

# Online Life and Gender Vagueness and Impersonation

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## INTRODUCTION

### Impersonation and Gender Categories

Gender is not always immediately obvious online and this has excited interest from early on (e.g., Bruckman, 1993; Curtis, 1997). Sometimes, people have drawn extreme conclusions from this vagueness. For example, Mark Poster (1997) suggests that "one may experience directly the opposite gender by assuming it and enacting it in conversations" (p. 223). McRae (1996) writes, "mind and body, female and male, gay and straight, don't seem to be such natural oppositions anymore ... The reason for this is simple: in virtual reality, you are whoever you say you are" (p. 245). Such statements imply that gender is simply a voluntary and unconstrained conscious performance. Other writers have concluded that such identity vagueness allows, or enhances, the formation of postmodern decentred or multiple selves (Kolko & Reid, 1998; Turkle, 1995).

These arguments suggest that, when online, people are free of off-line conventions, restrictions, and power dynamics, and can experience hidden aspects of themselves, or create themselves, through an act of will and performance. Frequently, these positions are surrounded by a conflicting moral discourse, either suggesting that the Internet promotes freedom and true self-expression, or that it promotes bad faith and betrayal.

However, easy voluntarism may not be common in practise. Although it is possible that people may present new identities, the categories they use and present within can remain unchallenged and may even intensify. After her praise of voluntarism, McRae (1996) points out that if someone plays a woman and wants to "attract partners as 'female' [they] must craft a description within the realm of what is considered attractive" (p. 250). Schaap (1999) likewise remarks on the relatively "strict

rules on what constitutes a convincing female character and what a convincing male character." So, although the gender of the person online may not match their gender off-line, the gender they choose usually exaggerates the conventions of attractive or good gender construction. As Kendall (1996) writes, "choosing one gender or another does nothing to change the expectations attached to particular gender identifications" (p. 217). Even if gender is simply a matter of performance, people will not experience life as the other gender or class does because they have to indicate which category they are impersonating via conventions, and thus tend to experience cliché, and reaction to cliché, rather than normal complexity.

On MOOs (MUD [multiuser domain] object oriented), where Netsex can be important in reducing the ambiguities of presence and sustaining relationships, most women and men are adorned with an excess of the symbolism and roles of the gender and sexual discourse they participate within, and this may reinforce ideals of gender difference (Marshall, 2003). This seems to be the case even when people portray themselves as nonhuman. As an example of this supposed variance, McRae (1996) quotes a player on a kind of MOO in which people present themselves as anthropomorphic animals, saying there is a form of sex in which "the submissive partner is eaten at climax ... [B]ears and wolves are usually dominant. Foxes are sorta generally lecherous. Elves are sexless and annoyingly clever. Small animals are often very submissive" (p. 248). Even here, the relationship of size, bulk, aggression, and strength to dominance is not far from conventional constructions of male and female.

This requirement to indicate gender by conventional referents may also lead people to portray their off-line gender in conventional terms as well. Clark (1998) notes this clichéd gender emphasis in her study of online teenage dating, while Herring (2000)

writes that she “found that nearly 90% of all gendered behavior in six IRC [Internet relay chat] channels indexed maleness and femaleness in traditional, even stereotyped ways; instances of gender switching constituted less than half of the remaining 10%.” Conventions can also provide debate on women-only groups, where people can only be identified as female by their feminine behaviour unless they are checked by known links off-line.

As it is possible to ignore the gender of those who contradict our expectations of gender, those expectations may grow stronger for not being challenged.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Betrayal**

In tandem with ideas of identity flexibility is the narrative that online life is full of cross-gender impersonation, and that as a result, interactions are potentially hedged with betrayal and disillusion (cf. Kolko & Reid, 1998).

These common narratives apparently contradict each other. If gender is so unimportant to online life, then why is impersonation such a source of anxiety and distress? The problem arises partly because life online is not separated from life off-line, and people commonly act as if the online needs verification by the off-line, where gender is important to the ways that people relate and the expectations people have of each other. These verification patterns are usually asymmetric; the off-line, which is more private or hidden, will usually be assumed to be true if it contradicts the online or more public sphere.

In general, it is the impersonation of women by men that causes anxiety, not the other way round, irrespective of whether the impersonation occurs amongst males or females, and this needs to be explained. Innocence of intention is rarely presumed. In a famous case, Van Gelder (1996) describes a male who was once mistaken for a woman by another woman who was “open in a way that stunned him.” He then deliberately embraced a female persona, became intimate with many women, and helped them with their problems. When this was discovered, some of the women involved considered it violative. Van Gelder asks “why a man has to put on electronic drag to experience intimacy, trust and

sharing” (p. 546). However, this performer had constructed an elaborate fictional biography and engaged in Netsex with others before marrying an equally fictional off-line husband. Eventually the man, as himself, tried to make friends with his character’s friends but failed. After the truth came out, only a few friendships carried over, with at least some of those who remained friends trying to see the similarities between the fiction and the persona (Stone, 1995). The case indicates that people may not wish to engage in intimate contact with a person who is not as they present themselves, contrary to the voluntarist or postmodernist argument.

### **Conventions of Identification**

People online seem largely confident that they can identify a person’s real off-line gender by that person’s habits or styles of conversation. These identifiers are derived from customs based on off-line gender expectations. One such expectation is that women tend to use lots of emoticons to indicate or express emotional states as Western English-speaking female discourse is supposed to be more emotional, or deferential, than that of males, and some research has found greater emoticon use to occur (Witmer & Katzman, 1998). Aggressive or argumentative behaviour is usually considered a mark of masculinity.

Other methods of divining gender include discussing the kinds of things an off-line person of that gender could be expected to know. This often translates into some kind of product knowledge, such as panty-hose or ring sizes, for example (Suler, 1999), and does not always translate well across different cultures. Some reports indicate that people will read books on gender differences in speech use, either to improve their ability to identify a person’s gender or to impersonate the other gender better (Wright, 2000).

When people apply gender-neutral pronouns to themselves, for example, in *spivak*, other people will not generally assume that they really are gender neutral or that their gender is a matter for privacy, and they will often try and find out what their real gender is (Kendall, 1996). Some researchers have reported that people who maintain vagueness about their real gender are “generally ‘dropped’ from the interaction” (O’Brien, 1999, p. 90). So, there can be

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