

Chapter 12

Who Am I? Establishing an Online Identity



Overview

“Who am I?” is a question all people have asked themselves at some point in their lives. Cyberspace provides an opportunity to experiment with different answers to that question.

In this chapter, you will learn about offline and online identities and how people use different personas in different situations. Methods of presenting a positive online identity and managing your online reputation are discussed. The chapter ends with a discussion of the dangers of using a false identity and ways of protecting yourself from people who present themselves dishonestly online.



Key Terms

- Identity
- Persona
- Offline identity
- Online identity
- Self-image
- Online profile
- Avatar
- Self-expression
- Online alias
- False identity
- Catfish

What Is an Identity?

Have you ever asked yourself the question, “Who am I?” People often answer this question by identifying themselves according to specific characteristics. Some people connect their identity to attributes such as race, religion, gender, and physical appearance. Others may view their identity as a collection of personal interests, goals, and aspirations. For most people, one’s **identity** is the combination of all the different elements of one’s self.

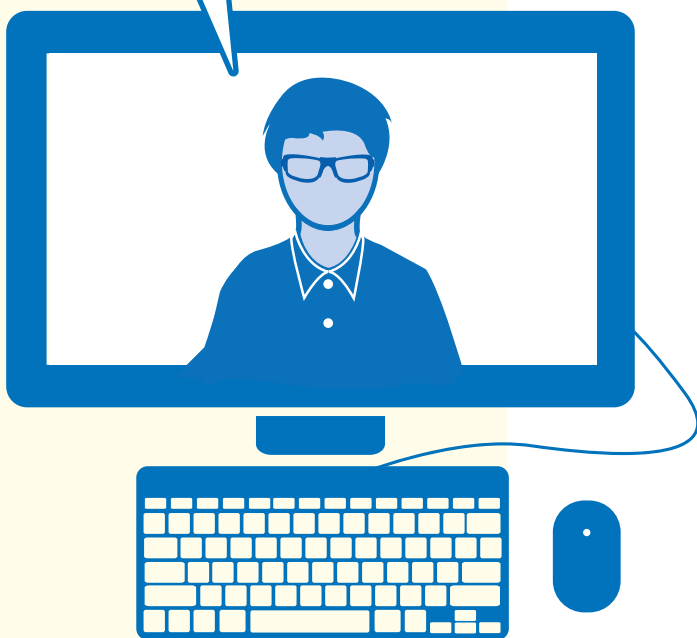
Online and Offline Identities

Your identity is the sum of the individual parts that make up who you are. However, people sometimes express different parts of themselves in one place and situation than they would in other places and situations. There is nothing unusual about this. Think about your own life. You might show one side of yourself to your teammates on your soccer team and another side of yourself to your neighborhood friends. In other words, you sometimes adopt a different **persona**—a personality or way of presenting yourself—at different times and places. Our different personas make up our complete **offline identity**, the way we present ourselves in the physical, real world.

The dawning of the digital age has brought about the opportunity to create yet another version (or versions) of ourselves. Your **online identity** is the persona (or personas) you adopt online, which includes your actions, expressions, and behaviors. You might even have more than one online persona, depending on whom you are interacting with online. Your online and offline identities might be exactly the same, or they might have significant differences. (Think about the mild-mannered girl or boy who is much more boisterous when using an avatar to play an online real-time role-playing game.) Sometimes, people try out an online identity in online communities, websites where people who share similar interests can interact, learning from and supporting one another.

Our online and offline identities, along with how we interact with others, build our **self-image**, or how we think about ourselves. Positive experiences with online identities can boost our self-esteem.

Remember:
Your online identity is the persona (or personas) you adopt online, which includes your actions, expressions, and behaviors.





Building an Online Identity

Our actions online influence how others perceive us. Whether we post something funny about ourselves in an **online profile** (a short description of oneself on the Web) or communicate with friends in a chat room, each move we make on the Web leaves an impression about who we are. **Shown below are three common ways that people build an online identity:**

1 Words

The words or language used in social networking and online communities help build a persona. For example, do you tell jokes? Are you kind? Are you sarcastic? Often, the words we use leave a sense of ourselves with others, so it's important to consider word choice when communicating in online environments.

2 Actions

How we interact with others online not only shapes our self-image, but it also helps others form impressions of us. For instance, if you go out of your way to help an online friend accomplish a task—find a summer job, locate a home for a stray dog, or even reach the next level in an online game you are playing together—you create a positive image of yourself in your friend's mind. If, on the other hand, you spread nasty gossip about someone online, you create a negative image of yourself in the minds of everyone who sees what you wrote.

3 Images

An **avatar**, a graphical representation of one's self, is commonly found on social networking sites (in two-dimensional form, such as an icon), on online gaming sites (in three-dimensional form, such as a character), and on other sites that include personal accounts. Avatars give people a sense of who you are by how you represent yourself visually. The photographs of yourself and others that you choose to post online also help people form impressions of you.

Avatars give people a sense of who you are by how you represent yourself visually.



Fact!



Did You Know?

A 2013 survey found that 19% of teenagers regretted sharing posts (videos, photos, comments, and updates) that they had made on social media sites.

Source: *Pew Research Internet Project*



Reputation Management

Once you build an online identity, it's important to remain in control of it. Managing your online identity means being mindful of the words you use, the actions you take, and the images you post. These three elements contribute to the reputation you have online.

Sometimes, when you are communicating with friends online, it may not seem like a big deal to post a silly picture or write something inappropriate in order to be funny. However, keep in mind that what gets posted online will never really go away. If you change your mind about posting a picture and decide to take it down, someone could have already downloaded it, copied it, or shared it with others.

In order to build a positive online reputation, it is important to be mindful about what you post. If you wouldn't say or do something in person, it's probably not a good idea to do it online, either.

Take Action

You are in charge of your own online reputation management. Obviously, you control what you post, and it's up to you to make good choices about how you present yourself online. But what do you do when someone else posts something negative about you online?

Today, cyberbullying is a common problem, and as you learned in Chapter 3, bullies often use the Internet to verbally abuse people. **It's important to keep in mind the basic rules (shown below) of what to do if someone is behaving cruelly toward you online:**

- 1 **Tell** a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher, or counselor.
- 2 **Don't respond** with revenge or bully back.
- 3 **Report the incident** to the service provider.
- 4 **Block** emails, texts, and social media communications from the bully.
- 5 **Maintain positive online safety habits** and avoid sharing private information.

You are in charge of your own
online reputation management.



In order to build a positive online reputation, it is important to be mindful about what you post.

Self-Expression and Safety

The great thing about the Internet is that it is full of interesting sites and worthwhile communities in which to participate. From online forums to social networking sites, the Web gives us a venue for **self-expression**, or the expression of our individual beliefs, thoughts, and personality.

Using the Web to express yourself is a great way to share opinions and pieces of your identity with others. However, just as with any other action you take on the Web, it is important to your personal safety that you be careful about how you express yourself. The guidelines in **Table 12.1** are a good place to start.

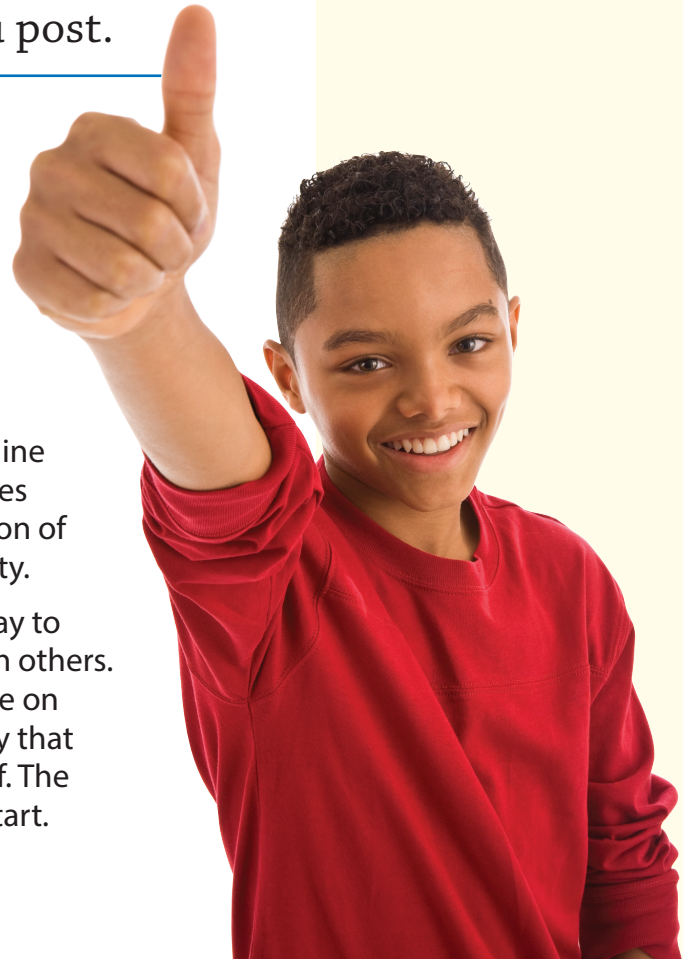


Table 12.1

Dos and Don'ts of Online Self-Expression	
Dos	Don'ts
Do use the Internet for self-expression.	Don't reveal private information that others could use to stalk you or to exploit you financially.
Do use the Internet as a tool to exchange ideas and opinions.	Don't be hurtful, rude, or insensitive while expressing ideas and opinions. Not only is such behavior cruel, but it could also inspire others to be cruel to you.
Do use the Internet to enjoy communicating with others.	Don't meet up in real life with people you know only from online interactions.

Choices

You have many different choices about how you present yourself online. Depending on the situation and on the person with whom you are communicating, you may choose to present different parts of yourself online than you would if you were talking with that person in real life. Sometimes people use an **online alias**—a name that is not their real name—so that they can't be identified online. Using an online alias is sometimes a good idea, as it helps ward off potential stalkers and can prevent your online activities from having repercussions in your personal and professional lives.

Be yourself.

When you create a false identity, you don't give people a chance to know the real you.



It's acceptable to try out different online identities. You might have fun releasing your inner warrior in an online game or showing off your smarts on a trivia website. However, you should refrain from creating a **false identity**, a persona that contains little or nothing of your true self. Sometimes, people create false identities in order to fit in with an online group, impress friends, or be accepted. But when you create a false identity, you don't give people a chance to know the real you, and you don't value your true self, which can harm your self-esteem.

Sometimes people use a false identity and an online alias for unethical or illegal purposes. For example, people who create a false identity in order to scam someone are said to **catfish**. (The word can also be used as a noun, as in, "That guy I met online last month was a total *catfish*.") Often, people who catfish do so to pursue a romantic relationship with someone whom they think would not be interested in them if they revealed their true identity. Sometimes people catfish in this way just to hurt another person emotionally or to scam the targeted person out of money or other material goods. Needless to say, catfishing is cruel, highly unethical, and potentially illegal.

When you are online, keep the following tips in mind:

Keep it real.

Don't embellish, make up facts, or engage in dishonesty. Avoid creating a false identity, and just be yourself.

Keep it respectful.

Don't judge or criticize other people's online identities. Be respectful and kind as you would in a real-life situation.

Keep it safe.

Be cautious when interacting online with people whom you don't know in real life. Be on the lookout for catfishing.

Chapter 12 Assessment



What Do You Think?

Write a reflection of three to five paragraphs on what it means to have an online identity. Your paragraphs should answer the following questions:

- 1 What are the similarities and differences between online and offline identities?
- 2 How can people make sure they are representing their true self online?
- 3 What are some reasons people might want to create an online identity?
- 4 How can people manage their online reputation?

Challenge: What Would You Do?

In this chapter, you learned about online and offline identities. Now, apply what you have learned. Read the scenarios below and write one paragraph for each, explaining what you would do if faced with a similar situation. Use information from the chapter to justify your reasoning.

1 A friend wants to impress other players in an online gaming forum, so he tells them he is undefeated, even though that's not true.

If you were in the same situation, what would you do?

2 One of your classmates leaves an insulting post on a friend's Facebook page. Your friend feels very sad about it, but she doesn't know what actions to take to combat this cyberbullying.

If you were in the same situation, what would you do?

3 A friend is thinking about posting a photograph on a social media site. The photo shows your friend wearing skimpy clothing and making inappropriate gestures.

If you were in the same situation, what would you do?



Extension Activities

Activity 1 Key Terms

For each term, write a definition in your own words.

Online identity	Persona	Online profile
Avatar	Self-expression	

Activity 2 True or False?

Using the information from this chapter, determine whether each statement is true or false.

- 1 One's identity is the sum of all the individual parts that make up who one is.
- 2 An avatar is a written representation of one's self.
- 3 A false identity records every website you visit.
- 4 While it's not acceptable to use the Internet for self-expression, it is acceptable to share personal information about yourself.
- 5 You can manage your online reputation by being mindful of the words you use, the actions you take, and the images you post.



Activity 3 Identify Your Identity

In this activity, you will explore your online identity and your offline identity by comparing your behavior in both worlds. If you don't currently have an online identity, imagine who you would be if you did use the Internet to communicate with others.

Take a piece of paper and fold it in half to create an image similar to the one shown in **Figure 12.1**. Label one column of your paper *Who Am I Online?* and the other column *Who Am I Offline?*

Next, write down your identity characteristics for each column. Think about the words you use, the actions you take, and the images you share both online and in the real world.

When you're finished, write a one-page reflection that answers the following questions:

- 1 What similarities do you see between your two identities?
- 2 What differences do you see between your two identities?
- 3 Why is it important to consider who we are in real life and who we are online?

Figure 12.1

Who Am I?	
Who Am I Online?	Who Am I Offline?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outgoing: I love to meet new people online.•••••	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shy: I don't really like to talk a lot.•••••



Hands-On

Self-Expression Portrait

Using colored pencils and paper, computer design software, or images found in magazines, newspapers, and on the Web, create a self-portrait that represents an image of yourself that you would want to share with others online. Think about what qualities you want to project and how you want others to see you. For example, you may prefer to create a realistic portrait of yourself, or you may want to create something more abstract, such as an animal, a superhero, or a fictional character. Keep in mind that your portrait should be a reflection of your true self and not a false identity.

When creating your portrait, ask yourself the following questions:

- What makes me distinctive?
- What do I like about myself?
- How do I want people to see me?
- What do I want to communicate about myself?



▲ In this example, each person is holding an avatar that is a simplified version of what he or she actually looks like.