

# The Digital Self: Through the Looking Glass of Telecopresent Others

Shanyang Zhao  
Temple University

*The impact of others in telecopresence on the formation of self has not been well studied, and existing research on the self in cyberspace has focused mostly on issues related to the presentation of self. A major question researchers have been trying to answer is how people present their self to others when they become disembodied and anonymous in the online world. The question the present study attempts to answer, however, is almost the opposite: how do people come to conceive their self when others become disembodied and anonymous? This question is particularly important for understanding the effect of the Internet on self-formation, especially in teenagers who are yet to form a stable view of themselves. Based on the analysis of teenagers' online experience, the present study shows that others on the Internet constitute a distinctive "looking glass" that produces a "digital self" that differs from the self formed offline. Teenagers' playful online self-presentation is thus an integral part of the process of self-formation. As such, "intimate strangers" or "anonymous friends" on the Internet play an important role in affecting the self-development of online teenagers.*

People we interact with influence the way we think of ourselves. According to symbolic interactionism, others serve as a looking glass in which we see ourselves (Cooley [1902] 1964). Our view of who we are emerges from our interactions with others. We present ourselves to others as we interact with them, and we come to know ourselves as others react to us. Just as we find out how we look from the reflections we see in the mirror, we learn who we are by interpreting how others respond to us. Others communicate their attitudes toward us not merely in the expressions they give, but more important, in the expressions they "give off" (Goffman 1959). Through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors, others convey to us, either purposefully or unwittingly, their appraisals of our self-presentations, which in turn shape how we view ourselves.

In corporeal copresence, others give off a rich array of embodied nonverbal cues,

---

Direct all correspondence to Shanyang Zhao, Department of Sociology, 1115 Berks Street, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122-6089; e-mail: bzhao001@temple.edu.

---

*Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 28, Issue 3, pp. 387–405, ISSN 0195-6086, electronic ISSN 1533-8665.  
© 2005 by the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals/rights.htm>.

such as tone of voice, facial expression, gesture and posture, kinesics, and proxemics, which reveal their attitudes toward us. There are times, however, when others may attempt to conceal their true opinions of us by deliberately providing false impressions and/or suppressing certain expressions. Yet, by observing others' "ungovernable" behaviors, we are often able to assess the authenticity of the governable aspect of their behaviors. In other words, the corporeal presence of others in a face-to-face situation provides us with "a maximum of symptoms" (Berger and Luckmann 1966) that enable us to see a clear picture of ourselves in others' appraisals of our performances.<sup>1</sup>

However, corporeal copresence is not the only context in which human interaction takes place. Through the mediation of the Internet, for example, people can interact with one another in "telecopresence" (Zhao 2003) without being physically copresent. Under the condition of telecopresence, we interact with others from a distance in a disembodied environment. In the absence of symbolic nonverbal cues that are essential for discerning others' hidden feelings and attitudes, we invariably confront the difficulty of obtaining an accurate knowledge of others' appraisals of our self-presentations.

Undoubtedly, not all others we interact with exert the same influence on us. We are less affected by the people we do not know very much about, and more influenced by the people we are acquainted with whom we respect and whose opinions we value. Those who matter to us in life are our "significant others," and they include our beloved ones in the family, important colleagues at work, and close friends. In the anonymous domains of the online world, however, those we interact with are essentially strangers whose "real" identities remain unknown to us. Can strangers be our significant others? Do the attitudes of such strangers influence our sense of self? And if yes, how?

Existing research on the self in cyberspace has followed mainly the Goffmanian tradition by focusing on the *presentation* of self to others in the online environment (Markham 1998; Surratt 1998; Turkle 1995; Waskul 2003). The literature has shown that in the anonymous online world, individuals are more likely to engage in a variety of role-play games, assuming different identities by "cycling through" multiple selves (Turkle 1995). The proliferation of self in cyberspace has been explained largely in terms of the detachment of the self from the body in telecopresent interaction: *as others cannot see who we really are, we are free to claim to be whoever we want to be*. However, this explanation raises a new question: since, like us, others in cyberspace are disembodied and anonymous, *how can we know whether they perceive our self-presentations as we intend them to?* In other words, without knowing the real appraisals others have of us, how can we validate the self-claims we make to them? In corporeal copresence, we test the "validity" of what we claim to be by looking at how others respond to us—in terms of both what they say (verbal) and what they show (nonverbal). In telecopresence, this kind of "reality check" is no longer feasible because we are unable to observe the nonverbal aspect of others' responses to us, which is crucial for the purpose of validating our self-claims. How

does this inability affect the formation of self in the online world? And in what way does the loss of embodied behavioral cues from others change the “looking glass” in which we see ourselves?

To study the self in cyberspace, it is therefore necessary to differentiate between the *presentation* of self and the *conception* of self. Although they are closely related, these two aspects of self-construction are affected by different factors. Whereas how we *present* ourselves to others is influenced by whether we believe others can directly see us or not, how we *perceive* ourselves is influenced by the extent to which we are able to directly see others and how they respond to us. This distinction is important for another reason. According to the developmental perspective on self-formation, a mature self evolves gradually over the course of childhood and adolescence (Erikson 1959). Rudimentary capacities for self-awareness and social imitation emerge at an early age, but it is not until adolescence that individuals begin to develop an integrated view of themselves by “internalizing the expectations of significant others in the form of self-guides” (Harter 1999:144). Relative to adults, therefore, children and teenagers are more susceptible to the influence of others in self-acquisition. While it may very well be true that for adults “online chat is a communication game that is all about ‘playing with yourself’ (in a literal rather than figurative sense) . . . [and] there is little commitment to any given self” (Waskul 2003: 49), for young people, the Internet may serve as “a new tool and a new environment for the construction of their identities” (Tapscott 1998:93).

In this article, I examine the impact of others on the conception of self in the online world. A major issue I attempt to address is whether disembodiment and anonymity in the online environment alter the ways in which we come to *view* ourselves. In the absence of the corporeal body or “the field upon which play the symptoms of his inner consciousness” (Schutz and Luckmann 1973:163), the anonymous other may become an “opaque” looking glass in which we find it difficult to see a clear reflection of ourselves. Thus, the self-view we come to obtain in telecopresence may differ from that formed in corporeal copresence. Indeed, the dynamics of self-acquisition vary over the life course. While we can never escape the influence of others in society, social appraisals seem to play a more prominent role in shaping our sense of self when we are young and “unformed.” I therefore choose to focus my analysis on the online experiences of teenagers who have been especially active on the Internet and whose susceptibility to social appraisal enables us to take a better look at the impact of telecopresent others on the conception of self. How are teenagers’ views of themselves affected by others in the disembodied online environment? Do teenagers take the attitudes of the anonymous others seriously in online interaction, or do they merely regard them as part of an entertaining and inconsequential role-playing game? I attempt to look for answers to these questions in the present study.

The empirical data used in this study, which include both survey findings and interview excerpts, are secondary in nature. Statistics about teenagers’ use of the Internet primarily come from “*Teenage Life Online: The Rise of the Instant-Message*

*Generation and the Internet's Impact on Friendships and Family Relationships,*" a nationwide telephone survey of 754 youth between the ages of twelve and seventeen and 754 of their parents conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates in 2000 as part of the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis 2001). Excerpts of personal interviews quoted in the article come from a number of books and journal publications. Although these materials are collected by different researchers using different methods, they provide valuable data for the kind of conceptual work I am undertaking here.

### TELECOPRESENT OTHERS

Telecopresence is an electronically mediated social context for human interaction. Unlike corporeal copresence where individuals are "in one another's immediate physical presence" (Goffman 1959), telecopresence is a situation in which individuals are electronically linked together while physically separate in different locations. Through electronic devices (e.g., networked laptop computers and palm pilots), spatially dispersed individuals become "copresent everywhere at once" (McLuhan 1964). In the sense that they are not in one another's immediate physical presence, the individuals are apart, hence "tele"; but in the sense that they can reach one another through electronic mediation for real-time communication, the individuals are together, hence "copresent."

Indeed, telecopresence became possible a long time ago with the invention of the telegraph, and the invention of the telephone further enhanced such capability. However, prior to the development of the Internet, telecopresence in the realm of socializing was primarily confined to the situation of one-to-one communication between people who had already known each other (Pool 1977). A notable exception was the networked communication via CB radio, which allowed many-to-many contact and provided anonymity through the use of "handles" or, in today's terminology, "screen names" (Cowlan 1979). The many-to-many contact capability in combination with the provision of anonymity gave rise to, for the first time, a viable online social domain that permitted complete strangers to interact with one another. The advent of the Internet has greatly expanded this domain, making it accessible to the general public. Nowadays the online domain of socializing exists in many forms, including, among other things, the Listserv and the Bulletin Board (Chesebro 1985), the Chat Room and the multi-user dungeon (MUD) (Rheingold 1995), and, more recently, the Weblog (Snider 2003).

In the online social domain, individuals interact with one another "face to device" from place to place (Zhao 2004). The interface device usually consists of a display screen with a keyboard that is linked to an electronic communications network through wired or wireless connections. Differing from face-to-face interaction where verbal exchanges are sustained by the presence of nonverbal behaviors, face-to-device interaction in telecopresence is characterized by the absence of the corporeal body, a phenomenon known as "disembodiment" (Dreyfus 2001). Electronic

writing, which is deprived of the vocal cues that accompany oral exchanges, is used most often in telecopresent interaction. Even with some of the more “embodied” forms of face-to-device interaction, such as video-conferencing, only a limited amount of nonverbal cues can be gleaned from the voice and image transmitted over distances.

The disembodied nature of telecopresent interaction enables individuals to communicate with one another in anonymity.<sup>2</sup> In corporeal copresence, individuals interact with one another face to face from body to body, with their “front region” entirely exposed; individuals retire into the “back region” to regain privacy (Goffman 1959). In telecopresence, on the other hand, individuals interact with one another face to device from place to place, which enables them to be “simultaneously linked to and buffered from one another” (Sproul and Kiesler 1991:30). The plain text mode in online chat, for example, conceals the identity of an individual while allowing him/her to maintain instantaneous contact with someone else who may remain anonymous as well. This unique simultaneous linking and buffering capacity “de-regionalizes” face-to-device interaction, making it possible for an individual to be in the front and back regions at the same time.<sup>3</sup>

There are three basic kinds of “others” we interact with in telecopresence: (1) people we do not know at all, (2) people we know both online and offline, and (3) people we know only online. These three groups of people come to affect our self-conception differently. Those we are unfamiliar with in telecopresence appear as total strangers to us in the online world; although some of these people may actually be someone we know offline, we have no way of telling because of online anonymity.<sup>4</sup> In the online social domain, it is entirely acceptable to contact and to be contacted by complete strangers. For example, we need not be introduced through a third party in order to talk to a stranger in a chat room or to read and comment on the weblog of someone we are not personally acquainted with. But, due to the lack of mutual familiarity and trust, complete strangers usually exert little influence on our sense of self, although, as members of an online group or community, they may become part of “an expansive cyber-based generalized other” (Altheide 2000:9) that indirectly shapes how we look at ourselves.

Many of the telecopresent others we interact with are in fact people we know both online and offline. It has been found that most e-mails are exchanged between people who know each other in person, such as family members, colleagues, classmates, and friends (Koku, Nazer, and Wellman 2001). This category also consists of people we came to know online first and decided later to also get acquainted with offline. Undoubtedly, people in this group can exercise a significant influence on our self-view, but for purposes of the present study, this group of people will not be included for examination, as we seek to exclude the confounding effects of offline relationships on online self-conception.

Finally, there are people we have come to know only online. Through frequent telecopresent interactions, we become familiar with people in the online world whom we have never met in person. Our familiarity with these people can vary considerably:

whereas we might have communicated with some of them solely via e-mail or in chat rooms, we might have spoken with others over the phone and also seen their pictures online (though we have no way of telling whether the pictures they posted online are really of them). Regardless of how much we have known them online, their offline identity largely remains unrevealed or unverified. This is a unique group of people existing in the online social world whose impact on the conception of self in teenagers constitutes the central focus of the present study.

People we have become familiar with only online are strangers and acquaintances to us at the same time. They are strangers to us because we have never seen them in person, do not know what they look like, and would not recognize them if we met them face to face. However, through online communication we have come to know a lot about them, including the personal secrets they reveal to us; we may feel intimately acquainted with them. As such, we may call individuals of this particular group our "intimate strangers" or "anonymous friends."

Another distinctive feature of this group of people is that, because they have solely interacted with us online, they are not structurally embedded in the offline world of our everyday life. This is akin to the characteristic of what Simmel's research (1971:145) described as a "mobile person" who comes into incidental contact with us and "is not bound up organically [with us], through established ties of kinship, locality, or occupation." Ironically, as Simmel's study (1971:145) showed, not being embedded in the local social structure sometimes enables a stranger to play the role of a special confidant who "receives the most surprising revelations and confidences . . . about matters which are kept carefully hidden from everybody with whom one is close [offline]."

### ADOLESCENTS ONLINE

According to the "looking glass" theory, the self is not something we are born with or something that is innate in us; instead, it is something we acquire through interaction with others. In the sense that our perceived appraisals of those we interact with serve as the basis upon which we establish our self-view, we say that we come to see ourselves through the lens of others. Mead's work (1934) postulated that in the context of social interaction, the self evolves gradually through childhood in two main stages. At the first stage, the self is constituted by the organization of the attitudes of the significant others in particular social contexts. At the second stage, the self is constituted by the organization of the attitudes of the generalized other that represent the views of the larger society. As significant others in particular social contexts can bring in different influences, a child may develop multiple selves; but a child learns later to integrate these selves by taking the attitudes of the "generalized other," namely, the view of the larger community to which the child belongs.

Prior to the advent of the Internet, the significant others a child interacted with on a daily basis resided primarily in the world of corporeal copresence. The social

world of a teenager in Western society typically consisted of three domains: family, school, and neighborhood.<sup>5</sup> People in these social domains exert different impacts on the formation of self, depending on the stage of development of the child. Research has shown that parents have a dominant influence on their children's sense of self prior to adolescence. As a child grows older, however, the influence of peers increases (Rosenberg 1986). Another finding worth noting here is that a significant number of teenagers have "special adults" outside the family who play an important part in shaping their conception of self (Galbo and Mayer-Demetrulias 1996). In most instances, these influential adults are situated in one of the other two domains (i.e., school and neighborhood) of a teenager's life-world. The emergence of the Internet, however, adds a fourth domain—the online life—to the social world of teenagers, hence altering the dynamic of self-acquisition in adolescence.

Since the spread of the Internet in the 1990s, teenagers' involvement in the online world has been increasing at a phenomenal rate. According to the findings of several Pew Internet surveys, 73 percent of all teens ages between twelve and seventeen used the Internet in 2000 (Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis 2001), and the number increased to 87 percent in 2004 (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin 2005). By comparison, about 66 percent of adults went online in 2004 (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin 2005). These findings show that teenagers constitute a unique group that is particularly active in the online world. Many teenagers are heavy users of the Internet, as about 42 percent of all the online teens go online every day. Once logged on, they are more likely to engage in multi-tasking, such as browsing Web pages, downloading music, and visiting chat rooms all at the same time. Compared to adults, teenagers are more likely to use the Internet for interpersonal communication. According to the Pew Internet survey conducted in 2000 (Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis 2001), the three most popular online activities for teenagers are e-mailing, instant messaging, and chat room discussion. While teenagers and adults are equally likely to use e-mail (92 percent for teens and 93 percent for adults), teenagers are considerably more likely than adults to engage in instant messaging (74 percent for teens and 44 percent for adults) and visiting a chat room (55 percent for teens and 26 percent for adults). These findings suggest that teenagers are more inclined to treat cyberspace as a social place for meeting people and interacting with others.

Most of the people with whom teenagers interact with in cyberspace are those they also know offline. The bulk of a teen's online "buddy list," for example, includes school classmates, summer campmates, and friends from other places. Keeping in touch with these people in telecopresence helps maintain and strengthen relationships established offline. Another major reason teenagers go online, however, is to meet complete strangers. The Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2000 (Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis 2001) reports that 50 percent of those teens who use e-mail, instant messaging, and chat rooms have corresponded via instant messaging or e-mail with people they have never met face to face. Twenty-nine percent of older teens and 37 percent of younger teens say that the Internet helps them make new friends whom they would otherwise never meet.

Why do teenagers go online to meet with strangers? There are three possible explanations. First, teenagers are at a stage of life when they begin to explore their place in the world. In making the transition from childhood to adulthood, teenagers are faced with what Erikson's study (1959) called an "identity crisis." As Steinberg's study (1996:307) explains, the maturational and social forces "converge at adolescence," forcing teenagers to "reflect on their place in society, on the ways that others view them, and on their options for the future." To find out who they are and where they belong, teenagers are eager to "leave home" to explore the unknown and mysterious world. But, restrained by limited mobility and adult supervision, most teenagers are able to interact with only the same people in the three familiar domains of their offline world day in and day out. The Internet has changed this situation by opening up virtually the entire world to teenagers, enabling them to visit different places and meet with different people all over the world without actually leaving home. It has been found that:

Interest in Net-based communications usually starts around age 11 for girls and 13 for boys—basically during adolescence. At these ages, children seek autonomy and the creation of an identity. The Net seems to provide a vehicle to explore the self and for children to establish themselves as independent, self-governing individuals. (Tapscott 1998:56)

Second, teenagers perceive the online world as a safer place to interact with others. Teenagers are socially adventurous and inexperienced at the same time. While they want to go out to meet strangers and make new friends, teenagers are more likely to be oversensitive and easily embarrassed when interacting face to face with unfamiliar people, especially people of the opposite sex. Among other things, they worry about the way they look, how others will judge them, and the possibility of being rejected or humiliated by others. In the online world, however, teenagers feel much more comfortable interacting with other people, including complete strangers. As a 16-year-old boy explains:

Why? Well, online, we have [the] mask of the computer screen. We don't have to worry about what we look like or what other people think of us. Imagine, for instance, meeting a teenager online named Pat. All Pat knows is what you tell Pat. Pat knows what you are feeling and who you REALLY are, based on what you talk to Pat about. Pat doesn't worry about what you look like or what people say about you. (Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis 2001:17)

Third, teenagers go online to look for a "soul mate" or someone they can really relate to. The online environment proves to be an ideal place for "heart-to-heart" talks. Protected by disembodiment and anonymity, people in telecopresence are more willing to bare their souls to others, and, as a result, are more likely to find "confidants" who really know them well. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear teenagers describe someone they have met online as "a better friend than anyone else in my life" (Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis 2001:17). Despite the fact that others in the anonymous online world are essentially strangers who show up merely as

disembodied text messages on the screen, they may be taken very seriously. As one MUD player puts it:

I don't care how much people say they are, muds (sic) are not games, they are "real"!!! My mud friends are my best friends. . . . They are my family, they are not just some dumb game. (Reid 1995:175)

The Internet, therefore, provides teenagers with a whole new world where they can go and explore the mystery of social life, meet with complete strangers, search for soul mates, and engage in many other social activities without stepping outside of their homes. This means that, for the first time in human history, anonymous and disembodied strangers become important agents of socialization, interacting with youngsters in their homes on a daily basis, and thereby affecting the formation of their self.

## THE DIGITAL SELF

In the online world, the disembodied and anonymous others teenagers interact with constitute what Altheide in his research (2002:42) calls the "E Audience," which, like those in the offline world, "invites meaningful participation and displays of self." To differentiate it from the self that emerges from face-to-face interactions with others, I name the self conceived online under the influence of the "E Audience" the "digital self." The digital self is constructed solely through online interaction without the intervention of nonverbal feedback and the influence of traditional environmental factors. As such, the study of the digital self will contribute to our understanding of the processes through which linguistic communications affect the formation of personal identities.

However, it must be noted at the outset that in practice it would be impossible to separate the digital self from other aspects of a person's self-repository. The self is an integrated structure that constantly evolves. To say that there is a "digital self" is not to suggest that a person's self is actually split into physical and digital parts, but to acknowledge the salience of the impact of the "E-Audience" on the formation of self in the Internet medium. For the purpose of the analysis being conducted here, the digital self is treated as if it were a separate entity so that the unique influence of others in telecopresence on self-formation can be better highlighted.

The digital self that teenagers come to acquire through interactions with disembodied others in the anonymous online world can be described as (1) inwardly oriented, (2) narrative in nature, (3) retractable, and (4) multiplied. These four characteristics of the digital self are explained in turn below.

### Inwardly Oriented

The self is a complex structure that consists of many components and dimensions. Rosenberg's research (1986) has differentiated between "social exterior" and

“psychological interior” in self-conceptions. The social exterior of the self pertains to the externally visible aspects of an individual, which include such attributes as height, weight, color, clothes, and behaviors; the psychological interior of the self, on the other hand, pertains to the less palpable internal world of thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and wishes. Rosenberg found that in the early years of childhood an individual tends to focus on the social exterior of the self; upon reaching adolescence, an individual starts to turn inward, paying more attention to the psychological interior of the self.

More specifically, adolescents tend to say that those who know them best know “what I’m really like,” “the real me,” “how I feel deep down inside when I’m hurt,” “what I really mean.” Particularly prominent are references to emotional states. The knowledgeable other understands our deeper feelings: “they know if I’m happy or not,” “my feelings,” “that I worry a lot,” “can tell when I’m sad or when something is wrong,” “know my feelings can be hurt easily.” (Rosenberg 1986:197)

However, “knowledgeable others” are relatively few in the offline world, for it is hard and often embarrassing for a person to confide his/her innermost thoughts and feelings to others in a face-to-face situation. One may lose control over one’s emotions, or freeze up when others lose theirs. Furthermore, revealing too much of one’s inner world makes one vulnerable and thereby runs the risk of being taken advantage of. In comparison, “knowledgeable others” are more easily found in the online world, as people appear to be more willing to bare their souls to others in telecopresence. There are several reasons for this. First, people believe that the disembodied text mode in which they communicate with each other in the online world ensures anonymity. Second, because they are able to conceal their offline identities in telecopresence, individuals feel that they can share with others their private thoughts without losing privacy. The possibility of revealing oneself while remaining unseen encourages teenagers to open up their inner world to others through what is known as “self-disclosure”:

Fairly intimate self-disclosure occurs frequently during the first private channel interaction with an individual, and for the most part, the participants ask and respond easily to questions that, if put to them on such short notice in “real life,” could be taken as offensive. . . . channel members might confide personal problems or issues with which they are dealing. Within the culture of internet relay chat (IRC), these types of interactions can only be considered natural. (Surratt 1998:114)

The digital self is therefore more oriented toward one’s inner world, focusing on thoughts, feelings, and personalities, than one’s outer world, focusing on height, weight, and looks. Needless to say, this does not mean that individuals in cyberspace are no longer interested in overt personal characteristics. As a matter of fact, it has been found that when interacting with others in telecopresence, people always conjure an image of what others look like based on the bits and pieces of information gleaned from the disembodied text messages (Stone 1992). These mental projections, often idealized, can help maintain a relationship that might not be able to survive in corporeal copresence.

## Narrative in Nature

In the world of corporeal copresence, we rarely need to describe to others how we look as they can see for themselves, nor do we need to tell others what we are because they will come to know us over time. As such, we tend to take our self for granted in face-to-face interaction. This is not the case in the online world, however. When interacting with telecopresent others, especially those we have never met face to face, we are obliged to provide some type of self-description. The reason is simple: in text-based online communications we are nothing until we type at the keyboard and others do not know us unless we tell them something. In the process of narrating to others who we are and what we do, the digital self begins to take shape.

In this sense, the digital self is what Thompson (1995:210) calls a “symbolic project” that an individual actively constructs in working out a coherent “narrative of self-identity”:

To recount to ourselves or others who we are is to retell the narratives—which are continuously modified in the process of retelling—of how we got to where we are and of where we are going from here. We are all the unofficial biographers of ourselves, for it is only by constructing a story, however loosely strung together, that we are able to form a sense of who we are and of what our future may be.

Telling telecopresent others who we are therefore requires a level of introspection and reflectivity that is not normally exercised in the realm of face-to-face interaction.<sup>6</sup> It is a process in which we take a careful look at ourselves and seek to articulate solely in words what we see about ourselves that we would like others to know (including what we would like others to believe about ourselves even if it is not there). This reflexive process can become challenging and even frightening at times. Below is a perceptive observation by a student who was attempting to create, for the first time, a weblog for herself:

At first I found it difficult to fill in information on my profile regarding areas of expertise, or even hobbies. I suppose I am not often confronted with situations where I need to describe myself to total strangers. I found the process to be intimidating, leaving me to feel somewhat exposed and vulnerable.<sup>7</sup>

Self-description or introduction takes different forms in the online world. In online chat and instant messaging, for example, self-description begins with the selection of a “screen name” for oneself. A screen name serves as an indicator of what a person claims to be. In the same way that an individual dresses him or herself in the offline world, a screen name generates a “first impression” of a person on others. As Waskul has written (2003:41), “Without physical presence, screen names become the only initial means by which chat participants can communicate qualities of selfhood that are normally observed, discerned by social cues, or acquired through knowledge of the person.” In the online world, it is quite common for people to use more than one screen name. According to the findings of the Pew Internet and

American Life Project in 2000 (Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis 2001), 56 percent of online teens have more than one e-mail address or screen name, and almost a quarter of boys and one in five girls have more than four online identities. It seems apparent that teenagers are using multiple screen names to compartmentalize their presence in the online world so that they can try out or experiment with different versions of their self. Self-description also comes in the form of self-posted “personal profiles” on listservs, homepages, and weblogs. These autobiographical narratives allow individuals to craft a self in a more careful, elaborate, and coherent manner. By choosing distinctive screen names for themselves and telling interesting personal stories to others, teenagers in cyberspace come to acquire a stable and meaningful self.

### Retractable

In corporeal copresence, the self is constrained by the body that contains it. One’s body is not one’s self, but one’s self cannot exist in separation from one’s body. As such, once it is formed, our self follows us around like a shadow. Even after we as a person have changed, it takes time for others to change their attitudes toward us. In many situations, the only effective way to shake off an established self is to relocate to a new place where we rebuild our self by interacting with a totally different group of others.

In the online world, however, a given version of one’s self can be erased relatively easily. The digital self constructed online is detached from the corporeal body which, in Goffman’s research (1959), serves as the “peg” on which the self is hung in face-to-face interaction. The separation of the self from the body in telecopresence allows individuals to remain unidentified, thus making it possible for them to retract an undesirable self and build a new one without resorting to physical relocation and social uprooting. This proves to be a desirable attribute, for it enables teenagers to “cycle through” multiple versions of their self in the online world while avoiding potential punitive repercussions. As Tapscott points out in his research (1998:92),

Self-esteem also seems to be enhanced in chat groups because kids can always have another chance—they can adopt another self. In the real world, children can be labeled or isolated early in life and take years to shake it off. You may remember someone in your class who was characterized as a nerd, nose-picker, fatty, or creep—or you may have been that person. A nasty nickname can take years to shake. In cyberspace, if the child doesn’t like how he has been characterized, he can adopt a new identity. The other children forget about the old creep and you’ve got a new self.

Of course, retracting a self, either online or offline, comes with a price. Attached to a self is not only the time and energy one has invested in building it, but also a set of relationships that sustain one’s social existence. To retract a self is to abandon all the resources that are associated with it. It is true that the loss is relatively insignificant to those teenagers who treat their online construction of self merely as a playful

“identity game,” but the impact may not be so negligible to those who take their online identities seriously.

### Multiplied

Multiplicity in self is a reflection of multiplicity in society. In the traditional society, homogeneous communities exhibit a unified collective attitude that fosters a more unitary self in children. Modern societies expose people at an early age to the influence of different ideas, beliefs, and practices, which result in the conception of multiple selves in an individual. The advent of the Internet removes the barriers of physical distance, bringing the dazzling diversity of the entire world to anyone who has access to the World Wide Web. The incursion of cyberspace into the lifeworld of young people in the Internet era creates a type of self that has been described as “decentered, dispersed, and multiplied in continuous instability” (Poster 1990:6). As Lipton’s study (1996:343) describes,

When the construction of the self happens online in cyberspace, as is occurring at an increasingly rapid rate, taking the attitude of the other becomes awfully complex. It is not just me and my mom anymore. But it is also not just me and my family, or me and my community. Without fixed and distinct communities, the range of potential interactions becomes infinite. These are, after all, so many “others,” so many unique identities to choose from. . . . Consequently, there will be no fixed self, but multiple selves, and identity will be further fragmented with each interaction in cyberspace.

However, this appears to be just part of the picture. It is probably true that the Internet has made “the entire world” available at our fingertips, but what is also happening is that most of us go online only to look for what we want to find and filter out what we are not interested in. We are doing this partly because there is simply too much to be seen and partly because we are more free to choose what we like in the online world. The overflow of information combined with the greater freedom of personal choice works to create a self-selected online environment conducive to the formation of a digital self that is more insulated than its offline counterpart.

Self-selection is a prevailing phenomenon in the online world. In instant messaging, for example, teenagers use the “buddy list” to include people they would like to hang out with, and use the “block” function to exclude people they do not want to talk to. In online chat, channel names are instrumental in helping people decide which channels to enter and which channels to stay away from. Once in a chat room, people use the “public channel” to screen for those they can relate to and switch to the “private channel” to hold intimate discussions with them. It is not uncommon to find the public domain of a crowded chat channel virtually empty, with most of the conversations being conducted in “private rooms” among people who like and perhaps also are like one another. In addition to being able to seek out like-minded individuals for one-to-one contact, people can form cyber-groups or online communities that consist of only individuals of the same kind. For example,

people can establish listservs that only allow authorized individuals to sign up, and they can create web pages that only designated members can subscribe to. Even personal weblogs can be connected to form "blog rings" according to shared interests. Thus, in contrast to face-to-face interactions in the offline world which are often constrained by spatial and institutional arrangements that are not of one's own choice,

[w]hat computer-mediated communication adds is a greater capacity to avoid public interaction of the kind that would pull one beyond one's immediate personal choices of taste and culture. Discussion groups may transcend the spatial community, but they do so precisely by linking people with similar interests, not by forging links among people sharply different from one another. (Calhoun 1998:385)

Such a capacity to look for and bring together the like-minded on the Internet has contributed to the homogenization of the others one interacts with in the different domains of the online world. Putnam's work (2000:178), for example, has noted that, compared to the offline world, "the virtual world may be more homogeneous, not in demographic terms, but in terms of interest and outlook." Lack of diversity in the appraisals of those with whom one interacts invariably results in the formation of a self that is less "de-centered." The freedom to go where we want to go and be with whom we want to be with may therefore counterbalance the impact of anonymity on self-construction in the online world. Even though anonymity and disembodiment encourage teenagers to experiment with multiple versions of their self, the homogeneity of the attitudes of the like-minded people teenagers choose to interact with in telecopresence may in the end make the resulting digital self more insulated than those formed in corporeal copresence.

## CONCLUSION

What happens to the formation of self in the online world? Can people we do not know in person affect how we think of ourselves? Does lacking nonverbal cues from others in telecopresence change the looking glass in which we see ourselves? The present study has provided some preliminary answers to these questions. Analyses of the online experience of teenagers have shown that telecopresent others in the online world do constitute a unique looking glass which generates a digital self that is different from the self constructed offline. The digital self has been found to be oriented inward, narrative in nature, retractable, and multiplied. The digital self is oriented inward toward the world of thoughts and feelings because others cannot see our overt attributes; it is narrative in nature because others come to know us primarily on the basis of what we tell them; it is retractable because others are unable to link our online self-claims to our offline identities; and, finally, it is multiplied because others interact with us in different domains of the online world. As is true in corporeal copresence, those we interact with in telecopresence affect how we perceive ourselves; furthermore, the ways in which we interact with others also play a part in determining the outcome of our self-conception.

Loss of nonverbal cues from others in telecopresence does not prevent us from validating our self-claims. Even though others cannot be physically seen online, people tend to believe that “you can always tell after you’ve talked to them [online] long enough” (Surratt 1998:117). A mental image of the others will emerge from mere plain text exchanges and the digital self arises in consequence. The disembodied online environment provides a unique situation in which the self is constructed solely through linguistic forms. Consistent with the looking-glass perspective, the present study has shown that nonverbal expressions are important, but not necessary, for self-formation, as our sense of self is based primarily on what we believe others think of us, rather than on what others actually think of us. Even in corporeal copresence, discrepancies exist between a person’s self-view and the views others hold of that person (Rosenberg 1986). In telecopresence, such discrepancies may become more pronounced due to the absence of nonverbal cues, but the strength of the association between our self-views and our perceptions of the views others hold of us must be similar to those in corporeal copresence.

Anonymity in the online world appears to work in two different ways. On the one hand, the use of aliases or pseudonyms tends to turn online interactions into playful identity games, which are “employed for fleeting, ‘fun’ relationships that hold little consequences in the ‘real’ lives of the teens who engage in them beyond self-gratification” (Clark 1998:180). This happens mostly to those teenagers whose main purpose of going online is to have fun. On the other hand, anonymity makes it easier for people to develop online intimacy and trust through opening themselves up to one another. Offline strangers, for example, may become online soul mates and influence each other in the construction of self. Anonymous online chat, therefore, can be an integral part of the process of self-formation.

It must be mentioned that, although the principle of the looking-glass self is applicable to people of all ages, telecopresent others may affect teenagers more than adults, as teenagers are yet to form a stable view of themselves and thus are more susceptible to the influence of others. As such, it may be true that adults participate in online role-play games mostly for the purpose of self-presentation, and teenagers mostly for the purpose of self-experimentation. Yet, in the sense that the self is a symbolic project to be worked on throughout one’s life, others, acting as our “looking glass,” always have an impact on our self-perception regardless of whether we are teenagers or adults.

The results of the present study also have implications for some broad issues regarding the nature of the self. The main research questions for this study were formulated on the basic premise that we come to see ourselves as we believe others see us. This well-known “looking-glass” principle has been a cornerstone of the symbolic interactionist theory of the self. Opposing the notion that the self is something given at birth or something an individual freely creates, symbolic interactionists regard the self as an outcome of social interaction in which the appraisals of others come to influence the conception of self. Upon taking shape, the self becomes an internal force that guides an individual’s dealings with others. However, this interac-

tionist perspective has recently been challenged by postmodern critics who argue that there can be no true self residing inside an individual (Hall 1996). Following Foucault's argument about discourse and power, many postmodernists reject not only the notion of an authentic personal identity but also the concept of a knowledgeable and agentic actor. As such, "much of the postmodern scholarship assumes a radical anti-essentialism that rejects on philosophical grounds the very concept of self" (Callero 2003:116).

According to Callero's work (2003), there is a need to develop a new sociological understanding of the self that draws from both interactionist and postmodern viewpoints. The case of the digital self appears to shed some light on the possibility of such a convergence. As a product of pure linguistic manipulations, the digital self illustrates the power of language and discourse, and the ease with which individuals change their online identities attests to the fluidity and inconstancy of the self. It can be argued, however, in opposition to the view of post-structuralism, that the self is created not by discourse, but by individuals through discourse. The digital self arises in the context of telecopresent interaction among individuals who are also situated in the world of corporeal copresence. Furthermore, the fluidity of the digital self does not mean that the self is inherently transient and unstable; rather, it reflects the fact that social relationships change more often and more quickly in the online world. In a society where there is little change, for example, the self will remain largely constant. Finally, even in the online world where the self is multiplied and in great flux, some personal claims are more true or real than other ones, for the authenticity of an identity claim can, in most instances, be evaluated if the specific context of interaction is revealed.

Another related issue concerns the distinction between self-conception and self-presentation. Although they are essentially two aspects of the same process—individuals present to others the self they are conceiving and come to conceive the self they are presenting to others—there are important differences between the two. First, self-conception and self-presentation involve two different sets of cognitive and interpersonal skills: while perceptiveness is required of both activities, deceptiveness usually comes with the latter. Second, the conception of self takes place in a broader social context that includes not only the significant others in the present and past environments but also the generalized others in the larger society. The presentation of self, on the other hand, almost always takes place in a specific situation of the present time. Third and perhaps most important, the self conceived is not always the same as the self presented. The conceived self is a product of social interaction in different domains of the social world and over the entire course of one's life, whereas the presented self is an outcome of one's interaction with specific others in specific situations. These differences show that a good understanding of the self-construction process requires knowledge of both self-conception and self-presentation.

Finally, the results of this study regarding the effect of telecopresent others on the conception of self in teenagers have practical implications for parents, teachers,

and other agents of socialization. As has been shown, the Internet is not just a new source of information and a new form of entertainment, it is also a new domain of social interaction. The addition of this emergent social domain to the life-world of teenagers has altered the ways in which young people make the transition from adolescence into adulthood, and the long-term societal effect of such alteration remains to be known. The study of the formation of the digital self in teenagers in telecopresence is only a beginning step toward a better understanding of the changing dynamics of socialization in the Internet era.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank the four anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Simon Gottschalk, editor of *Symbolic Interaction*, for his understanding, encouragement, and guidance.

## NOTES

1. To say that we come to see ourselves as others see us does not mean that our self-views are thus a carbon copy of the views others hold of us. As Cooley's work ([1902] 1964) pointed out, we see ourselves in the attitudes *we believe* others hold toward us. It is therefore our perceptions of what others think of us, rather than what others actually think of us, that affect how we think of ourselves.
2. With the increasing use of the Web cam and Web mike attached to the computer and providing live images and voices, people are able to engage in less anonymous interactions on the Internet. However, plain-text exchanges still dominate the online domains where anonymity is preferred.
3. Of course, telecopresent interaction is not completely region-free. During a telephone conversation, for example, an individual may seek to suppress the television sound or the laughter of a friend that arises in the background. Likewise, in the course of a videoconference, participants may choose to keep certain objects out of the camera range. These are analogous to back-region behaviors in face-to-face interaction, except that in telecopresent interaction the line between front and back regions is blurred to a greater extent.
4. Whether *we think* we know others and whether we in fact know them are two separate issues. In a way, we rarely know for sure what others really are even in face-to-face situations. The same is also true in the online world. The person who claims to be one's brother may in fact be one's sister, and a picture one sees online may bear no resemblance to the person it is supposed to represent, but that never stops us from judging and interacting with others based on what we believe they are.
5. Here, we only look at the social realm in which direct interactions with other people become possible. As such, "para-social" domains such as mass media (e.g., books, newspapers, radio, and television) are excluded from examination in this study.
6. It must be noted that self-presentation through writing exists not just on the Internet but also offline through communication by surface mail. In both instances, individuals interact with others in a disembodied text environment. However, there are important differences between the two: while letter correspondence, always asynchronous and one-to-one, takes place mostly between acquaintances, online communication, which can be synchronous as well as asynchronous and one-to-one as well as many-to-many, may take place exclusively among strangers. These differences affect the ways in which people interact with one another in the text-based environments.
7. This comment was taken from a research paper a student wrote for my class on Internet and Human Interaction.

## REFERENCES

- Altheide, David L. 2000. "Identity and the Definition of the Situation in a Mass-Mediated Context." *Symbolic Interaction* 23(1):1–27.
- . 2002. "Toward a Mapping of the Mass Media and the 'E Audience,'" Pp. 41–62 in *Post-modern Existential Sociology*, edited by J. A. Kotarba and J. M. Johnson. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Doubleday.
- Calhoun, Craig. 1998. "Community without Propinquity Revisited: Communications Technology and the Transformation of the Urban Public Sphere." *Sociological Inquiry* 68:373–97.
- Callero, Peter L. 2003. "The Sociology of the Self." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29:115–33.
- Chesebro, James W. 1985. "Computer-Mediated Interpersonal Communication." Pp. 202–22 in *Information and Behavior Volume I*, edited by B. D. Ruben. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Clark, Lynn S. 1998. "Dating on the Net: Teens and the Rise of 'Pure Relationships.'" Pp. 159–83 in *Cyberspace 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, edited by S. G. Jones. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cooley, Charles. [1902] 1964. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York, NY: Scribner's.
- Cowlan, Bert. 1979. "A Revolution in Personal Communications: The Explosive Growth of Citizens Band Radio." Pp. 116–21 in *Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communication in a Media World*, edited by G. Gumpert and R. Cathcart. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. 2001. *On the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Erikson, Erik H. 1959. "Identity and the Life Cycle." *Psychological Issues* 1:18–164.
- Galbo, Joseph J. and Diana Mayer-Demetrius. 1996. "Recollections of Nonparental Significant Adults during Childhood and Adolescence." *Youth and Society* 27:403–20.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "Who Needs 'Identity'?" Pp. 1–17 in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by S. Hall and P. Du Gay. London: Sage.
- Harter, Susan. 1999. *The Construction of the Self: A Developmental Perspective*. New York: Guilford.
- Koku, Emmanuel, Nancy Nazer, and Barry Wellman. 2001. "Netting Scholars: Online and Offline." *American Behavioral Scientist* 44(10):1752–74.
- Lenhart, Amanda, Mary Madden, and Paul Hitlin. 2005. "Teens and Technology." Available online at: [www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Teens\\_Tech\\_July2005web.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Tech_July2005web.pdf).
- Lenhart, Amanda, Lee Rainie, and Oliver Lewis. 2001. "Teenage Life Online: The Rise of the Instant-Message Generation and the Internet's Impact on Friendships and Family Relationships." Available online at: [www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP\\_Teens\\_Report.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Report.pdf).
- Lipton, Mark. 1996. "Forgetting the Body: Cybersex and Identity." Pp. 335–49 in *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*, edited by L. Strate, R. Jacobson, and S. B. Gibson. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Markham, Annette. 1998. *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Mead, George H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pool, Ithiel de Sola, ed. 1977. *The Social Impact of the Telephone*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Poster, Mark. 1990. *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Reid, Elizabeth. 1995. "Virtual Worlds: Culture and Imagination." Pp. 164–93 in *Cybersociety*, edited by S. G. Jones. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rheingold, Howard. 1995. *The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World*. London: Secker & Wargurg.
- Rosenberg, Morris. 1986. *Conceiving the Self*. Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger.

- Schutz, Alfred and Thomas Luckmann. 1973. *The Structure of the Life World*. Vol.1. Translated by R. Zaner and H. T. Engelhardt, Jr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Simmel, George. 1973. *George Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*. Edited by Donald N. Levine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Snider, Michael. 2003. "The Intimacy of Blogs." *Maclean's* 116(37):40.
- Sproul, Lee and Sara Kiesler. 1991. *Connections: New Ways of Working in the Networked Organization*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Steinberg, Laurence. 1996. *Adolescence*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Stone, Allucquere R. 1992. "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures," Pp. 81–118 in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, edited by M. Benedikt. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Surratt, Carla. G. 1998. *Netlife: Internet Citizens and their Communities*. New York: Nova Science.
- Tapscott, Don. 1998. *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Thompson, John B. 1995. *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Turkle, Sherry. 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Waskul, Dennis D. 2003. *Self-Games and Body-Play: Personhood in Online Chat and Cybersex*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Zhao, Shanyang. 2003. "Toward a Taxonomy of Copresence." *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 12(5):445–55.
- . 2004. "Consociated Contemporaries as an Emergent Realm of the Lifeworld: Extending Schutz's Phenomenological Analysis to Cyberspace." *Human Studies* 27(1):91–105.