

## **Anonymity and Personality Change**

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The Internet is the fastest growing medium in the history of the world to date. The different facets of the Internet – chat, email, e-commerce, et al have touched millions of lives. There are few whose lives have been isolated from the effect of this dramatic medium.

History teaches us that there is a definite impact of media on social change and the more impact the medium has, the more significant the change it evokes. Given the speed of its adoption and the versatility of its usage - the Internet has some claim to be the most influential medium the world has seen. Understandably the Internet's impact on many of its constituents has been very high. While there are several areas where the effect of the Internet is highly apparent and some that are not so apparent and need exploration.

The key differentiator between the Internet and earlier media forms is the attribute of interactivity. The ability of the user to interact with the medium is one of the reasons why the Internet has become so popular. Along with interactivity – the role of personalization makes the Internet even more attractive to many users and this feature has definitely added to users' appreciation of the medium.

Important to this paper is the fact that the Internet offers anonymity of identity to its users and that anonymity has served many users to develop an alter ego or 'another self'. This 'other self' is used both as a cover as well as, at times, the manifestation of the ideal social self image. Internet users have chosen to be anonymous in transactions across utilities like email, chat, discussion forums, and even subscriptions to free services.

There are millions of people inhabiting chat rooms most of whom are operating under pseudonyms or nicks, misrepresenting their personal details for safety as well as for role playing.

Consistent role-playing over a period of time could lead to a personality change amongst individuals. When a consumer or group of consumers undergo a personality change, there is a strong possibility that a set of brands that were purchased by these consumers may no longer be relevant as the brands' personality are no longer in line with the changed consumer personality. It is also very possible that the consumer personality change can lead to a different set of brands assuming relevance for these consumers because of the brands' personality relevance to the consumers' new personalities.

The movement towards or away from their brand is extremely important for brand managers as this would have a bearing on the brand's standing in the market. Tracking the shift in personality of consumers could be very difficult as the very anonymity that leads to personality change would prevent identification of the chatters as consumers of a particular brand or subscribing to a set of demographic parameters.

### **Explaining the concept:**

Before looking at the possible effect of the anonymity provided by Internet chat rooms on personality change, it is important to have an operating definition of the term personality that is provided as (1) 'the fairly stable patterns of thought, feeling and action that are typical of an individual'.

Personality is unique for every individual however there are certain characteristics that an individual may have that are similar to those of others. Personality is consistent and enduring across most individuals and most people have fairly stable personalities over time without any drastic changes.

However personality can change and over a period of time personality does change for a lot of people. The change in personality in many cases can be linked to a change in self-image.

*Marketing implications:* The similarity of personality across sets of individual sets enables marketers to target segments and promote a brand based on its appeal to a particular personality type. The fact that personality does not change drastically and is fairly enduring gives the marketer the assurance that this segment will be in existence for a period of time. The fact that personality does change means that marketers need to keep in touch with their consumers and see the enduring relevance of their brand to the target segment.

**Internet chat rooms – some observations:** One of the most popular past times on the Internet is chat. Chat has caught the interest and imagination of a large number of Internet users and some estimates state that the number of Internet chatters could be as many as 50 million. Chatting could be practiced in different ways based on the kind of software available at the user's disposal. Internet users chat on instant messenger based software, chat room-based software and voice based software. Many studies indicate that chat room participants are highly engrossed when they are chatting and show a high level of concentration and involvement while chatting.

Other studies show that visiting a chat room can easily become a habit with some users visiting chat rooms regularly for even over 5-7 years. The time put in the chat room is often fairly significant ranging from 20 minutes to upto 2 hours. Some people chatting from work are present in the chat room throughout the day however participating only when they are free to do so. For some further observation on chat room participants please refer Annexure 1.

**Internet chat rooms and anonymity:** The Internet with its thousands of chat rooms has made it possible for millions of people to chat online with millions of others sharing the same interests. Popular chat software like MIRC and ICQ has made it easy for total strangers to get acquainted and form relationships over the net. Importantly chat on the net is anonymous and so individuals are safe from being identified. Anonymity provides different benefits to its practitioner. For some it enables them to be free of persecution by cyber stalkers where as for others it enables one to interact without the burden of operating under a particular stereotype. The freedom associated with operating under the cloak of anonymity allows the individual to role-play and or develop/create an alter ego.

**Role-playing and the creation of alter egos:** In real life individuals tend to take into consideration the expectations that others have from them. Across different situations an individual ends up playing several roles including those of a child, sibling, spouse, colleague, friend, etc. Each of these roles have with them a set of behavioural expectations/tendencies associated with the individual in that particular role. However, when chatting on the net, individuals under the cloak of anonymity can don their own identity or alternatively assume an alter ego. (This paper does not judge individuals on

the basis of the chat rooms they visit or the role that individuals play in chat rooms but only quotes the social phenomenon of online chatting and its possible implications.)

They can exhibit a totally different set of personality traits in their interaction on the net as well as play a new set of roles that are unlike the ones they play in real life. For example – Jack the car mechanic may on the net exhibit a very high degree of political maturity and lead a conversation on political insularity in local politicians. He may not exhibit this degree of erudition in real life for fear that people may laugh at his thoughts due to his status as a mechanic. Creating an alter ego of that of a suave, influential person allows Jack to play the role of an intellectual political thinker who has a message for the masses.

**Role-playing and self-image:** Individuals have enduring images of themselves. These images of self are closely linked to their personality. These images are multiple because of the multiple roles that the individuals play across different occasions in life as members of society. As per a popular model (2) there are four different types of self-images:

1. Actual self image – how individuals see themselves
2. Ideal self image – how individuals would like to see themselves
3. Social self image – how individuals feel people see them
4. Ideal social self image – how individuals would like others to see them.

As an individual indulges in role -playing over a period of time, there is the possibility of carrying the behaviour of the alter ego into real life. A person dissatisfied with his/her actual self image and social self-image may try and create an alter ego aimed at moving towards ideal social self-image. In the process of adopting this alter ego the person may actually move towards his/her own ideal self-image.

A shy person may find himself becoming increasingly talkative in real life with his shyness and fear of strangers diminishing due to confidence gained through his/her chat room experiences. Similarly a person who is unable to become popular in a chat room may feel humiliated and carry the hurt into real life. For some alleged personality change cases – refer Annexure 2.

**Change in self-image:** The aforementioned psychological changes can lead to a change in the individual's self image. The example of a shy person gaining confidence in real life due to chat room experiences could be due to a change in self-image. The acceptance as an interesting 'chatter' may increase one's self-confidence and change one's self image. The change may be slow and gradual and take some years to take place but the chances of it happening are real. Some of the factors that can play a role in influencing personality change are given below:

- a. Duration of presence in chat room: For personality change to take place it is believed that by and large the duration of interaction with other chat members would need to be fairly long or alternatively the interaction could be short but for sustained period so as to enable gradual personality change.
- b. Intensity of experience in chat room: It is expected that more intense experience could lead to either more drastic personality change or alternatively personality change in a shorter time span. In a world where relationships that even culminate in marriage have been developed over the

Internet, there is a lot of intensity of experiences/ relationships possible in Internet chat rooms.

- c. Nature of chat rooms/ chat interaction: There are 1000s of chat rooms catering to different topics of interest. While the topic of interest could have significant bearing on personality change – ‘I get to talk to other people who share my interests/problems and therefore I feel less alienated’ however the more important point would seem to be the nature of chat interaction as this is the facet that would possibly catalyse personality change – ‘I feel very relaxed when I go in there – everyone likes me and I have great time. I lose my inhibitions and feel very confident.’

***Change in values, beliefs and attitudes:*** The change in self-image can lead to important changes in values, beliefs and attitudes of the individual. The relationship of change in values, beliefs and attitudes and its impact on consumer purchase behaviour / brand affinity has been well documented across marketing journals.

**Implications for brand managers:** Knowledge on change in beliefs, values, attitudes and personality of consumers is vital to marketers. Critical to brand desirability is the development of a brand personality that is indicative of the consumer segments’ real or aspirational personality. If there is a change in the consumers’ personality then this could have an impact on the extent of the desirability of a brand or set of brands. While one set of brands may become less desirable to a consumer segment that has been affected by personality change, another set of brands may be gaining in relevance to this consumer segment.

Similarly a change in consumers value system could trigger a change in the kinds of brands one looks at. For example, a person who does not feel accepted may suffer from low self-esteem and may believe that he/she needs to build his/her desirability to be accepted in society. Good looks and sociability may be core values to this kind of an individual. The brands purchased may be in line with these values to buffer his/her self-esteem or enhance sociability. A change in self-image could lead to a change in values to more self-actualisation oriented values leading a different set of brands being more relevant to this consumer because of their consonance to his/her new set of values.

**Tracking personality change:** Given the fact that the chat participants are anonymous it is going to be extremely difficult to track personality changes and their consequent effect on brands. It is however an important task and brands targeting similar consumer segments could possibly collaborate to study the effect of personality change amongst their consumer segments. Tracking personality changes of consumers is as important for brands as is the importance of studying the changes in the demographic composition of their target audiences.

## **References:**

- (1). Robertson Ian. ‘Sociology’. 1977. Seventh Printing. Worth Publishers Inc. New York. Chapter 5. Page 95.
- (2). Joseph M Sirgy, ‘Self Concept in Consumer Behaviour – A Critical Review’ Journal of Consumer Research 9 December, 1992, 287-300; cited in Leon G Schiffman, Leslie Lazar Kanuk – Consumer Behaviour, Sixth Edition Prentice Hall of India; 1997 p137,143.

## **Annexure 1 – Some observations on why some people visit chat rooms regularly.**

To understand better what makes some people visit chat rooms regularly a small survey was conducted amongst people who visit chat rooms. This survey was done by visiting chat rooms at random across different sites. An unstructured questionnaire was used to gather responses. A total of 300 respondents were questioned to get some basic information on the kind of reasons why these respondents visited chat rooms.

While the sample size is too small to arrive at a definitive picture of why people visit chat rooms it is sufficient to list out some of the broad reasons that influence their interest in chat.

1. *Knowing about other people:* Chat rooms are seen to be a good way to exchange ideas with other people. There is a belief that one can get to know a lot about how people across the world react to different issues by interacting in a chat room. To quote a respondent ‘ It is really weird to hear how differently some people think about issues like family, adoption, abortion, national pride, etc. I guess the Net is a good place to experience ideological diversity.’
2. *As a sop for loneliness:* The net seems to be the place for succour for a lot of lonely people. Chat rooms seem to be a place where one feels accepted and the speed with which relationships seem to develop is indicative of the depth of release some people feel.
3. *As a place to kill time:* There are some people who visit chat rooms as a means of killing time. Neither do they visit chat rooms often nor do they spend much time in chat. Their intention in visiting is to entertain themselves for a short while.
4. *As a meeting point for people who share special interests:* People who share common interests visit chat rooms to discuss with others who share these interests. Special chat rooms catering to topics like cricket, Ally McBeal etc have these kinds of visitors.

## **Annexure 2 - Some cases of alleged personality change**

The cases given below have been drawn out through chats with people from various chat rooms over a period of time. As is the case in chat rooms – the respondents were anonymous and the findings should be taken at face value in the absence of any means of verifying the same. The research was undertaken with an unstructured questionnaire over a period of different chat sessions. The sample size is not large enough to be conclusive but the findings provide a good enough indication that personality change is a reality that some chat room visitors have experienced.

1. A 45-year-old divorcee with 2 children claims that chat rooms have helped rehabilitate her emotionally. Following her divorce 14 years back she tended to become a loner with her interest in group activities dropping. With lower self-confidence arising from her divorce she felt lonely and had feelings of being unworthy of anyone's lasting affection. Over the last 7 years she has been regularly present in a multiple chat rooms and has developed a set of cyber friends with whom she shares her problems. Even though she knows that these friends are of no use to her due to their anonymity she feels that by interacting with them and because of their solicitude she has gained confidence to become more forthcoming and open in her real life and is willing to put behind her earlier bad experience and build real life relationships with people. She is more confident and self-assured than she was a few years earlier.
2. A 25-year-old student claims that his problem was shyness. His conversational skills have improved over the last few years through participation in chat rooms and this confidence has carried into his day-to-day life. While he continues to get bogged down in real life conversations with people he finds it easier to 'get into the groove' and leave behind his inhibitions than he did earlier. Consequently this student feels that he has become a lot more outgoing than earlier.

There are several instances of people who have found the inability to break through a clique in a chat room very disturbing and saw it as a sign of rejection leading to lower self esteem as this happened across cases. There are also cases of people who have felt 'cheated' in their cyber relationships as well 'humiliated' by chat room bullies who are as prevalent in chat rooms as they are in real life.