


Chapter 3


The Digital Mask as Identity, Anonymity, and Behavior in the Online World

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ABSTRACT

The mask is one of humanity's oldest cultural artifacts, long used in ritual, theater, and carnival to mediate transformation, concealment, and revelation. In the digital age, the mask has migrated into virtual environments, where avatars, pseudonyms, curated profiles, and anonymous forums function as digital masks. Unlike traditional masks, digital ones are persistent, searchable, and networked, leaving traces that endure well beyond their intended context. The digital mask offers a powerful lens for understanding identity, anonymity, and behavior online. It is not simply deception but a necessary element of digital life. Masks can liberate or constrain, protect or endanger, depending on the social and technological context. The challenge for individuals and communities is to design technologies, norms, and policies that preserve the protective and creative capacities of digital masks while mitigating their destructive potential. The essential question is not whether we will wear masks in digital life, but under what conditions, for whose benefit, and at whose expense.

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INTRODUCTION: WEARING MASKS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The mask is among the oldest human inventions. Across cultures, masks mediated ritual, performance, and play, serving as devices of transformation, concealment, and revelation. In sacred ceremonies, they allowed dancers to embody gods or spirits. In theatre, they signalled archetypes and emotions, bridging the gap between actor and audience. In carnival, they enabled temporary reversals of hierarchy, freeing peasants to mock nobles and women to parody men (Le Bon, 1895/2002). The mask has always been double-edged: liberating but destabilizing, protective but dangerous.

Today, the mask has migrated to digital space. Avatars, pseudonyms, censored profiles, encrypted channels, and anonymous forums function as *digital masks*. They shield individuals from exposure, enable exploration of self, and create distance between actor and act (Goffman, 1959). Yet they also provide cover for incivility, deception, and harm (Christopherson, 2007). Unlike traditional masks, digital ones are persistent, searchable, and networked—leaving traces that endure beyond their intended context (Nissenbaum, 2019).

This chapter examines the *digital mask* as both metaphor and analytical lens. It traces its cultural roots, explores its psychological and social functions, and analyzes its ethical and political stakes. Above all, it emphasizes ambivalence: the digital mask is neither inherently liberating nor inherently corrupting, but an amplifier of human motives shaped by platform architectures and cultural norms (Marwick & boyd, 2018).

The Cultural Roots of the Mask

To grasp the novelty of digital masks, we must first recognize their continuity with history.

Ritual Transformation: In ancient societies, masks were portals to the sacred. West African ceremonies and Native American rituals used masks to embody spirits, collapsing the boundary between human and divine. Wearing a mask transformed the self into something larger. Online, pseudonyms and avatars play a similar role, allowing people to step outside embodied identities and experiment with new selves—gendered, ideological, or fantastical (Floridi, 2016).

Theatrical Performance: In Greek theater, masks exaggerated expressions and facilitated role shifts. In Japanese Noh, subtle changes in mask angle conveyed shifting emotions. Digital masks operate comparably: LinkedIn personas, gaming avatars, and pseudonymous handles enable role-playing across contexts. They are not lies but performances, vehicles for expression and storytelling (Goffman, 1959).

Carnival Inversion: Medieval carnival masks temporarily upended order, granting license to mock authority (Le Bon, 1895/2002). Similarly, anonymous online

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