

# Appreciating Cyberculture and the Virtual Self Within

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## SYNOPSIS

Relentless connection to social networks, blogs, forums, email, chatrooms, virtual environments and videoconferencing has resulted for many people in what Rosen (2012) has termed an iDisorder. Drawing on the term iDisorder and examining the psychological underpinnings of Disinhibition (Suler, 2004), this article examines disordered facets of the self when in online communication, such as dissociative anonymity (You Don't Know Me); invisibility (You Can't See Me); asynchronicity (See You Later); solipsistic introjection or egoistic self-absorption (It's All In My Head); dissociative imagination (It's Just a Game); and minimising authority (We're Equals).

According to research by the networking group Cisco, there will be more internet-connected mobile devices than people in the world by the end of 2013 (Arthur, 2013). Some 65 per cent of the population in the developed world currently own at least two such devices, meaning that connection to others is likely to be available to us 24 hours a day.

As educators at the Online Therapy Institute, our work is based on training other mental health practitioners to not only understand the practicalities of how communication has developed in society and to work with those changes to empower change in a human being for the better by working with them online, but also to appreciate the psychological changes that take place when one starts existing in a virtual, online environment. The parts of the psyche that rise to prominence in behaviour when online may look very unfamiliar in face-to-face societal norms. In many cases, this leads to confusion at best and psychological damage at worst, and as mental health practitioners it is our remit to recognise those facets that emerge and facilitate the client's management of them.

Although extreme outcomes of iDisorders do exist, such as the levels of fantasy and denial that occur in the

documentary (and subsequent TV series) 'Catfish' (Joost and Shulman, 2010) or the murder in the documentary 'TallHotBlonde' (Sutherland, 2012), for the most part, the examination of the psyche that use of technology affords us can be not only fascinating but also enlightening. By understanding the norms of Cyberculture – that is, holding the concept that 'Cyberspace transcends culture while being its own culture' (Nagel and Anthony, 2012) – we can use the rich wealth of psychological material to learn how our behaviour falls within what is and what is not acceptable in society. Correlating what seem to be abnormal changes in society with poor mental health is dangerous – after all, in 1886 Savage claimed to have cured a case of insanity by removing a woman's facial hair.

One of the most damaging colloquialisms in recent years has been that there is a difference between what takes place online and what is 'Real Life (RL)'. Recognising that, as technological communication with others has become a natural part of day-to-day life, it is the blending of 'technologies' – including face-to-face interaction – that can lead us to be more psychologically fulfilled in appreciating the parts of the psyche that, until now, have been buried, and potentially causing us distress.

The concept of the Online Disinhibition Effect has

been well documented since Suler's coining of the phrase in 2001 (since revised), and remains a central theme of the potential success of online mental health services. Using Suler's headings, we shall explore how examining emerging behaviour in light of access to online territories can lead us to better understand our full selves. In addition, from a mental health perspective, we offer case examples of how this can manifest behaviours that clients often bring to sessions, challenging our assumptions of what constitutes 'normal' behaviour in an increasingly connected world (Shlain, 2012).

### **You Don't Know Me (Dissociative Anonymity)**

The Internet offers apparent anonymity – if you wish, you can keep your identity hidden and use any name, either close to your own (e.g. KatAnt or DeeAN) or very far away (e.g. Xyz123). For the most part, people only know what you choose to tell them about yourself. When people have the opportunity to separate their actions from their real world and identity, they feel less vulnerable about opening up. They also feel less need to be accountable for their actions – in fact; people might even convince themselves that those behaviours 'aren't me at all'. In psychology this is called 'dissociation'.

Client A, a male writer in his 40s, has discovered that by blogging anonymously as a 16 year old girl experiencing unwanted intimate attention from an uncle, his writing has taken on an improved sense of reality. His blog is popular – and attracts comments from people all over the world who empathise with him and offer advice and support. He has realised that he has come to depend on these compassionate comments, and reveals more and more about his fictional characters experiences. He tells his therapist of this, who attempts to explore further where these 'fictional' feelings of unwanted attention are coming from. The client laughs these attempts at exploration off – it's fiction, after all, and writing a story that his readers enjoy is the job of a writer. That he is dreaming of the 16-year old's experiences and waking up scared and vulnerable is irrelevant.

### **You Can't See Me (Invisibility)**

In many online environments other people cannot see you. As you browse through web sites, message boards, and even some chat rooms, people may not even know you are there at all. In text communication such as e-mail, chat, blogs and instant messaging, others may know a great deal about who you are. However, they still can't see

or hear you – and you can't see or hear them. Even with everyone's identity visible, the opportunity to be physically invisible amplifies the disinhibition effect. Invisibility gives people the courage to go to places and do things that they otherwise wouldn't, often with undesirable results.

Client B, a 20 year old woman, is an avid Facebook user, with friends numbering around 300. Most of these friends are old school friends, new co-workers in her job as a bartender while she studies, or current University friends. She often wakes up in the morning after a party with her iPhone in her hand, and has to trawl back through what she has posted the previous night to several social networking sites. Increasingly, she realises in these moments that not only have several of her friends taken offence at her public opinion of their behaviour at such parties, but she will be seeing them very soon. She realises that posting that pic from the party on the wall of her friend's boyfriend is inexcusable, and her session with you is filled with remorse and loss of friendship.

### **See You Later (Asynchronicity)**

In e-mail and message boards, communication is asynchronous. People don't interact with each other in real time. Others may take minutes, hours, days or even months to reply to something you say. Not having to deal with someone's immediate reaction can be disinhibiting. In e-mail and message boards, where there are delays in feedback, people's train of thought may progress more steadily and quickly towards *deeper expressions* of what they are thinking and feeling in comparison to instantaneous communications. Some people may even experience asynchronous communication as 'running away' after posting a message that is personal, emotional or hostile. It feels safe putting it 'out there', where it can be left behind.

Client C tells you that he was somewhat put out by the lack of response to his recent email to his boss about the attached reports that were due. He had worked hard on them and she obviously didn't appreciate that. As the days passed, still without acknowledgment from his remote office in Japan, his annoyance grew until he just emailed her 'I resent the email' out of frustration and decided to forget about it, while his feelings of irritation continued to grow unchecked. He was surprised when management called him in to discuss attitude-at-work issues.

### **It's All In My Head (Solipsistic Introjection or Egoistic Self-absorption)**

The absence of the visual and aural cues of face-to-face



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communication, combined with text communication, can have other interesting effects on people. Reading another person's message might be experienced as a voice within one's head, as if that person magically has been inserted or 'introjected' into one's psyche, similar to how we hear a character when reading a book. In fact, consciously or unconsciously, we may even assign a visual image to what we think that person looks like and how that person behaves. The online companion now becomes a character within personal mental experience of the world. Online text communication can become the psychological tapestry in which a person's mind weaves fantasy role-plays, usually unconsciously and with considerable disinhibition.

Client D has been working with her online therapist Kim for twelve sessions, discussing intimate issues she has with her mother. Despite very little identifying information given about the therapist, which caused her some concern at the beginning of the work, she knows from the website that Kim lives in the UK, and is around the same age as her mother. Over the course of the work, Client D develops a strong attachment to Kim, associating the therapist with her mother until she feels the communications are between parent and child. Kim, trained in psychodynamic theory, turns the conversation to the possibility of transference in the relationship, and mentions that it is interesting that this is happening with a male therapist. Client D, having had no idea she was working with a man, feels betrayed and lied to – damaging the relationship beyond repair and causing more distress over her mother than ever.

### **It's Just a Game (Dissociative Imagination)**

If we combine the feeling that all these conversations are going on inside our own heads with the nature of cyberspace as a means to escape real life, we get a slightly different force that magnifies disinhibition. People may feel that the imaginary characters they 'created' exist in a way that is quite separate from everyday life – a different realm altogether. It is possible to split or 'dissociate' online fiction from offline fact. Once they turn off the computer and return to their daily routine, they believe they can leave that game and their game-identity behind. Why should they be held responsible for what happens in that make-believe play world that has nothing to do with reality?

Client E is a regular user of Second Life, using it for relaxation and enjoying meeting new people in a virtual environment. He discovers an island where he is able to explore his interest in wearing women's clothes, creating a female avatar and making strong relationships with other female avatars. He enjoys the freedom he feels as a woman, and spends increasing amounts of time away from his wife and children at the laptop, chatting late into the night with one person in particular. Although he has a mic, he tells his new friend it is broken and they can only use the chat function, so that his presence as a female remains intact. When he is away from the platform, he can easily forget his life as a woman, and return to the very male-dominated world of his work. Increasingly, however, he is irritable and bad-tempered, and feels hassled by the volume of emails from his SL friend to an account he set up to maintain his false online identity. Sometimes he wonders why his very identity seems threatened.

### **We're Equals (Minimizing Authority)**

While online, others may not know a person's status in the face-to-face world, and it may not have as much impact as it does in that world. In most cases, everyone on the Internet has an equal opportunity to voice him- or herself. Although one's status in the outside world ultimately may have some impact on one's powers in cyberspace, what mostly determines your influence on others is your skill in communicating. People are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure, but online, in what feels like a peer relationship – with the appearances of 'authority' minimised – it is much easier to speak out



and think, 'Well, what can they do to me?' As the Internet grows, with a seemingly endless potential for creating new environments, many people see themselves as independent-minded explorers. This atmosphere and philosophy contribute to the minimising of authority.

Client F is semi-retired as an in-house consultant to a large economics firm. He has worked hard all his life to reach his status as a well-respected expert, winning prizes for his academic papers and accolades from his government for his work as an economist. In his role as consultant, he is able to work from home, and has grown accustomed to not leaving for the office every day. While he has always loved both his work and the respect it gives him, he increasingly feels undervalued as the communications he receives from younger co-workers become more and more casual. Where once the staff under him would work through weekends to complete reports he needs, he now just gets emails saying as little as 'leaving the office now, might get to it next week'. He is increasingly unhappy as the respect and command he once had ebbs away, and he considers full retirement.

## Conclusion

Society is changing in ways that are often uncomfortable for those who remember a world pre-Internet and mobile phones. The culture of Cyberspace is often unfamiliar and confusing if one tries to apply offline societal norms to the online world. One of the written exercises our students undertake is to imagine a world where the Internet had gone down worldwide, which in itself can create feelings of disorientation in just imagining it.

For us as mental health professionals, it is our remit to immerse ourselves in the changing society, from the perspective of both how online relationships affect our offline ones, and indeed vice versa. We are not yet at the point of technology blending seamlessly into our consciousness – confusion about relationships and what the motivation is behind written communication still leaves us often bewildered and unsure of what the reality is.

We do believe, as an Institute, that embracing cyberculture and working to fully understand how and why people behave differently online in light of the lack of physical presence is one of the most important facets of our work. We are already looking ahead to how we shall behave when holographic technology allows us to communicate at a distance while retaining the physical presence, and where the above headings will fit with that, if at all. What we do consider essential is to recognise

that technology, and the changes in culture it brings, should be embraced, if we are to find our virtual selves sitting comfortably within it. It is likely that what are currently called iDisorders will become as out-of-date a concept as the removal of women's beards to treat insanity. ☺



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