

OUR EXTENDED SELVES IN A DIGITAL WORLD

CB 2.0

CHOICE
READING

Has the Internet and digital technology changed the way we build, enact, and communicate our selves? The answer is a resounding yes. In a big way. Actually, in five big ways:

1. Dematerialization Many of our possessions, once in physical form, are now in digital (i.e., nonmaterial) form, the principal examples being our music, photos, and videos. This is called dematerialization. These personal possessions, not only a source of hedonic experience, were (and are) also our identity markers as they show our tastes. Freed from their “plastic prison,” they are now easier to acquire, categorize, and share, and even build a listening community around them; consequently, they enable a breezier avenue of expressing our extended identities. Such ease of communication enhances their identity marker role and in turn they acquire greater centrality in our self schema.

2. Reembodiment The Web also allows us to construct a digital self, breaking free from our physical bodies, with all its defects, real or imagined. On the Web we can be whatever we want to be—by Photoshopping our photos, disguising our appearances with props and embellishing them with accessories we may not be able to afford in the real world; by building or adopting avatars, with new skins, dressing them with hairstyles and clothes that index our imagined ideal selves. Moreover, on the Web, we get



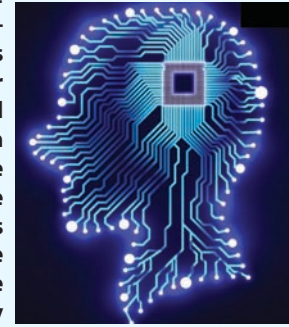
to be known primarily by the content we create, curate, publish, and share. In the physical world, our physical body and our physical possessions (or lack of them) are the most visible window into our identities, while our thoughts are accessible only to a few. On the Web, it is our thoughts that we choose to share that form our most visible persona by which others know what kind of people we are. Although these thoughts are non-physical in form as all thoughts are, in the human mind they are autonomously attached to our visualization of people’s physical identities. In other words, we are acquiring new bodies, so to speak, i.e., our selves are being reembodied.

3. Sharing The Web allows us to share more, more easily, and more widely. By sharing our “creative writings” called “posts” on our social media timelines and by sharing those facets of our lives that we wish to showcase, we write our mini-autobiographies, progressively, every day. These days everyone is an author, so to speak. These autobiographies are self-serving and embellished but also reflective of our inner real self, and, most of all, joyful. It is debatable which is more real: the self we live in the physical world, tethered in the physical reality of limited resources (money, health, talent), or the person we really wish we were and we believe we could become given more resources (and which we are able to construct on the Web).

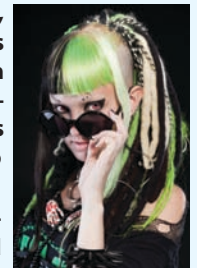
The digital self thus constructed on the web is both less and more real. It is less real in that the self that lives in the physical world is the only self that has an actual job, actual family, an actual lifestyle; all else is mere fantasy. It is more real in that our inner selves are now finding true expression. To cite a popular example: If a 45 year old person really thinks of himself or herself as being a 25 year old and acts out the spontaneity and youthful energy of a 25 year old, which is more real—that his or her chronological clock reads 45 and that the external world views him or her to be 45; or that in his or her own internal, subjective experience, he is 25? Scholars call it the “disinhibition effect”—online we get anonymity and freedom from the face-to-face gaze and thus are able to shed our inhibitions and express ourselves more freely and also more truthfully.



4. Co-construction of Self Humans are social creatures, and as such our selves have always been shaped by others we consider our referents. Urbanization has debilitated this process, limiting our face-to-face contacts, and diminished the circle of our communities so much so that some could live in complete isolation or even suffer loneliness. The Web has opened up new possibilities so that we can reconnect with once lost classmates and build a new circle of connections, interacting frequently with those we choose. Our online conversations with our connections are both public and personal. With our posts we seek validation of our thoughts, eagerly awaiting comments. By responding to our posts (liking and commenting), our connections self-select themselves to become part of our inner circle and in so doing affirm our self-presentations. We also analyze, like a cultural scholar, which of our posts get praised and which spurned, and then make a mid-course correction in our “work-in-progress” identity expression. Thus, with the Web, we increasingly harness others in co-constructing the self that we can then more proudly display, and the Web is allowing it on an unprecedented scale, to millions of consumers whose social reach was hitherto very limited.



5. Distributed Memory The digital world offers us a completely new array of devices and storage containers (“the cloud,” if you will) in which to store our memories of our lives. In part, the outsourcing of personal chores was already taking root (e.g., hiring baby sitters rather than rearing our babies ourselves), but the Web makes such outsourcing doubly prevalent—e.g., a company called Home Chef delivers ready-to-cook ingredients in meal-sized portions to our homes. Our lives’ memories now reside in the digital records of the Web-based suppliers of our meals, clothing, magazines, and entertainment (e.g., Netflix). Intimate details of our lives now reside in the digital information vessels of our cell phone providers, our doctors, online *evites*, and video and music streaming app managers, and even merchants who once fulfilled our orders for gifts to our now-alienated significant others! And of course we place them, happily, also on our Facebook pages, on our Pinterest and Instagram boards, and in our Fitbits and Apple Watches. Perhaps our fondest memories now reside in the stream of “selfies” in which we attempt to capture increasingly smaller micro-segments of our lives, to share with others, of course, but also to reminisce every now and then and hopefully also, say, 50 years from now when our organic memories might serve us with less fidelity or at any rate with less immediacy.



[This description was inspired by renowned consumer research scholar Russell W. Belk’s recent essay (“Extended Self in a Digital World” *J. Cons. Res.*, 2013, 40, Oct., 477-500). It has been crafted for purposes of teaching (borrowing his five categories typology) and does not claim to represent Belk’s ideas in either their core or nuances, nor in substance or prose. To gain real insights, interested readers are directed to his original essay.]