



Gender Pretender, Who's the Sender?

Elisabeth Rackham

Abstract.

This dissertation was undertaken due to the researcher's interest in internet chat rooms and identity construction. The current study attempts to examine the role of gender in the relationships individuals have regarding regular internet use. This research used a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to identify reasons why and the sorts of people that liberate themselves from their gendered identities in cyberspace.

Previous studies have emphasised the fragmented nature of our identities both on and offline. Gender-switching is an important but relatively unexplored aspect of internet use that explores this. Past research has related gender-switching to issues of power, control, sexuality and the body, which are themes that contribute to the concluding discussion.

Findings suggested that people gender-switch online because: they are able to explore the fragmented nature of their identities; they experience some of the power that comes with becoming a member of the opposite sex; they have a great deal of control whilst in cyberspace and experiment with this control; the absence of the physical body makes it possible for people to gender-switch and the people that are most likely to gender-switch are cross-dressers. The findings generally concluded that in cyberspace, people can liberate themselves from their gendered identities, despite some discussion into the constraints that occur.

The Internet and Social Interactions.

The Internet has become a huge phenomenon in our contemporary lives and has resulted in the advent of CMC (Computer Mediated Communication). Perhaps we can even go as far to say that these new ways of interacting have produced a new type of self; the *electronic self* (Stone, 1991, in Miller, 2005:1). A central theme in studies of internet interactions is the impact that it has on our identities and social interactions. Theorists across many disciplines believe that the Internet can allow people to essentially be who they want online. This is due to a lack of physical presence and subsequent visual anonymity, which Joinson refers to as "lack of identifiability" (2003:23). Turkle links this idea of identity changing to gender and shows how difficult it is to do this in the physical world:

“For a man to present himself as female in a chat room...only requires writing a description. For a man to play a woman on the streets of an American city, he would have to shave various parts of his body; wear make-up, perhaps a wig, a dress, and high heels; perhaps change his voice, walk and mannerisms” (1996:212).

The opportunity we are given to change or play with our Identities in internet chat rooms is an aspect of the Internet that is fascinating and is believed to implant major implications on the construction of the newly formed self.

“It has changed (and is changing) the way we remember, the way we interact, the way we imagine, and the way we think. As a result, it may be changing the nature of who we are” (Rolfe, 2004:1).

This study aims to explore the potential reasons and the type of people that choose to liberate themselves from their identities in internet chat rooms, with particular reference to gender. Internet chat rooms will be used as the main source of CMC in this study. MSN messenger, MUDs, LambdaMoos and news-rooms are just some of the chat rooms that can be found online (See glossary in appendix I for explanations of these concepts).

Liberation from gendered identities or gender-switching will be the focus of this study. Gender-switching refers to people who present a gender that is different from their biological sex (Roberts & Parks, 1999). Gender-switching is just one way in which we can experiment with our identities online, yet the extent to which it is a success is debatable. Our identity is made up from biologically determined aspects of the body and social aspects of our self, which is determined by the social, cultural and economic features of our environment. Gender is an aspect of our identity that portrays this.

“Gender, like identity, is simultaneously internal and external to the person. It is deeply implicated in the composition of self-identity, affecting personal conceptions of social identities of womanhood or manhood” (Byrne, 2003:445).

Thus, the research question shall be focused on the debate around why and who are the most likely people to free themselves from their gendered identities in cyberspace. For the purpose of this project, web-cams will not be taken into account as an aspect of internet interactions because this opens up a totally new branch of research, whereby anonymity is not such an issue.

The research question shall be: Why do people liberate themselves from their gendered identities in internet chat rooms and who is most likely to do this?

To facilitate an in depth understanding on the topic of gender-switching and the internet, my aims will be:

- To explore how popular gender-switching online is for students
- To identify the reasons why people gender-switch online

- To gain an understanding of the sorts of people that gender-switch
- To compare Internet interactions and face-to face interactions, with reference to identity
- To assess how easy is it for people to be someone they are not online, with particular reference to gender

Essentially, the key points that this study will focus on is; gender-switching, internet chat rooms and identity.

A Theoretical Framework: Identity

Identity, in the context of this project will be taken as the way in which people represent themselves in certain communities. Giese recognises communities as a determinant of the identity that we portray.

“The communities individuals find themselves in play a large role in identity formation” (1998:9).

These communities can be found in real life and virtual situations. The differences between these are the tools used for self-presentation and context-building, however the social contexts are very similar (Giese, 1998). Identities in face-to-face interactions need to be understood in order to provide a base to compare virtual identities to. Symbolic interactionists, such as Mead (1967) and Goffman (1959) focus on physical world interactions and have an important contribution to play in the identity debate, because identity is used to develop their understanding of human behaviour. Their main interests are to implement meaning towards people’s actions. They try to establish where actions derive from or derive out of and attempt to interpret how and why people deal with things that they encounter in human interactions (Blumer, 1969b, in Ritzer & Smart, 2001). Within this identity debate, it will become clearer why gender-switching on the internet occurs.

Fluid Identities?

One way to explore identity is to debate whether or not our identities are fixed or fluid. Most theorists point to the idea that identities are fluid or ‘flexible’ as they are otherwise known (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1967; Giese, 1998). Mead (1967) emphasises the fluidity of our identities by distinguishing between the ‘Me,’ which is the self that we believe other people to see us as and the ‘I’, which is the self as an actor (Baldwin, 1986:115). This portrays the idea that we act out different identities all the time. Similarly, Bargh et al distinguishes between the ‘actual self’ and the ‘true self.’ The ‘actual’ self refers to characteristics that people are supposed to actually possess, whereas the ‘true self’ is based on characteristics that people feel they can not portray to others, despite the fact that they have them (2002:37). Goffman relates these fluid identities to ‘performance’s’ that occur in the physical world.

“A ‘performance’ may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way of the other participants” (1959:26).

Thus people's behaviour is determined by whether or not other people are present, so we can therefore be seen as 'actors.' Goffman also imputes deviant manipulation into the mix: "His audience is also convinced in this way about the show he puts on - and this seems to be the typical case" (1959:28). This suggests that it is easy to act out different identities in real-life situations. It would therefore seem that changing of identity is not just exclusive to CMC. Giese supports this argument through his claim:

"Text based constructions of personal identity are governed in much the same way as self-representation is in RL...They must be taken at "face value" in the same way they are in RL" (Giese, 1998:10).

So, assuming that we do have 'fluid' identities in the virtual and physical world, the next step is to explore how we use these identities. We can interchange different parts of our identities in order to fit into all sorts of social situations. Goffman (1959) acknowledges the importance of 'setting' to identity formations, which implies that we can only play out particular identities in certain places. This idea is also extended by Mead who instead emphasises our identities as being 'people dependent.'

"We are one thing to one man and another thing to another...We divide ourselves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances" (1967:142).

However, Goffman (1959) also introduces the concept of 'social laws.' These can be referred to as unspoken about rules that are not illegalised, but everyone understands and follows them in order to gain social acceptance. Gender-switching is an example of a type of behaviour that goes against societal norms because it is a form of deception. Turkle highlights some of the specific social constraints that may hold people back from gender-switching online, which can be used as an explanation as to why people may not gender-switch:

"You are not in danger of being arrested, but you are embarked on an enterprise that is not without some gravity and emotional risk" (1996:213).

'Social laws' and 'social constraints' can both be used to highlight the other side of the debate; that our identities are fixed. By having fixed identities, it implies that we cannot explore their potential:

"An individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is" (1959:24).

In further support of the idea that our identities are fixed, Mead believes that essentially all these different identities that we act out still form a complete self, which is essentially fixed.

"There is usually an organisation of the whole self with reference to the community to which we belong...there is a unified self, but that may be broken up" (1967:142/143).

Mead also refers to our biological make-up, which inevitably forms part of our identity that is fixed. It is not just our social experiences that develop our different selves, but also that our fixed biological features can distinguish us from anybody else.

“He is a member of the community, but he is a particular part of the community, with a particular heredity and position which distinguishes him from anybody else” (1967:200).

Thus, although we have fluid identities, they are constituted from partially fixed biological characteristics, which cannot change. This has important implications for the overall successfulness of gender-switching online. The effect of socialisation is another factor that can be used as an explanation as to how gender-switching can or cannot occur online.

Socialisation and Identity

Socialisation links to the idea that our identities are formed through social experience. Mead extends this idea through his belief that our whole ‘self’ is a social construct that is affected by the act of socialisation:

“The structure of the complete self is...a reflection of the complete social process” (1967:144).

Goffman (1959) sees socialisation in terms of enhancing the fluidity of our identities. He believes that because we observe from birth, we can see how all categories of people, (e.g. male, female, elders, youngsters) act and behave. Goffman therefore believes that we are capable of acting out any of these roles, through this process of observation. For example, a male may study a female’s behaviour and from this could successfully take on her role. Goffman terms this “anticipatory socialization” (1959:78).

However, there is also extensive evidence for the opposing view that we are most strongly socialised into our own gender roles and that this can constrain us from playing out the opposite gender. Although, Whitley (1997) does not specifically talk about gender identity within the strand of socialisation, the general argument put forward still supports this opposing view. Whitley (1997) studies a psychiatrist, Alex who participates in an internet chat room. When a lady he is chatting to mistakes Alex for a woman, he decides to change his identity to “Joan”. Joan deceives people that she has been in a terrible accident that has made “her” disabled. The only way that “Joan’s” true identity was discovered was by other disabled women. This was due to the inconsistencies in Joan’s conversations that did not correlate with attitudes that most disabled people have. This suggests that we are born into a certain role through socialisation from birth and observations of people with who have different ‘roles’ are strong enough for us to produce a realistic account of someone else, even online. Goffman (1959) also contradicts his ideas on previous suggestion of anticipatory socialization by suggesting that it is not so easy to liberate oneself from their gendered identity:

“When the individual does move into a new position in society...he is not likely to be told in full detail how to conduct himself...” (Goffman, 1959:79)

There are vastly different perspectives as to whether socialisation keeps our identity fixed or makes it fluid. This can be applied to the physical and virtual world. Now, gender patterns in Internet behaviour will be discussed, which will introduce ideas into a possible link between gender and gender-switchers.

Gender.

Conventionally, there have always been more males that use the Internet (Rheingold, 1993; Weil & Rosen, 1995; Brand, 1995; Herring, 2000, in Gackenbach, 1998). Furthermore, the general consensus so far from research is that men tend to lie in chat rooms more than women do (Turkle, 1996; Whitty, 2002; Fallows, 2005). Relating this to gender-switching, Turkle found in particular that “more men are willing to give virtual cross-dressing a try” (1996:212). This strongly suggests that male’s would be more likely to free themselves from their gender. In further support of this argument are the potential reasons that male and female’s visit the internet in general; it is generally believed that women tend to use it more for interactional purposes, where as males have been found to enjoy the net due to the sense of freedom that they feel, which allows them to try new ways of doing things (Fallows, 2005). This also has strong implications that men are most likely to be interested in gender-switching.

It is also important to assess the ways in which male and females communicate online through their textual conversations. With knowledge of this, it could make it easier to gender-switch and also recognise a gender-switcher if they go against the general gendered patterns of behaviour. For example, it is generally found that women tend to send fewer messages online, and are less likely to persist if they get no response (Broadhurst, 1993, in Herring 2000). Further factors that perhaps clarify a person’s gender online are the general manner in which they play their character:

“Politeness is one common means through which gender is cued in asynchronous CMC. Women are more likely to thank, appreciate and apologize, and to be upset by violations of politeness: they more often challenge offenders who violate online rules of conduct” (Smith et al, 1997 in Herring, 2000).

The aforementioned research suggests that the gender differences are reflected in distinct ways online. As a result the likelihood, prudence and successfulness of internet, gender switching appears to be partially determined by genetic sex. Sexuality is another possible deterrent of gender-switching.

Sexuality.

Sexuality is not an easy concept to explain, however it is believed that it encompasses a mixture of psychosocial and cultural factors (Gackenbach, 1998). The internet is said to create new possibilities in terms of sexual identity. (Bell, 2001)

Some research has suggested that people are not generally heterosexual when they want to take on the role of the opposite sex. (Roberts & Parks, 1999) The explanation for this is that people generally gender-switch to 'experiment,' not as an "enduring expression of their sexuality" (1999:537). This therefore suggests that gender-switchers sexuality is often not yet defined.

Cross-dressers (otherwise known as transvestites) are one type of gender-switcher. They also attempt it in the physical world and their link to sexuality is that they generally have different sexual orientations (Bullough & Bullough, 1997). Cross-dressers often do not feel as confident to portray this side of their identity in real life situations due to various anxieties, and therefore the internet provides a place where this identity can be illustrated.

"He would have some anxiety about passing, and there might be even more anxiety about not passing, which would pose a risk of violence and possibly arrest" (Turkle, 1996:212).

Cross-dressers go to the extremes of exchanging photos with others, dressed as a member of the opposite sex online (Hegland & Nelson, 2002). Cross-dressing therefore involves the visual side of identity as well and seems to be an aspect of identity that can be far more accepted online and is far easier to do.

"The Internet is the vehicle through which the self becomes public, in that anyone with access to a computer can create and broadcast his or her own narrative" (Hegland & Nelson, 2002:158).

However, even though the internet allows people to be whichever gender they want to be, the underlying truth with transvestites is that their identity is not realistic to other users, similarly as it is not in the physical world:

"Autobiographical accounts of transsexuals document that hormonal intervention and surgical changes alone are not enough. These individuals work very hard to learn to perform their desired gender" (Danet, in Jones, 1998:132).

It can therefore be concluded that although cross-dressing is easier to do online, it does still not mean that people accept them as a member of the opposite sex. This type of gender-switching is therefore not successful. It must be assumed also that particularly for heterosexuals looking for potential sexual partners online, that they must be a little alarmed by the prospect of people not actually being the gender that they say they are online. This can be another reason for gender-switching, claims Wakeford, who speaks of a LambdaMOO:

"Men pretend to be women to attract the attention of 'real' women, who are in fact themselves other than men pretending to be women" (1996:99, in Bell, 2001).

This emphasises the idea of the internet being a "climate of suspicion" (Bell, 2001: 128) in terms of sexuality, gender and identity. The confusing nature of this situation must produce huge amounts of doubts when assessing somebody's true sexuality,

as well as gender. For a man to present himself as a woman to ensure that he talks to real women, this can only enforce the predatory nature of men which links to an issue of power, which will be the next issue to be discussed.

Power.

Power is an explanation as to why people may gender - switch. The internet is argued to be a source of patriarchy, due to more males being present online (Rheingold, 1993; Weil & Rosen, 1995; Brand, 1995; Herring, 2000, in Gackenbach, 1998). This is portrayed by Turkle (1996), who claims that men often gender-switch to improve the ratio of men to women. There are many stereotypes that people have of males that are based on "power." Women often wish to experience the power that comes with these stereotypes. Gender-switching is a way that they can do this.

"Women often disguise themselves as men to experiment with power associated with neutral or male identities" (Whitty, 2002:345).

Furthermore, Pagnucci & Mauriello (1999) enforce the idea that cyberspace supports the gendered stereotypes that are apparent in the physical world. They illustrate male power through studying virtual class rooms whereby students writing is put on the web for other students to analyse. Out of the 36 students, 5 women opted for male identities, usually using famous names. No men opted for female identities, because this did not give them the same sense of power, despite there being many famous females too. Cooper further adds to this argument of gender stereotypes and provides a reason for such gender-switching:

"Bae plays a man because she thinks that male avatars have more charisma, she wants to 'project strength', and all the 'masters' in the game have male avatars" (2005:1).

Another reason that females may gender-switch online is because they want to escape the sexually dominating male, who perhaps makes them feel uncomfortable (Herring, 2000). In many cases, women can be seen as the targets of intimidation, harassment and sexual deception, which are all ways that males can express their power (Van Gelder, 1990; Dibbell 1993; Brail, 1994; all in Herring, 2000). Turkle, herself also became involved in the internet culture of gender-switchers through playing a male on a LambdaMOO, mainly to feel "less out of place" (1996:210) in a sexually orientated conversation. Roberts & Parks' (1999) research provides further evidence for this. They found that out of all the people who gender-switched online to avoid sexual harassment, they were all females.

However, females can be powerful to a similar extent, just in different ways. One of the male users of a MUD believes that playing as a little girl "helps in negotiations" (Cooper, 2005:2). Another example of a male gender-switcher that Turkle follows is Garrett who plays a female and names her, "Ribbit" in a MUD. Garrett explains his motives for gender-switching:

“I wanted to know more about women’s experiences...I wanted to be collaborative and helpful, and I thought it would be easier as a female” (Turkle, 1996:216).

It seems that power is a determining factor for gender-switchers. Different types of power can be achieved from being male or female and it is in gender-switchers interests to investigate these forms of power that they cannot experience in the physical world. The body is another factor that can influence the occurrence of gender-switching.

The Body.

Gender-switching online can only occur when their body is placed in front of a computer screen; for this reason, the body is an essential part of virtual interactions as well as physical interactions. Goffman (1959) recognises the importance of the body in communication and sees it as providing a ‘personal front,’ which can be divided into ‘appearance’ and ‘manner.’ Goffman describes some of the aspects of this ‘personal front,’ and each of these can be seen to be absent in CMC; “sex, age and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like” (1959:34). For this reason, with the body’s absence, it leaves people with the potential to create any persona or identity that they choose online.

“When the bodies of users are left behind they are able to choose and construct their virtual form(s) and identity (ies).” (Hardey, 2002:570)

However, it can also be argued that the body is not always absent in internet interactions. In relation to Goffman’s (1959) theory, Giese (1998) argues that the ‘manner’ side of our ‘personal front’ that is developed by bodily gestures is not absent in CMC. It seems more appropriate to say that it takes on a different form, which can be explained through the development of typographical symbols, which accounts for the loss of expression. (Giese, 1998) Essentially, this absence of the body can therefore be compensated for in virtual interactions.

Further more, it is generally thought that people do not feel comfortable playing out a completely different body online. “Users feel obliged to anchor their online identity in their off-line embodied self” (Hardey, 2002:579). Possible explanations for this have already been partially discussed previously, in terms of socialisation. However, another explanation that stops us from completely liberating ourselves from our bodies online is the fact that for a lot of people, they like to meet the people that they chat to online in the physical world as well, once they have established a relationship:

“Self presentation is underpinned by the knowledge that an off-line meeting would involve a manifesting the virtual self in a reassertion of the obduracy of the corporeal self” (Stone, 1991; Shilling, 1995, in Hardey, 2002:579).

Thus, it seems that although the body is visually absent in online interactions, it is obviously still physically there. After all, a body still needs to be present in order to

type out a conversation. It also still restricts us from changing our physical identity if the aim is to meet those that people are communicating with online. It can be concluded, therefore that the body is still an essential feature of the identity that we portray online, despite its partial absence. This lack of the physical body can also be linked to giving people a greater sense of control of their identities online, which can be used as another explanation for gender-switching.

Control.

The Internet can give people an enormous sense of control that is not apparent in the physical world. This provides an explanation as to why gender-switching occurs in cyberspace more than the physical world. People can control aspects of their identity that determines how other people see them:

“The virtual social worlds of the Internet give people unparalleled control over the construction and presentation of their identities.” (Roberts & Parks, 1999:521)

Some examples of this control are that people can leave a chat-room whenever they feel that their identities are being detected. Unlike in real life situations where the consequences of faking an identity can be severe, online, people are far less constrained due to the sense of control that they have over their identities.

“This simple opportunity provides a sense of control experienced by users that some described as ‘liberating’ them from what they see as the limitations or possible embarrassments of encounters in off-line” (Hardey, 2002:576).

Goffman’s (1959) theories on the physical world highlight some of the aspects of interactions that people cannot control and also portrays the embarrassments that are encountered in the physical world:

“He may trip, stumble, fall; he may belch, yawn, make a slip of the tongue...Secondly the performer may act in such a way as to give the impression that he is too much or too little concerned with the interaction” (Goffman, 1959:60).

It is clearly a lot easier to act out the role of another online because we have control over the stated embarrassments that can occur in physical interactions. We control these aspects because we do have to make them apparent online. Cherny (1998) sums up this point, through her claim: “What you see is what I say” (in Gackenbach, 1998:29) which suggests that the identity that we portray is controlled by what we type instead. However, it has been found that despite this sense of freedom, most people still chose not to play out a different identity (Giese, 1998). This can be explained by Giese’s belief that the social contexts in Internet chat rooms are essentially the same as the physical worlds. Therefore, even in the virtual world, people seek general acceptance by behaving in the same way as they would in the physical world (Giese, 1998). Roberts & Parks (1999) extend this finding. They found in their study some reasons why people chose not to gender-switch, which included; wanting to express themselves online; seeing gender-switching as dishonest and

having doubts about whether they would be successful gender-switchers. From looking at these reasons, it seems that the individual is not the only person who is given a sense of control. Instead the individual is also controlled by the constraints that are apparent in the physical world.

Conclusion.

The literature that has been discussed has addressed a variety of important issues and themes that is central to this study. It is important to have addressed the potential debates that surround our identity constructions, especially with relation to gender. Goffman, (1959) Mead (1967) and Giese (1998) have all produced different theoretical perspectives into identities and the 'self', which have produced thought provoking ideas into the idea of 'flexible' identities. It was particularly important to discuss real-life identities first in order to provide a comparison to the way we portray our identities within cyberspace.

There has been some insight into the sort of people who gender-switch which suggests that they are predominantly males and not heterosexuals. The possible explanations for gender-switching have included experiencing both the dominating nature and strength that comes from being a man, or the helpfulness that comes from being a woman. Also, due to the anonymous nature of the Internet, people can control who they are and can easily escape interactions in which they feel they are being detected. The body, of course has been recognised as being an essential aspect in enabling us to interact on the internet. Its visual absence online has provided the potential to play out a different gender.

By exploring all these areas, it has given some insight into the sorts of people that gender-switch and why they do it. Before any analysis is produced that will compare this study to previous theories on identity and gender-switching, it is important firstly to justify the particular research methods chosen.

Methodology.

Students were used as the sample for this project because they were easy to access. Furthermore, it was also felt that they might be likely to take an interest in this project, due to the nature of their course, which was sociology and also because a lot of them are likely to have used internet chat rooms themselves. The sample was narrowed down to a first year sociology lecture group, which had 120 students in it, that included male and females. Due to the attendance rate on the day (48 people) and perhaps the nature of the course, there were a lot more females present, which admittedly demonstrated a sample bias. However, as Bryman explains, it is unlikely that research will be able to represent the whole student population (2001:85). This sample bias was slightly problematic for the analysis of this research due to a lack of male opinions into the topic area; however it is fair to say that the sample was representative of the population that was studied on that particular day.

To access this sample, firstly a first year sociology lecturer was emailed (see appendix II) and then asked if short questionnaires on a general introduction to questions on identity and gender-switching in internet chat rooms could be given out in her lecture (see appendix III for questionnaire). The main purpose of this questionnaire was to get the six participants that were needed to interview, by giving them the opportunity to take part in either the individual interviews or the focus group interview. Those who said they would take part in the interview were then emailed to find out when they were all free (see appendix IV).

It can be concluded that this sample was a cluster sample because my sample is logical due to the fact that;

“It is possible to get a good enough sample by focusing on naturally occurring clusters of the particular thing that the researcher wishes to study” (Denscombe, 2003:14).

As has already been partially discussed, this method of sampling can produce sample biases, which was portrayed to the lack of males compared to females. This was the main downfall of this they of sampling.

Semi-structured interviews (see appendix V for interview schedule) were the most successful way to conduct this research. Some of the reasons for choosing semi-structured interviews as the research method were that interviewers are able to add more questions into their schedule depending on the responses they get, which can gain a lot more relevant data that was not even originally considered (Bryman, 2001). This was very beneficial to the research because through listening to people’s individual experiences and opinions of online interactions, this determined the development of the discussion, which meant that each interview was completely different. This gained a fuller range of responses and data.

Face-to-face interviewing was the most effective way that the interviews could be conducted. This enabled the author to “focus all [their] attention on the interviewee, and give appropriate eye-contact and non-verbal communication” (Blaxter, 2001). This, not only ensured that the interviewees were encouraged to continue discussing their points, it also ensured that the respondents were visually who they said they were.

Focus group interviews as well as individual interviews were used to provide a slightly different approach. With more people present and therefore more ideas, a fuller ‘discussion’ was achieved.

“Advocates of focus groups maintain that the social interaction between group members will produce a dynamic and insightful exchange of information that would not be possible in any one-to-one interview situation” (Ruane, 2005:34).

By using a focus group to discuss the topic of gender identity in cyberspace was very beneficial. As a topic area that has so many opposing views, it was very interesting to discuss them all within the same interview. This method of research provided some very rich and valid data. However, to get the maximum potential out of this discussion, it had to be ensured that the discussion was not fired up with regard to

my own viewpoints (Ruane, 2005). If this had happened, people would have been far less likely to voice their own opinions if they contradicted mine. For this reason, it was important before the focus group discussion even began, that the ground rules were made clear to all the respondents. Some of these included; alerting interviewees that all opinions are valid and that dominant people were not expected to take over the discussion (Ruane, 2005). The respondents were told this before the interview began. This ensured that all participants felt comfortable.

Ethics.

It had to be ensured that the author was respectful to all the interviewees, which meant that they could not deceive them of things that were going on. The respondents were therefore informed of the interviews purpose for my project. This was based around the principle of 'informed consent.' The interviewees had the opportunity to say whether or not they were willing to take part in the research after being informed of what it involved (Ruane, 2005). This meant that an informed consent form had to be constructed (See appendix V). Within this form, interviewees were alerted to the fact that the interview would be recorded. This was essential to the research because a tape recording was essential for later transcription of the interviews that could identify relevant themes for the purpose of analysing the findings. Respondents also had to be promised that the information they gave in these interviews would all be kept confidential (Ruane, 2005). The names of the respondents were also changed when transcribing the interview so that their identities were left anonymous. All of these factors aimed to avoid deception of interviewees and are all placed under the term, 'ethical decisions,' which arise when;

“...we try to decide between one course of action and another not in terms of expediency or efficiency but by reference to standards of what is morally right or wrong” (Barnes, 1979 in May, 1997:54).

By applying these ethics to the project, it made people feel more comfortable in the interviews developed a sense of mutual trust between the interviewees and the author.

Results.

The interviews demonstrated six respondents' attitudes, views and experiences of gender - switching on the internet. The findings from these interviews shall be constructed around the topic areas that are apparent in the interview schedule in appendix V. The areas that are examined in this section are therefore illustrated by an overview of how respondents interpreted 'identity', a synopsis of the differences between virtual and physical interactions, possible explanations for gender-switching and the respondent's concluding views on whether we can be liberated from our gendered identities online. It is firstly important to summarize the findings from the questionnaire to provide an overview of the sample's views.

Out of the 10 males and 38 females that filled in the questionnaire, 35 people had used an internet chat room. Out of these 38 people, only 4 people had gender-

switched whilst online; 3 of which were male and 1 of which was female. However 8 people admitted to playing out a different role or identity to their own. Some examples that people described were;

“to piss around...conning a friend into thinking I was a Spanish priest...changing a few personality traits and exaggerating my looks...having a slightly more open personality” and “pretending to be someone else from school to see what someone’s reaction was” (Male).

Out of the 48 respondents, 10 agreed to attend an interview either in the form of an individual interview or as a focus group interview. However, in the end, only 6 could attend either interviews; 5 girls and 1 boy. Although the interviews were predominantly female, it is fair to say that this was fairly representative of the sample group. However, perhaps with hind sight, as discussed in the methodology, it might have been beneficial to have more male perspectives.

Who are we?

An important idea is that our identities are fluid, which was reflected by the majority of the interviews that were constructed with the six respondents.

“I think it varies over time...and um, potentially place” (Sammy).

The interview with Tara, however did demonstrate the idea that to an extent our identities are still fixed and implemented the idea that we still have a ‘true’ identity.

“...the basic way I interact with people is different, but I think basically my identity is the same” (Tara).

How do virtual interactions differ from physical interactions?

The absence of the body in Internet interactions is a key difference between virtual and physical interactions. This was implied from the majority of the interviews with the respondents.

“I don’t even like talking to my friends online because you don’t get any emotions out of them or expression” (Steve).

“I think you miss out on all the body language that comes with real life conversations” (Laura).

The idea of having more control over internet interactions than with face-to-face interactions was a dominant perspective that evolved from the interviews. A few of the respondents highlighted the idea that this sense of control made them feel more at ease online.

“I think, yeah, sometimes you can be chatting to someone and they can just come out with some really weird remark...but it's quite easy to just finish or leave the conversation” (Sarah).

Another dominant idea that became relevant in two of the interviews that took place was that there are also many similarities between the flexibility of our identities in the physical world and the virtual world. Thus respondents generally believed that people can liberate from their identities in the physical world as well.

“I moved here from, er, South London...I knew not a soul, and as I walked around Bath, I thought, I could be anybody I choose!” (Sammy)

Why Gender - Switch?

An important contributor that may influence people to gender-switch is so that they can escape unwanted attention from members of the opposite sex. This was reflected by some female respondents.

“Men are usually only looking for girls...so if you say you're a man, they'll kind of just not talk to you any more.” (Tara)

A common reason for gender-switching that was demonstrated through the interviews was that gender-switching occurred as a form of entertainment, which was also demonstrated through the findings from the questionnaires.

“When I was about...fifteen, when me and my friends were bored, we'd just make up things, just for a laugh I suppose” (Tara).

“If you're not doing it for a joke... why would there be any purpose in gender-switching?” (Steve)

Curiosity into the opposite gender is another leading factor that influences people to gender-switch, according to the findings from interviews.

“...because you want to find something out about the other sexes...perhaps something as simple as fashion tips or something” (Tara).

“Male's find it much harder to show their feminine sides, so maybe the Internet is the place where they can express these” (Sammy).

Sexuality was emphasised as a key deterrent when respondents were asked who they thought was most likely to gender-switch. Cross dressers, in particular were seen as likely candidates.

“...it wouldn't surprise me if people who were wanting to gender-switch thought that they were in the wrong body, so I'm talking about transsexuals...you know that would be a way that people could develop their female persona” (Sammy).

Why Wouldn't you Gender-Switch?

Biology is something innate for every human being, so it is therefore a restrictive force in terms of enabling someone to gender-switch. Only one of my respondents considered this idea as relevant.

“I’m biologically male, so I can’t talk and understand things like a female” (Steve).

Some respondents saw that there would be no incentive for single people to gender-switch, especially if they want to meet their potential partners that they have originally met online in the physical world.

“I think usually people who go online want to meet people of the opposite sex for relationship purposes, so there would be no point in gender-switching” (Tara).

Can we Really be Liberated from Our Gender Identities Online?

The majority of respondents from this research all saw it as very achievable for someone to liberate themselves from their gendered identity.

“Um, I think it’s very easy, if you’ve got the internet, you’ve got the chat room...away you go” (Sarah).

However, this was not necessarily to say that the people online should believe this new identity that is portrayed online.

“I don’t think even if I knew a girl very well that I could believably pretend I was her, because I wouldn’t be aware of what that female talks to her friends about on MSN” (Steve).

Discussion.

This chapter will present the findings by demonstrating them in such a way that supports or contradicts past theories in order to portray the contribution my research has had to expanding already existing data. The findings that have been found to be most prominent in this project are that the fluidity of our identities enable us to gender-switch online, the control that we have online encourages us to experiment with our identities online, the absence of the physical body can enable us to gender-switch online, male power can force women to gender-switch and sexuality is a contributor into determining whether we are likely to gender-switch or not. Fluid identities are the first topic that will be discussed.

Factors Influencing Liberation from Gendered Identities in Cyberspace.

Fluid Identities

Firstly, to reaffirm what identity is in the context of this project; it is based on the way individuals represent themselves in a community. Mead, (1967) Giese, (1998) and Goffman (1959) all provide theoretical evidence on our identities being fluid. Mead (1967) believes our different selves develop when we are with particular people. This research demonstrates Mead's (1967) point from respondents who saw themselves as different people whilst in the company of certain others.

"I talk differently to my friends than I would to people at work" (Tara).

Giese (1998) similarly suggests that different communities produce different identities. The interview with Steve demonstrated this through his emphasis on the virtual world being seen as a different community to real life communities in relation to the identities that are portrayed in each. Steve seems to imply that you play with your identity more in these virtual communities, so reinforces Goffman's emphasis on the importance of particular 'settings' to certain patterns of identity.

"Internet makes it so easy to manipulate your identity" (Steve).

So far, the findings from this research have reflected that there are fluid identities in the virtual world and the physical world, therefore implying a certain amount of similarity between the two. This corresponds with Giese's (1998) view that personal identity should be taken at face value in the real world and the virtual world.

Goffman (1959) is very assertive in his claim that identity can only be manipulated to a certain extent and that 'social laws' determine how far you can push it. Goffman illustrates that in the physical world, people are constrained from liberating themselves from their identities too much due to it being immoral. Goffman's ideas are contradicted by the findings of this project when the emphasis is placed on the virtual world instead. This is emphasised by Sammy who claims; "It's a virtual world and the rules are virtual." This therefore suggests that the two worlds should not be compared due to the vast differences between the virtual and physical worlds. This idea is similarly approached by Tara, who suggests that moral values are underplayed when she is part of a community in the virtual world.

"I don't feel guilty at all when I gender-switch, I never know the people, so I don't really care" (Tara).

These comments emphasise the fluidity of identities in the virtual world, suggesting that they can potentially be far more fluid than in the virtual world, because there are more constraints outside the borders of cyberspace.

The Body.

There is a lack of the physical body in Internet interactions (Hardey, 2002). Giese explains that “our bodily existence stands at the forefront of personal identity and individuality” (1998:5). Vital physical features of our identity such as ‘appearance’ and ‘manner’ as Goffman (1959) chooses to call them are absent online. This therefore implies that without the presence of the body, our personal identity is undefined and makes it harder for people to draw conclusions about others online. All the respondents seemed to recognise this and saw them as very important aspects of communication.

“It’s a lot easier to get to know the person if you can see them...you can see if they’re lying for one thing” (Tara).

This quote not only suggests that the physical body is an important aspect of identity, but it also implies that with the body’s absence, it makes it easy for people to deceive others. This idea goes against Giese’s (1998) ideal that typographical symbols can successfully represent the expression that is supposed to be absent from virtual interactions. Steve further contradicts Giese’s statement by specifically relating to these typographical symbols as “rubbish.” It can therefore be concluded that the absence of the body can allow people to act out any identity that they want to online, with reference to appearance, so therefore this can apply to gender as well.

There are some exceptions to this conclusion, however. With internet interactions, it seems that as soon as the virtual interaction begins to potentially change into a physical interaction where the body becomes involved, people are far less likely to ‘stray’ from the identity that they portray in the physical community.

“Erm, I can’t really lie about what I look like most of the time because I want to meet them, so it’d be a dead give away!” (Sarah)

This quote clearly reflects Turkle’s (1996) suggestion that people do not want to gender-switch, or portray a different identity of any form due to the emotional risk of being found out. Of course, for Sarah, if she had lied about her appearance in any way online, it would be emotionally distressing and embarrassing to then meet up with people in the physical world and face up to her deceptive behaviour. As Stone (1991) and Shilling (1995) explain; the real self has to be let out if they aim to meet offline as well. This places an emphasis on the “aesthetic features” (Steve) of identity that cannot so easily be manipulated in real life interactions, which therefore portrays the presence of the physical body as being an essential difference between the virtual world and the physical world. The findings from Tara also relates to gender-switching by suggesting that for people seeking physical companionship, gender-switching is not something that needs to be attempted.

“I think usually people who go online want to meet people of the opposite sex for relationship purposes, so there would be no point in gender-switching” (Tara).

It can therefore be concluded that although the body is an extremely important aspect of communications, it does not constrain us from gender-switching in internet chat rooms, unless the interaction is advanced into a real life context. Power is

another thing that can be questioned as to whether it can be apparent online as well. Power is clearly a social construct though, unlike the body which is physical.

Power.

The Internet has always seemed to be dominated by males (Brand, 1995; Reingold, 1993, in Gackenbach, 1998). An example of male power being used on the Internet is implied by the fact that women can be targets of intimidation, harassment and sexual harassment (Van Gelder, 1990; Dibbell, 1993; Brail, 1994, all in Herring, 2000). This suggestion has been supported by some of the female respondents in the findings who have experienced this harassment themselves. Tara not only emphasised the harassment she gets online my men, she also expands her comment by using it as a reason for gender-switching.

“A lot of people would first of all ask age/sex/location (a/s/l)...most of them were men constantly asking this. This made us say stupid things because it became so tedious. We’d say things like we were some hairy big Indian man just to get them back for being such perverts all the time” (Tara).

This explanation from Tara highlights one of Turkle’s reasons for gender-switching which emphasises the benefits of gender-switching for females.

“My sense of freedom didn’t just involve a different attitude about sexual advances, which now seemed less threatening...” (1996:211)

The explanations so far have been based on female’s gender-switching to escape male power due to sexual harassment. Explanations can explore reasons for gender-switching also as a way for females to experience the ‘male power’ (Whitty, 2002). Females from the findings, however only discussed sexual harassment as a form of male power. Steve, on the other hand highlighted the idea that he would not want to loose the power that came with being male if he gender-switched and introduced strength as the form of power that female’s might like to use as an explanation for gender-switching.

“If I was to play in a MUD, I’d still play a male role because I’d still want the strength and manliness” (Steve).

Steve’s quote here is representative of Cooper’s (2005) research who demonstrates a female’s reasoning to gender-switch to “project strength.” Furthermore, Pagnucci & Mauriello’s (1999) research showed that no male’s opted for famous female names, where as female’s opted to take on famous male identities due to the power associated with these names.

Gender-switching from male to female is a lot harder to relate to power. Turkle (1996) suggests that the power of females is structured very differently to that of males. She believes that the power that females have is that they are respected for being collaborative and helpful and this idea is also supported by Cooper’s (2005) research that highlights females as being to negotiate in situations. The findings of this research did not support this as a reason for males to gender-switch. Steve

however did emphasise the aesthetic features of females as being a source of their power.

“I’d do it in a female body so that it’d look good...I’d have breasts as well so I’d be a winner!” (Steve)

However, this quote can be interpreted as supporting the previous idea that has already discussed, which is that female’s are seen as targets of intimidation, harassment and sexual deception (Van Gelder, 1990; Dibbell, 1993; Brail, 1994, all in Herring, 2000). Steve’s opinion here simply emphasises the dominating, sexually orientated male that is a source of power over the Internet. It is therefore the women’s duty to have control over these potentially difficult situations.

Control.

Linking control to the issue of male sexual domination, it seems that the Internet is a place where people can have control over the extent to which this occurs so can be used as an explanation of why and how gender-switching occurs. One of Hardey’s (2002) respondent claims; “I can choose when and if I reply or contact a guy” (576). This idea is evident from the ways that the respondents dealt with possible negative encounters.

“...you can be chatting with someone and they can just come out with really weird remark...they’re obviously trying to lead the conversation somewhere. But it’s quite easy to just finish or leave the conversation” (Laura).

The idea that Internet gives people a sense of control over the construction and presentation of their identities (Roberts & Parks, 2002) is therefore demonstrated by the respondent’s responses. Steve claims that it is “not hard what so ever” to play out the role of a different identity online and also illustrates the point that if his he feels his identity is being detected, he can “just leave the conversation”. Sammy further implants an explanation as to how control can enable gender-switching to successfully occur without being detected.

“Because you have time to think what you write, you can think, *oh, a man wouldn’t write that, I’d better write this*” (Sammy).

This comment clearly fits in with Cherny’s interpretation of Internet chat rooms as; “what you see is what I say.” (1998, in Gackenbach, 1998: 29) Without ‘expression’ as Goffman (1959) interprets it, people seem to have much more control over what they say because it can only be the text that people read that they can base their interpretations of other people they are speaking to on. This illustrates the idea that bodily gestures are the only way that people can be caught out for gender-switching or faking out any other identity. It can therefore be concluded that people have complete control of their identities online.

Who is Most Likely to Liberate Themselves from Their Gendered Identities in Cyberspace?

Sexuality.

Sexuality was the only factor that claimed to be of significance in terms of gender-switching patterns which was reflected by the respondent's views. Sexuality has claimed to be a controversial issue in terms its link to gender-switchers and this has been illustrated by past literature and by my respondent's views. Roberts and Parks (1999) illustrate that people are not generally heterosexual when they gender-switch. Despite Tara's minority response who claims that "heterosexual people do it just as much", the majority of responses from the interviewees support the idea that heterosexuals are less likely to gender-switch.

"I think in the majority of cases, people must have some kind of issue with their sexuality to want to do it" (Claire).

This argument is explained by Roberts and Parks (1999) who portray the internet as being a place where people can 'experiment' with their sexualities. Steve, however, is fast to contradict this explanation and instead believes that gender-switching occurs after the stage of 'experimentation.'

"If you're gay, you know you're gay...you don't need the internet to prove this to you" (Steve).

Cross-dressers are the people who receive the most attention from the respondents and are seen as one of the main contributors to the gender-switching phenomenon.

"I think if people would genuinely like to be a man or woman, they'd be more likely to gender-switch" (Laura).

Hegland & Nelson (2002) explain this phenomenon by the fact that they are more greatly accepted in the virtual world, which is something that Laura addresses through her claim that people only have the confidence to cross-dress online and seems to see it being something that is more out of context in the physical world.

"I think it's the confidence...how you dress completely determines all your social interactions and how people look at you" (Laura).

It can therefore be concluded with reference to sexuality that the general consensus is that sexuality does contribute to whether or not someone is likely to gender-switch and that cross-dressers seem to be the people who are most likely to do so.

Summary.

The findings support the existing literature that our identities are fluid. Respondents supported both Mead's (1967) emphasis on the importance of other people to the identity that we portray, as well as supporting Goffman's (1959) focus on 'setting' to

the construction of identity. The findings also highlighted that we are restricted in a different way in the virtual world than the physical world and that factors such as 'social laws' (Goffman, 1959) do not restrict us online, therefore giving us scope to play with our identities even more. Respondents also recognise the danger's of 'playing too much' with identities online if they plan to meet their associates in an offline meeting. This therefore highlights the restrictions that come with too much experimentation with our fluid identities and imply the idea that to an extent they still have to remain slightly fixed.

In terms of the body's significance to making it possible to gender-switch online, this research demonstrates that respondents generally believed that it was due to its absence online that made it possible to gender-switch. Respondents suggested that with the absence of 'appearance' and 'manner,' (Goffman, 1959) people were left free to be who they want to be online. Respondent, Steve also disputed Giese's (1998) suggestion that typographical symbols could represent the 'expression' that is absent online which further emphasised the majority view that the bodily features were completely absent online.

Power was something that was highlighted in particular from the female respondents of this research, who supported already existing literature (Van Gelder, 1990; Dibbell, 1993; Brail, 1994, all in Herring, 2000) that female gender-switched to escape the 'predatory' male, which emphasised the male power that still seems to be apparent. Findings did, however contradict previous research (Turtle, 1996; Cooper, 2005) that men may choose to gender-switch due to the association of female powers such as being collaborative and helpful. Respondent's showed no support for this idea, so it can be concluded that power can only be used as an explanation of gender-switching from females to males.

Past research based on control was also respected as an explanation for gender-switching from the findings of this research. In particular, Hardey's (2002) emphasis on the control that people have to leave a chat room was supported by respondents and was used as an explanation how people can get away with gender-switching. Also, of course control, as Roberts & Parks, (1999) claim is what allows people to construct certain identities, which were reflected by the respondent's beliefs that it is so easy to be someone you are not online.

By attempting to link gender-switching to a type of person, the only link that was found was with reference to sexuality. The majority of responses (with the exception of one) supported Roberts & Parks' (1999) suggestion that people other than heterosexuals were more likely to gender-switch. Cross-dressers were the people that the findings found were most likely to do it and explanations for this supported Hegland & Nelson's (2002) research suggesting that this was because they were more greatly accepted in the virtual world.

It is now essential that these findings are summarized in the conclusion with reference to the original aims of the research that can be found in the introduction section of this study.

Conclusion.

The aims of my research study were: to explore how popular gender-switching online is for students, to identify the reasons why people gender-switch online, to gain an understanding of the sorts of people that gender-switch, to compare internet interactions and face-to-face interactions, with reference to identity, and to assess how easy it is for people to be someone they are not online, with in relation to gender. The outcomes of these aims will be discussed in relation to the findings of this research.

In terms of popularity, gender-switching has proved to be the reverse amongst students. Out of the 48 participants that filled in a questionnaire, only four admitted to gender-switching online, despite more people admitting to pretending to be someone else online. However, this must be taken at face-value because it must be realised that many people may not admit to gender-switching if they have. In terms of interviewing, there was only one respondent that admitted to gender-switching.

This project found several different reasons that people might gender-switch and were all supported by past literature. The first was based on the fluidity of our identities that enabled us to play out the role of someone else. Secondly, the absence of the physical body provided an explanation how people can gender-switch without being 'found out.' Power was used as an explanation for why females gender-switched; by gender-switching they no longer felt intimidated by the sexually dominating male online. Control was the final explanation that was highlighted through the findings and suggested that because people had control of their identities online and could escape conversations when their identity was starting to get 'detected,' they were able to gender-switch successfully.

In terms of 'the sorts of people' that were found to gender-switch, the only link that was found from my findings was to sexuality, otherwise known as sexual orientation. The findings supported already existing literature that non-heterosexuals were more likely to gender-switch than heterosexuals. Cross-dressers received the most comments on from the respondents.

The main differences that my findings demonstrated between virtual interactions and physical interactions were the lack of the physical body, which Goffman (1959) splits up into 'appearance' and 'manner.' It is thought that without these characteristics, people are free to be whoever they want to be online, including any gender.

Although this research has provided some interesting and valid material, the main limitation is that it is based on a small sample of participants. By having a larger sample to base my analysis on, it would be hoped that a deeper understanding of potential reasons for gender-switching could be achieved, which is therefore an implication for further research.

Another downfall of this study is the lack of gender-switchers that could be accessed to interview; with only one female respondent out of six that admitted to gender-switching, it made the investigation a lot harder to achieve a full understanding on the topic. By having more male interviewees it would have discarded the sample bias

in this study and perhaps enabled some sort of gender-patterns to be established as a finding of this research.

Despite this, this study has provided a good basis for exploring the phenomenon of gender-switching on the internet and has successfully established potential reasons why people would be likely to gender-switch and the sorts of people who are expected to be the main contributors to this phenomenon.

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Appendix I.

Glossary of terms

MSN Messenger: "...lets you talk online and in real-time with friends and family using just a web browser! Use it on any shared computer – at school, at work, at a friend's house or anywhere you can't install the MSN Messenger software" (<http://webmessenger.msn.com/>).

MUDs: "...text based virtual environments that developed out of role – playing games" (Joinson, 2003: 4).

LambdaMOOs: "...a type of MUD that uses object orientated programming" (Parks and Roberts, 1999: 523).

Appendix II.

Email to lecturer regarding questionnaires!

Date: Mon, 20 Feb 2006 17:07:35 +0000 [20/02/06 05:07:35 PM GMT]
From:
To:
Subject: Re: My dissertation

Dear Lizzie

That is fine. My lecture is Thursday 9.15-11.05. Meet me in my office 3.02a at 8.55 or in the Arts Lecture Theatre at 9.05 this Thursday or next!

.....
Hi!!

I am i final year doing a dissertation on gender swapping on the internet and am emailing you to ask a huge favour regarding my questionnaires!!

I have some very short questionnaires that need to be handed out in a lecture group, in order to hopefully get some interviewees!! I have been told by my dissertation tutor, that you have a particular large group of first years that you are a lecturer of. I ask to take 5 minutes at the beginning, end or middle of your lecture, where i can hand this questionnaire out to students and then collect them after they have completed them!

Please let me know if it will be at all possible for you to let me do this in the next couple of weeks.

Kind regards

Lizzie Rackham

Appendix III.

Questionnaire

I am a final year sociology student currently doing my dissertation on gender-swapping on the internet. I thank you hugely for taking part in my research by answering this questionnaire. All your responses will be kept confidential and your name will not be used so that your identity cannot be discovered. You do not have to answer any questions in this questionnaire that you do not feel want to.

In filling in this questionnaire, where boxes are provided, please tick the relevant box. If there is space provided to write your answer, please provide a more detailed response.

Q1. What is your sex?

Male

Female

Q2. How often do you use the internet?

More than once a day

Once a day

3-4 times a week

Once a week

Once a month

Hardly ever

Q3. Have you ever used an Internet Chat room?

Yes

No

If you answered 'no', please explain why and then move straight to Q.8.....

.....
.....

Q4. Have you ever used any of the following chat rooms? (Tick all of those that apply to you)

MSN messenger

MUDs

MOOs

Please specify other (s)

.....

Q5. Do you ever use the internet to discuss topics that you may not talk about in 'real life' conversations?

Yes

No

If you answered 'yes' to this question, please specify and/or explain why.....

Q6. Have you ever gender-swapped (pretended to be a member of the opposite sex) in an internet chat room?

Yes

No

Q7. Have you ever played out any kind of role or identity in an internet chat room that is different from your own?

Yes

No

If you answered 'yes', please specify.....

Q8. To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Cyberspace is a place where one can construct a new identity, present a new image of the self. (Turkle, 1996)

Very true True Partially true Not sure Partially false False Very false

Further comments

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

After I have analysed the data from these questionnaires, I am aiming to follow them up with a series of interviews. I am hoping to get people that will take part in either individual interviews or to be part of a focus group. Please let me know if you will be willing to take part in either of these interviews by ticking the relevant box. Also provide an email address so that I can make further contact with the details of the interview.

I will not be willing to take part in any of the interviews

I am willing to take part in an individual interview

I am willing to be interviewed as a member of the focus group

I am willing to participate in either of the interviews

Email Address.....

Appendix IV.

Email to potential interviewees

Date: Thu, 02 Mar 2006 15:01:28 +0000 [03:01:28 PM GMT]
From:
To:
Subject: My interviewees for my dissertation on gender-switching and the internet!

Hello to you all!!

I would like to thank you all for being amazingly helpful, and allowing me to interview you for my dissertation on gender-switching and the internet!!

Some of you have specified that you would rather be interviewed individually and others of you would rather be interviewed as part of a focus group! For those of you that would rather be interviewed individually, i will leave it up to you to tell me a time and place that suits you (preferably somewhere on campus if possible)? Just let me know when you have an hour spare next week (from 6th March) and I will schedule the interview for that time!!

For those of you that would like to take part in the focus group interview, i will need to be more specific with times to ensure that i get you all together. Are you free sometime between 5 and 7 pm on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday night? Please, please let me know when is best for you all ASAP and i will send u an email to let you know when it will happen!! Also, please let me know if i could use a room or kitchen in your halls of residence in which this interview could take place - that way it keeps it on campus and provides a relaxed atmosphere which would be better for everyone! If not, i can make other arrangements!

Please let me know as soon as possible what you can do and don't worry - the interviews will be stress free and you will not have to answer anything that you do not want to!

If when you reply to this email you could let me know your phone numbers, that would make the whole process a lot quicker, but no worries if you don't want to give that information out!!

Many thanks to you all

Lizzie Rackham

Appendix V.

Interview Schedule

- Introduce myself and the topic and hand out consent forms
- Discuss topic of identity – who are we? Do we have fixed identities?
- Identity online – how far can you push faking an identity, if you can at all?
- Have you ever acted out a fake identity online?
- Have you ever gender-switched online?
- Would you have thought gender-switching is a popular phenomenon? (With which age groups, gender, sexuality etc)
- Why do you think people generally gender-switch online?
- What makes online communications make people feel so free to enact out another gender or does it?
- What effects do you think socialisation and our biological make-up has on us to successfully be any person that we want to be online?
- Why don't people gender-switch? (Societal constraints, morals...?)
- How important is our sexuality in gender-switching?
- How easy do you think it is to be someone you are not online?

Appendix VI.

Informed consent form

Dear interviewee,

I am writing to gain your consent. You will be taking part in a focus group interview that will form part of my dissertation on gender-switching and Internet interactions.

The responses you give in this interview will be kept entirely confidential and will not be taken outside of the project itself. You are under no obligation to answer all or any of the questions and you can retract from the interview at any time.

As an active participant in our research, I also ask your permission to allow me to record your responses onto audio tape.

You will be given the opportunity to read and discuss the final findings that I get from my research.

Please sign here if you are willing to give me your consent:

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Acknowledgements.

Thank you to everyone who has helped with this research.

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