constructs were provided by the NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992), a shortened 60-item version of the NEO Personality Inventory, measuring the five domains of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Internal consistency for the sub-scales is acceptable, with alpha coefficients of .86, .77, .73, .68, and .81 respectively (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Correlations between NEO-FFI scores and adjective self-reports obtained three years earlier are reported of .56 to .62. Correlations between NEO-FFI self-reports and spouse and peer assessments also provide evidence of validity (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

6.2.2.6 MOO self-presentation measures

Participants provided a name for their MOO character, selected their gender (female, male, plural, or neuter) and wrote an open-ended description of themselves for the MOO. They completed a semantic differential as described above, this time describing the self they were presenting in the MOO. Finally, participants were asked to describe their ideal impressions, that is, how they would like to be perceived by others in the MOO.

The independent and dependent variables, together with the measures used, are summarised in Table 6.1.
Table 6.1

*Summary of Variables and Measures*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-concept</td>
<td>Self-Statement Test (SST)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired identity images</td>
<td>Possible selves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undesired identity images</td>
<td>Possible selves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMC experience</td>
<td>Likert scales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>NEO-FFI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender identity</td>
<td>ASRI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline identity</td>
<td>Semantic differential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal impressions</td>
<td>Description (open-ended)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-presentation online</td>
<td>Screen name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online identity</td>
<td>MOO character description (open-ended)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MOO gender choice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**6.2.3 Procedure**

Participants were recruited face-to-face through on-campus classes in Melbourne and Singapore. Participants received a plain language statement detailing the nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality of responses was assured. In accordance with the ethics procedure of the institution at which data were collected, consent forms were also obtained. Copies of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form are included in Appendix B.

The offline, pencil and paper measures and the electronic, MOO measures were all self-completed. To control for order effects, participants were randomly assigned to receive either the pencil and paper or electronic measure first.
6.2.3.1 Procedure for MOO constructs

All data pertaining to MOO identity were collected online using a web site called The Place. The site was created specifically for the research and was designed to replicate the opening screens of a MOO. After logging on, participants were provided with the following information:

The Place is an online community where people interact and socialise. Members of the community can create their own rooms within The Place, set up discussions on particular themes, hold meetings, play games, and just hang out. A set of simple instructions allows members to move around the community and talk to each other.
Members of this community all use screen names. Before entering the community you need to select your own screen name. Remember, as all the meetings in this community take place online using screen names, you are not constrained by any characteristics of your real life person.

Participants were instructed to choose a screen name different to their real name. A new screen then welcomed them by their screen name and asked them to specify their gender as female, male, plural or neuter. Next participants were asked to describe themselves:

You need to provide a short description of yourself that will be available to all other members of the community. Other members of the community will be able to read this description.

Participants were then required to complete a semantic differential for their MOO character. They were also asked to describe in writing the ways they would like to be perceived online. Before submitting their responses, an opportunity was provided to make changes:

If you want to change any of the details you have provided, do this now by clicking on NEW MEMBER DETAILS and retyping your responses. When you are satisfied with your responses, press SEND and your details will be registered with The Place.
Finally, participants were given an opportunity to register their interest in the second study. The research was described as a study extending over several weeks involving interaction in The Place. The majority of participants, 81%, indicated their interest in being involved in the second study. Participants in this study did not interact with each other or spend any further time in the “MOO” following the data collection procedure.

Approval for the project was granted by the Ethics Committees of RMIT University where data were collected and the University of Melbourne.

6.2.4 Methodology

The first study employed a cross-sectional survey method using self-completion pencil and paper and online questionnaires. The survey method is an economic way to identify the characteristics of a population from a sample. Although the response rate of self-completed questionnaires is often lower than interviews and there is a greater risk of missing data, they are relatively cheap and quick to administer and they eliminate interviewer variability and bias (Bryman, 2001). For these reasons a self-completed survey was the preferred method for the first study, the aim of which was to generalise from the sample to the larger population of social MOO users.

6.2.5 Data coding and analysis

6.2.5.1 Presentation of offline identity in the MOO description

In order to determine the extent to which offline identity was presented online, all offline statements (SST, desired identity images and undesired identity images) were coded using the following nominal ratings: 1 = consistent with the MOO description, 2 = a contradiction of the MOO identity description, 3 = neither consistent nor contradictory, 4 = unclear. Some offline statements contained several codifiable units. For example, “I am a wild girl, who likes to party hard and isn’t into commitment”, contains four separate
units. The presence of any one of these units consistent with the MOO description would have earned this item a score of 1. No single offline statement contained items that were both consistent and contradictory.

Coding of the offline statements was completed by five undergraduate psychology students, who each undertook a one-hour training session and then rated all statements independently. Cohen’s kappa was used as a measure of agreement of each pair of raters. Kappa ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 corresponding to the amount of agreement expected under chance distribution of ratings and 1 to perfect agreement between raters. The significance of Kappa can be assessed with a T statistic. Approximate values are reported. All p values result from Monte Carlo inference. Kappa and approximate T values are reported for each pair of raters in Table 6.2.

With the exception of Rater 4 who used category 4 (unclear) more frequently than the other raters, agreement between raters was moderate to good. Rater 5 showed the strongest agreement with other raters. For ease of

Table 6.2
Inter-Rater Agreement for Judgement of Consistency between Offline SST and MOO Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rater 1</th>
<th>Rater 2</th>
<th>Rater 3</th>
<th>Rater 4</th>
<th>Rater 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rater 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>K = .47</td>
<td>K = .46</td>
<td>K = .19</td>
<td>K = .47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T(1946)=28.90*</td>
<td>T(1618)=23.67*</td>
<td>T(2030)=13.60*</td>
<td>T(1947)=28.00**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>K = .47</td>
<td>K = .19</td>
<td>K = .57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T(1617)=25.30**</td>
<td>T(1931)=13.90**</td>
<td>T(1942)=34.80**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>K = .21</td>
<td>K = .50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T(1604)=14.99**</td>
<td>T(1617)=26.49**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>K = .19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T(1930)=14.8**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p <.01, ** p <.001
analysis, only those judgements made by Rater 5 were included in the analyses.

6.2.5.2 Content analysis of SST and virtual character descriptions

Content analysis was used to quantify the content of the SST in terms of predetermined categories. Content analysis has the advantage of being easily replicable when coding schedules are clearly set out. For this reason it is sometimes referred to as an “objective method of analysis” (Bryman, 2001, p.189). Even so, nearly all coding involves some interpretation. The potential therefore exists for invalid interpretations. This risk is magnified if the technique is used to impute latent content (Bryman, 2001).

Various coding schemes have been proposed to examine TST content from a very simple dichotomous classification of statements as consensual (reflecting reference to groups or categories) or non-consensual, through to a 51-content category approach developed by Kemper (1966). McPartland (1965) proposed an economical system of four mutually exclusive categories or “referential frames”, used to classify all statements: (a) physical, including statements about the person in time and space, e.g., I am tall; (b) social, including statements about social roles, e.g., I am a student; (c) reflective, including characteristics of the person as a social actor, abstracted from social structure, e.g., I am outgoing; and (d) oceanic or non self-identifying statements e.g., I am a human being. Gordon (1968), in an early study of the structure of identity, expanded these four basic categories to 8 and defined a series of sub-categories within each. Social roles, for example, were broken down into 7 types including kinship roles, occupational roles, and citizenship.

Since the 1970s an increase has been noted in the number of reflective responses to the TST (see for example Grace & Cramer, 2002; Spitzer & Parker, 1976). In response, Rees and Nicholson (1994) developed a more detailed scheme for classifying items in this referential frame. Referred to as
the SICV (Skills, Interests, Character, and Values) system for classification of reflective TST responses, this coding schedule distinguished four major subcategories within the reflective frame and further identified dimensions within each of these. Skills, for example, were divided into cognitive, social, technical, and organisational skills.

The coding scheme adopted in the present study combined Gordon’s (1968) extended version of the referential frames with the expanded SICV proposed by Rees and Nicholson (1994). A copy of the coding manual is included in Appendix C. The unit of analysis used was the meaning element. A meaning element is defined as a codifiable unit. This approach to analysis of the TST was explained by Gordon (1968). Each self-statement typically contains more than one codifiable unit and even a single word could contain more than one meaning element. For example, “I am a daughter” could be coded for both gender and relationship. Meaning elements were multiply coded where appropriate in the present study. Quantification in TST research typically refers to the number of respondents who made at least one reference to the category (L’Écuyer, 1992). This approach was used in the present study; categories were checked as present if at least one reference was made to them. Reference could be affirmative e.g., socially competent, or an indication of lack of that particular dimension e.g., socially awkward. Only manifest content was coded.

This coding scheme was used to analyse the SST items, desired identity images, MOO descriptions, and ideal MOO impressions. All the coding was carried out by the researcher. Intra-rater reliability was checked by repeating the content analysis after 12 months for one-third of the data. One inconsistency in coding was noted and all data in that dimension were recoded.
6.2.5.3 Significance testing and effect size

Alpha levels were set at $p<.05$ for all inferential tests. Effect sizes have been reported, using Cohen’s $d$. The interpretation of effect sizes, small, $d = 0.2$, medium, $d = 0.4$, and large, $d = 0.8$, suggested by Cohen (1992) has been used.

6.3 Results

The results section is divided into six main parts. The first part presents descriptive statistics relevant to the demographics of participants and addresses questions related to response rate and representativeness of the sample. In the second part, multidimensional scaling is used to present a picture of the semantic space that the participants as a group used online and offline to describe their identity. Differences between perception of identity offline and online are summarised and semantic differential responses are used to cluster participants into five demographically distinct groups. These groups are then used to examine self-presentation strategies in the remaining parts of the section.

In the third part of the section, screen names are examined, focusing particularly on the types of screen names chosen and the use of the screen name to reveal and conceal biological sex. The fourth part provides a quantitative analysis of the presentation of the three major aspects of self online: self-concept, desired identities, and undesired identities. Variables including sex, age, ethnicity, CMC experience, and personality are examined for their predictive potential. The fifth part provides a detailed content analysis of the presentation of gender, self-concept, and desired identity images online. The ideal impressions that participants described are also compared to the MOO descriptions presented. In the final, sixth part of the
section I present a qualitative analysis of identity play observed in the MOO descriptions.

6.3.1 Demographics

6.3.1.1 Response rates: A comparison of completers and non-completers

The study had an initially high response rate of 82%. That is, 123 of the 150 recruited participants completed at least one measure. No information is available on the 27 non-responders. Of the 123 who completed at least one measure, 75 (61%) completed both the offline and MOO components. The overall response rate was therefore 50%. Although this response rate is acceptable for survey research (Bryman, 2001), attrition presents a threat to both the external and internal validity of the research conclusions, especially when there are systematic differences between the non-respondents and the rest of the population (Blaikie, 2003).

In order to check whether non-respondents differed from responders, the 48 partial completers (those who completed only one component, either the offline or MOO section) were compared with the 75 full completers. A small number of participants (12) did both sections during class time. All of these participants were full completers. These 12 participants have been excluded from the following analyses comparing full and partial completers, as conditions probably contributed to compliance for this group. The remaining participants completed the tests in their own time.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with some partial completers. Reasons given for non-completion included difficulties accessing computers, lack of motivation and simply forgetting. Analysis of quantitative data sheds some light on these reasons.

First, the order of administration of the offline and MOO measures distinguished partial from full completers. Of those who completed the MOO measure first, 74% were fully compliant, compared to only 40% of those who
did the offline measure first, $\chi^2 (1, N=111) = 11.83 \ p = .0005$. Demographic information was only available for those partial completers who did the pencil and paper test. These partial completers were compared with full completers on all demographic dimensions. No significant differences were reported for sex, age or online experience. Completers were, however, distinguished from this group of partial completers by language and country of birth. Partial completers were more likely to have a language other than English as their first language, $\chi^2 (1, N=100) = 12.87, \ p = .0003$ and be born outside Australia, $\chi^2 (1, N=100) = 6.11, \ p = .05$. Only full completers have been included in the remaining analyses.

6.3.1.2 Representativeness of the sample

The sample used in the first study was a nonprobability sample. Nonprobability samples are generally considered less desirable than probability samples (Creswell, 2003) because these samples lack the logical underpinning that allows confident generalisation of findings to a specific population. Shaughnessy and Zechmeister (1977) have however implied that inferential statistics are appropriate if there is evidence that the sample is representative. The first step in the data analysis was therefore to determine the representativeness of the sample. In order to do this the demographics of the present sample were compared with other samples of social MOO players.

The mean age in the present study was 21.4 years. This was consistent with the mean age reported in other social and role-playing MOOs. Although one-third (33%) of the present sample was born outside Australia, the respondents were predominantly from English-speaking backgrounds (95%). This finding is consistent with estimates provided by Kendall (2002). In these two respects the sample therefore appears representative. The area in which the sample

---

1 Yates' corrected chi-square was calculated for all 2 x2 tables.
was not consistent with other studies was sex. Previous research has suggested that at least 50% of MOO players are male. In the present study 28% of the sample was male. In this respect the sample is similar to new Internet users; new Internet users are more likely to be female than more experienced users (Roberts, 2001).

6.3.1.3 CMC experience

Participants varied in their level of online experience, with self-reported ratings on the five-point scale ranging from none (1) to extensive (5) on all items.

Table 6.3
Mean and Minimal Levels of Experience for each Online Domain (N = 74)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online domain</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Participants with at least minimal experience (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>3.67 (1.14)</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>2.16 (1.51)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsgroups</td>
<td>2.09 (1.14)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOOs</td>
<td>1.80 (1.20)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 6.3 participants reported low to moderate levels of CMC experience. Email was the most widely used of all the interaction domains; nearly all participants had at least minimal email experience. MOOs were the domain with which participants were least experienced; approximately two-thirds of participants had no previous experience in these interaction spaces.

In all areas males had more online experience than females and this sex difference was significant for email, $t(73) = -2.31, p = .023, (-1.23, -.092)^2$, $d =$

---

2 Reported in brackets are 95% confidence intervals for the difference between means.
0.63; newsgroups, \( t(73) = -3.10, p = .00, (-1.41, -0.31), d = 0.76 \); and MOOs, \( t(73) = -2.49, p = .015, (-1.33, -0.14), d = 0.60 \). The only area in which a significant sex difference in experience wasn’t reported was chat, although a moderate effect size was noted, \( d = 0.45 \).

Because the level of MOO experience was generally low in the sample, MOO and chat experience were combined to create a new variable representing experience with synchronous CMC (\( M = 3.96, SD = 2.23 \)). A three-way split of the total synchronous experience score range was used to divide the sample into groups of low, moderate, and extensive synchronous CMC experience. Nearly half the sample (45%) had no experience with any form of synchronous CMC.

Figure 6.2. CMC synchronous experience as a function of offline sex.

Females and males were not distributed equally across these three experience levels. As shown in Figure 6.2, women were more likely to have low than high levels of experience, whereas the obverse relationship was noted for

---

3 All effect sizes were measured as the standard difference between the two means.
men. No significant ethnic or age differences emerged across these categories of synchronous online experience.

6.3.1.4 Gender identity

The ASRS generates two gender scores: femininity and masculinity, as well as a score for social desirability. As recommended by the authors of the test (Antill et al., 1981), median-splits were used to transform these data into four sex-role categories: feminine (high feminine and low masculine scores); masculine (high masculine and low feminine scores); androgynous (high feminine and high masculine scores); and undifferentiated (low feminine and low masculine scores). The highest proportion of males was classified as masculine, whereas females showed a more even distribution across the four categories (see Figure 6.3). These four ASRS categories were used in analyses involving gender identity.

![Figure 6.3. Percentage of female and male participants in each ASRS sex role category.](image-url)
6.3.1.5 Personality characteristics

One-sample t-tests were used to compare the means of the sample on each sub-scale with norms provided by Costa and McCrae (1992). Compared to the university-age sample on which the test was normed, the present sample had significantly higher scores on Openness and significantly lower scores on Extraversion and Conscientiousness than the population norms (see Table 6.4).

Table 6.4

NEO Sub-Scale Scores for the Present Sample Compared with Norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEO sub-scales</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Norms</th>
<th>t (74)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>24.99</td>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>24.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>27.95</td>
<td>6.46</td>
<td>30.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>29.03</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>30.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>30.60</td>
<td>6.55</td>
<td>27.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>30.96</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>30.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.05 ** p<.005

6.3.2 Online and offline identity: Analysis of the semantic space

The semantic space described by participants in their semantic differential identity data was explored using multidimensional scaling (MDS). MDS is an exploratory approach used to facilitate interpretation by examining the “hidden structure” in data (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995; Kruskal & Wish, 1978). This is done by representing dissimilarities between items as distances between points in an n-dimensional space. Items perceived as similar are represented in the spatial model by points plotted closer together.
and dissimilar items are represented by points that are further apart. Diagnostic indicators, such as “Stress” (a badness of fit measure) and scatterplots of the raw input data derived from the spatial model, provide a way of assessing how well the MDS process has captured the patterns inherent in the original data.

Data for MDS analyses must be in the form of symmetric or asymmetric matrices, the elements of which are distance measures. The data collected from a semantic differential is not immediately in this form and so an intermediate step is necessary to create these matrices. Using the ALSCAL procedure in SPSS, a Euclidean distance matrix was created from the semantic differential data generated by the 75 participants. The data in this matrix reflects the averaged perception of the participants and was regarded as being interval level data - an assumption that was supported by the MDS diagnostics.

Two and three dimensional solutions were derived from the data. Because it is usually the case that solutions with higher dimensionality are more easily fit by a given data set, an important consideration in an MDS analysis is finding the solution that has both an acceptable fit with the data and the minimum dimensionality. In this case the stress value for the two-dimensional solution was low (.08, RSQ = .97) and the scatterplot of linear fit revealed a smooth relationship between distances and disparities.

Figure 6.4 shows the two-dimensional configuration for the offline data. Anchoring one end of the first dimension are the adjective pairs happy-sad and good-bad. At the other extreme is unfriendly-friendly. This dimension has a strong evaluation focus. The second dimension, anchored by feminine-masculine and aggressive-passive, illustrated potency. The configuration therefore shows evidence of two of the three dimensions identified by Osgood (1976).
Figure 6.4. MDS configuration of offline semantic space.

The configuration for the online data is presented in Figure 6.5 (stress = .09 and RSQ = .97). The most notable feature of the offline and online solutions is their similarity. The almost identical stress values indicate a similar degree of fit between the raw data and the derived model in both the online and offline conditions. The dimensions observed in the offline condition are replicated in the online semantic space. Of note, however, is the tight clustering of items on the first dimension in the online condition, particularly in the left half of the configuration. These same items are more spread out and differentiated in the offline condition.

Although the semantic space was conceptually similar across the two conditions, ratings on the adjective pairs were more positive online. Paired sample t-tests indicated that in the MOO participants described themselves as significantly more friendly, beautiful, leader-like, stable, strong, funny, and happy than they did offline (see Table 6.5). Participants also described themselves as more masculine, passive, unsure, and smarter online, as well as
not as good; however, these differences were not significant. No participant produced identical ratings across conditions on all pairs. These findings are also consistent with the MDS analysis in that the MDS analysis captures the relationship between all pairs of items, and thus the frame within which people make their judgements. Within this frame, the participants varied the intensity (scale values) of particular items, however, the overall picture remained consistent. No order effects were noted.

The adjective pairs with significant $t$ values were examined further. Difference scores were calculated for these 7 pairs by subtracting individuals’ online scores from their offline scores. Distributions of these difference scores were characterised by low levels of variability, limiting their use as continuous variables. Visual analysis however revealed two groups of participants: those whose semantic differential scores did not change across
the two conditions and those for whom the change was large (two or more points on the scale). The change groups ranged in size from 15% on the adjective pair funny-serious to 39% on unfriendly-friendly. The change participants almost always conceptualised themselves in more socially desirable ways online than they did offline. For example, all but one of the participants who reported changes in friendliness reported being more friendly online than offline.

Table 6.5
Results of t-Tests Comparing Offline and Online Semantic Differential Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic differential adjective pair</th>
<th>Offline</th>
<th></th>
<th>Online</th>
<th></th>
<th>t (72)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfriendly-friendly</td>
<td>6.04</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>6.89</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>-6.12**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumb-smart</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>-1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure-confident</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugly-beautiful</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>-2.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive-passive</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follower-leader</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>-2.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine-masculine</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>-1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable-unstable</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>3.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong-weak</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>3.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny-serious</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>2.59*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy-sad</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>2.55*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good-bad</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>-1.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher scores indicate agreement with the second adjective in the pair.
*p<.05. **p <.001

There were five adjective pairs with change groups comprised of 10 or more participants: unfriendly-friendly, ugly-beautiful, follower-leader, strong-weak, and happy-sad. Univariate analyses were carried out comparing the age and synchronous CMC experience of the change and no-change groups for these five semantic differential adjective pair. Only two significant differences emerged. Those who described themselves as more beautiful
online than offline were significantly older than those who did not change their rating on this adjective pair, $t(41)=2.11, p=.000$, (-5.23, -0.12), $d = 0.57$. Those who described themselves with more leadership skills online than offline had less previous synchronous CMC experience than those who did not change their ratings on this adjective pair, $t(36)=2.86, p=.007$, (0.68, 4.04), $d = 1.19$.

Given the findings from the MDS and the subsequent analysis of response behaviour on an item-by-item basis, hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted on the offline semantic differential responses to identify distinct groups of participants. Hierarchical cluster analysis attempts to differentiate relatively homogeneous groups of participants based on selected characteristics, using an algorithm that starts with each variable (in this case each participant) in a separate cluster and combines clusters until only one is left. Clusters were combined using Ward’s method. Ward’s method has been reported as superior to other methods in developing an interpretable hierarchy (Ritchie, 2003).

Hierarchical cluster analysis, like MDS, is an exploratory technique and a range of solutions is reviewed in the search for the one(s) that provides the most useful and potentially valid representation of patterns in the original data. The dendogram derived from the cluster analysis is shown in Figure 6.6.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>CASE</th>
<th>Num</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aaa</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blues</td>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sheep</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sam</td>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dodgey</td>
<td></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thredony</td>
<td></td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melly</td>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chelsea</td>
<td></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jarbu</td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daas child</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirk</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiddles</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bernardo</td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiger</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chloe</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princess</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>francis</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achilles</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolores</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ioey</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>miss</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flower</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voon Meng</td>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harri</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Softhearted</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skylight</td>
<td></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>154</td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>melpet</td>
<td></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Green</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>miriam</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noble</td>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIPPO</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slasher Arcane</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iceman</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layayna</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquarius</td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seemore</td>
<td></td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the DOCTOR</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>justin</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casanova</td>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khee Seng</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deVilmor</td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>polly</td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>148</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vidal</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noddy</td>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gumboot</td>
<td></td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>love</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JustAGirl</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>milli</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$9B</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A rescaled distance of five was used to include participants who responded in relatively similar ways on all semantic differential pairs. Using this cut off, five clusters of participants were identified. The four groups (Clusters A, B, C, D, and E) contained 18, 16, 8, 16, and 15 participants, respectively. Boxplots (Figure 6.7) were used to examine the semantic differential profile for each cluster.

Of particularly note are clusters E, B and C. Cluster E is distinguished by ratings of instability, sadness, and weakness. This group, along with Cluster B rated themselves as less beautiful than the other clusters. Cluster B also rated themselves as less confident than the other groups. Cluster C rated themselves as more masculine, confident, smarter, and stronger than the other groups.
Figure 6.7. Boxplots of semantic differential scores for each cluster.

The demographic and personality characteristics of these clusters are summarised in Table 6.6.
Table 6.6

Participant Characteristics on Demographic and Personality Variables by Cluster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic and personality variables</th>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>F-Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>A 18</td>
<td>B 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (% female)</td>
<td>77 94</td>
<td>12 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (% Anglo-Australian)</td>
<td>89 69</td>
<td>63 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchronous CMC experience</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEO-FFI</td>
<td>24.33</td>
<td>27.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>8.03</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>30.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>5.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>30.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>34.28</td>
<td>33.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>4.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Means in a row sharing superscripts are significantly different at p<.05.  
* p<.05  ** p<.005

Post hoc pairwise multiple comparisons were carried out using Tukey’s honestly significant difference test. The identity clusters did not differ on age or synchronous CMC experience, however, the groups did produce different gender and NEO profiles. Scatterplots were used to examine the NEO profiles on conceptually meaningful sub-scale pairs across of the five identity clusters.
These are produced in Figures 6.8 and 6.9. Dotted lines represent the norms for each sub-scale identified by McCrae & Costa (1992). In general there is evidence of grouping of participants on the basis of the identity clusters. Figure 6.8 shows Neuroticism scores plotted against Extraversion scores. Of note is the dominance of Identity cluster E in the low Extraversion/high Neuroticism quadrant, which fits with the semantic differential ratings of instability, sadness, and weakness for this group. Participants in cluster C are primarily located in the high Extraversion/low Neuroticism quadrant, which is consistent with their confident, strong self-perceptions.

*Figure 6.8. Scatterplot of Neuroticism and Extraversion scores by identity cluster.*
Figure 6.9 plots Extraversion against Agreeableness and reveals the predominance of Identity cluster A in the quadrant marked by high Extraversion and high Agreeableness.

Figure 6.9. Scatterplot of Agreeableness and Extraversion scores by identity cluster.

When read together, the demographic details, boxplots of semantic differential ratings, and scatterplots of NEO scores, a picture of the cluster profiles emerged. Identity cluster A was ethnically homogenous, comprised of primarily Australian-born participants. Chloe⁴, a 19-year old Australian

---

⁴ Because the content of the screen names was considered important to the data analysis, real screen names have been used. This research focus was balanced against the risk of identification. Some participants adopted both their offline given and family names. In these cases the family name has been omitted.
female was representative of this group with high Extraversion and Agreeableness NEO scores. *Identity cluster B* contained only one male. This female group rated themselves as low on beauty and confidence. Dolores, a 19-year old Australian female was characteristic of this group, scoring relatively high on Agreeableness and low on Extraversion. *Identity cluster C* was the smallest cluster and predominantly male, hence the high ratings on masculinity for this group. This cluster rated themselves as more confident, smarter, and stronger than the other groups. Casanova, an 18-year old Asian male, was typical of this group with a very low score on Neuroticism and a high Conscientiousness score. *Identity cluster D* was ethnically heterogeneous and was distinguished by relatively high Extraversion scores. *Identity cluster E* was heterogeneous in terms of sex and ethnicity. Cluster E was distinguished by ratings of instability, sadness, and weakness. A typical group member was Mary, a 23-year old Australian female with very high Neuroticism and very low Extraversion scores.

These profiles indicated convergence of semantic differential ratings and personality scores, confirming the validity of the five cluster solution.

### 6.3.3 The screen names

With the exception of a small number of individuals who used their participant number or offline name, the majority of participants adopted names for the MOO. The screen names were classified using the categories developed by Bechar-Israeli (1996) (Table 6.7). Screen names relating to the self, such as names (other than the participant’s real name) or personality traits, were the most frequently occurring, used by just over half the sample. Animal and object screen names as well as screen names from literature, film and music were also used. Only one male participant used a screen name with

---

5 Several participants used lower case first letters for their screen names. Names have been reproduced as the participant entered them.
sexual connotations. The “unclassifiable” category included names for which I was aware of no obvious meaning. Some screen names were coded on more than one category. Casanova, for example, was coded under the self, literature, and sex categories.

Table 6.7

*Percentage of Participants Using each Screen Name Category (N = 75)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Participants (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human-related screen names, e.g., mary, Noble</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen names related to objects, flora and fauna, e.g., island, Tiger</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen names from literature, TV, films, fairytales, e.g., Noddy, Achilles</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline name</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID code provided on questionnaire</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen names related to sex and provocation, e.g., Casanova</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclassifiable e.g., jarbu, abunai</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of screen names adopted (57%) were gender-neutral. Gender-neutral screen names included androgynous names such as francis and sam, as well as object-related screen names. Female names, such as Dolores, becky, miss, and princess, were adopted by 24% of participants. Male names, like Peter, Horace, and iceman were used by 19% of participants. In total, 40% of participants adopted female or male screen names consistent with their offline sex and this strategy was more common for men than women.

Gender-neutral screen names were most frequently adopted by those in Identity clusters A (extraverted, agreeable Australians), B (women), and E (emotional introverts). In general, the use of gender-neutral screen names was more common amongst females than males; 63% of females and 43% of males
used gender-neutral screen names, $\chi^2 (2, N=32) = 24.69, p = .000$ (see Figure 6.10).

![Gender of Screen Name]

**Figure 6.10.** Gendered categorisation of screen name by sex of player.

Adopting cross-sex screen names was not common. Two females used male screen names: Jimmy and vidal. No males adopted female screen names. Overall, females were therefore more likely to choose a screen name that disguised (concealed or swapped) their offline gender than men.

A cross tabulation of gender identity with screen name gender is displayed in Figure 6.11. Regardless of gender identity, participants were most likely to present a gender-neutral screen name. Those with an undifferentiated gender identity, however, were particularly likely to present themselves in a gender-neutral way.
Figure 6.11. Gendered categorisation of screen names by gender identity of player.

6.3.4 Presenting the self online: Quantitative analysis

The next step in the analysis was to examine the presentation of the open-ended identity data (SST and possible selves) in the MOO. In order to determine whether all SST items were relevant to identity and to check for order effects in the way participants completed the task, centrality scores for the SST items were examined. Centrality scores ranged from 4 (most central) to 1 (least central). Mean scores for each item are presented in Table 6.8. Participants began the SST with the most important items. This importance decreased in the second half of the list, however, a marked increase in importance was noted on the final item. As no item had a mean centrality rating indicating triviality, all 10 self-statements were included in the following analyses.
Table 6.8

*Means and Standard Deviations of Importance Ratings Associated with each SST*

*Item Number (N = 75)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SST item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>(SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>(0.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>(0.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>(0.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>(0.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>(0.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>(0.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>(0.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>(0.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>(0.82)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.3.4.1 *Self-concept, desired identities, and undesired identities online*

In order to determine the relative impact of offline constructs (self-concept, desired identity images, and undesired identity images) on MOO impression construction, three new variables were created: MOO identity (MOOi), the number of items from the SST that were presented in the MOO description, MOO desired identity (MOOdi), the number of desired identity images that were presented in the MOO description, and MOO undesired identity (MOOundi), the number of undesired identity images that were presented in the MOO description.

To test their suitability for parametric analysis, the spread of scores on the three new variables was examined. MOOi showed reasonable variability, however, MOOdi was characterised by a low spread of scores. Nonparametric statistics have been used for analyses involving MOOdi. Undesired identity images were presented online by only two participants. These two participants are considered separately below.
Descriptive statistics revealed a low representation of offline constructs in the MOO descriptions overall. The mean for MOOi was 1.38 (SD = 1.43), with a possible range of 0–10 and an actual range of 0-6. Desired identity was represented even less frequently (M = 0.52, SD = 0.16, Range 1-4). A Wilcoxon signed ranks test revealed a significant difference between the number of self-statements and desired identity images presented online, Z (65) = -4.54, p = .000. The effect size was large, d = 0.85. To better understand the presentation of offline self-concept and desired identity images online, these two variables were considered in more detail, using both descriptive and inferential analyses.

Although the mean number of SST items included in MOO descriptions was low, the majority of participants (65%) included at least one element from their SST in the MOO description. For example, chloe described herself as “funny and creative” on the SST. On her MOO description, these two personality characteristics were presented, using both similar and different words:

I have a good sense of humour and am quite witty... and have a lot of fun creative ideas.

Exploratory univariate t-tests and bivariate correlational analyses were conducted to examine MOOi as a function of age, biological sex, previous synchronous CMC experience, ethnicity, personality, and identity clustering. No significant findings were reported, although of all the identity clusters, Group E (emotional introverts) was least likely to present self-concept online.

Compared to the presentation of self-concept, desired identity images were incorporated less frequently into the MOO descriptions. Less than one-third (28%) of participants included one or more desired self in their character
description. For example, Chloe described her desired self as “relaxed” and in her MOO description she presented that same image:

Most people think I’m quite … relaxed by the way I speak….

The numeric variable MOOdi was transformed into a categorical variable with two values: no presentation (those who did not present any desired identity images online) and presentation (those who presented at least one desired identity image online). This new variable was cross-tabulated with synchronous CMC experience and a significant difference was noted, $\chi^2 (2, N=65) = 11.41, p = .003$. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of those who presented desired identity images online had low synchronous CMC experience. The remaining 38% were divided between moderate experience (14%) and high experience (24%). A cultural difference was also noted, $\chi^2 (1, N=65) = 5.96, p = .021$. Of the Australian-born participants, 40% presented desired identity images online compared to only 10% of participants born in Asia. No significant differences were noted for age or biological sex. One personality difference was noted. Compared to those who didn’t present desired identity images online, those who did scored significantly higher on Conscientiousness, $t(73)=-2.18, p=.033 (-6.67, -29), d = 0.58$. Differences were again noted between the identity clusters. Members of Identity cluster C, the cluster who scored high on Conscientiousness, were particularly likely to present desired identity images online, as were members of Identity cluster A (extraverted, agreeable Australians). Nearly 50% of each of these groups presented desired identity images online compared to 33% or less of the other identity clusters. Presence of desired identity images in the online description was unrelated to whether the possible selves were perceived to be likely to transpire.
Only two participants presented their undesired identity images online, both of whom were Asian and had moderate experience with synchronous CMC. Abunai, a 20-year old female, who included amongst her undesired selves “intimidating” and “cruel”, provided the following online description:

*go away I bite! grrr*

Francis, a 20-year old male, described one of his undesired identity images as “single and alone”. Single was mentioned in the online description.

Although undesired identity images were rarely presented online, 32% of participants presented an online description that contradicted one or more undesired identity image. Contradictions of undesired identity images were particularly likely to be presented online for members of Identity cluster A (agreeable Anglo extraverts). For example, one 26-year old European female identified her undesired identity images as “fat and ugly” and “dumb”. In the MOO she described herself as both “beautiful” and “intelligent”.

Nearly one-third of participants (32%) made no reference to any SST items or possible selves in their online description. This group was not distinguished from those who did presented offline elements online by sex, age, ethnicity, synchronous CMC experience, or any of the personality subscales. Identity group E, however, was particularly likely to present selves without reference to items in the offline measures with nearly half the participants in this group falling into this category.

6.3.4.2 Importance and desirability of SST items online

In order to determine whether the centrality or importance of SST items affected their inclusion in MOO descriptions, the centrality scores of all items that occurred in both the SST and MOO descriptions were analysed. Items rated by participants as of greater importance to their self-concept were more
likely to be presented in the MOO than items of less importance, $\chi^2 (3, N=65) = 55.21, p = .000$.

Every participant included positively rated items in their SST and these dominated the SST items ($M = 5.83, SD = 2.24$). Negative items were included by 85% ($M = 2.12, SD = 1.62$) and neutral items by 65% of participants ($M = 1.42, SD = 1.47$). As poor variability characterised the presence of negative and neutral items in the MOO descriptions, Friedman’s nonparametric test for related samples was used to compare these variables. The inclusion of SST items in the MOO description was affected by the self-assessed valence of those items, $\chi^2 (2, N=65) = 66.22, p = .000$. The mean number of positive, negative, and neutral items included in the MOO descriptions was 1.29, .17, and .12 respectively. Positive items were included in 59% of the MOO descriptions, whereas both neutral and negative items were each included in only 9% and 8% of MOO descriptions respectively.

There were no significant ethnic differences in the valence of offline information presented online. One sex difference emerged: the mean number of negative self-statements presented online by women was .24 (SD = 0.88), whereas no men presented items in this category. Positive items were included with different frequency across the identity groups, $F (4,68) = 3.26, p = .01$. The number of positive items included by Identity group A (1.78) was significantly different to the number included by Identity group E (.47), but this probably reflects the low presentation of SST items for this latter group.

A summary of the variables found to explain the presentation of identity and possible selves is presented in Table 6.9. The table shows that the presentation of undesired identity images was the self-presentation practice best explained, with four of the five independent variables explaining its occurrence. The identity groups, based on clustering of semantic differential
responses, proved to be the most useful variable, explaining a range of self-presentation behaviours.

Table 6.9

Summary of Empirically Supported Relationships between Independent and Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>MOOi</th>
<th>Desirability of MOOi items</th>
<th>MOOdi</th>
<th>MOOundi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality (NEO)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchronous CMC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity clustering</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.3.5 Presenting the self online: Content analysis

6.3.5.1 Gender choice

Only two participants chose a MOO gender different to their offline sex. These participants were both females from Identity cluster A (extraverted, agreeable Australians) and both selected the male option for their MOO persona. No participants selected the plural or neuter options. One of the participants who gender swapped, dodgey, a 37-year old Australian, provided a gender-neutral MOO description:

student in 30s enjoys life.
The second, Thredony, a 19 year old Australian, included the male pronoun in her description.

Thredony is a young media studies student from the Greensborough region of Melbourne, heavily influenced in his every action by his favourite musical groups and film-makers.

One Asian participant, francis, self-identified as male on the both the offline and online measures, but described his desired identity images in female terms on the SST: a “sophisticated woman”, and “a good and caring mother”. This participant was removed from all gender analyses, as it seemed likely that the individual ticked the wrong boxes.

Sixty-five of the 75 participants provided MOO descriptions. These descriptions varied in length and content. Descriptions ranged in length from two to 49 words ($M = 17.05$, $SD = 14.57$), but in general were shorter than those provided offline ($M = 24.03$, $SD = 17.14$). Both these variables were negatively skewed, so a Wilcoxon signed ranks non-parametric test was used. The difference in length was significant, $Z = -2.85$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.44$. Age was negatively correlated with the number of words used in the online descriptions, $r (75) = -0.2483$, $p = .03$, but not with the length of the SST responses. The number of words used online was not correlated with synchronous CMC experience. No sex differences in length of online statements were noted. No significant differences were reported between the identity clusters in length of online descriptions.

Nearly two-thirds of participants (60%) relied exclusively on the third person in their MOO description. For example,
mary possesses a sense of humour and can make people laugh… (23-year old, Australian female, IG E)⁶

Rum is outgoing and friendly, but at times can be a bit emotional. Rum enjoys sports and going out. (18-year old, Australian female, IG E)

In contrast 38% used the first person exclusively. For example,

I am 18yrs old, I go to uni and I love to dance. (miriam, 18-year old, Australian female, IG C)

And one participant used both:

Justin is a friendly, fun loving guy who wishes to meet others that share similar interests. I currently have a business of my own that is doing very well. However I am looking to meet some new people… (Justin, 20-year old, Australian male, IG C)

The choice to write in the first or third person was unrelated to age or sex. Synchronous CMC experience distinguished those who used the first and third person, _t_ (62) = -2.25, _p_ = .028, _d_ = 0.55. Those who described themselves in the third person had significantly more experience with chat and MOOs than those who used the first person in their MOO descriptions.

6.3.5.2 Comparison of SST items and MOO descriptions

A comparison of the four referential frames used in the offline SST and the online descriptions is presented in Figure 6.12. The reflective frame

---

⁶ Participants’ age, sex, ethnicity, screen names, and identity cluster membership are provided in parentheses at the end of quotes.
dominated both the SST and online descriptions. As many participants used the reflective frame online as offline. The physical and social frames in contrast occurred more frequently in the online descriptions than the offline SST. Few participants used the oceanic referential frame in either the offline or online domain.

![Identity referential frame profiles for offline SST and online descriptions.](image)

*Figure 6.12. Identity referential frame profiles for offline SST and online descriptions.*

A more detailed analysis of the sub-categories within each frame indicated that MOO descriptions were more than four times more likely to include reference to age and sex than the SST items. Also more frequently occurring in the MOO descriptions were references to ethnicity and roles. All other categories occurred more frequently in the offline descriptions. References to
character and behavioural style or elements of personality, which were nearly ubiquitous in the SST responses, occurred in 71% of the MOO descriptions. Skills and abilities, another frequently mentioned category, occurring in at least one SST item for 70% of participants, was present in only 24% MOO descriptions. Cross-tabulations were conducted to compare the participants who presented each sub-category on both the SST and in the online descriptions. For nearly all sub-categories, this percentage was smaller than the percentage of participants using the sub-categories in either domain, demonstrating independence of the two domains. Details of these cross-tabulations are provided in the following sections. Where cell size was adequate chi-square statistics are reported.

In order to examine the breadth of the MOO descriptions, the number of different sub-categories that was used online was compared with the number used in the self-statements. Participants drew on an average of 7.5 sub-categories (SD = 1.84) in the offline measure, with a range of 1-11. In their MOO descriptions participants presented significantly fewer different sub-categories (M = 3.24, SD = 1.63, range 1-7), t(64)=13.30, p=.000, (3.55, 4.81), d = 2.45. Comparison of sub-categories (Table 6.10) indicated that those sub-categories that were used more online than offline (physical and social characteristics) were also represented with more breadth online. In contrast, in the areas of character and behavioural style, skills and interests the MOO descriptions contained less breadth than the SST. In the following section, the MOO descriptions are analysed in detail.
Table 6.10

*Mean Number of Identity Sub-categories Presented in SST and MOO Descriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity category</th>
<th>SST M</th>
<th>SST SD</th>
<th>MOO M</th>
<th>MOO SD</th>
<th>t (65)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>-4.44**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>-3.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>6.45**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>2.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character and behavioural style</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>15.67**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.05. ** p<.005

6.3.5.2.1 The physical self

Age and sex were used more often to describe MOO identity than offline identity. Participants in Identity cluster B (women) were particularly likely to present their age online. Dolores, for example, described herself as being in her “early twenties”. Other participants stated their exact age.

I am a 19 year old Australian male. (Pete, 19-year old, Australian male, IG D)

Although sex was sometimes explicitly presented, it was more often implied, particularly through the use of gendered pronouns in the third person descriptions, such as,

flower is easy to approach… she is funny and some describe her as inspiring.
(25-year old, Australian female, IG B)
One participant described himself as an object and did not refer to sex in the MOO description, but allocated sex consistent with his offline sex (male).

Bowl was previously an inanimate standard soup bowl who has not been blessed with an electronic identity (18-year old, Australian male, IG E)

References to physical appearance appeared as often in MOO descriptions as on the SST, however MOO descriptions appeared more objective and socially undesirable terms were avoided. Participants appeared to strive for a description that was neither too positive nor too negative; words like “fat”, which appeared in the SST statements, were not used in the MOO descriptions. Four female participants provided details of their appearance, all of which are reproduced below. All of these participants had low levels of online experience. Two of these participants also mentioned physical appearance in their SST.

I am medium height, medium to heavy build, ok looking, brown eyes, brown hair… (Tiger, 24-year old, Australian female, IG A)

I am short with black short hair. Medium build, early twenties. (Dolores, 18-year old, Australian female, IG B)

I am short, not tall, brown hair, brown/hazel eyes. Not ultra skinny, not fat … (miss, 22-year old, Indian female, IG B)

In contrast to the moderate descriptions above, Aeon described her physical appearance more positively, as “attractive”, adding
She has light brown hair, blue eyes and a petite figure… (19-year old, Australian female, IG E)

And one participant, Princess, described herself with unabashed superlatives:

Young and intelligent. Bold and beautiful (26-year old, European female, IG A)

The three less emotive descriptions were all written in the first person, whereas the more positive self-presentations were written in the third person.

Although physical appearance was as likely to be mentioned in the SST as online, it was not the same group of participants who used this information in both contexts. Seven out of the 10 participants who presented an aspect of physical appearance online did not mention it on their SST. Conversely, eight participants who included reference to physical appearance in their SST did not present it online.

6.3.5.2.2 The social self

Four aspects of social identity were examined: cultural background, relationship, student role, and occupational role. Overall social identity was presented in more MOO descriptions than SST responses. In particular, student role was mentioned more frequently in the online context than the SST (17% and 7%, respectively), as was ethnicity (15% and 7%, respectively). None of the participants who presented information about student role online included this information in their SST. Most participants who mentioned being a student in the MOO also stated their area of study.

I am a 19 year old female student, studying Public Relations at RMIT… (chloe, 19-year old, Australian female, IG A)
Both Australian and Asian participants mentioned cultural background, although Australian participants were more likely to state where they lived.

...I am originally from Ballarat and now reside in Melbourne... (chloe, 19-year old, Australian female, IG A)

Asian participants were more likely to present race and citizenship.

Singaporean Chinese, middle aged female. (Voon, 28 year old, Asian female, IG B)

Half of those participants who presented ethnic information online also mentioned it in their SST. Although on the SST participants noted their relationships to others, such as being “a girlfriend”, online, relationship status was primarily referred to in its absence:

Jane is a female career woman in her mid 20s, she is single... (19-year old, Australian female, IG B)

6.3.5.2.3 The reflective self

Because the reflective frame was used so frequently both on and offline, the sub-categories and their specific dimensions were examined in detail. The use of the dimensions in the MOO descriptions was compared to their presence in the SST. These data are summarised in Table 6.11. Also included in this table, in the right-hand column is the percentage of participants who referred to the dimension in both the online and offline measures.
Table 6.11

Percentage of Participants Who Referred to Reflective Sub-categories at Least Once in MOO Description \( (N = 65) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity categories</th>
<th>SST description (%)</th>
<th>MOO description (%)</th>
<th>SST and MOO description (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-category</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dimension</strong></td>
<td><strong>SST (%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>MOO (%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills and abilities</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organisational</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adaptive</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Achieving</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fortunate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests and needs</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arts and interests/entertainment</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work orientation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical, active</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character and behavioural style</td>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impulsive</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open to experience</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-application</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introspective</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values and beliefs</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Skills and abilities were mentioned by more than two-thirds of participants in the SST, but were included in less than one-quarter of MOO descriptions. Social skills were the most frequently occurring dimension in the MOO descriptions for this sub-category. Typical of this dimension is the following description:

People enjoy his company and feel welcome and comfortable around him. (Kirk, 19-year old, Australian male, IG A)

All other dimensions in this sub-category occurred infrequently online and all were mentioned less often in the MOO descriptions than on the SST. One notable difference is cognitive ability. More than one-third of participants described themselves as intelligent in the SST using terms such as "fairly intelligent" and "reasonably intelligent" as well as "clever", "smart", "knowledgeable", "intellectual", and "too intelligent for own good". Reference to cognitive ability in the SST was made more often by males than females, $\chi^2 (1, N=123) = 3.75$, $p = .05$. In comparison, words like "intelligent" and "very smart" occurred in only 5 MOO descriptions. Unlike the predominance of males who described their cognitive ability in the SST, four of the five participants who used this sub-category in the MOO description were female. Presentation of this sub-category online was not dependent on whether intelligence was mentioned on the self-statements.

The need for affiliation and interests were the most frequently occurring sub-categories in the interests and needs category online. Participants described themselves as enjoying meeting people and being with friends.

Sarah likes to have fun with friends and meet new people... (19-year old, Australian female, IG A)
As on the SST, participants described themselves in terms of their hobbies and interests, including sport, music, and computer games. However, only one of the participants who referred to interests online also mentioned this sub-category in his SST. Examples of interest-related self-presentations include:

…My hobbies include playing chess, computer games and the arcades (Khee, 25 year old, Asian male, IG D)

…-independent music, -french films, -english soccer (Joel, 19-year old, Australian male, IG E)

Two participants chose screen names to reflect their musical interests. For example, JustAGirl, described her MOO identity like this

Who is JustAGirl??!! Well, I guess u could say she’s a girl!!!! She is a music fan – as can be guessed by the name… (JustAGirl, 19-year old, Australian female, IG D)

Achievement motivation, mentioned by 15% of participants on their SST, with words such as “competitive” and “ambitious”, was presented in only one MOO description:

A cool, calculating, serious individual that loves to be competitive and strives for excellence in any task. (iceman, 18-year old, Australian male, IG C)

*Character and behavioural style* were mentioned by all but one participant on the SST. On the SST, participants used words like “articulate”, “likeable”, “popular”, along with phrases such as “good at telling people what they want
to hear” and “too worried about others opinions about me”. Fewer MOO descriptions (72%) contained references to character and behavioural style. As on the SST, outgoing descriptions were the most common type of self-presentation. Friendliness and sense of humour were frequently occurring themes in this sub-category; “fun-loving” presentations were common.

Loves to chat and meet new people as well as having fun. (Noddy, 22-year old, Australian male, IG D)

I have a good sense of humour and am quite witty… (Jimmy, 19-year old, Australian male, IG D)

Antonymous responses, reflecting a quiet, reserved, or serious personality, were infrequent, but included the following:

Lucy is a quiet person who enjoys pondering lifes questions trying to find answers to questions that she knows there are none. She feels in her world – friends and family don’t understand her. (20-year old, Australian female, IG B)

Aspects of well-being were mentioned by nearly one-quarter (24%) of participants in their MOO descriptions. “Happy”, “fun-loving”, and “optimistic” were common terms used. For example,

Usually fun, happy, easy-going. (aaa, 19-year old, Australian female, IG A)

Aspects of caring, present in nearly two-thirds (62%) of SST responses, were mentioned infrequently online (17%). The same pattern was noted for confidence and emotional stability. The latter, which was mentioned in 45% of
SST responses, was referred to by only one participant online. Rum described herself as someone who was:

…outgoing and friendly, but at times can be a little emotional… (18-year old Australian female, IG E)

Religious, political, and ethical values and beliefs occurred in few SST responses (12%) and only three MOO descriptions. Vladmir, an 18-year old Australian male (IG E), who described himself on the SST as “political” and “opinionated”, introduced his online persona as:

… a young, powerhungry socialist from Australia, very political and opinionated.

In summary, MOO character descriptions focused on personality traits. Physical features as well as social identity were also presented. Relatively infrequent, compared to their presence in the SST, were descriptions of cognitive ability, confidence, and caring. Considerable independence of SST and MOO descriptions was noted.

6.3.5.3 Comparison of desired identity images and MOO descriptions

Desired identity images were presented in 28% of the MOO character descriptions. In total 28 meaning units were presented online. Content analysis of these images revealed a similar pattern to the SST items that were presented online. All of the desired identity images presented online were from the reflective referential frame. The majority of desired identity images presented online (54%) described character and behavioural style, primarily related to being happy, fun-loving, and honest. The other major category represented was interests and needs (32%). Physical aspects of desired
identity images were conspicuously absent in the online character descriptions. Only participant, who included being “more attractive” amongst her desired identity images presented this aspect online.

6.3.5.4 The ideal MOO impression

As well as providing a description of their MOO identity, participants were asked, in an open-ended question, how they would like to be perceived by others online. These ideal impression statements were coded using the same categories as were used to code the MOO descriptions. A comparison of the ideal impressions and the MOO descriptions is presented in Table 6.12.

There were few dimensions on which ideal impressions matched MOO descriptions. Ideal impressions occurred more frequently than MOO descriptions on 15 of the 33 dimensions. These included: cognitive skills (generally expressed as a desire to be seen as intelligent), outgoing (fun, good sense of humour), caring (kind, willing to help), emotional (typically expressed as easy-going), and reliable (good, trustworthy). A small proportion of participants (4%) wanted to be seen as unique or different in the MOO. These were coded as non-self-identifying (antonymous) and so increased the frequency of this category. One new category that did not fit into the existing coding schedule arose in the ideal impressions: 9% of participants wanted to be seen as “interesting”. The most frequently occurring theme of the ideal impressions was a desire to be seen as outgoing, good fun, and having a good sense of humour.

Also of interest are those categories represented more often in the MOO descriptions than ideal impressions. There were 16 dimensions in this category, including all of the physical and social sub-categories. Of particular note in the reflective referential frame were well-being and self-application.
Table 6.12

Percentage of Participants Who Referred to Identity Sub-categories at Least Once in MOO Description and Ideal MOO Impression (N = 65)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referential frame</th>
<th>Identity categories</th>
<th>MOO description (%)</th>
<th>Ideal MOO impression (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical appearance</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Cultural background</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student role</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occupational role</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>Skills and abilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organisational</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adaptive</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Achieving</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fortunate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests and needs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arts and entertainment/interests</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work orientation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical, active</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character and behavioural style</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impulsive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open to experience</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-application</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introspective</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values and beliefs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceanic</td>
<td>Non-self-identifying</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each ideal impression was compared in toto to its related MOO description, and coded as completely consistent, not consistent, or partially consistent. A small proportion of the ideal impressions (9%) were completely consistent with the MOO descriptions, that is, all of the elements in the ideal impression were included in the MOO description. For example, Kirk, a 19-year old Australian male (IG A), who described his MOO identity as “outgoing and confident … funny and easy to relate to”, noted that he wanted to be seen as “fun and sociable”. For a much larger group of participants (41%), however, the ideal impression was not explicitly contained in the MOO description. These responses were rated as not consistent. For example, in talking about how she would like to be seen, Tiger, a 24-year old Australian female (IG A), noted that she wanted to be perceived “as a strong person mentally, but with deep emotions. Not hung up on looks. Not overconfident.” None of these components were apparent in her MOO description, rather she provided a detailed physical description of herself in the MOO.

I am medium height, medium to heavy build, ok looking, brown eyes, brown hair…

In addition, she added,

I am intelligent, but know when to listen. I am a wonderful listener, and love to help.

The emphasis on physical detail provided in the MOO description contradicts her ideal impression of someone “not hung up on looks”.

For about one third of participants (35%), the ideal impression statements reflected elements of the MOO description, but also included additional dimensions. These statements were coded as partially consistent. For
example, Princess, who described herself as “Young and intelligent. Bold and beautiful”, picked up some of these themes in her ideal impression, but also added “Approachable and kind. Strong and fun-to-be-with”, none of which were explicitly part of her MOO description.

Two participants talked about the process of impression monitoring in their response:

I would like to be seen as an honest person anything else they can figure out for themselves (Mordeth, 21-year old, Australian male, IG E)

I don’t really mind about what others think and see of me because nobody can be perfect in everyone’s eyes… (love, 22-year old, Asian female, IG D)

6.3.6 Playful responses

Seven participants (11%) produced MOO descriptions that were qualitatively different to the majority of responses. Their descriptions are examined here and the particular characteristics of this small group of participants explored.

Several participants chose to use an inanimate object for their screen name, such as gumboot, island, and flower, however, bowl was the only participant to follow up the screen name in a literal way in his description:

Bowl was a previously inanimate standard soup bowl who has now been blessed with an electronic identity. (18-year old, Australian male, IG E)
Despite the gender-neutral nature of the description, bowl still selected a male online gender. Another participant\(^7\) drew on car advertising in a mixture of images in her description:

intelligent, happy, cute, thermal, radio-active, chemically balanced perhaps, fuel injected comes with free air and power steering (soldier, 20-year old, Australian female)

Two participants, one female and one male, wrote short, alliterative descriptions, presenting themselves in socially desirable ways:

Young and intelligent. Bold and beautiful (Princess, 26-year old, European female, IG A)

clean, neat and sweet (bernardo, 33-year old, Australian male, IG A)

Another two participants produced self-referential descriptions:

He is what he is… (Mordeth, 21-year old, Australian male, IG E)

Just me. I may be a little strange sometimes. (HIPPO, 18-year old, Australian female, IG E)

HIPPO’s description appears to contain a warning, or at least an explanation for her behaviour. Abunai’s description was even more direct:

*go away I bite! grrr* (Abunai, 20-year old, Asian female, IG E)

---

\(^7\) This participant did not provide responses to the offline semantic differential, therefore she was not included in the cluster analysis.
These 7 participants who appeared playful in their MOO descriptions were compared with the rest of the participants on a range of variables including age, online experience, and the NEO sub-scales. Large effect sizes would be needed to detect differences given the small size of the sample, therefore the quantitative analysis focused on trends. Playful individuals were younger and more experienced with synchronous CMC than other participants. They also scored lower than the other participants on Neuroticism, $d = 0.41$, Extraversion, $d = 0.76$, Agreeableness, $d = 0.67$, and Conscientiousness, $d = 0.57$. The only NEO sub-scale on which playful individuals scored higher than other participants was Openness, $t(73) = -2.09, p = .04$, ($-10.39, -0.25)$, $d = 0.87$. Proportionally, Identity cluster E (emotional, introverts) had more playful individuals than any other group.

6.3.7 Identity clusters revisited

The identity clusters derived from a cluster analysis of offline semantic differential responses proved useful in explaining online self-presentation. The major findings concerning these groups are summarised below. Identity clusters A and E emerged as associated with a range of self-presentation strategies. Identity cluster A (extraverted, agreeable Australians) was associated with both the presentation of desired identity images and contradictions of undesired identity images. The only examples of gender swapping also came from this identity cluster. In contrast, participants in Identity cluster E (emotional introverts) were least likely to present their self-concept online or possible selves online. They also presented less positive images. Nevertheless, this group was the most qualitatively playful. The presentation of age in the character descriptions was associated with Identity cluster B (women). These three groups, Identity clusters A, E, and B, were also most likely to conceal their biological sex through gender-neutral screen
names. Identity cluster C (emotionally stable, conscientious males) presented desired identity images. It was difficult to establish a distinct profile for Identity cluster D using the demographic and NEO profile. This group was also difficult to distinguish on the self-presentation variables.

6.4 Discussion

Five hypotheses were generated for study one. The four hypotheses about the contribution of offline content to MOO self-presentation were supported. As predicted by self-presentation theory, items from the SST describing identity were presented in the MOO descriptions more frequently than desired identity images and desired identity images were presented more often than undesired identity images. The prediction regarding the presentation of important offline identity items was supported. Central offline statements were presented more frequently in the MOO description than those items rated as less central. Also supported was the prediction that positive SST items would be presented more frequently than negative or neutral items. Although the proposed mediating effect of CMC experience was not observed, other data suggest that low levels of CMC experience is associated with more idealised self-presentation online.

Five exploratory questions were posed at the beginning of this study.

Research question 1: What patterns exist in ideal impressions? To what extent do ideal impressions predict presented identities?

Research question 2: How do personality traits impact on the presentation of identity, desired identity images, and undesired identity images in a MOO?

Research question 3: How does gender identity impact on the presentation of gender in a MOO?

Research Question 4: What types of screen names are adopted in a social MOO?
How is gender revealed and concealed through the use of screen names?

Research Question 5: In what ways are online ratings of self similar and different to offline ratings of self? How are online ratings of self related to online self-presentation?

With respect to the first of these research questions, comparison of ideal impressions and MOO descriptions revealed considerable discrepancies between the two measures, suggesting that how a person wishes to be seen is not necessarily a good predictor of how she or he will present online. In relation to the second research question, patterns of Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion and Openness appeared related to a range of self-presentation strategies. With respect to gender, only two participants changed their gender online. Online gender was therefore determined almost exclusively by biological sex. Screen names were primarily human-related and both revealed and concealed biological sex. Finally, online identity was rated more positively than offline identity. This self-enhancing tendency online was also reflected in the positive nature of the self-presentations. It was this final question about the relationship between identity and self-presentation that provided a structure for much of the analysis. Whereas few variables alone proved to be useful indicators of self-presentation online, clustering participants on the basis of identity ratings provided insight into the ways demographic, personality, and identity variables might interact in online self-presentation.

In the following sections, these major positive findings are discussed in more detail. Negative findings, that is the failure to observe expected outcomes, are also considered. The discussion begins by considering the use of the screen name as a self-presentation tactic. Character descriptions are then examined in terms of revealing and concealing the offline self, as well as presenting desired and undesired identity images. The absence of gender swapping in the present sample is discussed, as are possible relationships
between personality and self-presentation. Consideration is given to the effect of CMC experience on self-presentation online. Finally, issues related to generalisability of the findings are discussed.

6.4.1 Pseudonymity: The screen name as self-presentation

On registering a MOO character, a player’s first task is to choose their screen name. The screen name that a player adopts is a potentially important form of self-presentation. The equivalent of physical appearance in face-to-face interaction, the screen name presents the first information that others perceive.

The screen names chosen by the present sample were analysed using the categories identified by Bechar-Israeli (1996) in IRC. Despite the different domains of CMC, similar patterns were noted across the two studies (see Table 6.13).

As in the Bechar-Israeli study, the majority of screen names were human-related, either as names, such as Lucy or harri, or in the form of personality-related characteristics, such as Noble. Real names were found relatively rarely, but in similar proportion in the two studies. Also reported with similar frequency across the two studies were screen names related to objects and animals.

Participants in the present study did not use two categories reported by Bechar-Israeli (1996): technology or medium-related screen names and screen names with a play on words or sounds. These differences are likely to reflect the different methodologies of the two studies. Screen names that play with the medium or words rely on a degree of competence or experience online and require some time to compose. Bechar-Israeli (1996) collected his screen names from IRC users, many of whom presumably were regular users of chat channels. In contrast nearly half the present sample had no experience of
Table 6.13
Comparison of Screen Name Categories Used in the MOO and IRC Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage of screen names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MOO study (N = 75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human-related screen names</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen names related to objects, flora and fauna</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen names from literature, TV, films, fairytales</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real name</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID code provided on questionnaire(^1)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen names related to sex and provocation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology or medium-related screen names</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play on words or sounds</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclassifiable</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Category not used in the Bechar-Israeli study.

Synchronous CMC and some had only minimal online experience. It is unlikely that these participants had existing screen names they could use in the study. In addition, in the real, as opposed to experimental, world users have unlimited time to reflect on and choose their screen name. Participants in the present study were asked to choose a screen name after logging on to The Place. Screen names may have been chosen hastily. Further, participants in the present study did not have the benefit of seeing any other screen names in the community. In the “real” MOO world it is possible to refine a screen name after observing others’ choices. In fact in a “real” MOO, players generally log on as a guest, sometimes several times, before registering their character. This gives the player time to not only see other screen names, but also to read character descriptions, and get a feel for the self-presentational
strategies used in the MOO.

Compared to the previous IRC research, the present study included more screen names with a literary reference. Again the lack of familiarity with MOOs may explain this finding. In choosing their screen name, participants appear to have drawn on media with which they were familiar. This finding supports Miller’s (1995) argument that we appropriate practices from other contexts to guide self-presentational behaviour online. With the exception of these three categories, the screen names chosen by participants in the present study replicated those identified in earlier research (Bechar-Israeli, 1996). The major differences that were observed are explicable in terms of CMC experience.

As well as categorising the screen names thematically, the screen names were coded for gendered content. Although the sample was primarily female, with males constituting only 28% of participants, female screen names did not predominate. The largest group of screen names were gender neutral, chosen by nearly two-thirds of participants. Women favoured gender-neutral screen names, whereas men were more likely to reveal their offline gender, using a male screen name. Two women concealed their offline gender, both of whom used male screen names. The masking of gender through screen names, particularly amongst women has been widely reported (Bruckman, 1993; Jaffe et al., 1995; Reid, 1994; Turkle, 1995; Wallace, 1999), however the prevalence of gender-neutral screen names in the present study was much higher than noted in previous research (Danet, 1996). The frequency of the practice in the present study may be related to the predominance of women in the sample.

Few MOO studies have attempted to quantify the practice of gender concealment in screen names. Although some studies of MOOs, such as Danet’s (1996) research on LambdaMOO and MediaMOO, have reported the use of gendered screen names, this data has not been linked to offline sex. The present study therefore provides new quantitative information on how screen
names are used to reveal and conceal offline sex.

The influence of gender identity on the gendered nature of screen names was examined. Given that few women selected male screen names and no men selected female screen names, the category of particular interest was gender-neutral names. Participants from all gender identity categories chose gender-neutral names, but individuals with an undifferentiated gender identity were particularly likely to select a gender-neutral name. The undifferentiated category is described as one in which scores on both the feminine and masculine dimensions are low, a state of gender-neutrality, so in this respect the screen name appears to offer an opportunity to represent one’s “true” gender identity. Gender identity may be a useful variable in future research.

The relatively high proportion of participants, particularly women, who concealed their gender online through the use of a gender-neutral screen name suggested a certain playfulness online. If these participants were not explicit about their gender in their screen name, what other aspects of identity, I wondered, might they play with online?

6.4.2 Presenting the self-concept: Revealing and concealing identity online

Self-presentational research from offline contexts suggests that much impression construction involves attempts to present ourselves as we really think we are (DePaulo, 1992; Leary, 1993; Snyder & Gangestad, 1982). In face-to-face contexts we therefore often want others to see and validate us as we see ourselves. Results from the first study indicate this motivation can be generalised to online contexts. Self-presentations were influenced more by participants’ perceptions of themselves than desirable future selves. In addition, items considered central to identity were more likely to be presented online than items rated of lesser importance. Schlenker (1986) hypothesised that important aspects of identity are thought about more often, are salient in
a range of contexts and thus are likely to be presented to others. The results of the present study support the application of this assumption online. Together, these results suggest that MOO self-presentation is fundamentally similar to self-presentation in offline contexts.

Although online self-presentations were more likely to be an accurate presentation of aspects of identity than a presentation of either desired or undesired selves, the total number of self-concept items incorporated into the MOO identity descriptions was low; on average less than one fifth of the self-concept items were presented online. In addition, the MOO descriptions were shorter than the offline SST descriptions and used fewer categories. These findings characterise MOO self-presentation, like any form of self-presentation, as an edited version of self-concept. Key questions for the present research therefore concern what was revealed and what was concealed in this editing process.

The self-statements and MOO descriptions were classified according to well-established categories descriptive of identity. As noted above, a count of these categories revealed that information was presented more economically online. Not only were fewer words used online, but also fewer categories and sub-categories were employed than in the offline SST. This economy probably reflects the process of editing information for self-presentation. Self-presentation is, by its very nature a process of condensation. Even when we attempt to reveal ourselves as we really think we are, we engage in a process of distilling information and emphasising certain facets.

This editing effect, however, may have been confounded by several factors. First, differences in the length and breadth of descriptions may be an artefact of the data collection tools themselves. The SST provided 10 lines on which to respond. These parameters may have prompted different ways of thinking about identity. In comparison, when writing about their MOO identity, participants were instructed to write “a short description” in a textbox. Unlike
10 separate lines, a single blank box may have discouraged thinking about different aspects of identity. In addition, participants may have attempted to fit their description into the box without scrolling down and so written relatively short descriptions. Second, although most people have access to considerable information about their identity, they may not have thought much about how they would like to present themselves in an online context. The sample was, after all, relatively inexperienced at MOOing.

Examination of the category contents revealed some clear patterns of disclosure online. The reflective frame was the frame most frequently referred to in both contexts. This finding is consistent with previous research using the TST that indicated respondents typically give one or two physical and social responses, then devote the rest of their description to reflective statements (Rees & Nicholson, 1994). Overall the physical and social referential frames identified by McPartland (1965) were revealed more often online than offline, whereas specific aspects of the reflective frame were more likely to be concealed online than in the offline world. In the following sections each of these is examined in turn.

6.4.2.1 The physical self: Age, sex and appearance online

Participants were more likely to mention ascribed characteristics as well as social categories, like roles and ethnicity, in their MOO descriptions than in their offline self-statements. More than half the MOO self-presentation included reference to age, sex, or physical appearance. This emphasis on the physical body online complements anecdotal evidence that users routinely seek information about “asl” in initial interactions.

Online users want to situate themselves and others with physical information. In the offscreen world age, sex, and ethnicity are often communicated often without conscious intention. This information is given off. These facets of identity are fundamental to the ways we categorise
ourselves as well as others (O’Brien, 1999). Onscreen, if we want to be sure others know this information, we have to consciously give it. The emphasis on these characteristics in participants’ MOO descriptions suggests an awareness of the importance of these features in online interactions. The result replicates previous findings in MOOs (Reid, 1994) as well as other CMC domains (Rutter & Smith, 2000).

Nevertheless, as Turkle (1995) has argued, the onscreen reliance on physical features is “illogical”; after all, the MOO world offers the perfect opportunity to interact unconstrained by these boundaries. Several writers have concluded that the emphasis on physical characteristics highlights their role as significant markers in the offline world (O’Brien, 1999; Turkle, 1995). Surprisingly, the SST data do not support this assumption: only a small proportion of participants referred to age, sex, or ethnicity in their offline identity descriptions. Were these ascribed aspects unimportant to participants? Or are they so deeply ingrained and taken for granted that they aren’t consciously considered as being part of identity? Perhaps the online context increases the salience of one’s physical self, simply because the body is so obviously absent and any information about it has to be given. This explanation is consistent with the widely held proposition that identity is context-dependent (Markus et al., 1982; Oakes, Haslam, & Reynolds, 1999). Different facets of identity become salient under different conditions. The disembodied nature of online condition highlights the embodied self.

It is possible that the physical and social categories presented online were not descriptions of offline identity, but were ideals or fantasies. Without reference to these items in the offline measures it is impossible to confirm this. In retrospect, follow-up interviews, although adding to the time commitment required of participants, would have enabled questions like this to be checked. Two characteristics of the data however led me to suspect the emphasis on ascribed characteristics more likely represented a desire to
present one’s offline self, beginning with basic information that is given off in face-to-face interactions. First, when people engage in deceptive self-presentation they often exaggerate characteristics (DePaulo, 1992). Few references to physical and ascribed characteristics presented in the MOO were embellished. Rather, moderate, understated, “factual” images were typically presented. Second, only two participants changed their gender online. At least on this dimension, participants did not engage in deception.

The major exception to the focus on ascribed characteristics in the MOO descriptions was the sub-category of physical appearance. In contrast to the tendency to disclose aspects of gender and age online, physical descriptions were less frequent. Physical descriptions appeared as often online as in the SST and I initially assumed that the presence of these items in the SST was therefore a good predictor of their self-presentation online. However, further analysis revealed that those who described their identity in physical terms were not, for the most part, the same group of participants who presented physical appearance online. For nearly one quarter of participants the medium appears to have altered the salience of appearance. About half of this group concealed their physical appearance in the MOO context, choosing not to disclose aspects of physical appearance that were important to their identity. The other half described a physical self, even though it had not registered as a part of offline identity.

The way in which physical traits were described in the two media was also different. Online, the physical self-presentations were neither self-enhancing nor denigrating. The participants who used this sub-category appeared to present a factual image. This finding contradicts previous work in which exaggerated and highly socially desirable physical descriptions have been reported (e.g., Reid, 1994).
6.4.2.2 The social self: Social identity online

Two aspects of social identity appear salient for the participants’ online self-presentations: ethnicity and being a student. Both of these subcategories were twice as likely to be presented online as they were to appear in identity descriptions offline. Presenting these aspects of social identity serves several purposes: these aspects of social identity contextualise the actor as well as signal possible common ground, providing information that can be used by other players to initiate interactions. Both of these functions have potential utility in The Place where the stated aim was to socialise.

These results indicate the importance of social identity, that is identity defined through group membership, in the MOO. Research on the minimal group paradigm has shown how easily social identity can be invoked (Vaughan & Hogg, 2002). CMC research has also demonstrated that social identity can be invoked easily online. Spears, Lea, and Lee (1990), for example, manipulated social identity in a CMC experiment by simply telling participants they were either being tested a part of a group or individually. Of particular interest in the present research was the finding that none of those participants who presented themselves as a student online included this information in their SST. Like physical appearance, the salience of being a student appears to be context-dependent.

6.4.2.3 The reflective self: Personality and cognitive attributes online

In general, whereas ascribed characteristics were revealed online, aspects of personality and cognition were concealed. Participants concealed elements of their personality, cognitive and social ability, interests and needs, as well as values and beliefs.

Specific personality characteristics that were concealed online related to confidence, caring, well-being, emotional stability, and reliability. Each of these was reported by nearly 50% of participants offline, but presented far less
frequently online. Of particular note are the characteristics of caring and intelligence. Although nearly two-thirds of participants described themselves as caring in their SST, very few included this reference in their MOO description. Intelligence was also referred to less often in the MOO descriptions than in the SST. But it is not the case that participants didn’t care how they were perceived on these dimensions; on the contrary, both caring and intelligence figured in descriptions of ideal impressions. Participants wanted to be seen as both caring and intelligent, but they did not explicitly present these attributes.

The absence of caring and intelligent self-presentations online can be explained by the self-presentational dilemma known as the likability-competence tradeoff. Describing oneself to others as caring or intelligent creates a paradox for the actor. Any form of self-promotion runs the risk of alienating others. That is likability decreases with increases in presented competence. In addition, truly caring and intelligent people don’t need to tell others that they are and so specifically alluding to these traits might be perceived as evidence of their lack. Leary (1995) described the presence of this self-presentational dilemma in the offline world; the present study indicates the dilemma also occurs online.

Hobbies and interests were mentioned as frequently online as offline, however, only one participant mentioned this sub-category in both contexts. Like ethnicity and being a student, hobbies and interests provide potentially useful information for initial interactions, offering possible topics for discussion and mutual interest. Some participants presented this information in the MOO even though it was not considered important to identity. Another group of participants, however, who included these items in their SST did not present them in the MOO. The online context produced a complex response to self-presentations of interests, as it did with physical appearance and the student role.
6.4.2.4 Self-presentation strategies

Content analysis revealed considerable independence of MOO self-presentation and offline identity. In several cases only one of the participants presenting a particular aspect online also described themselves that way on the SST. Therefore apart from the presentation of offline identity online, the data suggested two other self-presentational strategies: on the one hand are examples of participants who concealed offline aspects of identity and on the other hand are examples of information presented without any obvious offline basis.

Concealment is an obvious self-presentation strategy to use online; the visual anonymity of the medium affords opportunities to selectively disclose aspects of identity normally given off in face-to-face interaction. While it is not true that players maintain perfect control over the impressions that others form of them, they do, nevertheless, have the chance to hide some aspects of identity. Concealing specific aspects of identity online may also be an unconscious response to the dilemma of presenting a complex self in a limited amount of words, a natural part of the editing process. Information is omitted simply because we cannot present everything about ourselves in any interaction.

Not disclosing aspects of identity online can protect against social anxiety. Social anxiety arises when we seek to make a good impression but do not think we will be able to do so (Schlenker, 2003). One tactic used in such situations is to say as little as possible. Although this does not necessarily create a good impression, neither does it make a poor impression. The approach is known as protective self-presentation (Leary, 1995) and may explain the motivation for the individuals who did not present any facet of their self-concept or desired selves online.

Used as a subtle form of deception, concealment is referred to as exclusionary self-presentation. Withholding information is one of the most
common ways to deal with inconsistencies between self-presentation and the impressions one is seeking to create (Leary, 1995). Exclusionary strategies are a normal response to the risks of self-disclosure (Dindia, 2000). They are also particularly prevalent when actors seek to create an impression of competence (Feldman et al., 2002). Rather than lie about skills in a particular area, we can simply avoid referring to them.

Several researchers have observed exclusionary self-presentation tactics in other CMC domains. Donath (1999) referred to the “acts of omission” that characterise online presentations in newsgroups. Rutter and Smith (2000) described the process of concealment used to manage identity presentation in chat. The present study suggests that acts of online omission most frequently relate to personality, skills and abilities and are, not surprisingly, most likely to occur for negative and neutral information. Socially desirable characteristics were also excluded from self-presentation; some of the most notable omissions in the present study were intelligence, confidence, and caring. Although the present study provided information on exclusionary self-presentation online, the extent to which the strategy was employed consciously is unclear. In order to further examine this prevalent strategy, more information is required on how participants develop their character descriptions.

The second type of self-presentation, the presentation of information not included in identity descriptions, is more difficult to explain. This form of self-presentation was prevalent in the study; nearly one-third of participants presented an online image with no discernable relationship to their SST or possible selves and others presented a combination of items, some of them represented in the offline measures and some not.

Age, sex, aspects of social identity, as well as hobbies and interests are particularly likely to be presented online without any SST basis. The presentations of these items that do not figure in the offline descriptions
challenge conventional self-presentational theory. Were these individuals presenting trivial aspects of themselves online? If so, why would they bother to do so? Was the act one of playful deception, a game of identity experimentation? Was this group of participants trying on identity in an exploration similar to identity moratorium?

These areas of “deception” didn’t reflect those identified by Buss and Briggs (1984) as the facets about which we most commonly lie, but instead represented (a) aspects of identity usually given off in offline interactions and (b) elements that might be useful to engaging others in social interaction. Previous research has suggested that misrepresentations in these areas occur in chat (Cornwell & Lundgreen, 2001), however there was little to indicate that the information presented in the MOO was misrepresentation.

These results therefore probably reflect the contextual dependency of identity attributes. The online context increases the salience, for example, of physical characteristics for some people. Perhaps if participants had been given more than 10 items on the SST, these elements would have eventually emerged. Following advice from Bochner (1994), the number of items on the test was reduced from the traditional 20 used in the TST to 10. Bochner (1994) recommended that only the first seven items be used as he observed a tendency to trivialise and repeat attributes on the last three items. An analysis of self-rated importance of the 10 items in the present study revealed the predicted drop in importance around the seventh item. However, importance increased again for the tenth item, suggesting that participants may have been thinking their way through the task and that less important items may have helped to clarify priorities. Despite the drop in importance in the second half of the list, no items were rated as trivial. Given the resurgence in importance noted on the final item, inclusion of more items on the test may have allowed for other central items, possibly those that were presented online, to be included in the offline description.
6.4.3 Presenting the ideal self

Self-presentation theory predicts that the self that is presented in face-to-face interaction primarily reflects identity. Cyberspace in contrast, has been characterised as a medium of identity experimentation, particularly wish-fulfilment. Turkle (1995), for example, cited examples of participants who acted out idealised selves and Curtis (1997) observed that although role-playing decreased with time, self-presentation still retained elements of wish-fulfilment. The present sample included predominantly young adults, all university students and therefore was a group particularly likely to be experimenting with possible selves in an extended identity moratorium. Data from the present study lend some support to this position, but the picture is not a simple one.

Although self-presentation of desired identity images was not widespread, the strategy was used by more than a quarter of participants. It is possible that the driving force behind these idealised self-presentations was self-expression, a desire to try on a “wanna be” self in public. The motive of claiming an identity may therefore have operated for this small group of participants. More common, however, were self-promoting presentations, with positive images frequently presented. Together, these results describe a subtle process of putting one’s best foot forward in cyberspace rather than more overtly playful wish-fulfilment.

Personality attributes were presented in a particularly positive way. According to Leary’s (1995) research, the most desirable impressions, at least for American university students, are friendly, intelligent, attractive, fun, outgoing, sincere, funny, caring, and easy to talk to. More than half of these were relatively common personality themes in the MOO self-presentations: participants described themselves as friendly, outgoing, confident, fun-loving, and having a good sense of humour. The results of this first study therefore
suggest that we seek to create desirable impressions online that are similar to those that are considered desirable in the offline world.

Participants’ ideal impressions were also examined. These descriptions of how they wanted to be perceived by others in the online community were also positively skewed; the most frequently occurring adjectives were fun, friendly, approachable, caring, and intelligent, mirroring those attributes generated by the students in Leary’s (1995) offline study. Correspondence between desired impressions and actual the self-presentation was, however, only moderate. Nearly half of the MOO descriptions made no reference to the specific ideal impressions and more than 70% of statements about ideal impressions included information that was not presented online. Two possible explanations may account for discrepancies between these two measures.

First, character descriptions provide a potential self-presentational dilemma for the actor: to present oneself too positively runs the risk of alienating others and jeopardizing signification of the attribute: the likability-competence tradeoff. This is illustrated in the presentation of a caring identity online. Although this was an attribute that participants described as a desirable impression to create online and it occurred frequently in the SST, very few participants included this reference in their MOO description. Participants may have imagined presenting themselves over time in ways to create their ideal impressions, rather than explicitly stating it in their MOO descriptions.

Second, discrepancies between ideal impressions and self-presentation may be accounted for by the sequence in which the tasks were completed. Participants completed the ideal impression statement after writing their MOO description. Although they were given an opportunity to change responses before submitting, participants may have been reluctant to go back and do this. It is probable that prompting participants to think about their
ideal impression prior to writing their MOO description would have produced greater consistency. Nevertheless to have done so would have reduced the face validity of the online measure. MOOs never explicitly prompt players to describe their ideal impression.

No sex differences were noted in the presentation of self-concept or idealised identity images, suggesting that women are no more likely than men to disclose personal information in their initial self-presentational statements online. This is consistent with offline research that has indicated sex differences in self-disclosure are small (Dindia, 2002). One finding qualified this general conclusion: women were more likely than men to disclose negative information online. The numbers of participants who engaged in this practice were small and any conclusions are necessarily tentative.

Only one cultural difference emerged. Australian-born participants were more likely to present desired identity images than Asian participants. This cross-cultural difference is puzzling because individualistic cultures have been described as particularly intolerant of deceptive self-presentation (Triandis, 1995), yet the finding suggests they are more likely than Asians to present idealised images in the MOO. It appears that MOOs permit greater self-presentational experimentation for Australians than Asians. This interaction has not been reported in other research on MOOs perhaps because previous studies have typically used homogeneous American samples.

The patterns that emerged in the data are particularly notable given that the audience to whom the participants made their self-presentations was unknown. Consistencies were evident between participants in both the self-presentations and ideal impressions, suggesting that judgements about appropriate and desirable impressions in the context were made using similar underlying principles.
6.4.4 Becoming the ideal self

As well as examining self-presentation online participants conceptualisation of their identity off and online were compared. This was done using a semantic differential, completed once for offline identity and again for online identity. The semantic differential provided a brief measure, quantifying differences in identity conceptualisation between the two media. Comparison of online and offline data indicated some important differences. First, compared to the offline version, the online adjectives were less well differentiated. This was particularly so for evaluative items, suggesting that online the complex distinctions between self-evaluations of good, funny, happy, and stable are either not as easy to make or are perceived as less important. Second, significant differences occurred on more than half the adjective pairs. Compared to offline identity, MOO identity was perceived as more friendly, beautiful, funny, and stable, as stronger, happier, and having more leadership qualities. Several of these attributes (friendly, beautiful, and funny) coincide with those reported by Leary (1995) as ideal impressions. The others all represent socially desirable poles of the adjective pairs.

Self-presentations online were, for the most part, positive. The semantic differential data complement this finding, suggesting that these self-presentations were internalised; MOO identity was experienced in more positive ways than offline identity. This finding therefore goes beyond the widely held belief, often cited in the literature, that people present themselves more positively online than offline. The finding provides empirical support for the idea that people actually think of themselves more positively online. Lawson (1997, as cited in Lawson, 2000) reported MOO identity converged with ideal identity as synchronous CMC experience increased over a six-week period. The present findings suggest that placing someone, even momentarily, in an online context, can trigger these more idealised conceptualisations of self.
The possibility that entering an online community, even briefly, can prompt a more positive self-concept offers important therapeutic potential. Positive change, which can elude many clients, is reinforcing. Observing oneself thinking, feeling, and behaving differently can create a momentum of its own in maintaining therapeutic change. Understanding who might benefit most from online experience is therefore important. Few of the variables in the present study adequately accounted individually for this more positive perception of self online. Differences were indicated, however, between the identity clusters. Agreeable Australians and emotionally unstable, introverts were particularly likely to see themselves more positively online than offline. The agreeable Australians were also likely to present desired identity images online. For this group of participants, idealised self-presentation may have been sufficient to alter self-perception. For the second group, the online context may have provided a liberating forum in which self-perception, but not necessarily self-presentation, was enhanced.

6.4.5 The undesired self

Consistent with the general picture of positive self-presentation, undesired identity images were conspicuously absent from MOO descriptions. This strong effect indicates that participants did not perceive the MOO as a place to experiment with negative self-presentation, at least not initially.

The finding is in contrast to Turkle’s (1995) conclusion that players use MOOs to act out feared selves. Methodological differences between the two studies may, however, account for the disparity in findings. Turkle’s ethnographic work enabled players to reflect on their self-presentation over a long period of time, over several months, and in some cases, years. It is possible that undesired selves, if they are presented at all, only occur after a player has determined that the MOO is an appropriate and safe place. Undesired selves are, after all likely to represent vulnerabilities.
If this hypothesis is true, then it is not surprising that the present study, with its emphasis on entering a new community, failed to find evidence of undesired identity images. Undesired selves are also probably more likely to emerge as unconscious presentations, probably through interaction with others, rather than in the consciously constructed characteristics presented in an introductory description. In the example cited by Turkle (1995) of a male player who acted out a passive character online, the player described how his own insight into the meaning of this character trait was only triggered by an interaction with another player.

Although undesired identity images were not presented online, they were nevertheless influential on self-presentation, shaping the descriptions that players wrote. Slightly more participants presented contradictions of an undesired identity image online than presented a desired identity image. The contradiction of undesired identity images online was particularly likely for individuals who did not present overt aspects of offline identity online. The finding supports Ogilvie’s (1987) assumption that undesired selves are an important source of motivation. According to Ogilvie, life satisfaction is determined by discrepancies between undesired and current self. It is not surprising therefore that participants sought to minimize the difference between self-concept and undesired identity images by presenting aspects that directly contradicted their undesired selves.

6.4.6 Online gender swapping

Despite the widespread use of gender-neutral screen names, all but two participants selected their biological sex online. Given the anecdotal evidence of online gender swapping, the relative absence of it in this study was surprising. It has been so widely reported (e.g., Bruckman, 1993; Turkle, 1995) that I had presumed it would occur frequently in the present study.

Both the participants who swapped their gender online were female and,
despite the range of gender options available, both selected male for their MOO identity. Only one of these participants described her MOO identity using male pronouns, but the content of the description was androgynous, referring to geographic location and interests in music and film. The failure to find evidence of any gender swapping beyond the binary categories is consistent with previous research in which other categories were used infrequently (e.g., Danet, 1996; Roberts & Parks, 1999). Gender swapping, when it does occur, is often used to reinforce the binary definitions of gender rather than transcend gender labels (Kendall, 2002; O’Brien, 1999).

Research by Roberts and Parks (1999) indicated that gender swapping is less prevalent than often assumed. However, the relative absence of it in the present study was not predicted. How can the lack of gender swapping be explained? Roberts and Parks (1999) noted that the best predictor of online gender swapping was MOO experience: those who gender swapped had more years of experience on MOOs, spent more time MOOing, and visited more MOOs than those who didn’t gender swap. The relatively low level of MOO experience that characterised the present sample may therefore help to explain the lack of gender swapping.

It’s probable that only those participants with experience in online communities knew what the gender options “plural” and “neuter” referred to. The unfamiliar nature of these choices may have motivated a desire to stay with what was known. In addition, participants unfamiliar with MOOs may have anticipated the cognitive load of operating within the new space. Foreseeing the potential for derailed interactions in a new and unknown space, participants may have opted for a self-presentation that was simple and automatic. Gender swapping, with its additional complex cognitive demands, may have been perceived as too difficult an option.

Even those with experience in MOO-type environments, however, did not change their gender. One possible explanation for this is the way the online
community was represented; the description of the MOO may have inadvertently discouraged identity play. The Place was described as an online community for interaction and socialising: a place to meet people and hang out. Perhaps these features were so similar to the offline world that participants wanted to simply “be themselves” in the community rather than experiment with gender. Other research has documented a lower rate of gender swapping in social MOOs compared to role-playing MOOs (Roberts & Parks, 1999).

6.4.7 The effect of personality on self-presentation

Univariate analyses revealed few relationships between personality traits and self-presentation online, however, conscientiousness was associated with the presentation of desired identity images. Conscientiousness refers to an individual’s determination, organization, and achievement motivation (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Achievement motivation relies on goal setting. Conceptualising desired identity images as identity goals, helps interpret this otherwise unanticipated relationship.

Exploratory analysis revealed that a more useful strategy was to examine the personality traits in concert, rather than individually. Taking this approach two particularly prominent patterns emerged: Extraversion/Agreeableness and Extraversion/Neuroticism.

Analysis of the identity clusters indicated that one group in particular stole the self-presentational show, engaging in a wide range of self-presentation behaviours in the MOO including presentation of identity, presentation of desired identity images, and contradictions of undesired identity images. Gender-neutral screen names were common in this group and the only examples of gender swapping came from this cluster. This group had high scores on both Agreeableness and Extraversion. Other groups with high scores in only one of these traits did not engage in the same frequency of self-
presentational behaviour.

Agreeableness and Extraversion describe basic interpersonal tendencies, including warmth, friendliness, trust, and compliance and the two domains are often considered as a pair (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Together these traits were associated not only with authentic self-presentation as might be expected, but identity play. The excitement-seeking facet of Extraversion may impact on this self-presentational tendency.

The second pattern of personality traits with explanatory power was Extraversion/Neuroticism. Low Extraversion combined with high Neuroticism scores produced few references to self-concept and few positive references. This group was least likely to reflect aspects of identity or possible selves online. Nevertheless qualitative analysis of character descriptions indicated this group was particularly playful, as evidenced in their self-referential descriptions and their use of language. Neuroticism and Extraversion are often conceptualised as related, describing an individual’s basic emotional style (Costa & McCrae, 1992). High Neuroticism scores indicate the experience of negative emotions such as anxiety, shyness, and irritability. Low Extraversion scores indicate introversion, independence, and reserve. This combination of traits is logically related to protective self-presentation. The playful self-presentations that characterised this group might be evidence of how this protective style can be realised online. As well as concealing identity, the playful use of language may allow the player to distance themselves from the character and so not reveal too much of themselves.

Contrary to previous research (e.g., Roberts & Parks, 1999) the present research indicated that personality does play a role in self-presentation online. More research is needed, however, with larger samples, to examine the interaction between personality variables.
6.4.8 The effect of CMC experience on self-presentation online

The sample was characterised by low to moderate levels of experience with synchronous CMC (chat and MOO). The relatively low levels of experience, as already discussed, distinguishes the sample from other studies of MOOs that have recruited more experienced participants. This characteristic of the sample may explain several discrepancies between the findings in the present study and previous research.

Some research on MOOs has suggested a relationship between self-presentation and MOO experience. Both Kendall (2002) and Roberts et al. (1996) reported that as players became more experienced on the MOO they were more likely to perceive the forum as a communication tool, rather than as a virtual reality. Concomitantly, the player’s character shifts from role-playing to more authentic presentations of offline identity. This mediating effect of CMC experience on self-presentation was not observed in the present study. This result may, however, be confounded by the relatively low level of experience represented in the present sample.

Although level of experience was unrelated to the presentation of offline identity in the present study, experience was related to the presentation of desired identity images. Those who presented desired identity images online were more likely to have low rather than higher synchronous CMC experience. No specific hypothesis was made regarding these two variables, however this significant result is consistent with the original hypothesis, suggesting that identity play is greatest for those with lower levels of online experience. This assumption was supported by semantic differential data that indicated low levels of CMC experience were associated with more positive ratings of leadership online compared to offline ratings.

In summary, despite the artificiality of the task and the minimal cues provided about the nature of the MOO, most participants engaged in
predictable self-presentational behaviour. Self-concept contributed more to the MOO character description than any other variable tested, as predicted by self-presentation theory. Positive items contributed more than negative or neutral items and those rated as more important to identity were more frequently presented online than less important items. Desired and undesired identity images contributed equally; desired images were presented in the MOO description and undesired images were contradicted. Self-presentation strategies were, on the whole, unaffected by age or sex. However, interactions were indicated between presentation of desired identity images and both previous CMC experience and ethnicity. The majority of those who presented idealised images online had little previous synchronous CMC experience. They were also more likely to be Australian than Asian. Ideal impressions demonstrated only weak relationships with self-presentation online. Although biological sex was a better predictor of online gender than gender identity, gender identity was related to the more subtle and perhaps less conscious process of masking gender in the screen name.

6.4.9 Offline and online selves: The same or separate?

The lack of gender swapping, together with an emphasis on ascribed characteristics, suggests that participants conceptualised their MOO identities in terms of offline constructs. However, the ways in which participants wrote online, as distinct from the content of their descriptions, suggests a more complex conceptualisation.

The linguistic device of writing in the third person was used by the majority of participants, but most frequently by the more experienced synchronous CMC users, suggesting that these participants were aware this was a context-dependent self-presentational norm in MOOs. But even some of those with little or no experience of those media presented themselves in this way, so some other variable beyond familiarity appears to be responsible. The
instructions to participants were to “write a short description of yourself”. Participants were not asked to write about their “character” or “persona”, but about themselves. Despite this implicit emphasis on the offline self, the majority described themselves as if they were writing about another person.

Whether the use of the third person reflects a separation of online and offline identity is unclear from the present study, however the results support Roberts (2001) finding that MOO players experience the relationship between their on and offline selves in different ways. The present study adds the further empirical observation that some aspects of identity, most notably friendliness, beauty, leadership, stability, strength, humour, and happiness, are particularly likely to be experienced differently online and offline.

6.4.10 Generalisability and limitations of the study

Generalisability of results is a critical question for research and the extent to which results from any single study of online interaction can be generalised to other contexts is crucial for online researchers. As discussed in Chapter 2, CMC interaction spaces differ in important ways on a range of dimensions including telepresence, anonymity, and synchronicity. In addition, as Kendall (2002) has noted, even within one domain self-presentational norms can vary widely. How confidently then can the results from the present study be generalised to MOO players in particular and online users in general?

Two issues related to generalisability are especially relevant to the present study: to what extent was the sample typical of online users and to what extent are the results artefacts of the measurement tools rather than a product of the MOO world? The first of these issues concerns sample representativeness and the second concerns demand characteristics.

6.4.10.1 Sample representativeness

Two aspects of representativeness are important to the present study. The
first relates to the extent to which the sample represents the general population of Internet users who might use MOOs. Comparison with other research on Internet and MOO users indicated that the present sample is best conceptualised as representative of new MOO players. The second issue relevant to sample representativeness is the effect of the dropout rate. The original sample size was reduced considerably by the failure of more than a third of participants to complete one of the two measures. Drop out was affected by three variables: order of completion, ethnicity, and first language.

Participants who took the online test first were more likely to complete both parts of the study. There are several possible reasons for this order effect. The online measures were shorter in duration and may have been perceived as more novel, interesting, and motivating than the pencil and paper test. Internet access, required to complete the online version was difficult for some participants. Participants who completed the online section first, and made a special effort to find a computer, may have perceived themselves as having made a commitment to the study and felt an obligation to complete the second section. Whereas if the pencil and paper test was done first, lack of access to a computer may have been seen as too great an obstacle and participants may have dropped out at that stage.

Compared to full completers, partial completers were more likely to have English as a second language and be born outside Australia. Although it is possible that perceived language proficiency affected completion, another probable cause of the difference was the relationship I had with some participants. The majority of Asian participants were recruited when I was teaching in Singapore. My relationship with these students was intense, but short-term, lasting only a week and my opportunities to follow-up non-responders were limited. In contrast, many of the participants completing the measures in Australia were enrolled in semester length courses with me. I was therefore able to follow-up non-responders repeatedly.
Completion rates could be significantly improved by taking several steps including more rigorous follow-up or administration of the measures in a laboratory setting. The latter option has the added advantages of standardising the time interval between the two measures, ensuring order of completion is adhered to. An interview could be connected to this process which would allow interpretations to be confirmed and other questions relevant to the individual’s responses to be explored.

6.4.10.2 Demand characteristics

The SST and possible selves measures were selected because they provided quantifiable measures of offline identity and provided access to unconscious representations of offline identity online. Limitations have, however, been noted (Wylie, 1974). One of the major concerns is how spontaneous measures of identity are coded. "With reactive measures, the concern is that the respondents understand the researcher’s terms... with spontaneous measures, the concern is that the researcher understands the respondent’s terms" (Brinthaupt & Erwin, 1992, p.150). Although much of the content analysis of TST items is straightforward, coding less obvious items can require inference. For example “cool” might be interpreted as emotionally detached, easy going, or trendy. To deal with this dilemma Rees and Nicholson (1994) recommend that all the responses be taken into account when coding individual statements. However, even within this context, interpretations may still be incorrect.

I conducted the content analysis on my own. The principal issue for the present study was consistency of coding, ensuring that for example, outgoing was coded under the same dimension every time it occurred. An intra-rater reliability check indicated consistency. Even so, in retrospect the task would be better conducted by a team of coders. More than one coder would permit a check for those more difficult items that required interpretation.
Another question related to demand characteristics is the artificiality of the tasks. Although the key online measures were similar to “real” self-presentational tasks encountered on entering a MOO, participants did not interact or have the opportunity to view any other players’ descriptions. As already discussed, the simulated nature of The Place may have impacted on self-presentational choices. The absence of anticipated future interaction may also have impacted on the results.

Expectation of future interaction is an important variable in self-presentation (Leary, 1995). Several studies have supported the mediating effect of anticipated future interaction on self-presentation behaviour in face-to-face interactions (Baumeister, 1982b; Greenberg, Pyszczynski & Stine, 1985). It also affects online interactions, producing greater openness, affection, expressions of homophily, and involvement (Walther, 1994). More play might therefore be expected in a group with an expectation of future interaction.

One of the tasks free from demand characteristics however was the semantic differential; exactly the same measure was completed in both offline and online modes. The differences that emerged between offline and online responses on the semantic differential imply the results are not simply a product of the demand characteristics, but are evidence of underlying differences between the MOO and the offline world.

6.4.11 Issues for further research

The first study produced several surprising findings, such as the lack of gender swapping and the infrequency of wish-fulfilling type self-presentation. These findings generated a range of questions for the second study. Although the picture of self-presentation that emerged from the first study was of positively biased self-presentations, not all self-presentations were derived from identity or possible selves. The small group of participants who did not present any aspects of their SST online warranted further
exploration. What was the intention of these players in developing their character description? Were they engaging in protective self-presentation behaviours or was their impression motivation particularly low?

Nearly all players selected their biological sex, but many disguised their sex in gender-neutral screen names. How did players make decisions about the presentation of gender online? Concealment was a widely used strategy in the first study. To what extent was it a conscious self-presentational approach? Would these findings be replicated in a “real” MOO in which players anticipated ongoing interaction? All of these questions pointed towards a qualitative study, examining players’ subjective experiences of impression construction.
CHAPTER 7
STUDY 2: QUALITATIVE

7.1 Rationale

The first section of this chapter outlines the rationale for the qualitative study. In addition, some ethical issues that shaped my approach to dealing with participants who were also students are discussed.

The aim of the first study was to quantify self-presentational practices online. The results ended up as a more useful description of what people don’t do in MOOs, rather than a quantification of what they do. That is, people don’t typically play with identity in overt ways. People don’t present highly idealised images. They don’t swap gender or experiment with fantastical identities. These findings begged the obvious question: If people don’t do these things, what do they do online?

I began the second study wanting to understand how people go about constructing their initial self-presentations in a “real” MOO. Three central questions guided the inquiry: (a) How do people choose a screen name? (b) What self-presentational decisions do people make when they write their character description? (c) How do people describe the relationship between their online self-presentation and their offline selves? My focus was how players make, maintain, and understand their self-presentational choices. These questions called for a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods enable researchers to examine subjective experiences and the resultant data is often richly textured. This level of detail was required in order to explore the processes that guide impression construction and examine questions raised by the first study.

The two-stage, sequential, mixed-method design that evolved is an increasingly common one (Morgan, 1998). This type of mixed-method approach
has the advantage of being particularly straightforward in its application, with the quantitative and qualitative stages implemented separately (Creswell, 2003). The design is particularly appropriate when, as in the present case, a quantitative study produces unexpected results (Creswell, 2003). The major disadvantage of this sequential explanatory design is the time taken to collect data (Creswell, 2003), particularly when both phases are given equal priority.

In many mixed-method studies, one method is given priority (see, for example, Morgan’s (1998) priority-sequence model). Bryman (2001), however, noted that in some research neither approach is dominant. These designs are referred to as equal status mixed method designs (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The present research was an equal status design, giving equal priority to the two phases.

Because my focus was initial self-presentations, the study required access to a MOO with new players. A convenience sample was used, drawn from my own students enrolled in a MOO-based course. Students in this course have an expectation that they will interact for at least the 12-week duration of the course. All students register their screen name and post their character description in the second week of the semester. These early hurdle requirements provided obvious data collection points. One of the features of this educational MOO is its focus on identity in cyberspace. Through a series of activities and discussions, students are actively encouraged to reflect on and play with their self-presentations in the MOO. If identity play were at all likely online, surely there would be evidence of it here.

7.1.1 Educational MOOs

In 1992 Amy Bruckman established MediaMOO, an online community for media researchers. MediaMOO is generally seen as responsible for the shift in
focus from game and role-playing to the appropriation of MOOs for professional and educational goals (Holmevik & Haynes, 2000). A number of other MOOs with similar professional aims quickly arose. BioMOO, for example, was established in 1993 to provide biologists with an online meeting place. These MOOs, however, were primarily concerned with interactions between educators. The first MOO specifically designed for teaching students was Diversity University MOO, established by Jeanne MacWhorter in 1993. MacWhorter originally envisaged a MOO for social workers, but soon realised the potential to incorporate other disciplines. Her work led Diversity University to become the largest multidisciplinary MOO on the Internet (Holmevik & Haynes, 2000).

A range of educational MOOs now exists. North American universities host the majority of educational MOOs, although several have Australian homes, such as AussieMOO, BushMOO, and EdMOO. A number of educational MOOs are conducted in languages other than English, including French, Portuguese, Dutch, German, and Italian. SkooMOO, designed for students aged 7 to 18 years, is set in Singapore and is one of the few Asian educational MOOs. A theme common to many educational MOOs is language. Many MOOs are hosted by English, writing, and language departments.

Although some MOOs are only open to the staff and students of the university hosting the MOO, most educational MOOs welcome others and invite educators from other institutions to bring their courses online. Educational MOOs are viewed by many who use them as alternative learning environments, spaces in which the roles of teacher and learner can be deconstructed, in which learning is collaborative and student-centred, and knowledge is constructed through experience. “MOOs reinvent the notion of education, and their users reconceive this space to accommodate radically different genres of discourse and pedagogies” (Haynes & Holmevik, 2001, p.4).
Many of the tools available for face-to-face teaching are available in educational MOOs. Lecture theatres, tutorial rooms, whiteboards, slide projectors, bulletin boards, and notebooks are all commonly used. Although as Tari Linn Fanderclai (1995) has noted, attempting to replicate face-to-face classroom interactions in the MOO can undermine the inherently “chaotic and playful nature of MUD interaction” (p.3) and fail to take advantage of the genuinely innovative potential of the medium.

One of the innovative aspects of educational MOOs is their inbuilt theatricality. Like the dramaturgical metaphor that underpins self-presentation theory, the analogy of the theatre is particularly appropriate to MOOs. Juli Burk (2001) developed this theatrical metaphor in an analysis of performance in ATHEMOO, a MOO created for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education in 1995. MOOs are essentially theatrical places. Like the theatre, MOOs are both “part of and apart from the real world” (Burk, 2001, p.235). MOOs are, after all just another form of communication, permitting interaction between individuals, but at the same time, the absence of physical bodies allows MOOs to be separated from everyday life. Just as one buys a ticket, enters the lobby and then moves into the theatre, in the MOO, the player logs on, arrives at a welcome screen, connects, and then is transported to an area of the MOO.

The character descriptions that players write for themselves function like the actor’s costume, which can be used to communicate social, economic, and emotional characteristics in the theatre. The descriptions of each space within the MOO, like the sets of a play, provide players with information about the performances that are appropriate within that space. Players may decorate their own rooms to create a backdrop for their optimal self-presentation. Objects in MOOs can be manipulated and used in the performance like stage props. The text-based descriptions of movement within the MOO (e.g., Tiger hugs Flemmex)
are like the stage directions of a play and the textual interactions, the evolving script. The implied presence of lurkers contributes to this sense of being on stage (Wong, 2000), although the presence of overtly backstage behaviour, such as intimate self-disclosures, suggests that players are not always either conscious of or concerned about this potential, hidden audience.

7.1.2 Identity play in educational MOOs

Most MOO educators acknowledge the dynamic nature of MOOs and “recognize the importance of fostering a creative and playful environment” (Holmevik & Haynes, 2000, p.8). However, few studies have examined self-presentational phenomenon in the context of educational MOOs. One of the few studies to do so was conducted by Orly, Avigail, and David (2001), who collected survey data from 78 social and 88 educational MOO users. No significant differences emerged between the two types of players.

Like other research from social MOOs, Orly et al. (2001) found that educational MOOers were predominantly male (64.8%). An average age of 31.8 years was reported. This mean is higher than estimates for social MOOs (e.g., Kendall, 2002; Roberts & Parks, 1999). However, half the respondents in the study by Orly et al. (2001) were academic staff, which may account for the relatively high mean age. Educational MOO users are, like social MOOers, predominantly from English speaking backgrounds, although the presence of users from non-English speaking backgrounds appears to be comparatively higher in educational MOOs than social MOOs. Orly et al. (2001), for example, reported that one-third of their sample (37.5%) were from non-English speaking backgrounds. Respondents in the study by Orly et al. (2001) had, on average, slightly more than two years experience in MOOs. This is consistent with results from other research on educational MOOs (Roberts & Parks, 1999).
Orly et al. (2001) reported a preference amongst educational MOO players to use their real name (55.7%), and biological sex (92%) in the MOO. Nearly all participants (88.7%) claimed they presented their offline self in the MOO. The ability to remain anonymous and opportunities to take on more than one identity were described as advantages of the MOO by only one quarter of respondents. Together these results suggest a preference for authentic self-presentation in educational MOOs. This finding may be a reflection of the requirement in some educational MOOs to use offline names, implicitly discouraging identity play. The high proportion of staff in the sample may also have contributed to this picture of self-presentation. More than two-thirds of the staff retained their real name, whereas nearly two-thirds of the students chose a different screen name. Talamo and Ligorio (2001), in a study of avatars, reported that staff members were more likely than students to use a consistent avatar. Perhaps a desire to be recognised as the teacher motivates the use of real names and authentic self-presentation.

In an analysis of gender in educational MOOs, Daphne Dresser (2000) examined a synchronous session involving 11 graduate students (6 female and 5 male) enrolled in course on computers and writing. The majority of participants, male and female, chose gender-neutral screen names. Dresser (2000) was particularly interested in how the use of gender-masking by women would impact on behaviour online. Dresser’s analysis of the transcript revealed that women’s tendency to make social connection through language, was evident in the women’s speech online, even when they masked their gender or took on a male screen name. In contrast, Dresser cited the example of a male student who took on a female screen name and took on characteristically female speech patterns. This is consistent with research from other synchronous domains that has reported changes in male but not female self-presentation under
pseudonymous conditions (Jaffe et al., 1995). In both the study by Dresser (2000) and Jaffe et al. (1995), gender-masking males adopted conventionally female behaviours, behaving in socially interdependent ways. Jaffe et al. (1995) explained this as evidence that social interdependence is a human need that is generally repressed in males. Another interpretation, however, is that the online context replicates gender roles rather than freeing players from their confines.

One of the parameters unclear in Dresser’s study is whether the students had already established relationships offline. Being known by others in the offline world, especially when the MOO is small, may discourage identity play. Other CMC research has suggested that self-presentational norms of accuracy predominate in online groups where regular face-to-face meetings are held (Kendall, 2002; Rutter & Smith, 2000). Although choosing a different gender may be seen as acceptable, particularly if it is sanctioned as part of the course, playing out that gender might be viewed differently.

7.1.3 Ethical considerations

Two ethical considerations were important in the second study. The first was confidentiality. In an attempt to balance the privacy of the participants and the research interests I adopted a procedure described by Bruckman (2001) as “moderate disguise”. The usual way in which players are disguised in ethnographic MOO research is by assigning pseudonyms that protect the individuals’ privacy but nevertheless attempt to encapsulate the essence of participants’ screen names. I adopted this approach in the present study. Working with a colleague, who also teaches in the course, I assigned pseudonyms to each participant. Our aim was to represent the essential features, both overt and implied, of the participant’s original screen name.
The use of pseudonyms is, however, an imperfect solution to the issue of anonymity. Given the small group sizes in the present study, participants are likely to be able to identify at least some of the other participants, even with the use of pseudonyms. For this reason sensitive material has not been reported. Because a proportion of the students’ material remains in the MOO for the next intake of students, and as some participants continue to maintain a room in the MOO, the name of the MOO has been changed.

The second ethical consideration concerned researching my own students. Although as academics we are encouraged to integrate research and teaching, in reality this is often difficult to do because ethical requirements prevent using our own students as participants. This protection is based on a presumed relationship of dependence between students and teachers. Although it is easy to see how a student’s data or even their choice to participate might influence their treatment and grading by a teacher, in some cases a blind procedure can be adopted to ensure staff are not aware of which students are participating until the grading of the course is completed. The specific process I used is described in more detail in the Method section.

7.2 Method

7.2.1 Participants

Participants in the second study were 20 undergraduate students (12 females and 8 males) enrolled in an online course on the psychology of cyberspace. The first recruitment enlisted 9 participants from a class of 15. Data from two male participants in this group were incomplete, giving an initial sample of 7 (5 females and 2 males). In order to increase the sample size a second recruitment phase was undertaken the following semester. Using a more persistent strategy, which involved a series of asynchronous and synchronous prompts, recruitment
was more successful, with only one student declining to participate. This second group consisted of 13 students (7 females and 6 males).

The combined groups had an age range of 19 to 26 years ($M = 22.27$, $SD = 1.77$). Four students were born in Asia. The remaining students were of Anglo-Australian ethnicity. None of the students had pre-existing offline relationships with each other.

In designing this second study several considerations related to sampling were taken into account. The aim was not to recruit a random, representative sample, but rather to select a sample on purposive grounds. The sample, drawn from my own students, was both convenient and accessible, but it also represented a group of MOO users who, through the activities of the course in which they were enrolled, were likely to demonstrate playful self-presentation. Although representativeness was not therefore the major goal in the selection of the sample, the demographics of the sample were compared to those reported in other major studies of MOOs. This information is reported in the Results section.

7.2.2 Data

Students enrolled in this course undertake a series of hurdle requirements and assessment tasks, some of which provided data for the present study. These included character and dorm room descriptions, as well as reflective journal entries. At the beginning of the semester students were asked to write a journal reflecting on the meaning of their screen name and character description. At the end of the semester they wrote another journal reflecting on how the character had been played out over the past 12 weeks. Journal entries ranged from between 500 to 1000 words. Additional data consisted of other object descriptions, including dorm room descriptions.
Journal data are referred to as either J1 or J12, to indicate that the comments were written either at the start of the semester (J1) or at the end of the 12 week course (J12). Where the data are drawn from a character description the code “Char” follows the quote. Where the data are from a dorm room description, the code “Dorm” is used. CMC experience was measured using the five-point Likert scale described in the first study.

7.2.3 Procedure

All students enrolled in the course were posted a plain language statement detailing the nature of the study and were invited to take part. As I was also a lecturer in the course and was marking some of the students' work, administrative procedures were established to ensure that I did not know which students were participating until after the final marks were submitted. Consent forms and questionnaires were returned to an administrative officer who notified me of the number, but not names of those who had volunteered. Anonymity and confidentiality of responses was assured. The response rate in the first group of students was 60%. When the uptake was initially slow in the second group a more pro-active strategy for recruitment was implemented. Follow-up reminders were sent via email. This improved numbers only marginally. An administrative officer for the course spoke to students informally in the MOO about their involvement in the study and reported that the poor response appeared to be due to forgetfulness rather than lack of interest. Her personal prompts increased the response rate in the second group to 93%. Copies of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form are included in Appendix D.

Much of the data for this study were generated within the normal course of the 12-week period; participants gave permission for the use of their work and all their online interactions in my research. Approval for the project was granted by
the Human Research Ethics Committee at RMIT University where the students were enrolled and the University of Melbourne.

7.2.4 The course

*Psychology in Cyberspace* is a 12-week elective course designed to introduce students to some of the psychological phenomena that are part of life on the screen. The course is based on a constructivist pedagogy; all the interactions take place online, most within the MOO, and our experiences in the MOO form the content of the course. A series of graduated hurdle requirements are used to guide students through the basics of MOO navigation and interaction as well as demonstrate the potential of the medium for playful self-presentation. In the first week of the course students are taught, via online materials, how to access the MOO as a guest and work through a self-help manual provided in the MOO. After completing this orientation, students can then choose a screen name and apply for a character. When they first log on using their screen name they are asked to describe their character and select their gender. There are 10 genders available: neuter, male, female, either, Spivak, splat, plural, egotistical, royal, and 2nd. When these tasks are completed students are assigned a dorm room and are given help to decorate their room and create objects. As time progresses students are encouraged to extend their room.

Over the 12 weeks, several synchronous meetings are held. Finding a single time slot to accommodate all the students is generally difficult, so repeat times are often scheduled. It is unusual therefore for the entire class to be online at the same time; typically these meetings comprise between 6 to 10 students. The program for these meetings is flexible, with the order and focus of topics as well as the precise activities changed each time we run the course. The face-to-face meeting, held at the end of the semester, has become an important feature of the
course, permitting students a change to consolidate their learning and debrief. As a required component of the course, we are obliged to inform students of this meeting at the beginning of the semester. The general program, together with examples of typical activities for each meeting, are summarised in Table 7.1. The program indicates the context of the research and demonstrates the emphasis on identity play in the course.

Table 7.1

*Program and Examples of Activities for Synchronous MOO Meetings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Meeting Topic</th>
<th>Typical activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>OoWeek: An introduction to MOOs and to the course</td>
<td>Students share their expectations about the course. This meeting is used to check that the hurdle requirements (character and dorm room descriptions) have been completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Netiquette</td>
<td>Students are assigned to small groups to discuss case studies from past classes that constitute ostensible violations of netiquette.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Virtual relationships</td>
<td>Students work in pairs before the meeting on a branching scenario involving two people who meet online. The story can be followed along different paths, with students completing the ending of the path they take.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>More advanced MOO skills (optional)</td>
<td>This session is student-directed. It is used to trouble-shoot common technical problems as well as teach more advanced skills for navigating, communicating, and manipulating objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Online gender swapping</td>
<td>Students and staff use the meeting time to visit another MOO and deliberately conceal or change gender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Internet addiction</td>
<td>Prior to the meeting students complete an internet addiction questionnaire. In the meeting students learn how to check their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week</td>
<td>Meeting Topic</td>
<td>Typical activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Gallery of Dreams</td>
<td>This session, held in the Gallery, is an exhibition of student work. Prior to the meeting students, working either alone or in pairs, construct an object to represent their perception of cyberspace. Students present and defend their work in the meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Face-to-face meeting</td>
<td>The face-to-face meeting is an informal meeting that begins with a game of guessing people’s screen names.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Final meeting and debrief</td>
<td>This meeting is used to reflect on what has been learned over the course of the semester. Students who wish to remain in the MOO after the end of the course are invited to do so.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students undertake four major assessment tasks in the course. These include (a) attendance at a minimum number of synchronous meetings, (b) contributions to asynchronous discussions, (c) a virtual community project, in which students design and justify the specifications for their own MOO community, and (d) a journal documenting regular reflections on their time in the MOO.

The journal is comprised of two compulsory entries, completed at the beginning and end of the course. In the first entry students are asked to

Tell me a little about your alias [screen name] and the description you provided for your virtual self. What does your alias mean to you? Where does it come from? How is the description of your character you wrote for the MOO related to the real life you?
In the final entry, completed at the end of the course, students are given the following instructions:

At the start of the semester we asked you to choose an alias and describe your character. You wrote a journal describing how you had done this and what the screen name meant to you. Looking back now, how do you think you and your character are related?

In addition to these two compulsory entries, students are encouraged to keep an electronic journal documenting each visit to the MOO, detailing the date and length of the visit, a brief note about what they did during the visit, together with some reflection.

7.2.5 The MOO

The MOO space constructed for this course was part of KabukiMOO\(^1\), a small educational MOO, based in Japan that was initially established for the teaching of English language. Our technical adviser for the course is a wizard in KabukiMOO.

We created a “Tokyo campus” for our course, a precinct within KabukiMOO. Our space is defined within the larger MOO, but at the same time is open to all MOO users, meaning that any KabukiMOO user can enter our campus. This policy appears to have worked well, permitting easy access for our students to regular KabukiMOO users who generally have a high level of technical skill and a generous willingness to share this skill with our students. The openness of the space also encourages our students to travel beyond the confines of our campus

\(^1\) The name of the MOO has been changed for ethical reasons.
and explore the rest of the MOO. The most frequent visitors to our campus are graduates of the course, several of whom have retained their dorm rooms in the MOO and interact informally with currently enrolled students.

The campus is comprised of a foyer with noticeboards and lists of past students. A hall leads off the foyer to lecturers’ offices and rooms for visiting researchers who have participated in the MOO for other research projects. At the end of the hall is a courtyard.

Courtyard
----------
You are standing in the Courtyard. There is a shallow reflecting pool over which hangs a weeping cherry. Two wooden seats are placed near the pool. The sun shines gently into the courtyard and some birds chirp in the tree. The tall windows of the seminar rooms overlook the courtyard.

Café tables and chairs spill out through the open French windows of a warm, bright café. You can just see glimpses of people sitting inside, drinking coffee and chatting peacefully, while the strains of a live jazz quartet waft to you on the breeze.

Obvious exits: hall, Rm 101 Netiquette, Rm 102 Virtual Gender Swapping, Rm 103 Internet Addiction, Rm 104 Online Relationships, VC Project Room, and café.

--------------------

Leading off the courtyard are a series of seminar rooms, where real time meetings and asynchronous conferences were held. Each seminar room is decorated to suggest the topic of the room. For example, upon entering Room 102, the user sees:
Room 102 – Virtual Gender Swapping

You find yourself in a room whose walls are all different. One wall has wallpaper with a pattern of pink and white bows, lace curtains at the windows. The opposite wall is austere red with black lacquer trimmings: a tie rack hung with neckties and leather belts, a shaving table with razor and soap, a small oval shaving mirror. The third wall is a riot of colours, draped with rainbow flags, feather boas, evening frocks and leather harnesses. The last wall is covered in mirrors, each a different shape and size. None of the mirrors seems to be able to reflect your image quite the way you thought you looked before…

You see conference whiteboard.

Obvious exits: courtyard.

Also accessed from the courtyard is the café and from the café, the Gallery of Dreams, an exhibition space used for student projects. On the second floor of the building are the students’ dorm rooms.

7.3 Results
7.3.1 Analysis process

The content analysis of the data followed an iterative process, summarised in Figure 7.1. In the first phase, all data sources, journals, gender choice, character descriptions, and room descriptions, were read in detail so that I could determine
the range of issues that would need to be captured in the second phase, where

![Diagram of content analysis process]

**Figure 7.1.** Iterative process of content analysis used in the second study.

Text units and themes were categorised. In the second phase of the analysis, text was coded into meaningful units called nodes.² Base data or demographic coding was used to record information about the participants. These nodes included online gender and biological sex, synchronous MOO experience, and hours spent in the MOO. The content of data, in this case the journals, is referred to as case

---

² Analysis was conducted using QSR N6, the sixth version of NUD*IST (Non-numeric Unstructured Data * Indexing Searching and Theorizing), a program designed to help code, analyse, and explore text documents. It is widely used in several forms of qualitative analysis (Silverman, 2002).
data. Case data nodes were developed using a combination of two strategies. The nodes were shaped by the findings of the first quantitative study, but also emerged from the data. Nodes were created to represent the issues highlighted as important in the first study, such as the presentation of self-concept and ideal self. Journal entries were coded for these nodes. As I coded for these pre-determined themes, other themes emerged in the data and these emergent themes were entered. In the third phase these nodes were organised using categories and sub-categories into a hierarchical structure referred to as a tree.

The tree that emerged summarised participants’ own reflections on the process of self-presentation in the MOO. At this stage some nodes with insufficient text were dropped, although in other cases nodes with few counts were considered important in indicating negative instances and were retained. The tree is included in Appendix E.

7.3.2 Demographic data

Demographic data, presented in Table 7.2, indicate that participants in the second study were young and predominantly from Anglo-Australian backgrounds. These demographics match those from other social and educational MOOs. The present sample had slightly more females than males, which is the reverse of the gender ratio reported in other studies of educational MOOs (Orly et al., 2001). The sample was also relatively inexperienced at MOOing.
Table 7.2

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Screen name</th>
<th>Group (years)</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Offline sex</th>
<th>Online gender</th>
<th>MOO experience</th>
<th>Hours spent in the MOO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aerial</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SeLf_ATuAllIsEd</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green_Day</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Splat</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oracle</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faithful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Splat</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty_Dancer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BritChick</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andromeda1978</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jogirl</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snowflake</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two_by_twelve</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umpire6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BruceLee</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weevil</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquarius</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material_Girl</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robotics</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Spivak</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tinkerbell</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice_Maiden</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Participants who did not attend the end of semester face-to-face meeting.

7.3.2.1 *Previous CMC and MOO experience*

Participants started the course with a range of CMC skills and experience. Most had little or only limited experience of asynchronous online communication.

Not being what I would call an ‘experienced’ person with the Internet, I had … used e-mail, [but] I had never thought about entering a chat room I had never had to think of
an alias before and had never in any way been in a situation where I could have made
myself some thing that I am not. (Jogirl J1)

Even for those with chat experience the knowledge a seamless transfer of skills to
the MOO was not guaranteed.

I have been involved with the virtual communication world for some time however it
has been many months since I have entered a chat room and I think the old saying 'its
like riding a bike once you learn you never forget' well I think I just fell off my
bike…. MOOs are something I have never heard of and the different things that
happen there compared to the normal chat rooms are incredible. (Tinkerbell J1)

The majority of participants reported no or minimal experience of MOOs prior
to the course. Only a small number had extensive use of MOOs before they
began the course.

7.3.2.2 Participation in the MOO: Time spent online

All participants were enrolled in a course with the equivalent of 26 contact
hours and they were advised to spend at least this amount of time online over
the course of the semester. The actual time spent in the MOO over the 12-week
course varied considerably, ranging from 8 to 125 hours ($M = 45.71$, $SD = 38.16$). The
minimum recommended hours for the course was used to divide the total
MOO time into three categories: low (26 hours or less), moderate (27 to 52 hours),
and high (more than 52 hours or twice the amount of time recommended).

Slightly more than half the participants, 11, recorded low participation scores, 4

3 Time spent in the MOO was calculated using the @addiction command that calculates the total
time a character has spent online since their “birth” or first log on. Average session length is also
calculated.
were moderate users, and 5 recorded high levels of MOO time. Only students with previous MOO experience recorded high participation scores.

7.3.3 Choosing a screen name

Participants used three major strategies to develop their MOO screen name: the use of existing screen names, the adoption of offline nicknames, and the creation of a new name specifically for the course.

7.3.3.1 Using existing screen names

Those with experience in synchronous CMC considered screen names they had used in other online forums. Many of these participants had multiple screen names from which to choose. Some participants adopted screen names they had already developed for chat or used the names of characters from electronic games. Other participants considered existing screen names, but discounted them. Previous screen names were primarily rejected because they were perceived as an inaccurate or superficial representation of identity. One participant, for example rejected previous screen names that were variations on his initials. Although these all presented aspects of himself, in this course he wanted a screen name that more fully represented his identity.

I got a couple of nicknames aliases for me to online communicate with people, but all these aliases that I have been created are just kind of initial of my real name. What I done on these aliases is only swap over the order of the characters on my real name and put it into my different aliases. The reason why all my aliases are related to my real names, because I believe my real name can represent myself and the only name can identify myself in the real life as well as the virtual world. And this time I like to create a alias more deeply to represent my real life, something that I can express my feeling at this moment. (Two_by_Twelve J1)
7.3.3.2 Adapting offline nicknames

The second strategy, used primarily by those with less experience in synchronous CMC, was to adopt nicknames from the offline world. These nicknames, bestowed by family or friends, were described with warmth, affection, and acceptance.

the name reminds me of the special friendships I share with these people. (Weevil J1)

Their appropriation in the MOO appears to have created a sense of safety for their users. As one student reflected at the end of the course, using a familiar nickname decreased her anxiety.

The name Jogirl is something that I have always been called by family and close friends, but it is never something that I would openly introduce myself as…. By allowing myself to be called such a personal name to complete strangers… allowed me to feel a lot more comfortable than if I had called myself any other name. I am generally nervous when I meet new people in person and on the Internet and it sometimes takes me a long time to really be able to have a conversation with them. By me choosing a name Jogirl I was already opening myself up to the other MOOers around me, even if they did not know it. (Jogirl J12)

Another participant, in contrast, eschewed the use of a nick from her offline life because of the intimacy it would infer. Unlike the student above who used the association to create a safe entry to the MOO, this participant saw inviting strangers to use a well-established nickname as a violation of the longterm offline relationships in which the nickname was established.
I thought maybe I could use one of my nicknames, I decided against this as I did not want to use a nickname that I am commonly known by with my friends. The reason for this is it was too personal and I did not want people who do not know me well calling me the same name my friends for years have called me. (Material_Girl J1)

Several participants talked about offline nicknames they rejected in the process of choosing their screen name. These were generally rejected because they were either too revealing or not revealing enough.

My nickname my whole life has been Clarebear, and it was the first name that popped into my head. However I only thought about it for a second, as it would be quite obvious that I was a girl and my name was Clare. (Aquarius J12)

I thought of the nickname my dad gave me as a child ‘possum’ this sounded ok, until I though of the connotations of the name. A furry creature that climbs trees? Not really a picture that portrays my self. (Tinkerbell J1)

7.3.3.3 Creating new screen names

The third and most popular approach was to create a new screen name for the MOO. For the most part these screen names were chosen to represent important aspects of the player’s identity. Names were chosen to reflect personality, interests, and current situations. In focusing on these aspects, screen names signalled ways in which players were similar to the rest of the group as well as highlighting ways in which they were different. One student who was completing the course from a Canadian ski resort chose a screen name that reflected this. The use of numbers at the end of screen names by several participants indicated previous CMC experience to other ingroup members.
Amidst the meaningful construction of screen names, one participant stood out for the following admission.

The alias that I chose actually means very little to me. When I was trying to come up with one, I couldn't decide on a suitable name so I chose the name of a CD that I had just purchased. (Green_Day J1)

With this exception, screen names were selected for their meaning and their ability to convey an important part of the player’s identity. Nevertheless, for some the process of choosing their screen name was almost instantaneous.

To be honest, I took only a few seconds to come up with this alias. (BruceLee J1)

I chose my alias within minutes… (Weevil J1)

For the majority, however, the decision was time consuming, generally taking several days of contemplation.

I pondered for days as to what would be the most suitable nick for me… (Robotics J1)

I definitely spent a few days thinking about the kind of alias I wanted. (Aerial J1)

Self-presentation was central to this decision-making process, with participants weighing up what to reveal and how best to capture these elements in a single name, although several participants noted that the aim was to reveal, but not too much,
to say something about yourself, without actually disclosing who you are. (BritChick J1)

The length of time some participants took to choose their screen name underscores the perceived importance of screen names. The screen name was understood as the first self-presentational act. As one participant commented,

This alias that I would choose would be the first little bit of myself other people would see (or read!) (Aquarius J1)

Participants referred, both explicitly and implicitly, to a motivation to communicate an essential aspect of their identity through their screen name. Other considerations in choosing a screen name were whether it would be easy to remember, invite interaction with other players, and would not offend.

I decided to pick a nick that was easy to remember and something that was to do with me. (Tinkerbell J1)

I find that it is important for an alias to tell others some basic facts about the person in order to create interest and encourage communication (BritChick J1)

I have used this name previously for email and chat since it is fairly inoffensive and most people don’t have too much trouble remembering it. (Andromeda1978 J1)

Screen names were seen to contribute to first impressions and their potential to create inaccurate impressions was acknowledged.
I believe people make many presumptions when they see a name in a chat room, well at least I do. (Robotics J1)

I myself have taken some aliases the wrong way or gotten the wrong impression about the person … (Aquarius J1)

… all names can have people thinking very different things about yourself which are untrue or completely unintended. (Tinkerbell J1)

There was therefore an incentive, expressed by some participants, to choose wisely:

I wanted to think of the right one. (Aquarius J1)

One participant, experienced with synchronous CMC, disagreed that screen names were an important part of impression formation.

I think it [the screen name] should reflect the person in some way, however, from my experience, people are more likely to judge you from your personality rather then your name. This is especially true with people who have been using chat programs for some time. These same people also seem to be the ones who are more likely to invite you into a room and make you feel welcome regardless of your alias. I have tried a number of aliases in the past, and found that using either suggestive names or names that could be interpreted in many ways can have a negative impact on my experience. (Andromeda1978 J1)

This participant argued that screen names are not as important as the way one presents oneself in interaction; users, or at least those with some experience,
learn not to make assumptions on the basis of screen names. However, his own experience in chat subverts this claim as he recalls that a poor choice of screen name adversely affected his enjoyment. Users, it appears on further reflection, do respond to screen names.

Although many participants described the procedure of choosing their name as a reflective and often logical procedure of deliberation, some spoke of the process as an unconscious one.

To be honest, I took only a few seconds to come up with this alias. I don't know why at first, but when I try to think of another name, I can't find a better one to use. It is like something that is already in your mind a long time ago, and it comes out when the time comes. (BruceLee J1)

I think the alias I have chosen really matches the behavioural and cognitive aspects of my personality. When I say chosen I don't quite mean it though because the alias just came into my mind subconsciously and I really liked it. (Unknown J1)

Whether the choice was described as conscious or unconscious, participants appeared to locate layers of meaning as they reflected on their choice.

Another possibility, which I think could be the reason where this alias comes from, is that … (Unknown J1)

The second reason that I choose BruceLee as an alias is that it keeps me a warm feeling. Of course I don't know him personally, but I think it is a friendly name and there is one think that we are in common, which is we are both from a very small and busy city - Hong Kong. At this point, I found that if there is a meaning behind the alias
and you could find it, you could see through some part of that people. I think it is quite interesting. (BruceLee J1)

Although in the above quotation the participant is talking about the insight others might get into his ethnic identity if they were to analyse his screen name, he also seems to be discovering new meanings for himself.

The majority of screen names related to the self, however, another sizable group was derived from literature, computer games, and film. Smaller numbers of participants used screen names from the natural world and technology-related names.

The initial thematic analysis of the data revealed that participants used a range of strategies to select their screen names and many expended considerable time and energy in the search for the “right” one. Because participants signalled the screen name as an important element in the self-presentational process, the selection of a screen name was analysed in more detail. A series of node searches were carried out. Matrices were used to cross-tabulate nodes, looking for groupings using base data or demographic themes. Where meaningful groupings emerged, the text files in the relevant cells were then analysed in detail.

A matrix search examining the relationship between origin of the screen name and synchronous CMC experience supported the popularity of developing a new screen name regardless of CMC experience; even those with extensive chat and MOO experience preferred this approach to either using an existing screen name or adopting an offline nickname. A second matrix was conducted to examine the relationship between origin and sex. This analysis revealed that although developing a new screen name was the preferred approach for men, women were equally likely to use an offline nickname. In comparison offline nicknames were not used by any of the male participants.
All those participants who used offline nicknames expressed a strong sense of connection to the name and identification with it. The names were associated with warmth and security. Most of those who used existing screen names also identified with the name, however a sex difference emerged in the origin of these screen names. The women in this group used the names of characters from novels and games. These were characters with whom they identified strongly and they wrote in detail about their connection to the character.

The alias "Oracle" is one that I have used for over two years now. Its origins stem from a fantasy novel of the same name, written by Maggie Furey as part of her Artefacts of Power series (for as long as I can remember, I have had a keen interest in science fiction and fantasy paraphenalia.) Oracle, the title character, is flamed-haired mage (or wizard) who triumphs against all odds as a powerful ally in the quest to save the world from the ultimate evil. The way in which this character was written struck a cord with me, and I began to adopt its mannerisms while using my previous alias. This would generally involve acting as the all-great-and-powerful mage, invincible against anything. (Oracle J1)

The men in contrast had developed their own names. Although these screen names were nonetheless perceived to reveal elements of the player’s identity, they were chosen for pragmatic reasons. Andromeda1978’s earlier comment about choosing a screen name that was inoffensive and easily remembered illustrates this motivation.

No player changed their screen name during the 12-week period, although it is possible that some players logged on a guest.
7.3.4 Constructing an online identity

As well as choosing a screen name, impression-construction involved providing a character description that could be viewed by other players. Participants’ character descriptions were shaped not only by other players’ descriptions, but also the typically evocative way in which objects are described in MOOs.

I read over some other players’ descriptions to give myself some ideas of what to write. (Aquarius J1)

My first description was just about what I do at University and where I live, but I needed something that was more of a physical description, so I looked at the way the objects in the MOO were described and tried to use a similar format to that. (Ice_Maiden J1)

Given the use of existing object descriptions as models, it is not surprising that there was a pattern to the character descriptions, all of which were written in the third person. The more experienced MOOers actively engaged the observer by referring to them.

A tall and slim man with broad shoulders smiles back at you. (Andromeda1978 Char)

Escaping the cloak is piece of curled hair and you decide that this entity is female. (Oracle Char)
Character descriptions varied in length from single sentences, used by half the players, to longer descriptions. Less experienced MOOers and newbies tended to write shorter descriptions without explicit reference to the viewer.

At the start of the semester about half the participants described the potential of the medium for identity play.

Once you are in a virtual world where the only superficial traits people can see about you - are the ones you intentionally volunteer… you can be anything and anyone. (The_Umpire6 J1)

So I could write whatever I wanted other people to see me as, even become someone I am not. (Tinkerbell J1)

One of the aspects that I find most interesting and exciting about the internet and chat rooms is that you can be anyone you want to be. (Material_Girl J1)

Not all participants shared this picture of complete freedom however. Others conceptualised the medium as offering a chance to exaggerate or conceal elements of identity rather than present a radically different person.

It allows us, the players to either hide behind or embrace our personal selves. (Aquarius J1)

7.3.4.1 The real me

Before entering the MOO, most participants were sensitive to the self-presentational opportunities afforded by the pseudonymity of the medium.
Despite acknowledging the playful potential of cyberspace, one of the strongest themes to emerge from the journals was the desire to present the “real” self.

… in my experience I find it best to be more like your real self online, rather than making up stuff. (Self_AcuTulIsEd J1)

When describing myself I kept pretty close to my real self, becoming a completely different person is not something I feel very comfortable with. (Weevil J1)

The description I gave BritChick in MOO is the same as the real life me. After chatting online for a while, I have found that it's best and easier to tell people the truth…. Although I've had to choose another name to describe myself, I have not created a completely different identity. Basically the 'virtual' me, is me! (BritChick J1)

This was a strong theme and participants reiterated it at the end of the course.

From the start, my character was supposed to just be a vessel to hold the real me. I was not trying to be something other then I am in real life ...(Andromeda1978 J12)

I made a decision before the first online conference that I would be myself and tell the truth. (Aquarius J12)

This imperative to present oneself honestly was reflected in the character descriptions. For example, one participant who noted in her journal that she was “still feeling a little confused and overwhelmed by life in the MOO” (Weevil J1) originally described her character as simply “confused”, but later added some
interests. Character descriptions therefore evolved as students read other players’ descriptions and spent more time in the MOO.

Another participant, who was new to MOOing described her character in the following way:

A girl who likes to smile and get to know people, but can get a little frustrated by all of this (Jogirl Char)

This participant explained why she included a reference to her immediate emotional response to the MOO. As well as being an accurate self-presentation, it was designed to ease anxiety in other participants. She argued that by adding “frustrated” to her description she revealed

a little honesty by showing that I am human with different emotions. I have been frustrated at my own inability to do some things in the MOO and so by writing this I thought that I would show some others who are having difficulty that they are not alone. (Jogirl J1)

All participants who talked about presenting their “real” self discussed their decision to do so, as if their choice required justification. Interestingly the justification for exaggerating or idealising impression construction was not as frequently included. The rationale for presenting accurate images varied. Some participants argued that only people dissatisfied with their identity would change facets online.
The MOO character is, for the most part, me. If I didn’t like my personality in real life then I would change my personality, therefore why should I have a different personality online. (Andromeda1978 J1)

I believe that sometimes people take on different characters in this situation if they are not happy with their own personal situation. (Snowflake J1)

Others alluded to the difficulties inherent in playing out a deceptive self-presentation over time. It is simply “easier”, as one student commented, “to tell people the truth” (BritChick J1). Maintaining a character different to one’s offline identity would require considerable energy and, at the start of the semester, many doubted their ability to succeed at it.

The other reason I kept the description real is that with all our online discussions I may get confused as I do not know who I am talking from; the cyber me or the real me. This way is the easiest. Despite that it would be hard to remember all the ‘changes’ you have made to yourself. (Material_Girl J1)

I did consider a male character that was studying P.E. However I felt that my female personality, which is quite strong would let me down in trying to convince other users that I was male. (Aquarius J1)

This belief that even if one did decide to experiment with aspects of identity, one’s “true identity” would inadvertently leak out eventually, was common.

… it can be hard to keep up the act of the new person and I feel eventually your true self will seep through… (Aquarius J1)
The risk of detection appeared to inhibit intentions to play with identity in the MOO. However, it did not prevent one student, who, anticipating that he would reveal aspects of himself he was attempting to hide, nevertheless delighted in the playful possibilities of the medium.

Of course, people will eventually be able to see the real me as I am too chatty and I can’t resist a wisecrack… I know I’ll inadvertently give the game away. But at the same time, I also think that’s part of the fun. I’m still ‘me’ but I’m just a character at the same time, pretty cool, eh!? (The_Umpire6 J1)

7.3.4.2 The ideal me

The presentation of the real me was a theme for all participants and most returned to it many times in their journals. Few participants, in contrast, talked explicitly about playing out an ideal self. One notable exception was a participant who adopted the screen name of a character from an electronic game. This participant wrote in detail about how the social ease of the character in the game attracted her and how her MOO character provided an opportunity to act out this ideal self.

I loved that character very much and would love to be like her, hence I adapt her name as my alias. I do have some similarities with the character but there is more of her that I would love to be like. Such as her openness towards strangers and her ability to become friends with people so easily. By using this alias, I can feel myself become a totally different person than I really am in real life. (Aerial J1)

The participant makes it clear that the character has some basis in reality. She and her character share some attributes. The character is not therefore entirely
fictitious, however, it is obvious that the character reflects the participant’s desired identity images.

Although few participants discussed their intention to present desired identity images, analysis of the character descriptions revealed presentation of socially desirable, if not idealised, characteristics. Characters tended to be friendly and caring and when physical descriptions were included they were almost all tall and slim.

A girl who likes to smile and get to know people… (Jogirl Char)

Green_Day waves hello with a large furry paw. (Green_Day Char)

A tall and slim man with broad shoulders smiles back at you. (Andromeda1978 Char)

Undercutting these idealised presentations, however, was the disclosure of more commonplace or vulnerable descriptions. For example, the “girl who likes to smile and get to know people” was also "a little frustrated by all of this". Other players, males and females, used the same strategy, incorporating socially desirable and less desirable, but nevertheless endearing characteristics.

If only he wasn’t wearing such daggy clothes... Faded black jeans and a target shirt... (Andromeda1978 Char)

I’m very passionate with things that I like such as making friends, chatting on the Internet and trying to figure out other people's personalities. At the same time I'm a bit shy. (Faithful Char)
Expressions of frustration and confusion were common.

confused but friendly creature, afraid of study and loves to surf and party (Weevil Char)

An average fellow, lost and confused in the world of identities (Unknown Char)

7.3.4.3 The exaggerated me

At the start of the course participants anticipated that they would primarily present their “real” self. Despite the inherent opportunities within the medium, most participants did not intend to idealise their self-presentations. One participant, however, planned to exaggerate this offline self, and did so with obvious enjoyment. His character description read:

6ft tall and thin as a rake. He has pimples all over his face that look likely to erupt any second and thick black rimmed glasses. He is wearing a black and white stripey shirt and has a whistle around his neck. There are numerous thick textbooks under his left arm. (The_Umpire6 Char)

This player noted his own surprise at this description.

I had originally shunned the idea of creating a character that did not mirror my ‘real’ self. But as soon as the opportunity was placed at my disposal I found myself grossly exaggerating all my traits and creating the ultimate [geeky umpire]! I’m 6ft tall and lean in real life, but hate it when I’m referred to as skinny, hence the reference to my weight. The glasses, pimples and textbooks were all just to enhance the geekyness.
All of a sudden I was on a roll… I had a chance to describe my room – so naturally that became the ultimate stereotypical geek lair… (The_Umpire6 J1)

Even at this early stage the character seemed to gain a life of its own and despite expressing some hesitation, the student ran with the exaggeration, obviously enjoying the play. Of note is the way the player deliberately focused on aspects of this offline self (e.g., skinniness) that he judged to be undesirable. By exaggerating the features he revealed their humour and defused them as sources of vulnerability.

7.3.4.4 The concealed me

As well as intending to present their “true self” in the MOO, many participants also talked about an intention to conceal aspects of identity online. Previous MOO experience was unrelated to selective self-disclosure; it occurred at all levels. For these participants there was a desire to disclose information, but a competing motivation to withhold characteristics.

I wanted to be myself, but with a little mystery. (Tinkerbell J1)

I do like to be truthful but I also don’t want to divulge too much about my ‘real’ self. (Material_Girl J1)

With a nickname like this, it not only partly describes me but also leaves plenty of mystery at first glance, is this person male or female? (Robotics J1)

Selective self-disclosure was perceived as a strategy that left self-presentational options open.
I feel that this description allows me to still keep secrets or be anyone I want to be in the MOO. I can live anywhere, be completing any course, be any age or even any nationality I like. (Aquarius J1)

And reduced the possibility of being stereotyped before meeting online.

My character name and description are quite ambiguous to those who don't know me. This means that others shouldn't have too many preconceived ideas about me before talking to them. (Andromeda1978 J12)

Mysteriousness was valued. Some intrigue was considered useful in initiating interactions. As one participant stated, “a completely 'open-book' approach can often be perceived as boring” (Oracle J1). In order to achieve this mystery, some participants constructed deliberately ambiguous screen names and character descriptions.

The reason that I decided to stick with this name was that I think people will have no real idea why I chose it (unless I tell them) and will probably think of it meaning something totally different to what I want them to. I like that as I feel it leads to some sort of mystery or confusion about my character. (Snowflake J1)

Another participant, with online experience, reflected on his intention to both exaggerate and conceal.

The real me is interesting enough so I don’t really have to add too much to it. I have taken the liberty of slightly (open to interpretation really) enhancing my good points and not mentioning the bad. (Andromeda1978 J1)
7.3.4.5 The fantastical and unique me

Another theme related to the construction of online identity was a desire to create a unique or different character. Some participants adopted non-human, fantasy characters with obviously unique characteristics, such as a flamed-hair mage, a fairy, a snowflake, a Bernese Mountain dog, and a transformer, half robot, half plane. These character descriptions were relatively long, most consisting of several sentences.

Some other participants simply described their human character as unique or expressed a desire to be different.

My character … is an individual who likes to be different and is not scared to stand out … (Dirty_Dancer J1)

I really wanted Unknown to be different and unique … (Unknown J1)

The use of a fantasy character did not preclude honest self-presentation and for most of those who chose fantasy characters, accurate self-presentation remained a clear priority. Some therefore were careful to describe their fantasy character in terms that related to themselves.

There are obvious fantastical aspects embedded within the description…. I chose to contain information about myself in this description…. For the more astute, the information tells others that I am female, considered tall and have curly hair. Since my aims of this course were to be as honest as possible, I did not blatantly lie about the person that I am (Oracle J1)
Virtual characters were therefore established primarily as accurate versions of offline identity. Concealing aspects of identity was commonly used, employed primarily as an alluring strategy. Idealisation, exaggeration, and fantasy were used less frequently. When considered together, however, as a group of strategies, selective self-disclosure, idealisation, exaggeration, and the use of fantasy illustrate a widespread, but often subtle intention to play with identity that was reported by nearly all participants.

7.3.4.6 Conceptualisation of online identity

Although most participants talked about presenting their “real” self, some striking differences emerged in the ways they thought about their MOO identity. The first obvious difference appeared in the connections between screen names and character descriptions. The second difference emerged in the language participants used to describe their character.

Although all but one participant described the meaningfulness of their screen name, not all participants used their character descriptions to flesh out their screen name. The relationship between screen names and character descriptions was essentially a dichotomy; participants expressed either a strong connection between their chosen name and their character or, less commonly, little connection at all. Those participants who used the character description to augment a screen name fell into two groups. First there were participants who based their virtual persona on characters from fiction. All of these participants expressed a strong connection between their name and character description. A second group of participants used both the screen name and the character description to reveal an essential personality trait.

In contrast, other participants wrote character descriptions with seemingly little connection to their screen name. For example one student, whose screen
name was related to her passion for football umpiring, did not allude to this at all in her character description. Although this group was comprised almost entirely of participants who articulated a clear intention to present themselves online, the screen name and character description were not integrated.

The language used to talk about online identity also varied across participants. The linguistic analysis of character references suggested two different ways of conceptualising the online character. In the first instance, the MOO character was described in a dramaturgical sense, as a role. Participants talked about “my character”, used third person pronouns, or used the character’s name to refer to their online behaviour, as if the character and its behaviour were separate from the offline self.

One thing I guess that was a bit different about me in reality and my character is that I found my character to be more outgoing than what I am. (Ice_Maiden J12)

She is friendly but quite a bit flirty and full of life. (Dirty_Dancer J1)

Material_Girl had a lot of frustrations online… (Material_Girl J12)

The most common theme within this category was the use of the possessive pronoun, which communicated a clear sense of ownership. A much smaller group referred to themselves acting out the character.

As Aquarius I am free to … (J1)

As Jogirl, I often felt as if … (J12)
The use of these third person references suggested a connection between character and identity. But the degree of ownership that was implied varied. Despite this connection, the third person indicated a simultaneous separation of character and identity. The player might own the character and could act as the character, but she was also separate from her, in the same way that an actor is separate from a role she performs in a play. Even in describing themselves as the character, participants signalled a fundamental separation of online and offline selves.

This strategy allowed participants to explain online behaviour that was inconsistent with the offline world in a way that did not necessarily threaten their offline identity. For example, when one student described her “ditzy” behaviour in the MOO, she moved into the use of the third person. Those participants who noticed they were more confident online also typically used the third person to describe this change in behaviour.

All the participants described their online identity as a role at some stage. In contrast, fewer participants described their character as themselves, despite the strong emergent theme that participants were presenting themselves online. This group of participants described their online behaviour using first person pronouns and explicitly described themselves as the character.

So now I was the ‘The_Umpire6’… (J12)

I am 'Weevil'… (J12)

And some participants combined both conceptualisations in a single thought.
The alias of Jogirl allowed me the character to become unique and personal as it allowed me to be more of myself. (J12)

In this single sentence this student explains that using a familiar nickname allowed her to present herself through a character; she was simultaneously playing a character and presenting the “real” me. Her perception of self-presentation in the MOO echoes another student’s comment:

I’m still ‘me’ but I’m just a character at the same time, pretty cool, eh!?
(The_Umpire6 J1)

7.3.5 Online identity attributes
In addition to a desire to present one’s interests and personality, participants also presented ascribed characteristics, namely physical appearance, gender, age, and ethnicity.

7.3.5.1 Physical appearance
Many participants, male as well as female, referred to physical appearance in their character descriptions.

… a average height girl with mango coloured hair and moves to the beat of the music all day long (Dirty_Dancer Char)

Most participants commented that these were accurate self-presentations, although one participant noted the use of “a little artistic licence”
(Andromeda1978 J12). Only one participant discussed her rationale for avoiding a physical description.

I don’t like the idea of describing my physical self as I would rather someone get to know me for my mind. (Aquarius J1)

One participant noted the redundant nature of the character descriptions because most don't bother to look at you until you have spoken for a while (Andromeda1978 J12),

after which time they have probably formed an impression. The probability that others would form impressions of their physical appearance even in the absence of a corporeal reality online was widely acknowledged and these impressions were presumed to be inaccurate.

Despite the honesty on my part I am sure people will get a certain visual in their head as will I about them and when we meet it is almost evident that this predetermined visual will not match that of the person standing in front of me. (Material_Girl J1)

7.3.5.2 Gender

No participants crossed-sex, but four, all with minimal previous MOO experience, chose from the other gender options. Two of these participants, one female and one male, chose Splat. One male chose Spivak and another male chose to be neuter. Unknown, who chose to be neuter, was the only participant in this group of gender swappers who selected a gender that was explicitly
consistent with the character description. The other participants chose their gender to be different, mysterious, and conceal their biological sex.

When choosing a gender I wanted to again choose something that was not the basic male / female, and splat seemed a good alternative... (Green_Day J1)

With a nickname like this, it not only partly describes me but also leaves plenty of mystery at first glance, is this person male or female? (Robotics J1)

My character was genderless. I did not want to reveal my gender during the course and I think I achieved it. Many people thought my character was male. (Faithful J12)

Of the students who didn’t change their gender in the MOO, the women were particularly likely to draw attention to their gender either through their choice of screen name or character description. Four participants, all women, chose screen names that contained a reference to gender. Incorporating gender in the screen name was perceived as a way to present fundamental information about self and open up discussion.

... my alias ... tells people ... my sex. I find that it is important for an alias to tell others some basic facts about the person in order to create interest and encourage communication. (BritChick J1)

Nearly all of the other women mentioned their gender in their character descriptions. Some mentioned their gender explicitly. One student presented her gender less explicitly through the use of a single pronoun.
Light and clear.... soft as a snowflake. Constantly admiring her surroundings and wondering if Heaven is as beautiful as this. Always ready for action and always wanting to try new things. (Snowflake Char)

Gender, when presented by women in the character descriptions, was unambiguous and often the first information presented. An exception to this was one student who played with gender, withholding the information until the final word of the description.

You see a tall figure shrouded in mist [entirely inappropriate for inside conditions], enclosed in a cloak of black. Escaping the cloak is a piece of curled hair and you decide that this entity is female... (Oracle Char)

Although the final phrase states the gender she selected in the MOO, the expression draws attention to the character’s gender ambiguity. We make a decision that she is female, but it requires some thought. Her gender is not obvious. We should not therefore expect a stereotypical female. This student has us, the audience, make a decision about gender, but no other aspect of her identity. That we need to make a decision about her gender underscores the importance of this attribute online. This direct reference to the audience is an active invitation to interact, to take part in the self-presentation/impression formation process.

Three female participants didn’t allude to gender at all in their descriptions. The following student was one of these.

Another factor that I didn’t consider when choosing my alias is the gender that the name Weevil portrays, it didn’t even occur to me that people would assume that I was
a male. I didn’t want other people involved in the course to assume that I was a male so set my gender in the MOO as female so there is no confusion. (Weevil J12)

Even though this student was concerned that others would think she was male, she did not explicitly describe herself as female in the character description. At the end of the semester this student reflected on the gender impressions others had formed of her.

despite describing myself as female people assumed that I was male, I'm not sure whether this was because of my behaviour in the MOO or because of the impression that my alias 'Weevil' gave…. people may have decided I was male the moment they saw my name 'Weevil' and there would have been no way that I could change that judgement until we met face to face. Which is exactly what happened to me with Flemmex, I was convinced that she was a male and it was only when we met face to face that my way of thinking about Flemmex could be changed. (Weevil J12)

All of the men who selected a male gender underscored their gender in their character description, either explicitly or implicitly.

a man who try to face his next stage of life (Two_by_Twelve Char)

He has pimples all over his face that look likely to erupt any second and thick black rimmed glasses. (The_Umpire6 Char)

7.3.5.3 Age

Only two participants discussed their age in the journals and these males both signalled their age in their screen names. Both of these players were slightly
older than the majority of students in the group. No participant referred to age in
the character descriptions.

7.3.5.4 Ethnicity

Two participants made references to ethnicity in their screen names. One used
the name of a movie star whose name includes both Anglo and Asian
components. As an Asian student studying in Australia, the participant went on
to reflect on his own dual ethnicity.

Furthermore, if someone doesn't know BruceLee, he or she may think that it is just
simply an ordinary English name plus an Asian surname. It is perfectly fine because I
am just a very ordinary student and somehow reflects a major part of myself.
(BruceLee J1)

Another student included the name of a country in her name, although she was
not born there. She was aware that her screen name might be misinterpreted this
way.

My alias may create false images of me… but it is up to others to discover how
accurate my alias is. (BritChick J1)

Her screen name represented her interests rather than ethnicity, although it is
also possible that the screen name represented a desired identity image. Perhaps
she was inviting misperception. Another participant alluded, albeit subtly, to her
Balinese background when she described her character with mango coloured
hair.
The description for the character come from the idea that mangoes been a summer fruit and tropical climate. (Dirty_Dancer J1)

7.3.6 The dorm room as self-presentation

Like the character descriptions, the dorm rooms provided participants with an opportunity for idealised self-presentation. The actual descriptions ranged from plausible to fantastic, from messy student rooms with bed, TV, computer, books, and clothes piled on the floor to elaborately decorated rooms replete with murals and obscure objects. The dorm room descriptions were designed to entertain with their humorous, retro geekishness, welcome with their comfy couches and mood lighting, or dazzle with their intricate and exotic detail. All gave off information about their creator.

The dorm rooms functioned as a stage for the MOO identity, with a set designed specifically to contextualise the identity presented in the character description. For example, the fairy had a four-poster bed with a spare set of wings lying on the white linen; the flame-haired mage displayed jewel-encrusted staffs on her wall and an ancient chalice on a table. Less fantastical, but nevertheless idealised objects were prominent, such as large screen TVs, enormous beds, minibars, and huge windows. Students who emphasised relationships with others created rooms that were warm and inviting.

This is a welcoming room and feels friendly and cosy. (Aquarius Dorm)

Students with previous online experience demonstrated their knowledge and skill, creating humorous exit messages and constructing objects for visitors to interact with. One student filled his cupboard with 5 folded and numbered pink sheets. When worn as a cape this sheet enabled the wearer to jump from the
window unhurt. Without the sheet the unsuspecting visitor plummeted to their death and found themselves in a coffin, complete with helpful instructions for resurrection. Rooms like these added to the playful nature of the MOO and gave off clear messages about technical proficiency.

7.3.7 Playing it out

7.3.7.1 Self-presentation in the MOO

Given that the overwhelming intention at the start of the semester was to present the “real” me in the MOO, how did participants view their presentations at the end of the course? Were the intentions played out or, on reflection, did participants think they had presented themselves differently?

Most participants perceived themselves as presenting an accurate self-image.

During my time in the MOO I feel I acted like my normal everyday self. (Weevil J12)

I feel that my character online was no different to my character in real life. (Aquarius J12)

In the MOO I used 'Tinkerbell' as an alias however only an alias. I did not become another person whilst using the MOO nor did I decide to change my gender or decided that I was going to portray myself as anything other than what I actually am or was to the people of the MOO. (Tinkerbell J12)

Even the participants with well-developed characters at the start of the semester, found themselves dropping the character and reverting to accurate self-presentations as the semester progressed. One student, who at the start of the
semester revelled in the thought of playing out an exaggerated version of himself, ultimately found that he was himself online.

Although my original intent was to play up a character - I constantly found myself 'being myself'. To say that I wasn't being myself whilst in character isn't really right either. I mean, although I'm being The_Umpire6, bursting pimples on people and pretending to woo women into my 'babe lair'... this playful nature is 'me'. I have always been like that and find it impossible not to be like that. So there goes my creativity! I made up a character to exaggerate my physical characteristics and personality - but when it came to playing it out, all I could do was 'be me'.

(The_Umpire6 J12)

Another student also noted the transition from character to “real me” over the course of the semester, and interpreted the shift as a natural, but unconscious reaction to changes in relationships with other players.

At the beginning of the semester, I used the character of Oracle to interact with other people. For example, many of my earlier interactions involved “Oracle” casting a spell or summoning, provoking a reaction from other people. This was an easier way to communicate, a deviation from the standard “hi, how are you?” However, while I had adopted the alias of Oracle, the description that I used was more of a reflection of myself, rather than that of a character. I wanted to let other people in the MOO get to know a few details about me, whilst keeping in the realm of fantasy - I was tall, female, and had curly hair, no other personal details were given initially. However, as the semester passed, I found myself beginning to drop the 'mage' persona, becoming more of 'myself', if that is the proper term to for it. While in hindsight, I see this changes as an unconscious decision, at the time, it would have most likely been due to a change in familiarity with others. Acting in character was a good way to introduce
myself to others, but as I found out more about them and their lives, I felt the need to talk more normally, rather than playfully. (Oracle J12)

For this student, the character of the flame-haired mage proved a useful tool in the early stages of relationships with other players. Her fantastical powers served as a talking point. As the relationships deepened, however, the playful self-presentation, which had served its purpose was dropped, allowing her to slide into what she described as a more “normal” mode of interaction. This student’s character description, combining real and fantasy details, facilitated this transition. The participant referred to her online identity as “the character” several times in this journal, underscoring her separation of character and offline self.

Despite changes in self-presentation over time, character descriptions remained stable after the first three weeks.

The intention to conceal information, which had been an important theme at the beginning of the course was less important by the end. As well as being mentioned by fewer participants, the ways in which selective self-disclosure was written about had changed by the end of the course. At the beginning of the semester participants talked about a conscious withholding of information as an enticing communication strategy. At the end of the semester there was more acknowledgement of unconscious concealment.

Half the players noted some form of disinhibition online. No participants reported aggressive or antisocial behaviour, instead increased social confidence was a common theme. The following comment summarised several participants’ experience:
You could probably imagine the me online is quite similar to me in real life after a couple of beers (Andromeda1978 J1)

Some participants described their confidence online, observing with pleasure and sometimes amusement the change in behaviour online. One student described his reduced inhibitions in detail.

How are Robotics and I related? … I think essentially Robotics was simply me minus the inhibitions that a face to face world seems to place on us all… I would like to think that I would speak up to say whatever I like and not really have to worry about other people's opinions of me. With the character Robotics I was able to, through em, talk about anything and pipe up whenever I wanted to because of a detachment from the IPR [in-person relationship] world…. The impersonal nature meant my inhibitions were relaxed and those relaxed inhibitions were transferred to Robotics. With inhibitions of speaking in public removed Robotics was able to contribute to the online discussions and speak my mind freely in MOO… as Robotics I could 'bump' into people in the MOO and just start a conversation, something I can not do in the face to face world…. In general I enjoyed being Robotics because it was just me with the face to face inhibitions removed, I enjoyed it because I could relax mostly … and I felt no expectations to be something I'm not while I was using the MOO. (Robotics J12)

Reduced shyness was noted by other participants, particularly amongst those with relatively little previous MOO experience. These participants typically explained their altered behaviour as a result of the cues that are filtered out online.

On the Internet I was more confident, I guess that's because I was not talking … to their faces. (Ice_Maiden J12)
The greatest difference between identity and the self presented online was described by a participant who found the screen name freed her to behave as a desired self.

By using this alias, I can feel myself become a totally different person than I really am in real life. I feel that I'm stronger and more able to share my opinions with people. I'm more open and less scared to let others know how I feel. I feel more happy and contented with myself. I'm more able to communicate with new people that I met online. I do not feel any barriers that I normally felt when talking to people in real life. Though this is just the result that can be felt when communicating online, I still feel that the use of this alias online gives me security in a way that I know my real identity will not be known to others unless I allow them to. Just being online makes me a much open person, but with the use of an alias (not related to my real name), it makes me even more open and able to communicate easily with others. (Aerial J1)

This participant explains the disinhibition she experiences online as a function of the pseudonymous medium. Unconstrained by her “real” identity she is free to become the self she desires.

Most participants enjoyed the changes in self-presentation they noted online, however, two participants, both of whom recorded low levels of participation, thought they had revealed unattractive qualities in the MOO. One student, for example, found that her frustration and vulnerability, often hidden in the offline world, were easily revealed online.

The environment … caused a few traits to come to the surface that many other people normally do not see. The MOO was very new and different to me and so the character of Jogirl often seemed a bit 'ditzy' to me. I was often being lead around by The_Umpire6, like a little girl. He would almost hold my hand and help me to get around while we went exploring. As Jogirl, I often felt as if I asked the silliest
questions and felt frustrated a lot of the time. I have many of these qualities in real life, but I try not to let any one see them. This made Jogirl and myself seem a little vulnerable. (Jogirl J12)

Another student also described the emergence of her “real” self in moments of frustration.

All in all I do not think Material_Girl's character was entirely reflective of my real self but it certainly did display elements of my real character in challenging situations where Material_Girl and my real self merged momentarily…. She would say "frustrated" a lot and almost reflected a whiney tone at some times (yes, reflective of my real self at certain points). (Material_Girl J12)

This same player who described herself as talkative and confident in the offline world, found herself quiet, reserved and “passive” in the MOO.

In real life I seem to have a wacky personality, do and say silly things. This was not evident in my online character. I think Material_Girl was far more conservative than my real self… I found it hard to express my real self through text…. it seemed like too much was going on at once. (Material_Girl J12)

Although dramaturgically aware and motivated to present an accurate self-image, the demands of the MOO made it difficult for her to present the image she wanted. This player began the course with a strong belief in the ability of the actor to control the impression that others formed of her.

I guess you could say that in cyberspace you create your own image and have full control over it (Material_Girl J1)
It is not surprising therefore that finding herself unable to control those impressions was perceived with frustration.

When asked directly at the end of the semester about the relationship between their online character and their offline identity, participants made two general types of comments. The more common response was to see the character as predominantly an expression of offline identity, but a little more outgoing.

During my time in the MOO I feel I acted like my normal everyday self. The only difference being that I was probably a little more outspoken… (Weevil J12)

The other response, which was also common, was to see the character and offline identity as identical. Online self-presentation was considered a perfect expression of the offline self.

I always felt like myself in the MOO. (Jogirl J12)

I am who I am, no matter where…. That's why I picked an alias that represents my real personality (Two_by_Twelve J12)

7.3.7.2 Signification

At the start of the course all but two participants anticipated others’ impressions. Several participants implied that the audience’s perception would be a direct reflection of the text presented.
I guess you could say that in cyber space you create your own image and have full control over it…. you can control there perceptions of you and create an image in their minds of who you are. (Material_Girl J1)

Even though a belief that one could control the impressions others formed was a strong theme in the journals, participants were not sure how their self-presentations would be interpreted and many looked forward, with curiosity, to seeing how they were perceived.

I’m interested and looking forward to seeing how people will interact with me only knowing me as Weevil… (Weevil J1)

As my time in the MOO increases and I get to talk to more people their idea of who I am from my interactions might be quite different to the way I described myself, or maybe their perceptions of who I am will be coloured BY my description and alias. It will be interesting to find out at the end of the course what people think of me and they think of my character. (Ice_Maiden J1)

My alias to me is like an untitled piece of art which could probably mean everything and yet nothing. It's like being left to the observer to decide what he or she wants to make of it. (Unknown J1)

Some raised the possibility of inaccurate impressions. Even when players attempted to present themselves accurately, misperceptions were considered unavoidable, although these concerns tended to be voiced as general issues for online self-presentation. Few participants spoke about the possibility that they would be perceived inaccurately. Some participants deliberately courted
misperception, consciously setting up ambiguous screen names or character descriptions and challenging others to find their “true” identity.

When I initially thought of Snowflake as an alias I thought it sounded a bit common and reminded me of a name that a stripper would choose. The reason that I decided to stick with this name was that I think people will have no real idea on why I chose it (unless I tell them) and will probably think of it meaning something totally different to what I want them to. I like that as I feel it leads to some sort of mystery or confusion about my character. (Snowflake J1)

But most anticipated their screen name and character description would create a friendly impression and “provide a talking point/meeting point with other people” (Aquarius J1).

I am … making the name … seem more friendly and approachable. My hope … is that it conveys something about myself and tempts other participants to strike up a conversation with me. (Jogirl J1)

In contrast, one participant spoke about deliberately wanting to create an impression of deception.

This I hope will set up my character as deceitful and hence make other users think twice about what I say on the MOO. (Robotics J1)

Participants therefore expected that others would form impressions that were essentially accurate. However, participants imagined they controlled the information that was accessed by other players. At the end of the course participants reflected on the ways they thought they had been perceived, the
behaviours they thought had been signified by others. Several participants were surprised by the process. One participant, for example, was surprised early on by the impressions others formed on the basis of her character description.

I have noticed that many people have picked upon the style in which I have written my description and asked whether my interests include book and role-playing games. I have answered yes to both and found it fascinating how much unconscious information can be conveyed by a few simple sentences. (Oracle J1)

Primarily focused on crafting the given information, she had not considered that the style of her writing might also give off aspects of her identity.

The primary theme running through nearly all of the unanticipated significations was ascribed identity. Participants were particularly surprised when either their sex or ethnicity was misinterpreted. In an interesting twist two Anglo-Australian students perceived each other as Asian.

One thing that I thought a little strange was that one person I had spent quite some time with on MOO thought I was Asian. (Andromeda1978 J12)

My online interactions must have been slightly different to how I interact with people in real life because … [he] had thought throughout the semester that I was Asian. Maybe it was because I told him that I was a female doing Engineering or maybe it was because of the way I spoke, either way he was surprised when he actually met me and found out I wasn't Asian. (Ice_Maiden J12)

Several participants, both female and male, thought their sex had been misinterpreted. Despite signalling her sex as female, one student still thought others assumed she was male. Just as participants had emphasised identity
concealment online, this student enjoyed revealing her real gender at the face-to-face meeting.

… after the shocked and surprised reactions I received at the face to face meeting I was really glad that I chose 'Weevil' as my alias. Because I am 'Weevil' and it was really fun to get such a great reaction when people found out who I was. (Weevil J12)

Another student was also surprised that others made incorrect assumptions about his gender. Despite setting his gender as Spivak, this student assumed that he presented an accurate, albeit more confident, identity in the MOO. He therefore assumed that his “real” gender would be obvious.

I was surprised in the face to face meeting that other members actually thought I was girl. Although I was told the assumption mostly came from the name, I believe Robotics spoke the same way I speak in the face to face world. (Robotics J12)

The technical support person for the course, who is also a wizard in the MOO, and presents a gender-neutral persona, was typically perceived as male. Although some students noted that they were aware of information that contradicted this categorisation, it wasn’t until the face-to-face meeting that they were forced to acknowledge she was female.

I was convinced that she was a male and it was only when we met face to face that my way of thinking … could be changed. (Weevil J12)

The obverse theme, of being correctly signified, was also well represented. The following comments are typical of this theme. Several participants referred to the
ease with which others recognised them at the face-to-face meeting as proof that they had presented an accurate image online.

After the face-to-face meeting I feel that I must have been myself online since most of the people I had spent some time with in MOO knew who I was in real life before revealing it. (Andromeda1978 J12)

The conclusions I came to about how my character and myself are related were pretty much that I am almost the same in real life as I am on the MOO, and even once people meet me after talking to me on the Internet they can easily guess who I am. (Ice_Maiden J12)

The face-to-face meeting was conceptualised as an important event for many participants and it appears to have shaped decisions about self-presentation. The inevitable meeting was introduced early on as a reason for honest self-presentation.

I describe myself how I actually am. Especially when we are all going to meet up at the end of the course, it is best not to create a false impression of myself. (BritChick J1)

Knowing that I was going to meet these people made me be more natural. (Jogirl J12)

Despite the insistence that self-presentations were honest, as the face-to-face meeting approached, participants acknowledged their apprehension. One student noted in her journal how she had shared her concerns with another.
We also discussed the upcoming f2f meeting and our thoughts regarding it - a little worry, hesitation, excitement, fear - all rolled into one neat little package. (Oracle J7)

7.3.7.3 Emotional responses

In writing the journals, participants expressed a range of emotions about MOOing, about self-presentation in cyberspace, and about themselves. These responses fell into two broad categories: positive and negative emotional responses. Several participants provided clear statements of enjoyment.

I had an enjoyable experience… (SeLf_AcTuAllsEd J12)

[I] have really enjoyed spending time in the MOO as 'Weevil'. (Weevil J12)

In general I enjoyed being Robotics … I enjoyed it because I could relax… (Robotics J12)

Others implied positive responses. One participant described his screen name as giving him a “warm feeling”. Most participants expressed positive emotions about their character.

By using this alias … I feel more happy and contented with myself. (Aerial J1)

I wanted it [the character description] to be like a description on what I experience … when I am skiing. If people can read a description of what I feel like when I am skiing, they are reading a description of me when I am at an incredibly happy and high point in my life. (Snowflake J1)
Participants also expressed excitement at the start of the course, anticipating the self-presentation process.

This will definitely be an interesting scenario over the semester. I am having fun playing up my character now… and it seems inevitable that it will continue (but just in what direction?). (The_Umpire6 J1)

I’m interested and looking forward to seeing how people will interact with me only knowing me as Weevil and to see how my character develops throughout the semester. (Weevil J1)

Negative emotions were expressed less frequently and were primarily directed towards the MOO itself.

I’m still feeling a little confused and overwhelmed by life in the MOO. (Weevil J1)

[I] felt frustrated a lot of the time. (Jogirl J12)

Players’ reflections on the MOO experience therefore varied in emotional tone. Although positive responses outweighed negative ones, the way players responded to the MOO experience on an emotional level was related to the week in which they were writing and the amount of time they spent in the MOO.

Positive responses were more common in the first week of the course than in the final week. The reverse pattern was noted for negative emotional responses. A more detailed analysis of the final week emotional responses revealed a relationship between participation and emotion. Negative responses at the end of the course were primarily expressed by those who spent no more than the
recommended hours in the MOO. In contrast, those who spent a large number of hours in the MOO reported predominantly positive emotions.

7.3.7.4 Relationships with other players

Several participants commented on their experience of connection to the group. Two major themes emerged: a sense of separation from the group and a feeling of strong relationships. In the following quote, this participant, who described herself as shy in the offline world illustrates her character’s remove from the group.

Shyness was one of the similarities of my character and the virtual identity I presented in the MOO. When other people were talking, dancing, and hugging my character was sitting quiet in a corner. (Faithful J12)

Some participants explained the lack of connection in pragmatic terms: they simply did not have enough opportunities to interact with other players. Some argued that situational variables made meaningful interaction difficult.

… it was very frustrating that most of the times I logged into the MOO no-one else was there. (Weevil J12)

As I am in a totally different situation to many of the other moo users I sometimes found it hard to relate to the others. (Snowflake J12)

In contrast another group of participants spoke about their connection to other participants and the relationships forged in the MOO.
I feel that I formed very good friendships with several of my peers in the course. (Aquarius J12)

In some cases the depth of relationship was unexpected.

I did not realise the communication that would take place could be so real and that I would be able to bond and form a friendship with other participators in the MOO. (Jogirl J12)

Relationships were based on honest self-presentations.

We both spoke honestly with each other and I feel this helped us start a good friendship…. I felt good with my decision to be myself and be honest with them. I feel that I formed very good friendships with several of my peers in the course. (Aquarius J12)

7.3.8 Reflections on the self-presentation process

At the end of the semester participants made a number of comments about their experience of the self-presentation process online. Several participants emphasised the absence of the physical body online, noting that this aspect distinguishes the offline from the online world.

The only thing that seemed to make me different online to offline seemed to be the physical appearance of me that people imagined compared to my real appearance. This was a very interesting aspect of this course; the way people stereotype other people by what they say or what they do. (Ice_Maiden J12)
the only real difference between my character on MOO and my character in real life is that my appearance is much more obvious [offline]. (Andromeda1978 J12)

Despite the absence of physical appearance, some participants viewed the self-presentation process as very similar to self-presentation in the offline world. Just as in the offline world, the “real” self inevitably emerges online.

The IP [in person] meeting was so insightful because I was able to realise that people may have looked different to how you imagined them, but they could not hide their personality…. our individual personalities inevitably shine through no matter who we are trying to be. And that's probably why Internet relationships can be so strong because it takes away the physical traits which may otherwise inhibit people from socialising in the first place. (The_Umpire6 J12)

I do feel in the virtual world or the real world people's true colours always appear when they are challenged. (Material_Girl J12)

The challenges of MOOing were commented on by several participants. Some noted that the skill required to navigate the MOO affected the self-presentation process. Some students found themselves revealing their frustration and helplessness, aspects they would be better able to control in offline interactions. One participant who constructed a more confident version of her offline self at the start of the semester, noted that she did not present this character over time. The cognitive effort required to navigate and interact in the MOO meant that she had few resources left to play out her desired identity image.

I was never really like the character that I described at the start of the course.
That was what I wanted to be, but I never had the opportunity to work on my character…. I was struggling with MOO and MOO commands and the last thing I was thinking about was my poor character! (Faithful J12)

In contrast to the earlier hyperbole about the self-presentational freedom of cyberspace, one participant who had intended to act out a desired identity image, concluded that the parameters of identity play were not infinite.

In a way, I guess I am playing with my identity, yet I still can only be me. I am still locked within the traditions, experiences, culture, chains of what makes me me. (SeLf_AcTuAllIsEd J12)

Even when one can play with identity online, accurate self-presentation was a more desirable option. As one student concluded:

The character of Oracle has been a well-developed aspect of me, one that I do not see myself dropping from my persona any time soon. Acting in character can be a surreal experience, but it can be even more rewarding to interact as your own self. (Oracle J12)

7.4 Discussion

There were a number of reasons to believe that participants in the present study would play with identity. First, they were all young adults as well as students, characteristics that have been associated with general identity experimentation (Heaven, 2001; Marcia, 1993a). Second, they were enrolled in a course explicitly designed to encourage identity play. Third, they were relatively
inexperienced MOO users and research has indicated that identity play decreases with MOO experience (Roberts et al., 1996). Fourth, the MOO presented an optimal context for flow: cognitive challenge was high, but not insurmountable, a situation that encourages focus on the task, reduction in self-consciousness, and distortion of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

The picture that emerged from the second study, however, was not one of unreserved identity play and experimentation, but rather authentic self-presentation. Players intended, for the most part, to present their offline identity accurately. And in reflection, at the end of the course they believed they did this. Despite this priority, identity play was evident in various, albeit subtle, forms. Participants’ reflections of their self-presentation described a four-stage sequence, beginning with choosing a screen name, followed by the development of the MOO character, then the playing out of the character over the 12 weeks of the course, and concluding with the face-to-face meeting.

7.4.1 Choosing a screen name

Screen names are perceived as important self-presentational statements. According to Bechar-Israeli (1996), the purpose of the screen name is twofold: first it should convey something of one’s identity and second it should tempt others to converse. The participants in the second study endorsed this view. Many participants acknowledged, either explicitly or implicitly, the role of the screen name in facilitating communication. A poor choice of screen name could easily misrepresent oneself or fail to interest other people. Choosing the right screen name was therefore seen as an important act of impression-construction. Its significance was underscored by the time and thought that went into the backstage process of selecting screen names.
In the offline world names are usually assigned by others. People who change their name, however, typically report a heightened identification with it (Strauss, 1969). So too, the participants in the present study generally took the opportunity to select a name that reflected a key aspect of identity and typically expressed a strong sense of connection to the name and ownership of it, even when the name was only used for the 12-week course.

Although screen names are easily changed, previous research has highlighted their longevity (Bechar-Israeli, 1996), suggesting that screen names function very much as names in the offline world. Despite this, the practice of using multiple screen names is common (UCLA Internet Report, 2003). Both these aspects were illustrated in the present study: the majority of participants created a new screen name for the course, even though some players had multiple existing names from which to choose. Participants who rejected existing screen names talked about wanting to create a name more specific to the particular online context. Despite the apparent multiplicity of screen names, none of the names were changed over the 12-week period. Screen names therefore provide an additional layer of impression construction online, permitting the player to focus on aspects of contextual relevance, just as an actor uses make-up and costume.

Another strategy used by a number of participants was to select a nickname from the offline world that was associated with warmth and acceptance. Adopting a nickname allowed this group, most of whom were new MOO users, to reveal a personal aspect of their identity and at the same time create a sense of security. Several writers have implied that MOOs are safe places in which to experiment with identity. Repercussions are seen as minimal and escape routes easily accessible. “If things get too hot and the consequences get out of hand”, Wallace (1999) argued, “… we can simply disconnect” (p.48). Contrary to this popular belief, MOO players in the present study did not always feel safe.
Vulnerability was expressed at several stages in the course; the early weeks of the course and the face-to-face meeting at the end of the course were times particularly associated with apprehension. One way in which the early vulnerability was managed was through choice of screen name.

A small group of participants noted that they chose their screen name quickly and without much thought. This approach is common amongst online users (Roberts, 2001; Suler, 2002). People often choose screen names on a whim simply because it attracts them, Suler argued, “without fully understanding the deeper symbolic meanings of that choice” (p.458). For those students who chose their screen name quickly, the journal appeared to offer a chance to reflect. Even those who chose automatically found layers of meaning in their choice.

Screen names provided important information that others used to form first impressions. Although participants put considerable effort into writing their character descriptions, participants suspected that they were often not read until after some initial interaction. It was the screen name therefore that carried particularly important self-presentational weight. This was especially evident in cases of misperception, such as the female student who, despite deliberately setting her gender as female, still found herself perceived as male. In this case it is likely that other students invoked a male schema because of her screen name and looked for other information to support this categorisation. Contradictory information, such as the female gender she set, may have been disregarded.

The present study underscored the importance that MOO players attach to their own screen name. They believed the name shapes the ways in which others perceive them and they developed a strong sense of connection to their name. The question, however, of how important screen names are in the process of impression formation has received little research attention. One notable
exception is work by Jacobson (1999b), whose research confirmed that screen names elicit powerful stereotypes in the impression formation process.

Arising early in the students’ thinking was a tension between self-disclosure and concealment. The point of a screen name, as one participant described it “is to say something about yourself, without actually disclosing who you are”. This desire to play with the pseudonymity of the domain was a thread that gained increasing importance when participants talked about describing their virtual character.

7.4.1.1 Educational implications

Deciding on a screen name was understood as the first self-presentational act in the MOO. The significance given to this act has implications for online teaching. The care with which most students chose their name belies the time sometimes assigned this task in online teaching. The results of the present study indicate that when educational MOOs are conducted pseudonymously, the task of selecting a screen name should be allocated adequate time. Rather than expecting students to begin the course with a name already chosen, the task could be embedded into the program. Even in a course where students are not explicitly concerned with identity, allowing students time to think through how they want to present themselves can be useful because students believe the name to be important in the person perception process. Results from the present study suggest that even students with extensive online experience should be given time to select a screen name, as they will not necessarily choose to use an existing name.

7.4.2 The development and presentation of the MOO character

Wallace (1999) described the self-presentational dilemma facing new users of
mailing lists when invited to write an introduction. Without reading other introductions, the self-presentational norms are unclear and so Wallace noted, the length and style of introductions varies greatly. In the present study several participants expressed this same predicament. Participants dealt with the dilemma by using other character and object descriptions as a model. Like the evocative object descriptions used throughout the MOO, many of the character descriptions included a physical component. Most character descriptions included reference to gender, however few referred to age or ethnicity. The participants who did refer to age or ethnicity were, for the most part, distinguished from the rest of the group on those dimensions. The two participants who emphasised their age, for example, were older than the majority of the group and therefore distinctive on this characteristic. The tendency to describe one’s identity in terms of distinctive features has been noted in other offline research (McGuire & McGuire, 1982).

Holmevik and Haynes (2000) provided the follow advice for new MOOers: “In the MOO you are what you write – you are the text that other people read. For this reason you should invest some time in writing a good description for yourself.” (p.48) Most participants intuitively followed this approach and acknowledged the effort they put into this backstage preparation. Nevertheless, the role of the description for impression formation was questioned. The fact that descriptions were not altered during the semester, even when self-presentation changed, may be a reflection of the closed nature of the group. Character descriptions become redundant once one is already known.

7.4.2.1 The real me

The strongest theme to emerge in the data was the intention to present one’s “real” self. Participants used the word “real” repeatedly to refer to the actual self,
the self they believed themselves to be and the self they presented at the final face-to-face meeting. The extensive use of the term “real me” highlights an underlying belief in a core identity. Despite the acknowledged potential of the medium for identity play, the majority of participants entered the MOO with the firmly held intention to be authentic in their self-presentation and, at the end of the 12-week period, reported that they had done this. Self-presentation of anything other than one’s “real” self was viewed as dishonest, difficult to achieve, and motivated by dissatisfaction with oneself.

Offline accounts of self-presentation indicate that much impression management is concerned with presenting ourselves as we think we are (Leary, 1993). The participants’ intentions and experience suggest that this is a strong motivation in the online context. The “real” self is perceived to be both given, as well as given off. Even if one isn’t authentic in one’s self-presentation eventually, as one participant cautioned, “your true self will seep through”.

The emphasis on authentic self-presentation is consistent with other research findings. Orly et al. (2001), for example, in their study of educational MOOs, reported that the majority of MOO users perceived their online persona as a reflection of offline identity. The study by Orly et al. was characterised, however, by two features that may have inflated the levels of authentic self-presentation. First, the sample included staff as well as students. Other research has suggested that staff members are less likely than students to play with their identity over time (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001). Second, the MOOs surveyed by Orly et al. may have either implicitly or explicitly proscribed identity play. Although the authors did not include a list of the MOOs represented, it is likely that some required use of offline names and hence encouraged accurate self-presentation. The present sample, in contrast, included only students who were actively encouraged to
play with identity. The emphasis on accurate self-presentation in this context is therefore even more unexpected.

Authentic self-presentation is also likely to be linked to one’s motivation for MOOing. MOO players surveyed by Orly et al. (2001) liked the community and connection that MOOs offer. Chatting and sharing ideas were noted as the most frequent self-reported MOO activities. A desire for relationships with others was noted by Kendall (2002) as explanation for the norm of authentic self-presentation observed in BlueSky. Relationship was a strong theme in the present data and it is of note that positive connections with others were associated with authentic self-presentation.

Another variable influencing authentic self-presentation was the face-to-face meeting. Maintaining highly discrepant attributes in a MOO where members meet regularly offline would be difficult, although Kendall (2002) cited examples of players who continued to gender swap in BlueSky even after meeting others face-to-face. The face-to-face meeting, held at the end of the 12-week period, played a prominent role in the authentic self-presentation of some participants. Deceptive self-presentation was considered particularly inadvisable because dishonesty would be detected at the face-to-face meeting.

Despite the emphasis on presentation of the “real” me in participants’ journals, the character descriptions that were written for the MOO revealed relatively little personal information. Most of the character descriptions were short, generally only one or two sentences. The descriptions focused on sociable traits and physical appearance. Other information, such as gender and CMC experience was often given off, rather than expressly given in the descriptions. The descriptions were crafted so as to honestly provide just enough information to attract others.
Participants described a desire for connection with others in their choice of screen name, character description, and dorm room decoration and they indicated that authentic communication was the best way to achieve this. This is not to imply, however, that there was an absence of identity play.

7.4.2.2 Evidence of identity play

Despite the emphasis on authentic and accurate self-presentation, the intention to play with identity was nevertheless widespread in the sample. The two self-presentational strategies were not therefore seen as inconsistent. In fact even when players took on fantasy characters, this was not perceived as incompatible with the presentation of one’s “real” self. The experience of being both “in character” and oneself at the same time was expressed by several participants. I puzzled about this seeming incongruence for some time before I realised that my own character description in the MOO modelled this integration. In the course I used the screen name Tiger. In my character description I present a tiger, replete with big cat *purr* alongside information about my teaching interests and contact hours. I am Tiger and the teacher; I am simultaneously the character and me.

The ways participants talked about their intentions to present themselves challenged my pre-existing beliefs about what identity play was. In the literature, identity play has been described primarily in terms of wish-fulfilment and gender exploration (Curtis, 1997; Turkle, 1995) and it was this conceptualisation that I brought to the data. In the present study there were examples of idealised self-presentation and gender swapping, but the participants’ behaviour and reflections suggested that identity play could be more varied, subtle, and unintentional. However, let me begin with the most obvious form of identity play – the playing out of fantastical or otherwise exaggerated characters.
Several students began the semester by describing fantasy characters. Few of these players, however, indicated an intention to play these out with any conviction. The notable exceptions were two players who developed rich characters, one fantastical, but incorporating various elements of herself, and the other an exaggerated version of self. Although in both cases the character proved an effective vehicle for initiating interaction with others, neither of the characters was played out to the extent the students initially anticipated. Instead both players found themselves, over time, reverting to a presentation of their more “normal” self.

The two players explained this reversion to a more accurate self-presentation in different ways. One described it as a natural, but unconscious progression in wanting to develop deeper relationships with others. Intimacy called for more “normal” rather than “playful” communication. Her experience fits well with the self-disclosure literature that suggests self-disclosure increases with liking (Collins and Miller, 1994). Although not conscious of her motivation at the time, in retrospect the player observed that the props which had been useful in facilitating communication early on, were not only redundant as the semester progressed, but got in the way of more meaningful communication. The experience of this player suggested that although self-disclosure was possible when dressed in a costume and with full stage make-up, it was easier without. Perhaps the visual anonymity of the online medium itself is disinhibiting enough from some users, making redundant the anonymity afforded by a costume.

The other participant described the self-presentational change as a reversion to a strong self. Despite his intention to play out an exaggerated, stereotypical character, he observed in retrospect that he was essentially being himself. It is of interest that this players’ character was presented as physically and socially unattractive, although admittedly played out with considerable humour.
Nevertheless the question remains of how long an unattractive character can be sustained. The toll, like that for an actor who takes on an unsympathetic role, might be considerable. The degree of energy involved in exaggerating identity may have also proved, like other forms of deceptive self-presentations, unenjoyable in the long run. The humorous exaggeration may also have functioned as a protective mechanism, enabling the participant to present his competence in the medium and simultaneously test out relationships. Once the player felt safe, the humorous exaggerations could be relaxed. Presenting oneself as physically unattractive online also means that one’s interlocutors are unlikely to be disappointed by one’s “real” appearance. Exaggerated character descriptions therefore provide another way for players to deal with vulnerability.

Both these players were amongst the small group of participants with previous MOO experience. The other players who established, but did not play with their fantasy characters were all less familiar with MOOing. Freed from the demands of learning basic commands, the experienced players had more time and cognitive energy to invest in character development and presentation. Their experience fits with arousal theories of play that suggest play is used to increase low arousal. They spent long hours connected to the MOO and ended up playing important socio-emotional roles in the group, helping new students find their virtual feet. In addition, their playfulness made an important self-presentational statement, signalling their confidence in the domain to others.

The reduction in identity play over time noted by these players suggests that overt identity play might have a useful role in initiating and facilitating communication. Playing out the character in the long term, however, in an educational MOO, is perceived to not only hold little purpose, but actively prevent deeper relationships developing. Both these participants benefited from having adopted characters that overlapped sufficiently with their offline identity,
thereby allowing them to “morph” into themselves without violating the self-presentational norm of consistency. In a context with such a high premium placed on authentic self-presentation highly discrepant presentation might have been viewed with suspicion.

If hours spent online is an indication of interest in the MOO, then this combination of self-presentational tactics appeared to work well for these two students, both of whom continued to spend extensive hours online until the end of the course.

Overtly idealised and fantastical character play were not, however, the only forms of identity play observed online. A more subtle technique was concealment of offline identity. As already noted, the theme of concealment arose when participants were selecting their screen name. The theme was discussed in more detail when participants formulated their character description. Selective self-disclosure is an important protective strategy adopted in the development of relationships, allowing partners to manage vulnerability (Dindia, 2000). None of the participants, however, described the strategy as motivated by this desire, although reflecting on the information that was concealed suggested this protective motivation may have been operating, albeit unconsciously. One participant, for example, reflected that she preferred not to describe her physical appearance online so that her relationships might be based on her ideas rather than her looks. To describe one’s looks is to risk being rejected on those grounds.

Concealment or exclusionary self-presentation tactics is also one of the most common ways that people manage conflicts between competing impulses to create a specific impression, but nevertheless present an authentic image (Leary, 1995). None of the participants described selective self-disclosure in these terms. Instead the concealment of information was perceived as alluring and described
as a short-term strategy, designed to intrigue and engage others and accordingly its value diminished as the semester progressed.

The intention to play, either by revealing oneself through a fantastical or exaggerated character or by concealing aspects of self, was widespread and the dorm rooms were used as a set to contextualise these self-presentations. This finding is similar to Myers’ (1987a) early conclusion that bulletin board contributors actively shape the community to suit their online persona. Dorm rooms in the MOO operated as front of stage spaces for players to present themselves. The dorm rooms also provided a way to manage vulnerability; by enabling players to control their own space we facilitated a safe place, a backstage space where players typically resided when logged on, a space for private interaction.

Although the intention to play was common, its realisation was less than participants anticipated. The usefulness of all three strategies, fantasy, exaggeration, and concealment, dissipated after the first few weeks. If there was evidence that the MOO provided a kind of identity moratorium, then its effects were short-lived.

7.4.2.3 Online gender swapping

One of the major forms of identity play available in MOOs is gender swapping. The ways that gender is played out over time has been the focus of a range of studies, particularly by those with linguistic and communication expertise (Herring, 2001; Cherny, 1994). The focus of the present study, in contrast, was on participants’ initial gender presentation.

Many writers have noted the prevalence of gender swapping online (Bruckman, 1993; Curtis, 1997; Reid, 1994; Turkle 1995). The practice was not, however, common in the present sample; only four of the 20 participants chose
an online gender at the beginning of the semester that was different to their biological sex. Although not common, the proportion is similar to the prevalence of gender swapping in social and educational MOOs reported by Roberts and Parks (1999). Although Roberts and Parks (1999) noted that nearly 40% of social MOOers had tried gender swapping, only 20% were engaged in the practice at the time of testing.

In the present sample gender swapping was confined to those without any previous MOO experience. This finding contrasts results reported by Roberts and Parks (1999) who found that those who gender swapped had been using MOOs for longer and used them more frequently than those who didn’t gender swap. None of the participants in the present sample adopted opposite genders, but instead chose three non-binary categories. Again this is contrary to previous research which has suggested opposite sex swapping is the most common practice (Danet, 1996; Roberts & Parks, 1999)

How might these differences between the present sample and previous research be explained? One possible explanation lies in the reasons given for gender swapping. In previous research, a primary motivation for gender swapping has been curiosity, a desire to experience life as the opposite sex (Roberts & Parks, 1999). In the present study the reasons for gender swapping focused on self-presentation. Participants chose another gender to be unique or different; these participants wanted to distinguish themselves. It is therefore not surprising that the genders chosen were outside the conventional binary opposites that define everyday gendered experience.

The reason typically given for not gender swapping, apart from lack of interest is that it is dishonest (Roberts & Parks, 1999). This fits well with the general emphasis in the present data on accurate, authentic self-presentation and might explain why those with previous CMC experience did not swap gender.
Doubts about their ability to successfully present with another gender, reported as a reason for avoiding gender swapping by Roberts and Parks (1999), were also raised by participants in this study.

7.4.2.4 Disinhibition

When considered together, these types of identity play - exaggerated and idealised self-presentations, selective self-disclosure, and gender swapping - were common at the beginning of the semester. As the semester progressed these strategies were dropped and players found themselves increasingly revealing aspects of themselves. Sometimes these disclosures were not intentional, as in the case of disinhibited behaviour. Unlike the forms of identity play discussed above, this change in behaviour was not deliberate, but seen by participants as a product of CMC and considered, in nearly all cases, a pleasantly surprising experience.

The conditions that facilitate disinhibition include visual anonymity, lowered sense of responsibility, altered sense of time, and novel situations (Joinson, 2003), all characteristics particularly salient for new MOOers. Disinhibition can produce both toxic or antisocial as well as benign effects. Toxic disinhibition, such as flaming, has been widely researched online (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Walther et al., 1994). Less well studied is benign disinhibition, the uninhibited and open expression of socially acceptable aspects of oneself online. Some research exists to support the idea that people disclose more personal information online than they do face-to-face. Bargh et al. (2002), for example noted that the true self is more likely to be accessible and presented in online interaction rather than face-to-face.

It is often taken for granted that CMC facilitates benign disinhibition and in particular increased social confidence. Sonja Utz (2000) for example, concluded that “the potential of virtual worlds for overcoming shyness has long been
considered and now appears to be somewhat conclusive” (p.16). In fact, however, only a handful of studies have examined reductions in shyness online. In a series of studies Roberts, Smith, and Pollock (2000) noted shy individuals were less inhibited in MOOs than offline. Other studies have examined shyness, but primarily as a predictor of Internet use (e.g., Birnie & Horvarth, 2002; Scealy, Phillips, & Stevenson, 2002).

The present research adds empirical support to the widely held assumption that online spaces create a context for more confident behaviour. Benign disinhibition was a common theme amongst new players in the present study. Although rarely anticipated, the experience of finding oneself more confident in the MOO was regarded positively. It was prominent in the sample, primarily amongst those with little or no previous MOO experience.

Leary (2001) described social anxiety as a response to an actor’s perception that they will be unable to maintain a satisfactory impression. Reduced shyness online may therefore be a product of greater confidence that one can control impressions in this medium.

A second hypothesis suggests that decreased shyness amongst online users results from lowered public self-awareness, which in turn reduces self-presentational concerns (Roberts, 2001). As Bechar-Israeli (1996) argued, CMC can “free us from inhibitions created by our physical identity.” (Nicks in IRC Identity Games section, para. 5) Research however, has suggested that decreases in public self-awareness during synchronous online interaction are only marginal (Mattheson & Zanna, 1990). Other work has suggested that public self-awareness may actually be enhanced online (Walther, 1996). In particular, the conventions used in MOOs may increase public self-awareness. Public self-awareness can be prompted by a range of contextual cues in the offline world, such as seeing oneself in a mirror, watching oneself on video, or knowing one is being observed.
Writing about oneself and observing oneself in the third person, as one does in a MOO, may be the equivalent of a mirror in the offline world. In MOOs, players are simultaneously actors and observers, writing about themselves in the third person as they interact with others. The effect of this convention on public self-awareness has not yet been examined.

A third possible explanation for increased confidence online relates to cognitive load. Research on cognitive load has indicated that introverted individuals playing an extraverted role were more effective in their self-presentation when presented with another attentional task (Pontari & Schlenker, 2000). Cognitive load may distract socially anxious individuals by lowering arousal and focusing attention on the distraction rather than feelings of anxiety (Schlenker, 2003). The technical demands of MOOing may provide this cognitive load in MOOs. Like a flow experience, attention is focused on the task and directed away from self-presentational concerns. Two participants in the second study noted that when their energy was directed towards learning technical skills, their ability to manage impressions was impaired. Rather than presenting in socially desirable ways, however, these players reported regressive disinhibited behaviour. Further research is required to determine the mechanisms that facilitate confidence online and to examine how best to generalise the benefits to offline interactions.

In facilitating the expression of a more confident self, the MOO did therefore provide a type of identity moratorium. Some participants were able to experiment, albeit for the most part unintentionally, with less inhibited, socially desirable way of interacting. Experienced players anticipated the effect and revelled in it, whereas less experienced users were agreeably surprised.

Although no participants reported toxic disinhibition, some players were less pleased with the unanticipated ways they presented themselves in the MOO,
describing experiences of a type of disinhibition that I have called “regressive”. Two women commented on their inability to control their self-presentations in moments of frustration and noted their reversion to dependent, childish behaviour. This observation was particularly surprising to both women who were used to managing these impressions skilfully offline. Both players reflected that the steep learning curve required to function in the MOO was the source of their frustration. With cognitive energy focused on mastering the technological demands few resources were left for self-presentation. It is therefore not surprising that in moments of frustration, when newly learned skills did not appear to work correctly, impression management was difficult to maintain.

It is of note that both of these students who experienced regressive disinhibition spent less than the recommended number of hours in the MOO. It is likely that regressive disinhibition resulted from lack of MOO skills. The unpleasant nature of the experience led to avoidance of the context, which prevented further development of skills.

7.4.2.5 Deceptive self-presentations

The strong emphasis on authenticity in the present study raises questions about how deception is defined online. If accurate portrayal of offline identity is the norm, then is any violation of this considered to be deceptive? Despite the strongly held belief in honest self-presentation, concealment was common. This was not regarded as deception. Deliberately false presentations were also considered permissible, but only if they constituted obviously unreal characteristics. Characters from fantasy – mages, fairies, and animals, for example, were not only permitted, but were used to facilitate playful and humorous interactions. The students patted and fed me and tickled my furry tummy. Gross stereotypes were likewise allowed. The_Umpire6 squeezed his
pimples until we begged him to stop. And gradual change, such as the progressive disclosure of self did not appear to violate norms. What was considered deceptive was the presentation of realistic characteristics that others might believe to be true. In addition, the presentation of ideal selves was generally regarded with disdain. This was considered dishonest and eschewed as a self-presentational strategy. Ironically, however, most participants adopted this strategy in either overt or covert ways.

7.4.2.6 Educational implications

Many take their classes to MOOs because of their potential for identity play, particularly for the ease with which participants can mask or change gender. This facility is seen to offer a range of opportunities in education, including experimentation with different voices (Dresser, 2000; Kolko, 2001). This study, however, suggests that many students may be reluctant to engage in spontaneous identity play. Identity play may be perceived as dishonest and experienced as uncomfortable. Students may therefore need permission and active, structured encouragement to engage playfully. Educators need to be prepared to challenge a desire for accurate self-presentation and help students explore the potential of identity play.

Exercises that encourage identity play might include role-plays that require players to take on specific characteristics. In the relatively safety of a role play, students can be encouraged to explore uncomfortable roles and permitted to act in ways they might otherwise find difficult. Character descriptions could be rewritten for students, altering key characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age, and physical appearance. Alternatively, after players have had a chance to establish relationships the characters could be deleted, giving a chance to begin again. Finally, students could be permitted more than one character. If one
character is used for essentially authentic self-presentation, does this free the other character for identity experimentation and play?

The presence of disinhibited behaviour online has important educational implications. Although some popular reports have indicated antisocial behaviour online is widespread, empirical analysis has reported its presence to be infrequent (Walther et al., 1994). The present study supports this finding. No participants reported presenting themselves in antisocial ways online, although several noted ways in which they were less inhibited. Finding oneself more confident in an online class could be a liberating experience for students. The visual anonymity of MOOs, together with the use of pseudonyms can therefore be used to facilitate interactions that are unlikely to occur in face-to-face classes. Helping students find a voice is a crucial element of education and MOOs therefore hold enormous potential as teaching and learning tools. Facilitating benign disinhibition, however, according to the principles of the SIDE model, first requires that those norms exist within the group and second entails increasing group salience, for example, by building cooperative group tasks and encouraging students to spend time together in the MOO.

Social anxiety is likely to increase when people are not sure what impression they should make; novel or ambiguous situations often produce anxiety (Leary, 1995). For many students, even those with previous online familiarity, entering a MOO can be both a novel and ambiguous experience. MOO instructors can work to reduce ambiguity by ensuring sufficient parameters are provided at the beginning of the course. One way to do this is to furnish the MOO with examples such as character and room descriptions that allow students to see the range of self-presentation behaviours that might be appropriate.

The infrequent, but powerful experience of regressive inhibition in the MOO also has important implications in educational settings. An inability to control
self-presentations in the MOO can lead to distress and feelings of embarrassment. Finding ways to increase the amount of time students spend in the MOO is likely to ameliorate this experience. Those students who spent the greatest time in the MOO also reported the most positive experiences. Vulnerability is not necessarily antithetical to the learning process, but in order to be productive, there needs to be some mechanism to acknowledge and process the experience.

7.4.3 The relationship between on and offline selves

At the beginning of the semester participants acknowledged the potential of the medium for identity play, however, as one player argued at the end of the course, that play was not without constraint. “I still can only be me. I am still locked within the traditions, experiences, culture, chains of what makes me me.”

Identity play is therefore shaped by one’s experiences in the offline world. This observation is echoed in the literature. Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman (2000), for example, argued that although CMC makes invisible many aspects of offline identity, such as visual and aural markers, people cannot “simply shrug off a lifetime of experiencing the world from specific identity-related perspectives” (p.4). CMC does not therefore “nullify our physical existence” (Bechar-Israeli, 1996, Nicks in IRC Identity Games section, para. 5) as some writers have argued. Rather, our physical existence and offline identity remain central to online self-presentations in both conscious and unconscious ways.

Participants described their self-presentations in the MOO as essentially accurate and authentic representations of their offline selves. Moreover, when asked directly about the relationship between online and offline selves, participants perceived either complete or substantial consistency between the two. Linguistically, however, the ways participants referred to their character
painted a different picture. Less than half the participants referred to their online character as themselves. The conception of on and offline selves as the same, was positively associated with previous MOO experience and time spent in the MOO. This finding is consistent with work by Roberts et al. (1996) who reported more experienced MOO players were more likely than newer players to view their character as themselves.

The way players conceptualise the relationship between their online and offline selves has important therapeutic implications. Previous research has already noted that players vary in their ability to work through, as opposed to act out online (Turkle, 1995). The important element is the extent to which players see connections between their online behaviour and offline identity. Research on stigmatised aspects of identity has indicated that online behaviour can have important implications for offline behaviour. In particular, the presentation of marginalised sexual and ideological identities in online newsgroups that are specifically focused on these marginalised identities leads to enhanced self-acceptance and greater expression of those identities in offline relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). To what extent can this finding be generalised to other forms of identity presentation in online forums less specifically focused on marginalised identities?

In the present study there was a unanimous, inherently playful conceptualisation of the online character as a role, similar to, but separate from the offline self. Conceptualising the online self as a role allowed participants to acknowledge unanticipated behavioural changes online, particularly disinhibited behaviour, without disrupting core beliefs about offline identity; “In real life I am fairly shy…. On the Internet I was more confident”. Distanced in this way from everyday experience, the therapeutic nature of the MOO experience is
undermined. If online experience is quarantined, then lessons learned online are not necessarily worked through in the offline world.

7.4.4 Signification and the face-to-face meeting

Signification is the recognition and validation of self-presentations by others (Leary, 1995). The ultimate signification for participants took place at the face-to-face meeting. The knowledge of this meeting shaped self-presentational intentions at the start of the course and at the end of the course it was viewed as a test of how accurately they had presented themselves over the previous 11 weeks.

Misperceptions did occur; that is players thought they had been incorrectly perceived. Although participants were surprised that they had been misperceived in fundamental ways, such as in terms of gender or ethnicity, these tended to be seen as anomalies and participants did not dwell on them. These misperceptions did not therefore alter the basic belief in authentic impression construction. One of the most intriguing misperceptions concerned two Anglo-Australian students, who spent considerable time together in the MOO and nevertheless perceived each other as Asian.

This fundamental misperception challenged the often cited belief that self-presentation online is a perfectly controllable process: “When interacting via computer, only one type of information is provided: information a person wishes to give, whether factual or fiction” (Bechar-Israel, 1996, Nicks in IRC identity games, para. 5). Although it is true that self-presentations in MOOs are entirely textual which permits considerable control over the images presented, participants in the present study also reflected on ways they had less consciously given off information. Identity is therefore presented both intentionally and unintentionally and, as Andromeda1978 and Ice_Maiden discovered, they did
not have control over how others interpret either type of information.

The types of misperceptions that occurred point to a desire to classify people on the same categories that are fundamental in face-to-face interaction, even when information in the MOO is scarce or ambiguous. The finding challenges Rheingold’s (1995) optimistic assumption that online communities enable people to be treated as they “always wanted to be treated - as thinkers and transmitters of ideas and feeling beings” (p.26). Although MOO players may be better able to focus on the thoughts and feelings, the present study suggested that thinkers and feelers are perceived in embodied ways.

Research on impression formation in cyberspace indicates that initial impressions are resistant to change. Jacobson (1999b) interviewed MOO players about their experiences of meeting other users. Participants were asked about their impressions of the person before and after the face-to-face meeting. In a second study Jacobson had a group of students form impressions of MOO users with whom they interacted, using information from the conversation as well as their screen names and character descriptions. Results from the two studies suggested that MOO participants often base their impressions on stereotypes, frequently elicited by the screen name and character description. In this way it is easy to see how a female player who chooses a screen name with a masculine connotation could be misperceived as male. Once categorised in this way, schemas lead otherwise ambiguous information to be interpreted as consistent with the initial impression, thereby strengthening the original perception (Kelley, 1950).

It is not surprising that misperceptions occurred. Mismatches between online and offline impressions are common. Jacobson (1999b), for example, reported that these occurred primarily in two areas: loquaciousness and physical appearance. MOO players perceived as talkative online did not always turn out
to be so face-to-face and physical appearance was often difficult to determine accurately. Kendall (2002) also noted that face-to-face impressions can contradict those formed online. She observed that offline perceptions generally take precedence over online presentations. Players are referred to by their offline gender for example, even when they continue to gender swap online. The implicit assumption for MOO players appears to be that the offline self is the “real” self. Researchers also imply this distinction. Jacobson (1999b), for example, relied on this assumption, labelling online impressions as “images” and offline perceptions as “reality”. Jacobson’s work is important in clarifying the prototypic effects that operate online, however, there is little acknowledgement that the mismatches between on and offline self-presentation might be deliberately constructed (like the student in the present study who deliberately sought to present herself as genderless) or unconsciously produced (like the students in the present study who found themselves behaving more confidently online). Perceptions formed in the online context are not necessarily inaccurate even though they may be inconsistent with self-presentations in the offline world.

John Suler (2002) examined this issue when he questioned where the “real” self lies in cases of inconsistency between the online and offline worlds. Suler asked whether the disinhibiting features of life on the screen might not facilitate the emergence of a self that is more “real” than the one presented in face-to-face interaction. “If people drop the usual face-to-face persona and bring to life online those hidden or fantasized identities, might not that be in some ways more true or ‘real’?” (Suler, 2002, p.458) Several participants in the present study suggested that their online self reflected aspects of identity that are usually inhibited in face-to-face interaction, implying that the self presented in the MOO was a true self, presented without some of the inhibiting constraints of the offline world.
Research from other CMC interaction spaces supports this hypothesis, indicating that users are more likely to present their “true” self in CMC rather than in offline interaction (Bargh et al., 2002). The distinction is an important one that challenges the definition of identity play. To what extent can the presentation of a true self be considered identity play?

Face-to-face meetings are, like initial self-presentations online, an example of border crossing, liminal spaces where players negotiate boundaries between the offline and online worlds. As such they offer rich spaces for further investigation. The change in response to the case of Alex/Joan, from initial disbelief at the deception to more recent outrage at the way Alex used Joan to procure sexual relationships, is evidence of increasing interest in the ways we cross from the online to the offline world.

7.4.4.1 Educational implications

The powerful nature of first impressions adds weight to the argument that students should be permitted time to develop their screen name and character description. One of the putative benefits of teaching online is that students are not stereotyped by aspects of their physical appearance such as sex, age, and ethnicity. The present study, however, suggested that this stereotyping occurs anyway and students sometimes find themselves incorrectly categorised. For some courses, as it is in ours, these experiments are grist for the mill, becoming important parts of the reflective process.

It is curious that neither of the students whose ethnicity was misperceived was aware of this mistake until the face-to-face meeting. Although there are a number of possible reasons for this, it may suggest a difficulty in assessing how one is being perceived online. Incorporating exercises in which students communicate their impressions of each publicly would give students more insight into the
ways their self-presentations are interpreted by others and provide opportunities to reflect on the messages they give and give off.

7.4.5 Limitations of the study

7.4.5.1 Using assessable material as research data.

Many forms of research carry with them the risk that participants’ awareness that they are being studied will alter their behaviour. Known as participant reactivity, this awareness can lead to the adoption of a range of roles. These roles include the “good, helpful” participant, who behaves in ways she or he thinks the researcher is expecting, the “apprehensive” participant, who alters their behaviour in order to create a desirable impression, the “negativistic, antagonistic” participant who, often out of suspicion, acts contrary to what she or he thinks the researcher is expecting, and the “faithful, honest”, ideal participant, who remains faithful to their own behaviour, despite their perceptions about the research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Being a student as well as a research participant adds an additional complexity to the issue of reactivity, for students also adopt roles in their interactions with staff and in the submission of assessable material.

Much of the data analysed in the second study was collected for the purpose of assessment in the course. The journals written at the beginning and end of the course, for example, which provided most of the data for the thematic analysis, were submitted for graded assessment. Using this data for research purposes carries with it the potential limitation that the assessment shaped the nature of responses. Did students really take time to reflect on their screen name, or did this just seem like the sort of comment that would earn them a good grade?

Although it is impossible to answer this question definitively, one reassuring finding is that not all participants admitted to careful and thoughtful reflection.
In addition, not all participants explicitly “played” with their identity even though the practice was actively encouraged in the course. Therefore whatever biases the data collection process induced, they appear to be varied rather than systematic.

The journals operated as a backstage area where players could work through self-presentational dilemmas. However, the fact that I read the journals and that they were assessed limited this function. Although self-reflexive, the journals were nevertheless prepared for an audience, which signals a type of performance. The journals therefore offered insight into both backstage preparation as well as facets of self-presentation.

7.4.5.2 The face-to-face meeting

As already noted, the emphasis on honest self-presentation was shaped by participants’ knowledge of the face-to-face meeting held at the end of the course. Gross exaggerations, concealments, or outright fabrications were considered inadvisable, as they would be detected at the meeting. Without the meeting, or at least the thought of the meeting, would this desire for accurate self-presentation have been as strong? It could be argued that the meeting placed constraints that are not present in “real” MOOs. After all, players in a real MOO have the choice of meeting face-to-face; in the present study the meeting was compulsory. These issues raise questions about the generalisability of the findings.

The meeting was included because it has proved to be an important component of the learning experience, offering a unique opportunity to consolidate learning and explore boundaries between the offline and online worlds. In attempting to integrate educational imperatives and data collection, it is sometimes necessary to compromise the research design. The key question is whether the compromises that are made limit the extent to which the research
findings can be generalised. In the present case, the face-to-face meeting may not necessarily be a limitation of the study. It is possible, for example, that many students using MOOs do meet during the course of a semester. This is particularly likely when students are from the same program, perhaps even sharing other face-to-face classes. The design may therefore represent the experience of many educational MOO users. In any case, one way to determine the impact of the meeting would be to replicate the study using a class that did not know they were going to meet at the time they developed their screen names and character descriptions.

7.4.5.3 Improving the quality of data

The aim of the second study was to better understand how MOO players construct their online self-presentations. In order to do this, participant reflections were combined with self-presentational data. This integration of data was advantageous. Accounts that rely entirely on participants’ reflections fail to acknowledge possible discrepancies between what people say they do and their actual behaviour; reliance entirely on participants’ own reflections blurs “the distinctions among identity performances, participants understandings of those performances, and the descriptions … participants offer to outsiders (Kendall, 2002, p. 12).

The approach adopted in the second study permitted access to some conscious as well as unconscious intentions. The open-ended questions used in the journals allowed students to focus on aspects of the impression construction process they perceived to be important and permitted time to reflect in ways that interviews may not have facilitated. The themes that emerged from the data were representative of the students’ own emphases, within the broad constraints of the questions posed. However, at the end of the second study several questions
remain, including how players make decisions about gender choice and which aspects of identity to conceal as well as what the “real” self is.

Supplementary interviews would have been particularly useful to clarify these aspects of the process and help tease out the perceived and experienced connections between identity and online self-presentation. Ideally these interviews would be conducted close to the time of initial impression construction. Timing is important to capture the initial motivation. Because I was teaching the students, ethical requirements prohibited me from knowing which students had participated until the end of the semester and, in this case, prevented interviewing participants.
Chapter overview

Like the moment in which one packs for a journey, deciding which clothes to take and which to leave behind, the two studies in this thesis focused on the backstage space that exists between the on and offline worlds. This is the place where players construct their impressions and prepare to present themselves, deciding which elements to reveal and which elements to conceal. These backstage places also offer space to reflect on front stage performances.

The specific combination of features of text-based MOOs makes them particularly fertile places for identity play. The vividness, interactivity, synchronicity, and visual anonymity of MOOs have the potential to create a “magical reality”, unlimited by the constraints that shape offline experience (Butler & Chester, forthcoming). One might predict then, limited only by the imagination, that individuals would play with self-presentation in unprecedented ways. Early writing on MOOs had suggested this to be the case.

The first quantitative study examined offline identity measures as predictors of self-selected screen names, MOO character descriptions, and gender choice. Contrary to early writing, results indicated that participants in social MOOs engaged in self-presentational strategies essentially similar to those processes that operate in offline interactions. Self-presentations were primarily based on socially desirable aspects of offline personality. The MOO also increased the salience of elements usually given off in face-to-face interaction, such as sex, age, and ethnicity. Some identity play was evident in the form of wish-fulfilment, repudiation of feared selves, and exclusionary self-presentation, but one of the most obvious forms of identity play, gender-swapping, was conspicuously absent. Few variables emerged as useful
predictors of identity play online. In general identity play was unrelated to CMC experience, ethnicity, sex, or gender identity, however combinations of personality traits proved useful in explain self-presentational differences between individuals. Unexpectedly a considerable proportion of character descriptions (more than one-quarter) bore no obvious relationship to offline identity at all, raising questions about how online character descriptions are developed.

The second qualitative study clarified how players construct their online impressions in an educational MOO. Players’ reflections on their screen name choice, character description, and chosen gender were thematically analysed. A strong emergent theme was authentic presentation of the “real” self. One of the strengths of the mixed-methodology was that this emphasis on presentation of self-concept, observed across the two studies, was robust and therefore unlikely to be a methodological artefact.

Despite an emphasis on authentic self-presentation, an intention to play with identity was also observed in the second study and took three major forms: fantasy play, exaggeration and enhancement of offline identity features, and selective self-disclosure. Also prevalent was unintentional disinhibited behaviour. None of these forms of identity play were perceived as inconsistent with the principal motivation of authentic self-presentation. Also emerging in the second study was the widespread tendency to describe the online self as a role, separate from offline identity.

Particularly prominent were the ways in which the findings of the quantitative and qualitative studies complemented each other. In the following sections these areas of consistency are examined. The major implications of the findings are considered, limitations of the mixed-method approach are discussed, and some directions for future research are explored.
8.1 What is identity play in cyberspace?

In her study of LambdaMOO, Mnookin (1996) concluded that a character “need not in any way correspond to a person’s real life identity; people can make and remake themselves, choosing their gender and the details of their online presentation; they need not even present themselves as human.” (An introduction to LambdaMOO, para. 5) This conceptualization of cyberspace as a laboratory for identity experimentation and play has, as I have argued throughout this thesis, been widely assumed (Bruckman, 1993; Reid, 1994; Turkle, 1995). I began this research expecting to quantify this type of identity play. The literature led me to expect that, given the chance, people would remake themselves, choosing highly desirable, unfulfilled, or fantasy images. I found, however, only limited empirical evidence to support this position. Rather, the impression construction processes that operate in social and educational MOOs are fundamentally similar to those that operate in the offline world. The online context does present ways to play with identity not possible in the offline world and players acknowledge these possibilities. The forms of play that results, however, are, for the most part, subtler and less overt than I originally presumed.

MOO players present themselves in several distinct, but related ways: through their screen name, choice of gender, character description, and room description. In the following sections I draw on data from both studies to describe how MOO users play with identity through each of these forms of self-presentation.

8.1.1 Screen names and identity play

Few players, when invited to use a screen name adopted their real name in the MOOs I examined. Screen names were constructed using the following strategies: new names were created, offline nicknames were appropriated, or existing screen names were adopted. The majority of screen names referred
either to personality characteristics or were names, some from common usage. The majority of screen names were also gender-neutral. Results from the first study suggested that women were more likely than men to choose a gender-neutral screen name, however the reverse finding was reported in the second study. This discrepancy may be a product of the social and educational MOOs that were sampled in the first and second studies respectively. Whereas female players in social MOOs may wish to disguise their gender in their screen name to avoid unwanted attention, harassment may not be perceived as likely in an educational setting.

MOO players understood screen names to be important tools in the process of impression management, communicating an essential part of the player’s identity. Screen names were also seen to play a crucial role in promoting interaction. Despite these important aspects, not all players deliberated over their choice; for some the process of choosing a screen name was quick and the significance of its meaning not consciously apparent.

Regardless of how MOO players went about the task of selecting their screen name, the construction of a name different to one’s offline name signalled an inherently playful approach to communication and indicated a willingness to enter the play frame.

8.1.2 Gender choice and identity play

This playfulness did not, however, extend to gender choice. Although the majority of MOO players constructed screen names that disguised their sex, when it came to selecting their gender in the MOO, most chose a gender consistent with their biological sex. This finding runs counter to the commonly held belief that gender swapping is one of the most frequently occurring forms of identity play online. Nevertheless the finding adds weight to the empirical picture emerging in other research (e.g., Roberts & Parks, 1999). The infrequency of gender play was also consistent with a desire for
honest relationships with other players and a strongly held belief in authentic self-presentation.

8.1.3 Character descriptions and identity play

8.1.3.1 Authentic self-presentation

The strongest theme to emerge from the second study was a desire for authentic self-presentation. This finding helped to make sense of the results from the first study that indicated character descriptions were more likely to reflect self-concept than desired identity images. This emphasis on authenticity echoes the patterns of self-presentation in offline interactions. “Most people find it anxiety producing to project and maintain public images that they know are not true. Because of these considerations, people project truly deceptive self-presentations only in rare instances.” (Leary, 1995, p.5)

The emphasis on “being oneself” online was consistent with two other recent studies. Both Kendall (2002), who conducted a three-year ethnographic study of a social MOO and Bewersdorff (2001), who interviewed players in LambdaMOO, concluded that online self-presentation was used to present and explore accountable and core aspects of identity. Both researchers rejected the highly fragmented, fantastical self-presentations proposed by previous writers. According to Bewersdorff (2001), “Individuals do not experience fluidity and multiplicity of self posited by postmodern theorists” (p.2).

The picture of identity play online described in the literature is therefore beginning to shift, from idealized and plural experimentation to more consistent, accurate self-presentation. The current picture, to which the present studies contribute, is therefore one quite close to the type of self-presentation that often transpires in the offline world, in which individuals seek to “reflect a slight polished and glorified conception of self, but one that is genuinely believed by the actor to be true” (Schlenker, 2003, p. 493).
8.1.3.2 Playful self-presentation

Despite the overarching principle of authentic self-presentation, character descriptions were nevertheless playful. This play occurred in five major ways: through self-enhancement, selective self-disclosure, the incorporation of fantasy elements, disinhibited behaviour, and the humorous use of language.

First, self-enhancing presentations were common. Just as in offline interactions, MOO players focused on positive traits, using the self-presentation strategy of ingratiation to create likable impressions. Study One data also suggested that undesired identity images were contradicted in the online self-presentations, providing an opportunity to increase the distance between self-concept and these feared selves. In the process of impression construction, who players don’t want to be was as important as who they do want to be.

The primary areas of self-enhancement were socially desirable personality traits, such happy, fun-loving, and honest. Physical attractiveness was also enhanced online, sometimes quite consciously. This enhancement typically retained a feel of objectivity. In face-to-face interactions physical appearance is an important element of impression formation (Leary, 1995). Online, however, every aspect of this non-verbal self-expression must be described in text. The tendency to enhance physical appearance may occur, as Joinson (2003) has pointed out, simply because it is so easy to manipulate this information online.

In MOOs any aspect of corporeal reality can be altered in text; the meaning of these constructs therefore is challenged. The ease with which everyone can achieve socially desirable attributes undercuts their meaning. “When everyone can be beautiful, there can be no hierarchy of beauty.” (Reid, 1994, Chapter 3, section Self-Made People, para. 6) However this subversion does not undermine the power of these constructs: “such freedom to become beautiful tends to support these conventions by making beauty not
unimportant, but a pre-requisite... MUD worlds are free from the stigma of ugliness not because appearance ceases to matter, but because no one need to be seen as ugly.” (Reid, 1994, Chapter 3, Self-Made People section, para. 6).

Results from the first study also suggested that users not only presented themselves positively online, but they also perceived themselves as more socially desirable online on a range of dimensions. To this extent CMC offers unique opportunities for self-presentation and facilitates altered perceptions of self.

This is not to argue, however, that character descriptions included only positive elements. MOO players selectively disclosed vulnerabilities to either emphasise their similarity to others, an important self-presentational device used to increase one’s attractiveness (Leary, 1995) or undercut the self-enhancing nature of the presentation in a humorous way.

Second, players concealed aspects of themselves in their MOO descriptions. The areas of concealment were primarily skills and abilities, interests and needs, and character traits. Some aspects of identity that might be considered socially undesirable were concealed, however, for the most part, those elements not disclosed tended to be positively valued. Some, such as need for achievement, may not be considered relevant to the MOO context, however other apposite aspects were concealed. Players did not, for example, typically describe their intelligence or caring nature online, although both were considered desirable impressions to attain online. Verbal forms of self-description, as might be used in everyday interaction, are not typically direct. Explicit claims about self are often regarded suspiciously; indeed the assertion that one has certain strengths can be interpreted as proof of their absence (Leary, 1995). MOO character descriptions operated in the same way.

When developing their screen name and character description, MOO users played with the nature of selective self-disclosure and used concealment as an alluring strategy. Information was held back in a conscious effort to entice
others to interact. Reveal a little of interest and others will be curious enough to want to find out more.

Despite the opportunities for identity play, participants therefore utilised the same self-presentational strategies that are commonplace in everyday life: self-enhancement and selective self-disclosure. These strategies are as likely to be a function of the situation as of the online medium; self-enhancement is, after all, more likely to strangers than friends (Tice et al., 1995) and self-disclosure increases with liking (Collins & Miller, 1994). In these respects MOOs offer new contexts for the expression of familiar self-presentation behaviour.

Third, identity play was evident in the use of fantasy elements. This strategy was contextually dependent, occurring more frequently in the educational MOO rather than the social space. Although used as an initial self-presentation tool, fantastical elements were abandoned as the semester progressed. Fantasy and exaggeration proved effective in initiating interaction and establishing relationships, but obsolete in deepening those relationships. The emphasis on socialising in the first study may therefore have curtailed the presentation of fantasy elements.

The fourth way that MOO users played with identity was through disinhibited behaviour. Danet et al. (1997) noted that the features of MOOs free “participants to be other than ‘themselves’, or more of themselves than they normally express” (The Masking of Identity section, para. 1). Although this research provided little evidence for the former type of identity play, the latter was well supported. Participants described the experience, both pleasant and disturbing, of presenting aspects of identity normally constrained in face-to-face interactions.

A typical example was the way the MOO provided a context in which shy individuals experienced greater confidence. The disinhibiting features of the
medium enabled users to present themselves more confidently, although this
certainty was typically an outcome rather than an initial goal.

Finally, players used language in humorous and playful ways to present
themselves online. Like the object descriptions in MOOs, players, particularly
those with previous MOO experience, used evocative images, entering into
the performance metaphor that is implicit in the MOO space. When I first
began teaching in MOOs I was struck by the creative ways in which language
was used. Players hug and thwack each other. They share food and play with
physicality through the meanings of words. This language play is a from of
self-presentation, giving as well as giving off information about the player’s
MOO experience, their language proficiency, and the extent to which they
have entered into the play frame. This playful way of using language was
evident in the room and object descriptions.

8.1.4 Room descriptions and identity play

MOO players generally have the option to own a space within MOOs. In
the educational MOO, this space was a dorm room in a nondescript corridor
on the second floor of the main building. After satisfying a series of hurdle
requirements, students were rewarded with the opportunity to decorate their
own room. Entering their undecorated room, the player sees the following:

You see a boring empty room.

Obvious exits: hall

Decorating a room incorporates not only those activities associated with
the task in the offline world, such as painting and furnishing, but it also
includes writing messages that players will see when they enter and exit the
space. Through these descriptions and messages players have the opportunity to demonstrate their technical skill, humour, and playful use of language.

Physical environment is an important element of self-presentation in face-to-face interactions. Leary (1995) noted how impressions are managed through the set, props, and lighting of physical spaces. The style, size, and position of a desk in an office, for example, can be used to create an impression of power. The theatrical nature of the elements that Leary described was particularly apparent in the MOO where the set, props, and lighting were all manipulated for optimal presentation of the character. This active construction of the front of stage context resonates strongly with the notion of performance.

8.1.5 Predicting play

Only a small number of the variables hypothesised to predict identity play in cyberspace proved to be useful indicators. Few obvious patterns emerged in identity play regarding gender identity or individual personality constructs. The first study indicated that the presentation of gender online was determined almost exclusively by biological sex. Nevertheless an interaction between gender identity and screen name choice was noted, gender identity was related to choice of female, male and gender-neutral screen names in predictable ways. Gender identity did therefore impact on gendered self-presentations, but its effect was more subtle than anticipated.

Previous research by Roberts and Parks (1999) on gender swapping in MOOs failed to detect a relationship between personality and identity play. The first study confirmed this finding, with few clear univariate relationships between personality traits and identity play. Exploratory analyses, however, revealed that patterns of personality constructs proved useful in explaining a range of self-presentational behaviours online. The combinations of
Extraversion and Agreeableness as well as Extraversion and Neuroticism in particular proved informative.

Findings on the effect of CMC and MOO experience on identity play in cyberspace have not been consistent. Roberts and Parks (1999) reported that players with more years of experience MOOing and those who spent more time in MOOs were more likely to play with gender than those who had less MOO experience. Other research, however, has suggested that identity play decreases with time online; that the more time players spend MOOing, the more likely they are to see the MOO as a vehicle for communication and so present themselves honestly (Kendall, 2002; Roberts, 2001). The first study supported the latter hypothesis: players with little previous online experience were most likely to present idealised images in the MOO. In the second study, however, those players who presented the most elaborated fantasy characters were also those with the greatest previous CMC experience. Further research is therefore called for into the effect of CMC experience on types of identity play.

Sex and age were also unrelated to identity play, although an interaction may exist between sex, gender-neutral screen names, and type of MOO. As discussed above, results from the present studies suggested that women were more likely than men to mask their gender through their screen name in the social MOO and men were more likely than women to mask gender in the educational MOO.

Ethnicity is a relatively unresearched variable in the cyberspace literature despite the face that demographic estimates suggest the North American hegemony of the Internet is giving way to ethnic diversity (Cyberatlas, 2003). For the most part, ethnicity was unrelated to self-presentation in the social MOO however one cultural difference was noted. Australian-born participants were more likely to present identity images than Asian
participants, a finding that suggests an interaction between self-presentation and ethnicity.

8.1.6 Self-presentation as performance

The theatrical metaphor has been used widely in both the self-presentation literature as well as in writing about MOOs. There are aspects of MOO behaviour observed in the present studies that illustrate the metaphor well, such the construction of fantasy characters and the use of the dorm rooms as a personalised set. The presentation of positively biased and idealised images is also consistent with the concept of performance.

Jodi O’Brien (1999), in an analysis of gender online, suggested a distinction between intent to “be” and intent to “perform”. The distinction between “being” and “performing” in MOOs is a useful one beyond the context of gender and it can help to make sense of the present data. MOO players articulated a clear intention to “be” (primarily oneself). Nevertheless, the way participants wrote in their journals in the second study implied performance. Self-presentations were described as a performance when participants described their online self-presentation in the third person, as a role. A discrepancy therefore arose between conscious intention (to “be” oneself) and less conscious conceptualisations (self-presentations as performance).

The conventions of MOOs encourage a sense of performance through the use of the third person. Players write about themselves as a character. For example to shake Flemmex’s hand, I type

:shakes Flemmex’s hand.

On the screen I see

Tiger shakes Flemmex’s hand.
This structure, of referring to oneself in the third person, is rarely used in either written or spoken English, except in some specific contexts, such as by new parents, who often refer to themselves in the third person when talking to their child. A mother might comfort her child, for example saying, “Give Mummy a hug”. The third person is used intuitively with children to help them learn the names of speakers, but it also serves the purpose for the parent of explicitly claiming their new identity.

The players in the educational MOO in the second study used this same convention to refer to their online self-presentation. This separation of online and offline self was invoked particularly when participants described inconsistencies between on and offline behaviour. Many also described their character as themselves, thereby introducing the idea that one can perform oneself in the MOO, in much the same way that a celebrity might play herself or himself in a guest appearance on a sitcom.

Participants actively controlled the performance of identity. In the second study the MOO players described how they consciously constructed images for presentation, building an online self from information revealed and concealed. However, it was also apparent that elements of the performance were less conscious. In this respect the performance became an act of self-expression, permitting players to observe themselves through their self-presentation. Participants, for example, saw themselves behaving in less inhibited ways online or realised they had given off information about themselves through their use of language.

8.2 Self-presentation and postmodernism: A return to the essentialist self

The literature on cyberspace is still relatively new and has focused on a small number of issues and arguments (Kolko, 2000). Central amongst these is the conceptualisation of the Internet as a postmodern laboratory for identity
experimentation (e.g., Bruckman, 1993; Reid, 1994; Turkle, 1995). Postmodernism has presented a self that is fragmented, plural, contextually constructed. Cyberspace provides the quintessential playground for self-construction and re-construction.

Postmodern writers rejected the coherent, essential identity described by Erikson and Marcia. A committed identity, which was seen to provide unity and continuity, was the hallmark of mature development, and evidence that the psychosocial identity crisis had been resolved satisfactorily. The idea that one can ever be “finished” has been pronounced an illusion (Bauman, 1997) and the universal relevance of a committed identity been questioned (Côté, 1996). Rather than a single, coherent sense of self, the postmodern self is constructed and exists in discourse, “in the space between and among people, in conversational exchange” (Bohan, 2002, p.80). Identity is self-presentation and the Internet has been described as its “proving ground” (Doheny-Farina, 1996).

Via the Internet we have access to a wide range of people we might never interact with in our offline world. MOOs, in particular offer unprecedented opportunities for identity plurality and play, a chance to “cycle through selves” (Turkle, 1995). Compared to other CMC interaction spaces the particular features of MOOs lend themselves to identity play. Their high level of interactivity, pseudonymity, ephemerality, and their text-based nature combine to encourage players to play with language and its potential, to play with selves unconstrained by our corporeal reality. As Turkle (1994) argued, “when we live through our electronic self-representations we have unlimited possibilities to be many. People become masters of self-presentation and self-creation. The very notion of an inner, ‘true self’ is called into question (p.164)

Results from the present studies, however, challenge the conceptualisation of cyberspace as an identity laboratory and, more fundamentally question the application of a fragmented, unified self to people’s lived experience.
A strong theme to emerge from both studies was the presentation of one’s “real” self, a conscious focus on “being” rather than “performing”. This emphasis on “being” derives from two basic factors. First, a desire for relationships with others shaped MOO players’ behaviour. Online relationships were seen as dependent on honest self-disclosure and the presentation of a self that is consistent with offline identity. Second, selves might be multiple in that they were tailored to specific contexts, nevertheless coherence across situations was valued. A certain poetic licence was permitted; players could enhance and exaggerate without violating the self-presentational norm, however, presentation of facets inconsistent with this core self was viewed as a risk. Regardless of one’s intention, players believed that the “real” self would emerge eventually anyway. In particular the deliberate presentation of any elements that would be disconfirmed face-to-face was considered imprudent. Highly deceptive self-presentations were viewed as evidence of low self-esteem. For the most part online identity was therefore constrained by offline identity and deceptive self-presentations were limited by the same variables that operated in offline interactions.

Participants’ understandings of identity indicated a strongly held belief in an essential self, a “true self”, characterised by stability across time and coherence across context. The essentialist tradition, long disputed by postmodern writers, proposed that “at the core of each self-contained individual resides an identity, a persistent self that transcends particular contexts and comprises the essence of the person.” (Bohan, 2002, p.80) It is this tradition that best describes the present participants’ experiences of their identity. Even after 12 weeks exposure to the possibilities of identity play online, participants still held tightly to their belief in a core self and the importance of authentic self-presentation. Elli Schachter (2002) reported a similar emphasis on identity consistency, a sense of sameness and continuity, amongst the sample of young adults she interviewed.
Whereas participants’ outward allegiance was to essentialism, there was, however, an implicit acknowledgement of Turkle’s (1995) notion of the distributed self, a self that is contextually-constructed and plural in its presentations. The first, quantitative study demonstrated how the online context changes the salience of identity characteristics. MOOs don’t just focus attention on specific aspects of offline identity, they change the way we think about ourselves. In the second, qualitative study participants used language that suggested related, but distinguishable, contextually-constructed selves.

Few studies have explicitly examined the extent to which identity is experienced as unified. Considerable work has however discussed and validated the meaningfulness of multiple and possible selves (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Linville & Carlstrom, 1994; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Cloninger, 1996). The notion of multiplicity is now widely accepted within psychology, nevertheless ambivalence exists towards the associated concept of fragmentation (McAdams, 1997). Several writers have attempted to resurrect a belief in unity of the self. Dan McAdams (1997) has attempted to reconcile postmodernism with a belief in identity, challenging the idea of fragmented identity without a core. Although he has accepted multiplicity and fluidity, McAdams (1997) has noted his suspicion of a conceptualisation of identity that leaves us without any unity and coherence. Underlying even the more pluralistic social psychological theories of identity that hypothesise multiple self-schemata or subselves, there is a belief in a core self (McAdams, 1997). This is true of self-presentation theory, with its emphasis on a unified self-concept in impression construction.

Achieving a unified and purposeful identity is difficult when faced with the social saturation that Gergen (1991) described. Our answers to the question, “Who am I?” may be diverse and appear to lack integration. The more varied our answers to the question, the more difficult is the task of determining what an integrated identity would be like (McAdams, 1997, p.
61) For McAdams (1997) unity and purpose is derived from narrative. The self that is constructed through narrative has consistency over time, but flexibility to undergo transformation. For Lifton (1993), this complexity and ambiguity is integrated in the protean self, an identity that has coherence, but self-presentational flexibility.

Proteanism involves a quest for authenticity and meaning, a form-seeking assertion of self. The recognition of complexity and ambiguity may well represent a certain maturation in our concept of self. The protean self seeks to be both fluid and grounded, however tenuous that combination. There is nothing automatic about the enterprise... but rather a continuous effort without clear termination. Proteanism, then, is a balancing act between responsive shapeshifting, on the one hand, and efforts to consolidate and cohere, on the other. (pp.8-9)

Participants in the present research implied a protean self, coherent, but contextually-dependent. A self capable of multiple presentations, but with an essential “real” core.

8.3 Educational implications

This thesis arose from my teaching. It is therefore appropriate to return, at this stage, to teaching issues and to reflect on how the research impacts both on my own teaching in the course and more generally on its implications for teaching in MOOs.

Many educators take their classes to MOOs specifically because of their inherent potential for identity play. The managed ambiguity of the space allows players to choose which elements of identity to reveal and which to conceal. Players can try on different voices and act out different roles, all of which can be used to facilitate learning. The present research clearly indicates,
however, that simply providing students with a context in which to do this will not guarantee identity play.

As educators we need to pay attention to two variables if we want to encourage identity play in our classes. First, we need to be aware of the cognitive load that navigating and interacting in a MOO imposes on a new user. Learning to move around, talk, and emote can be a bewildering and time consuming experience. A certain level of frustration can, however, be constructive. As students overcome the technical challenges that the MOO presents, their sense of accomplishment is tangible. Nevertheless, expecting students to experiment with self-presentation while they are grappling with basic commands is unreasonable. One way to deal with this dilemma is to schedule a period at the start of the course in which students log on as guests. In this way they can navigate the space anonymously and work out basic commands. This has the added advantage of allowing students time to build up ideas for their character description.

The second issue to consider in encouraging creative impression construction is that some aspects of identity play may entail discomfort. Students may find swapping gender or race, for example, intensely uncomfortable. Although tertiary education appears to be increasingly driven by “consumer” satisfaction, a certain level of discomfort is to be welcomed in teaching as it can facilitate learning. Without well-designed structures, however, that support identity play, the discomfort, either real or imagined, may prevent experimentation. One way in which this could be done in our own course is to provide roles for students, scripting characters in an interaction in the same way that one might provide instructions for a role-play in a face-to-face class. Assigning roles may allow students to separate themselves enough from the performance so that discomfort is manageable.
8.3 Limitations and directions for future research

Limitations specific to each study have been discussed in the relevant discussion chapters. In this section I consider some of the ways in which the research as a whole might have been improved. One of the main questions that remains for the research is the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other MOOs and to other interaction spaces online.

8.3.1 Generalisability

The ability to generalise from a sample to a population is an issue for most researchers, qualitative as well as quantitative. In all but the most idiosyncratic of cases, researchers seek explanations that are representative (Silverman, 2000). The issue has particular salience in the present research because MOOs have been noted to vary widely on a range of dimensions, such as the extent to which anonymity is sanctioned and the degree to which gender play is tolerated. Given these differences is it possible to generalise across MOOs? Given the different characteristics of online interaction spaces such as homepages, email, newsgroups and chat is it possible to generalise from MOO research to other forms of CMC?

On the whole, the results of the two present studies complemented each other, producing a consistent picture of accurate, self-enhancing self-presentation online. One of the strengths of using a mixed methodology to explore both a social and an educational MOO is that results consistent across both studies can be generalised with some confidence. The finding of self-enhancement, for example, is not an artefact of the specific MOO examined or the methodology used and therefore is likely to apply across MOOs.

The limitation of examining two types of MOOs using different methods is that discrepancies in results may be due to differences in the MOO or differences in the methodology, or an interaction of both. For example, one of the most notable differences observed was in the prevalence of gender
swapping. The relative absence of gender swapping in the first study compared to the second study may have been a product of the social nature of the MOO or the artificial context, or both. Nevertheless a precedent exists for combining social and educational MOO players in research. Both Roberts and Parks (1999) and Orly et al (2001), who collected data from both types of MOOs, noted few differences between the two groups of players.

The extent to which the results from the present studies can be generalised to other MOOs depends on the degree to which the samples are representative of the general population of MOO players. Research has typically described MOOs as predominantly male spaces (Kendall, 2002; Orly et al., 2001). In contrast, both of the present studies were characterised by a majority of female participants. What effect is this female bias likely to have had on the results? Like other quantitative studies of MOOs, the present studies revealed few gender differences. This is consistent with offline research on self-disclosure and self-presentation. The overrepresentation of females in the sample is therefore unlikely to affect generalisability. One of the aspects associated with the predominantly female sample, however, was a low level of CMC experience. This relative lack of MOO experience noted in both samples has implications for generalisability.

Few participants in either study were experienced MOO users. This feature distinguishes the present studies from other MOO research, which has typically recruited participants from within MOOs. How this feature of the two present samples might have impacted on the results, however, is unclear. As already noted, previous research provides an ambiguous picture of the effect of CMC experience on self-presentation. If, however, identity play decreases with online experience (Roberts et al., 1996), then identity play may have been, if anything, over-represented in the present samples.

Increasing the number of participants with MOO experience would undoubtedly have produced samples more representative of MOO players.
Nevertheless the young, student samples with heterogeneous ethnicity were representative of Internet users, suggesting that results might be generalised to new MOO players and general Internet users.

Being able to generalise the results to general Internet users has some potentially important implications. Although the Internet offers unprecedented access to research participants, the validity of online data has been hotly debated. It is sometimes claimed that the potential for self-invention online renders data collected via CMC at best, spurious and at worst, useless (Walther, 2001). If the present findings can be generalised to Internet users, then this fear appears unfounded. The motivation to deceive online was minimal in the present research and there was little empirical basis for concluding that participants are any more likely to lie about aspects of themselves online than they are on any other self-completed measure.

As noted in Chapter 3, CMC interaction spaces differ along a range of criteria. Spaces vary in the extent to which they facilitate telepresence, as well as temporality, anonymity, and ephemerality, all of which are likely to affect users’ perceptions of front and backstage and impact on identity and its presentation. Despite these considerable differences, a surprising consistency has begun to emerge in the application of self-presentation principles across domains, from homepages to MOOs. The two studies that comprise this thesis add empirical weight to the application of self-presentation in MOOs. Some of the findings of the present studies, particularly the emphasis on accurate self-presentation echo those noted in asynchronous, domains, such as homepages (Wynn & Katz, 1997; Döring, 2002) and newsgroups (Baym, 1995; Rutter & Smith, 2000). This finding has now been reported regardless of the anonymity afforded by the CMC form and the ephemeral nature of the exchanges. It is of particular note that this finding was replicated in the educational MOO in study two, where identity play was overtly encouraged. There is a strong
basis therefore for concluding that the relative absence of overt play can be generalised to other CMC interaction spaces where such play is not a norm.

One of the motivations underlying this essentially authentic self-presentation was affiliation. Across CMC forms, research has reported that as relationships deepen, and particularly when face-to-face meetings are combined with online interaction, norms of authentic self-presentation develop (Baym, 1995; Kendall, 2002; Rutter & Smith, 2000).

8.3.2 Future research

The present research focused on the final stage of Leary’s theory of self-presentation, namely impression construction, and in particular examined the intrapersonal variables that shape the images that are presented. Some aspects of motivation were indicated, but both impression monitoring and impression motivation remain largely unresearched in the online context. In addition, little research has explicitly described the interpersonal components of impression construction such as the self-presentational norms that operate in online forums.

8.3.2.1 Self-monitoring

One variable that has not yet been examined in the online context is self-monitoring. Self-monitoring, first identified by Mark Snyder (1987), refers to the degree to which people monitor and control the impressions they are making in interaction with others. Self-monitoring therefore spans both the impression monitoring and impression motivation stages of Leary’s theory. A high self-monitor is “particularly sensitive to cues to the situational appropriateness of his or her social behavior and who uses these cues as guidelines for monitoring (that is regulating and controlling) of his or her expressive behavior and self-presentations.” (Snyder, 1987, p.14) Self-monitoring therefore involves dramaturgical awareness, together with an
ability to read social situations and the skills to alter behaviour to respond appropriately. Where other variables have not proved useful predictors of identity play online, this specific measure of self-presentational motivation may be more fruitful.

The first of these dimensions, acting, is particularly important in determining the effectiveness of self-presentations. Snyder (1987) argued that the statement “I would probably make a good actor” is the single more useful way to distinguish between high and low self-monitors. Acting ability or expressive self-control allows high self-monitors to manipulate voice and facial expressions effectively (Snyder, 1987), enabling them to present incongruent self images that are believable, and communicate congruent emotions and self-beliefs more accurately than low self-monitors (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000).

Some debate exists, however, over whether self-monitoring is a single construct. Richard Lennox (1980) proposed that self-monitoring comprised two different types: acquisitive and protective. Acquisitive self-monitoring is associated with confidence, extraversion, and a functional approach-oriented style, in which self-presentation is used for interpersonal gain. Protective or defensive self-monitoring on the other hand, is motivated by a desire to avoid social disapproval and is correlated with low self-esteem, and social anxiety (Avia et al., 1998). Both types of self-monitoring may help explain the self-presentation strategies observed in the present studies. The common presentation of socially desirable images observed in both studies may have been motivated by acquisitive self-monitoring, whereas the disclosure of only minimal identity information observed in a substantial group in the first study may have been a protective strategy.
8.3.2.2 Self-presentational norms

Although some MOO research has noted the rich normative structures that operate within MOOs (Kendall, 2002; Reid, 1994), few studies have specifically examined self-presentational norms such as consistency, decorum, and self-presentation matching online. These issues were beyond the scope of this thesis, although evidence suggested that players preferred consistency between “real” identity and online self-presentation, but changes in self-presentation over time were tolerated. A more detailed analysis of the ways in which self-presentations are negotiated over time online and the norms that guide behaviour is facilitated by the accessibility of transcripts.

Although much of the MOO research to date has been ethnographic, self-presentational norms lend themselves to alternative, more experimental research methods of investigation. Experimental manipulations, such as the violation of a self-presentational norm by a confederate, could be implemented and may prove more efficient than waiting for such behaviour to occur spontaneously.

8.3.2.3 Self-presentation and impression formation

The present research focused on the actor’s impression construction. Self-presentation is, however, a reciprocal process reliant on signification or validation by others. Despite the transactional nature of self-presentation, few studies have explored the ways online self-presentations are interpreted by others. This would appear to be a fertile area for research.

Two notable exceptions to the paucity of work in this area are the early studies by Lea and Spears (1992) that demonstrated paralinguistic cues can create powerful cues in the impression formation process online and Jacobsons’ (1999b) study of how cognitive heuristics are used to interpret information provided by screen names, character descriptions, and dialogue.
In the 1950s Harold Kelley (1950) demonstrated how the substitution of a word, “warm” instead of “rather cold”, in a written introduction to a lecturer could alter students’ impression of the lecturer and, in turn, affect their interactions with him. The highly concentrated nature of character descriptions implies that each word has the potential to carry significant weight. This however assumes that character descriptions are read as part of the impression formation process. Despite putting time and thought into developing their character descriptions, participants in the second study questioned the ways these descriptions were used in the impression formation process. The effectiveness of the character description as a self-presentational strategy is therefore unclear. Questions remain about how MOO players make use of character descriptions, when they are read, and how the information contained within them is used in the formation of impressions. The answers to these questions have implications for the presentation of identity in a range of professional and social settings.

8.3.2.4 The therapeutic potential of life on the screen

Results from the present two studies suggest that many MOO players consciously present themselves positively online, some find themselves unintentionally behaving in socially desirable ways, and a good proportion perceive their online self more positively than their offline self on a range of dimensions. In all these ways, online interactions hold therapeutic possibilities.

Play is seen to be therapeutic for children for three reasons: it allows mastery of conflicts, it provides an opportunity to experiment with new behaviours and emotions, and it permits the child to step outside the play frame and observe. These same three characteristics enable online interactions to be therapeutic. MOOs allows players to experiment, consciously controlling presentation of vulnerabilities and less consciously experiencing
different facets of self. They also facilitate, through their unique use of commands, an ability to be both actor and observer, watching oneself in the third person.

The increased confidence noted by participants in the second study holds particular potential as an area for future research, with therapeutic implications for the treatment of shyness and social anxiety. The online context offers unique opportunities for behavioural rehearsal, providing the benefits of public presentation and signification and hence the increased likelihood that the behaviour will be internalized, but with benefit of reduced repercussions. Although Roberts (2001) noted that shy individuals’ level of shyness decreased after a six-month period of Internet use, the variables that reduce shyness online have not been well tested empirically. The extent to which online confidence is transferred to offline settings, and under what conditions, are further questions for research.

I have described entering a new MOO as a liminal experience, akin to border crossing for a traveller in the offline world. The ways in which we enter online worlds have therapeutic implications. What is it that some people bring with them that allows them to almost instantaneously perceive themselves in a more positive light online? What is it that prevents this perception in others? If entering the MOO is a crucial phase, so too is the crossing back. Returning home from a journey can be tinged with a range of emotions and brings with it opportunities for learning. Travel can teach us new ways to see what was once familiar in our own culture. The anthropological term depaysement encapsulates this experience. Meaning literally to decountrify, “one leaves one’s own culture to face something unfamiliar, and upon returning home it has become strange - and can be seen with fresh eyes”. (Turkle, 1995, p.218). What facilitates the experience of depaysement when one crosses the border back to the offline world? What helps people use their online experiences in productive, therapeutic ways?
What helps people translate skills and self-perceptions from the online world to other areas of their life?

8.3.2.5 Doing MOO research: Methodological considerations

I was drawn to research on MOOs because my teaching experience suggested them to be rich places for exploration. MOOs and other CMC interaction spaces offer unique opportunities for data collection. Transcripts, easily numbering in the 100s of pages are effortlessly collected and researchers can be seduced, as I was, into imagining the information will be useful and useable. When I began examining the transcripts of my classes for evidence of self-presentational strategies, however, I was surprised by the absence of useful data. It is not that the transcripts appeared lifeless compared to the experience of being present during the MOO interaction, but rather that self-presentational statements were infrequent and generally required considerable interpretation.

Interpreting what transpired front of stage required access to the backstage. The significance of The_Umpire6's thinness can only be understood when we are privy to his backstage confession that he hates being called skinny in the offline world. These backstage reflections contained in the journals ultimately proved much more useful as data than the transcripts and the resulting analysis focused almost exclusively on them. In hindsight it might appear obvious that these backstage reflections would offer more useable material than the ongoing self-presentations themselves. The relationship between the front and back of stage is after all fundamental to Goffman's early work on self-presentation. And in other areas, reflection holds the potential for greater learning than the act itself. It is in the processing of a role-play, for example, rather than the doing of it, that most learning takes place.
The journals functioned particularly well for accessing backstage spaces. Unlike interviews, which have typically been used in ethnographic MOO research, they offered time for reflection and a certain distance from the audience (the teacher-reader). Although MOOs allow students to create their own notebooks that can be locked and carried with the character, we require our students to keep their journals outside the MOO. By separating MOO interaction from the process of reflection we hope the students will distance themselves from their behaviour and be better able to engage in self-reflexive practice, a process the MOO, with its unique actor-as-observer focus, inherently encourages. The journal process therefore encourages students to literally take a step back from the MOO.

Reflecting on the value of the journals as data for this thesis has emphasised their value in the teaching and learning process. It is debatable whether just being in the MOO would be a sufficiently educational experience without prescribed opportunities for reflection.

8.4 Concluding comments

The Internet provides new vantage points from which to observe conventional behavior, [as well as] views of new kinds of behavior.


This thesis examined the ways that students present and sometimes misrepresent themselves in MOOs. I have argued that self-presentation theory is a valuable theory for understanding these behaviours. Broad in its scope, self-presentation theory is a flexible approach, encompassing information that is given consciously as well as information that is less consciously given off. It accommodates and explains contextual variations in behaviour and acknowledges multiplicity in self-presentation. It describes public performances in the front of stage as well as private rehearsals and
reflections that take place backstage. It can explain the authentic self-presentations that arise online as well as exaggerated and fantastical performances.

In contrast, little evidence was found to support the MAMA cycles that characterise identity experimentation in adolescence and early adulthood. Overt identity play, such as gender swapping, was engaged in spontaneously by only a minority of players. Educators who seek identity experimentation may therefore need to structure MAMA cycles into their programs, proactively encouraging playfulness and helping students through their own discomfort.

The lack of overt identity play online and the ease with which self-presentation theory explains online behaviour challenges the conceptualisation of cyberspace as a new frontier, separated from the “real” world. A different view of the Internet is beginning to emerge.

Early research in the 1980s emerged when there were fewer than 1000 Internet hosts, when email was just beginning to take off as a communication tool, and as the first MUD was developed. Research in these early days was cautious about the benefits of CMC and was primarily driven by cues filtered out approaches. Online interaction was viewed as a diminished version of face-to-face communication. Sensationalistic reports focused on socially undesirable visions of CMC, emphasising disinhibition, identity deception, and manipulation.

By the early 1990s the World Wide Web was released and the number of Internet hosts had increased to more than two million. Coinciding with the hyperbole surrounding the dot.com boom and postmodern ideas about the self, writing began to emerge that described the rich, self-presentational and relational possibilities of “life on the screen” (Curtis, 1997; Reid, 1994; Turkle, 1995; Walther, 1996). The Internet, and in particular MOOs, were viewed as unique places for identity experimentation and seen by many writers as a
frontier land, a place quite different to the face-to-face world. Educationally, the Internet was seen to hold enormous potential for the innovative and economically efficient presentation of material. There was a rush to produce online courses. Much writing on the Internet during this period tended towards polarities, describing CMC in utopian or dystopian terms. Considerable emphasis was placed on the negative impact of the Internet on social relations.

On one side there is the hype, hoopla, and how-to-oriented discourse of popular media, the communications industry, and computer hobbyists and professionals. On the other, there is denial, dismissal, and silence. Between the two lies the path we must follow if we are to take cyberspace seriously, to study it as a communication phenomenon. (Strate, Jacobson, & Gibson, 1996, p.23)

At the turn of the century that picture has begun to change and the middle ground, advocated by Strate et al. (1996), has begun to emerge more strongly. In their book Moving the Internet out of Cyberspace, Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite (2002) pronounced a new way of thinking about cyberspace, not as a different and separate world, but rather as a transactional space embedded in everyday life. Now more than 20 years old, the Internet is simply a part of life for hundreds of millions of people. Most Western students entering university in 2004 have grown up with the Internet; it is as commonplace as a mobile phone or TV, embedded in their daily interactions. Research, like the present work, confirms Wellman and Haythornthwaite’s conclusion: cyberspace is no longer perceived by its users as a different world, but rather as one of a range of communication tools, albeit with some unique facilities.
Within this context, it is not surprising that psychological theories, originally developed to explain social behaviour before the advent of the Internet was even imagined, are able to provide valuable explanations of online behaviour. Cyberspace is not a virtual world without connection to the rest of people’s lives. What we do and who we are online are shaped consciously and unconsciously by who we are offline. Cyberspace is, after all, a part of our real life.

I undertook this research following a postmodern belief that cyberspace was, as Turkle (1995) described it, “a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life” (p.180). When I began this thesis the literature strongly supported this interpretation. I used a mixed-methodology, incorporating methods that arise from postmodern concerns with subjectivity. Ultimately, however, despite following a postmodern method to explore postmodern questions, participants’ lived experiences revealed a deeply held essentialist belief. Ironically, in cyberspace the most postmodern of all spaces, the most strongly held belief was in a coherent and authentic self and in the self-presentation of the “real” me.
REFERENCES


O’Brien, J. (1999). Writing in the body: Gender (re)production in online interaction. In M.A. Smith and P. Kollock (Eds.), *Communities in cyberspace* (pp.76-104). London: Routledge.


384


APPENDIX A
THE IDENTITY QUESTIONNAIRE

On the following pages are some questions that invite you think about who you are. Please follow the instructions on each page, complete all components, and answer honestly.

Demographic information

Age (in years): _______________ Sex (please circle): Female / Male

Country of birth: _______________________________________________________

What is your first language? _____________________________________________

Is English spoken in your home? Yes / No

Please indicate your level of experience in the following areas by circling your response. If you do not know what any of the terms mean, then chances are you have not experienced them and you should circle 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No experience</th>
<th>Moderate experience</th>
<th>Extensive experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsgroups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUDs and MOOs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Imagine for a moment that you are trying to describe yourself to someone you have never met who wants to know **who you really are**. How would you describe yourself? In the spaces below write 10 different responses. Put down ideas as they come into your mind, don't worry about ordering your responses and try to be as honest as possible. Remember to describe yourself as you think you really are, not as you would like to be.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who am I?</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Desirability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I am...</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I am...</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I am...</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am...</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I am...</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I am...</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I am...</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I am...</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I am...</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I am...</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now indicate how strong or central each item on your list is in describing or defining who you are by circling a number from 1 to 4 in the **Strength** column. Circle 4 if the item is very central – that is changing or removing it would take great effort or have a great impact on you. Circle 1 if you think the item is more easily changed or the impact on you would be less if it was removed. Use the numbers 2 and 3 to indicate items somewhere between these extremes.

Finally, use the **Desirability** column to indicate how you feel about each item. Put + is you think the item is a positive characteristic, - is you think it s a negative characteristic, and 0 is you think it is neither positive nor negative.
Now imagine the kind of person you would NOT like to be. List 10 items in the spaces below that describe the person you would not like to be. Again, put down ideas as they occur and don’t worry about ordering your responses. Feel free to include items that you think are likely to come about as well as those that seem unlikely.

1. I would NOT like to be...
2. I would NOT like to be...
3. I would NOT like to be...
4. I would NOT like to be...
5. I would NOT like to be...
6. I would NOT like to be...
7. I would NOT like to be...
8. I would NOT like to be...
9. I would NOT like to be...
10. I would NOT like to be...

When you have completed all 10 responses, circle the number next to each item that you think is reasonably likely to come about.
Now imagine the kind of person you would **LIKE TO BECOME IN THE FUTURE**. In the spaces below, list 10 characteristics that you would like for yourself. Again, put down ideas as they occur and don’t worry about ordering your responses. Feel free to include items that you think are likely to come about as well as those that seem unlikely.

1. In future, I would like to be...

2. In future, I would like to be...

3. In future, I would like to be...

4. In future, I would like to be...

5. In future, I would like to be...

6. In future, I would like to be...

7. In future, I would like to be...

8. In future, I would like to be...

9. In future, I would like to be...

10. In future, I would like to be...

11. In future, I would like to be...

12. In future, I would like to be...

When you have completed all 10 responses, circle the number next to each item that you think is reasonably likely to come about.
Next use the following list of characteristics to describe yourself. Circle a number from 1 to 7 to indicate how true of you each characteristic is. Do not leave any characteristic unmarked.

*Example:* If it is usually true that you love children, you would circle 6 for that item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loves children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bossy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noisy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs approval</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rash</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show-off</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nervous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive to needs of others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sufficient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-critical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grateful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcastic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A-5
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Never true</th>
<th>Usually not true</th>
<th>Sometimes true</th>
<th>Occasionally true</th>
<th>Often true</th>
<th>Usually true</th>
<th>Always true</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Clear-thinking</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Bashful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Mischievous</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Resourceful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Skilled in business</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Childlike</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Devotes self to others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Feels superior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Boastful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>Loyal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>Carefree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>Absent-minded</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>Rude</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Sees self running show</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>Outspoken</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>Worrying</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>Gentle</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>Silly</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>Pleasure-seeking</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please continue the questionnaire by following the instructions on the next page.

[Questions from the NEO-FFI were inserted here. The measure has not been reproduced for copyright reasons.]
Listed below is a range of items that people sometimes use to describe themselves. Place an ‘X’ on the line to indicate how you see yourself on each item.

*Example:* If you think of yourself as generally very passive you would mark the first item like this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
<th>_______</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>aggressive</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>passive</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>unsure</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>confident</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>happy</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>sad</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>follower</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>leader</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>feminine</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>masculine</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>good</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>bad</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>funny</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>serious</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>dumb</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>smart</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>stable</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>unstable</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>strong</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>weak</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ugly</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>beautiful</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>unfriendly</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>friendly</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

STUDY 1: PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT AND CONSENT FORM

PROJECT INFORMATION

Project title: Identity in real life and on-line

I am Andrea Chester, a lecturer in the Department of Psychology and Intellectual Disability Studies at RMIT. I am also completing a PhD at the University of Melbourne under the supervision of Associate Professor Diane Bretherton. This research in part of my PhD.

The aim of the study is to explore identity - who you think you are or would like to be. If you agree to take part in the research you will complete a standard series of questionnaires in which you will be asked to describe yourself. In the second part of the study you will be asked to imagine that you are about to join an on-line community. You will then complete another series of questionnaires describing the kind of person you would like to present to that community. This part of the study will be completed on a computer in a computer lab on campus. Altogether the questionnaires will take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

You will not be asked to put your name on any of the questionnaires so any information you provide will be anonymous. Your participation in the study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw your consent at any stage; even after you have completed the questionnaires you are free to withdraw any unprocessed information you have provided.

If, at any stage, you are unclear or concerned about any aspect of the study you should ask for clarification. If you wish to ask any questions after the experiment is over you can so by contacting me on 9660 3150 during office hours.
Thinking about who we are is a task that many people find challenging and fun, however, sometimes this process can raise issues about which we feel uncomfortable. If, as a result of participation in the study, you would like to talk to a counsellor, you should contact the RMIT Counselling Service on 9660 2963 in Building 14 on the City Campus.

Andrea Chester  
B.A., Grad Dip Couns Psych, M.A., M.A.P.S.

Ass Prof Diane Bretheron  
B.A. B.Ed., PhD, M.A.P.S.
RESEARCH PROJECT INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY AND INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY STUDIES

FACULTY OF APPLIED SCIENCE

Prescribed Consent Form For Persons Participating In Research Projects Involving Interviews, Questionnaires or Disclosure of Personal Information

Name of participant: ______________________________________

Project title: Identity Play in Cyberspace

Name of investigator(s): Andrea Chester Tel: (BH) 9660 3150

1. I consent to participate in the above project, the particulars of which - including details of questionnaires - have been explained to me and are appended hereto.

2. I authorise the investigator or her assistant to administer the questionnaires.

3. I acknowledge that:

   (a) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied;
   (b) The project is for the purpose of research and not for treatment.
   (c) I have read and retained a copy of the Project Information, and agree to the general purpose, methods and demands of the study.
   (d) The project may not be of direct benefit to me.
   (e) My involvement entails completing a series of questionnaires which will take approximately 60 minutes.
(f) My anonymity is assured.
(g) Confidentiality is assured. However, should information of a confidential nature need to be disclosed for moral, clinical or legal reasons, I will be given an opportunity to negotiate the terms of this disclosure.
(h) The security of the data obtained is assured following completion of the study.
(i) The research data collected during the study may be published, and a report of the project outcomes made available.

Any data which may identify me will not be used.

Signature: __________________________ Date: __________

(Participant)

Participants should be given a photocopy of this consent form after it has been signed.

Any queries or complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, RMIT, GPO Box 2476 V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9660 1745.
### APPENDIX C
#### IDENTITY CODING MANUAL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referential frame</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Sex and gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical appearance</td>
<td>Physical self and body image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Cultural background</td>
<td>Ethnicity, race, citizenship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Kinship, friendship, and intimate relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student role</td>
<td>Any reference to study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occupational role</td>
<td>Employed, specific occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>Skills and abilities</td>
<td>Being intelligent, quick-witted, good memory, analytical; (antonyms) slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cognitive</td>
<td>Persuasive, negotiating, relating to others, impression management, verbal fluency, approachable, being well liked, tactful, perceptive; (antonyms) tongue-tied, aloof, tactless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Social</td>
<td>Good at languages, computing, report-writing, numerate, knowledgeable, experienced; (antonyms) poor/bad at specifics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Technical</td>
<td>Administrative skills, methodical, accurate, tidy, persevering, meets deadlines, decision-making, conscientious; (antonyms) scatterbrained, sloppy, unpunctual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Organisational</td>
<td>Independent, self-sufficient, innovative, problem-solving, creative; (antonyms) non-creative, perfectionistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adaptive</td>
<td>Good at job, effective, successful, able, professional; (antonyms) ineffective, failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referential frame</td>
<td>Sub-category</td>
<td>Criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fortunate</td>
<td>Lucky, privileged, wealthy, high-status, non-specific (talented); (antonyms) unlucky</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests and needs</td>
<td>Like challenge, competing, achieving, ambitious, determined; (antonyms) non-competitive, unambitious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Need for achievement</td>
<td>Like controlling, assertive, dominant, argumentative, overbearing; (antonyms) modest, democratic, passive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Need for power</td>
<td>Needing and being interested in other people, liking groups, conforming, in love; (antonyms) only a few intimates, being a loner, liking solitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Need for affiliation</td>
<td>Interest in/need for development, learning, growth, interested; (antonyms) not wanting to change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Arts and interests/entertainment</td>
<td>Likes, hobbies, interests in literature, music, sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work orientation</td>
<td>Career-minded, committed, involved; (antonyms) family more important than job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Physical, active</td>
<td>Sporty, keen to keep fit, active, athletic; (antonyms) unfit, sedentary, overweigh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character and behavioural style</td>
<td>Lively, easily bored, fun-loving, fun to be with, flirt, humorous, friendly, trendy, sociable, attractive; (antonyms) reserved, quiet, serious, sober, studious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Outgoing</td>
<td>Self-confident, strong, arrogant, complacent, direct, straightforward; (antonyms) shy, uncertain, awkward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Confident</td>
<td>Risk-taking, hasty, romantic, restless, spendthrift; (antonyms) considered, unadventurous, patient</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Impulsive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referential frame</td>
<td>Sub-category</td>
<td>Criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open to experience</td>
<td>Open-minded, inquisitive, tolerant, expectant, keen to travel, change-oriented, complex; (antonyms) opinionated, obstinate, cynical, suspicious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Considerate, helpful, sensitive (to others), good listener; (antonyms) self-centred, nasty to people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>Happy, optimistic, satisfied; (antonyms) pessimistic, depressed, anxious, frustrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-application</td>
<td>Energetic, hardworking, fit, a worker, involved, enthusiastic, busy, proactive; (antonyms) lazy, cowardly, easily tired, unmotivated,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Changeable, moody, shows feelings, easily hurt, a worrier, nervous; (antonyms) calm, steady, easy going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>Good, decent, loyal, trustworthy, sincere, honest; (antonyms) moral self-condemnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introspective</td>
<td>Self-critical, self-aware; (antonyms) ignorant of self, unaware of what I want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Abstract, theoretical, analytical (types, not skills), critical; (antonyms) practical, scientific, logical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values and beliefs</td>
<td></td>
<td>Religious, political, ethical beliefs, beliefs about human nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-self-identifying</td>
<td></td>
<td>References abstracted from physical being, social structure, and social action, a human being; (antonyms) me, an individual, unique</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adapted from McPartland (1965), Gordon (1968), and Rees and Nicholson (1994)
APPENDIX D

STUDY 2: PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT AND CONSENT FORM

PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT

Identity in Cyberspace

My name is Andrea Chester. I will be teaching you this semester in CTXT 1221 Personal Identity and Community in Cyberspace. I am also a PhD student at the University of Melbourne. Working with my supervisor Associate Professor Diane Bretherton, I am currently conducting some research on identity in cyberspace.

Cyberspace provides unique ways to both conceal and reveal aspects of identity. Some writers have argued that online we can be whoever we want to be. Despite the tremendous potential of the medium, little is still known about the psychological dimensions of such identity play. What types of people, for example, are most likely to play with their identity? How do people play with their identity? These are themes we will consider throughout the course and they are the themes of my research. In particular I am interested in the extent to which psychological theories, designed to explain how we present ourselves to others in real life, can predict our behaviour online.

All students enrolled in CTXT 1221 this semester are being offered an opportunity to take part in this research. If you agree to take part you will not be required to do anything else on top of the course requirements, but I will need access to the work you submit and the interactions that take place online in this course, as these will comprise the data for the research I'm conducting. This information is routinely collected in this course, but in this case I am asking for your permission to analyse and use it in my PhD.

Participation in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent to participate and discontinue your participation at any time. Your decision to participate
in the study will have no impact on your marks in the course; in fact I won't even know who has elected to take part in the study until the end of semester. Our administrative officer, Jan Elliot, will take care of all those details until your grades are finalised.

Every effort will be made to ensure the confidentiality of any data you provide. Identifying information, such as your name or student number, will not be stored with the data. Only the screen name you choose for this course will be linked to your data and this screen name will be used in any publications.

If you decide to take part in this research you should sign the enclosed consent form, complete the questionnaires and return both in the reply paid envelope by July 30.

If you have any questions at any stage or are unsure what to do, please feel free to email me at the following address: andrea.chester@rmit.edu.au or call me on 9925 3150.

I look forward to meeting you, virtually speaking, when the semester begins!

Andrea Chester
B.A., Grad Dip Couns Psych, M.A.
Department of Psychology & Disability Studies
RMIT University

Assoc Prof Diane Bretherton
BA, DipEd, BEd, PhD
School ofBehavioural Science
University of Melbourne

Any queries or complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, RMIT, GPO Box 2476 V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 1745.
FACULTY OF
Applied Science
DEPARTMENT OF
Psychology and Disability Studies

Name of participant:

Project Title: Identity in Cyberspace

Name(s) of investigators: (1) Andrea Chester Phone: 9925 3150 (2) Assoc Prof Diane Bretherton Phone: 8344 4912

1. I have received a statement explaining the procedures involved in this project.
2. I consent to participate in the above project, the particulars of which - including details of the procedures - have been explained to me.
3. I authorise the investigator or his or her assistant to interview me and administer a questionnaire.
4. I acknowledge that:
   (a) Having read the Plain Language Statement, I agree to the general purpose, methods and demands of the study.
   (b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
   (c) The project is for the purpose of research and/or teaching. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
   (d) The confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded. However should information of a confidential nature need to be disclosed for moral, clinical or legal reasons, I will be given an opportunity to negotiate the terms of this disclosure.
   (e) The security of the research data is assured during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published, and a report of the project outcomes will be provided to the University of Melbourne. Any information which will identify me will not be used.

Participant’s Consent

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

(Participant)

Participants should be given a photocopy of this consent form after it has been signed.

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, University Secretariat, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 1745.
APPENDIX E

QSR N6 INDEX TREE

(1) Base Data
(1 1) Participants
   (1 1 1) Offline gender
      (1 1 1 1) Female
      (1 1 1 2) Male
   (1 1 2) Online gender
      (1 1 2 1) Female
      (1 1 2 2) Male
      (1 1 2 3) Neuter
      (1 1 2 4) Spivak
      (1 1 2 5) Splat
   (1 1 3) Synchronous CMC experience
      (1 1 3 1) Low
      (1 1 3 2) Moderate
      (1 1 3 3) High
   (1 1 4) @addiction (Hours spent in the MOO)
      (1 1 4 1) Low
      (1 1 4 2) Moderate
      (1 1 4 3) High
(1 2) Time of data collection
   (1 2 1) Week 1
   (1 2 2) Week 12

(2) Case Data
(2 1) Choosing a screen name
   (2 1 1) Origin of the screen name
      (2 1 1 1) Established screen names
      (2 1 1 2) Offline nicknames
      (2 1 1 3) New screen names
   (2 1 2) Time taken to choose
(2 2) Constructing an online identity
   (2 2 1) The potential to be anyone
   (2 2 2) The real me
      (2 2 2 1) Intentional presentation
      (2 2 2 2) Unintentional leakage
   (2 2 3) The ideal me
   (2 2 4) The exaggerated me
   (2 2 5) The concealed me
   (2 2 6) The fantastical and unique self
(2.2.7) Conceptualisation of online identity
   (2.2.7.1) Online identity as role
   (2.2.7.2) Online identity as me
(2.2.8) How will it all turn out?

(2.3) Online identity attributes
   (2.3.1) Physical appearance
   (2.3.2) Gender
   (2.3.3) Age
   (2.3.4) Ethnicity

(2.4) Playing it out
   (2.4.1) Self-presentation in the MOO
      (2.4.1.1) Accurate self-presentation
      (2.4.1.2) Deceptive self-presentation
      (2.4.1.3) Disinhibition
      (2.4.1.4) Changes over time
   (2.4.2) Signification
      (2.4.2.1) Anticipated
      (2.4.2.2) Actual
      (2.4.2.3) F2F meeting
   (2.4.3) Relationships with other players
      (2.4.3.1) Separation
      (2.4.3.2) Connection
      (2.4.3.2) Doing it differently next time
   (2.4.4) Emotional responses
      (2.4.4.1) Positive
      (2.4.4.2) Neutral
      (2.4.4.3) Negative
   (2.4.5) Reflections on the self-presentation process
(2.4.6) Doing it differently next time
Author/s: Chester, Andrea

Title: Presenting the self in cyberspace: identity play in MOOS

Date: 2004-01

Citation: Chester, A. (2004). Presenting the self in cyberspace: identity play in MOOS, PhD thesis, Department of Philosophy, University of Melbourne.

Publication Status: Unpublished

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/38846

File Description: Presenting the self in cyberspace: identity play in MOOS

Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.