Digital identity management: what is reality (and why should we care?)

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Scope
Image matters. And as the once-exclusive tools of impression management filter out to the digital masses, Michael Solomon documents some emerging behaviour strands and their potential impact on brand messaging, both on and offline – although the two spheres are no longer quite as clear-cut.

Believing what you read in the papers
A French legislator is raising quite a ruckus; she wants to require fashion photos to carry a label that indicates whether the models' images have been retouched. She argues that these digital distortions create false – and unattainable – expectations of beauty for girls, including her two daughters (1). For now, let’s put aside the rebuttal by industry insiders that this practice is so pervasive such a law is highly impractical. Let’s also side-step the more abstract philosophical arguments about how we know that anything is real.

For our purposes, the debate more generally highlights our fundamental tendency to believe that what we see in the media is “real” unless we are otherwise advised – and likewise our tendency to put more stock in what we see than in what we know. The true reality: most of us are quite gullible and we’re quite content to be so. We willingly ‘suspend disbelief’ any time we attend a live theatre production or watch a television sitcom. Even the current craze for so-called reality shows belies the fact that there’s very little real about them. Contestants are carefully screened, often coached, and sometimes willing to say or do whatever it takes to stand in the media spotlight (as President Obama’s Secret Service recently learned via the embarrassing state dinner gate-crashing fiasco).

Performances and marketing communications alike need to ‘sell’ the receiver to achieve their objectives. Sophisticated digital technologies that remove cellulite or add higher cheekbones simply make the sales job a bit easier. Editing, whether roughshod or subtle, has been a fact of life for eons. As we’ll see, the real game-changers are new techniques that allow each of us to completely modify our appearance or even to invent a totally new visual identity as we interact with others in virtual realities.

Appearance, self-worth and age-old social constructs
You don’t need to be a supermodel to manage the way you appear to others. In fact we all do it every day. If we didn’t, we would have no need for mirrors. Fifty years ago, the sociologist Erving Goffman, among others, wrote extensively about the elaborate process of impression management. Since that time, volumes of social psychological studies have empirically documented the preening process and the huge impact physical appearance exerts on our judgments of those around us ('beauty is only skin deep, but ugly is to the bone').

Furthermore, we know quite well that our perceptions of our own attractiveness profoundly influence feelings of self-worth as well. The French legislator’s concerns in this sense are well-placed; her daughters may well experience feelings of inadequacy when they see hundreds of images of impossibly beautiful women paraded in front of them week after week. Way back in 1902, the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley wrote about the looking-glass self that operates as a sort of psychological sonar: we take readings of our own identity when we ‘bounce’ signals off others and try to project their impression of us. Like the distorted mirrors in a funhouse, our appraisal of who we are depends on whose (imagined) perspectives we take. We also calibrate these sonar readings to the external standards we adopt; young women alter their perceptions of their own body shapes and sizes after they watch as little as 30 minutes of TV programming (2).
Mass-market image management

But, here’s what is different now: mainstream consumers can play with the same tools. Professional ‘identity managers’ assume many forms, from hairstylists and cosmetologists to wardrobe consultants and resume writers. And, more radical approaches that used to be available only to those with significant resources are now in the mix as well. Doctors perform nearly $60,000 cosmetic surgery procedures in the US each year alone. In some circles nose jobs or breast implants are part of the rite-of-passage for teenage girls, and an increasing number of men spring for pectoral enlargements.

Other makeovers don’t require a surgeon, particularly when it comes to digital identity. Professional editors (the bane of critics like our French legislator) have long been able to wield their airbrushes to give us advertising images of breathtakingly beautiful people who literally do not exist in the real world. Today, many techie teenagers can effortlessly produce the same results with Photoshop. Millions of us manage - and embellish - our digital identities when we strategically populate a Facebook profile page or post a self-aggrandizing ad (perhaps with vintage photo from 20 years ago to match) on an online dating site.

Insights and opportunities

Many marketers don’t seem to grasp the steady expansion of their customers’ energies and even their very identities into online realms. Indeed, the firm line many of us draw between real world and online activities grows increasingly porous; the distinction will probably seem quant to our grandchildren. Already many millions of consumers commute back and forth between their real and digital selves multiple times each day. It’s unlikely that the ten million kids who visit a virtual world like Habbo Hotel for an hour or more each day would regard that aspect of their lives differently to the time they spend in the playground.

Identity management is a fundamental social concern in our social and professional lives. It remains a concern no matter whether we network in an office building or at a virtual trade show, or flirt in a bar or on Facebook. The needs that relate to self-presentation in both domains yield three classes of opportunity for forward-looking companies:

Offline to online

The social media explosion means that we are what we post. Already a cottage industry is emerging as consultants offer to customise Facebook profiles and help people generate a photo or avatar to represent their online identity. As businesses continue to migrate their training, meeting and networking functions to virtual worlds the choice of an appropriate avatar will be more than a casual or aesthetic one. Indeed, the research firm Gartner predicts that within three years 70% of businesses will maintain behaviour and dress code policies for employees whose online avatars represent their organization.

Online to offline

Researchers are just starting to investigate how our experiences in online formats stay with us when we return to our corporeal selves. We know that when we assume an avatar identity, we transfer many of the interaction norms we use in the physical world. Just as in real life, male avatars in Second Life leave more space between them when they talk to other males than when they talk to virtual females, and they are less likely to maintain eye contact than are females. Work on so-called ‘Proteus effects’ demonstrates that the social feedback experimental subjects receive when they assume a virtual identity (such as being accepted or rejected by avatars of the opposite sex) lingers when they later interact with people in the real world. Rejection hurts, whether you receive it in an online format or as your physical self.

On a more optimistic note, early evidence that our virtual encounters shape our ‘real world’ self-concepts presents some promising therapeutic and marketing implications. Consider for example the potential to elevate the self-esteem of the thousands of disabled people who currently patronize Second Life gathering spots, where they can easily talk, flirt, and even dance. Or think about the virtual branding experiences we accumulate during the course of our cyberjourneys; their lasting impact provides yet another reason to take emerging practices like advergaming very seriously.

In addition, the fantasy identities people create online sometimes travel back with them: witness the growing global phenomenon of cosplay, where participants congregate at restaurants, clubs and conventions in full regalia as their avatars or other favourite characters from comic books and movies. We can expect this activity to influence fashion trends, licensing deals and perhaps the entertainment industry as social gamers and moviegoers increasingly import media characters into their daily lives.

Offline merges with online

We are currently being engulfed by a wave of augmented reality. As these applications proliferate, the outmoded distinction between a real world and a virtual one will disappear. This process will bring us back full-circle to the task of identity management, regardless of whether the self we project is made of atoms or pixels.

Sources

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Alan Moore, “It’s not about online or offline: it’s about blended reality’, 1 December 2009. Available here
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