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Adam N. Joinson and Beth Dietz-Uhler
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Explanations for the Perpetration of and Reactions to Deception in a Virtual Community

ADAM N. JOINSON

The Open University

BETH DIETZ-UHLER

Miami University

Cases of identity deception on the Internet are not uncommon. Several cases of a revealed identity deception have been reported in the media. In this article, the authors examine a case of deception in an online community composed primarily of information technology professionals. In this case, an established community member (DF) invented a character (Nowheremom) whom he fell in love with and who was eventually killed in a tragic accident. When other members of the community eventually began to question Nowheremom's actual identity, DF admitted that he invented her. The discussion board was flooded with reactions to DF's revelation. The authors propose several explanations for the perpetration of identity deception, including psychiatric illness, identity play, and expressions of true self. They also analyze the reactions of community members and propose three related explanations (social identity, deviance, and norm violation) to account for their reactions. It is argued that virtual communities' reactions to such threatening events provide invaluable clues for the study of group processes on the Internet.

Keywords: Internet, community, social processes, deception, deviance

Although initially envisaged as a network of computers, the development of e-mail soon after the implementation of ARPANET also allowed for connections between people (Licklider & Taylor, 1968). By the early 1980s, dial-up systems like the WELL (Rheingold, 1993) were providing a community-type experience for members of the public. Stone (1991) argued that virtual communities are "incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face-to-face'" (p. 85). However, the idea that groups of people exchanging messages in cyberspace can form real (i.e., psychologically rewarding) relationships and communities has not been universally accepted. An early complaint was that virtual communities, although looking to all extents and purposes like a real community, were actually pseudocommunities. The essence of a pseudocommunity is a lack of sincerity or genuineness (Jones, 1995)—a pattern of relating that, although looking like highly interpersonal interaction, is essentially impersonal (Beniger, 1987).

However, as Rheingold (2000) noted, "It's hard to sympathize with the charge that all online relationships are unreal when you've stood in front of a person's friends and family at their funeral" (p. 327). In a similar vein, Haythornthwaite, Wellman, and Garton (1998)

argued that “the question of whether or not one can find ‘community’ on-line is asked largely by those who do not experience it” (p. 212). In more recent years, the discussion of virtual community has developed to consider the use of the Internet in social support (e.g., Constant, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1997; Preece, 1999) and the social-psychological impact of virtual interaction on the individual’s psychological well-being (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998).

Deception on the Internet

Internet-based communities and social interaction represent the cusp of a paradox not yet well understood. The visual anonymity inherent in most Internet-based communities provides ample opportunity to engage in deception and identity play. And yet there is a large body of empirical and anecdotal evidence to suggest that visual anonymity online encourages candid self-disclosure rather than falsehoods (see Joinson, 1999, 2001), and may even encourage the expression of a true self online (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, in press).

A number of cases of deception in virtual communities have been reported in the press, and some gained almost a mythological status among early Internet users. For instance, one of the earliest cases was of the disabled “Joan” and “Alex,” two popular figures in an online community in the early 1980s (Van Gelder, 1991). Joan was reluctant to meet people face-to-face because of her physical disability, but she did forge many friendships with other women in the community and was a confidant to several whom had real life affairs with Alex. As it turned out, Joan was a persona developed by Alex, leading to a sense of shock, outrage, and betrayal within the community (O’Brien, 1999; Turkle, 1995).

Feldman (2000) reported four cases of “Munchausen by Internet,” where people in online support groups claim illnesses that they do not have. In one case, a woman called Barbara posted to a cystic fibrosis support group. Barbara claimed that she was waiting at home to die and was being cared for by an elder sister (Amy). The group sent many supportive messages to Barbara and were distressed to learn from Amy that she died a few days later. It was only when the group noticed that Amy shared Barbara’s spelling errors that they questioned the story. Amy admitted to the hoax, and taunted the group for their gullibility. Feldman warned that a common reaction to such cases is for the online group to split into believers and doubters of the claims or for people to leave the group in disgust.

During 2001, the case of Kaycee was the first large-scale deception to hit the weblog community. Weblogging is the posting on web sites of daily links to articles or events of interest on other web sites. It is also the terminology for online diarists who often use the same software to post their daily diary. Like many similar stories, the deception seemingly began quite innocently when a group of school girls developed an imaginary friend (Kaycee) and developed some simple hoax web pages sometime around 1997 or 1998. However, it would seem that when one of the girl’s mothers (Debbie) found this out, she developed the imaginary teenager to be diagnosed with leukemia, and at around the same time Kaycee joined an online community called CollegeClub. When the author of a weblog suggested that Kaycee and her mother begin a weblog on his own site, the tales of Kaycee’s battles against cancer and her seeming recovery became popular among the weblog community, with many members sending Kaycee cards and gifts. After a couple of years, when it was looking like Kaycee might be recovering fully, Debbie posted in early 2001 that she had died of an aneurysm. According to the Kaycee FAQ (<http://rootnode.org/article.php?sid=26>), “The community outpouring of support was remarkable and those who knew Kaycee well suffered serious bouts of grief.” However, suspicions began when Debbie would provide no details about the funeral or address for condolence cards. Investigations by Internet users

revealed no trace of Kaycee at any high schools or hospitals, or even an obituary. This and other evidence led to an admission by Debbie, who claimed that she had created Kaycee from a composite of three cancer sufferers she had personally known and that the picture of Kaycee was of one of these sufferers (as it turned out, this was not true either). According to the Kaycee FAQ, Debbie felt that she had done nothing wrong.

Case Study of Online Deception and Punishment: The Death of Nowheremom

The Anandtech forums are asynchronous bulletin boards aimed at information technology professionals. There are 12 main forums covering issues such as hardware, CPUs, memory, and so forth. The forum of interest in this case study is the "Off Topic" bulletin board. In the Off Topic board, members of the forums can discuss issues not covered by the main forums. When people join the Anandtech forums they are able to select a username and icon to visually represent themselves. They can also use .sigs and have profiles hosted of, for instance, their "rig" (the specification of their computer). The Anandtech forums also have a hierarchy of members based on activity, longevity, and, for promotion to the top level Elite member, some form of judgement from the community enforcers. Membership ranges from junior member through diamond and platinum to elite.

During October 1999 a new member, using the username Nowheremom (NWM), began posting to the Off Topic forum. Her postings were characterized by terrible spelling mistakes, something the community members seemed to find endearing. During the course of 1999, NWM was attracting the attention of a number of men on the forum, and a flirtation with fellow member DF began. Many other members of the community were seemingly enthralled by this developing relationship, some even describing it as a soap opera. However, on January 5, 2000, DF posted the following message under the subject heading, "NOWHEREMOM's dead . . ."

AUGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG!!! I just got a phone call from Mr. Anderson (her father) He said he tried to reach me all afternoon. I was at the university and just got back 15 minutes ago. He said that both Lili Marlene and Agnetha are dead . . . that they got killed just after noon Newfie time. He said that it was very windy and there was some freezing rain along the coast and that they were walking back from Agnetha's school and that they were at the bottom of a hill in a curve walking on the roadside and that a car went too fast downhill and missed the curve and hit them. He said that Agnetha was killed instantly but that Lili Marlene survived for a little while and that she died on the way to the hospital. Too many internal injuries, she hemorrhaged internally. He was called to identify them. The guy who killed them lives only 2 houses away and is in his fucking late seventies. What the hell was he doing on the road driving in adverse conditions. Geriatric motherf. I'd strangle him with my bare hands . . .

I am so fucking sad. . . . What will I do? She was the light of my life. . . . She was so young so sweet so full of life and hope. were gonna mend our lives together Now she's been taken away from me. . . . She shone like a beacon and now theres only darkness. All we had was 9 days together. . . . I wanted a lifetime, not just 9 fucking days. I never got a chance to meet Agnetha. I am so depressed. . . . I can't cry because I know when I start i will wail, but my eyes hurt so much. I can't keep all the tears in and it's dripping down my chin. I'm so angry I could kill a million people and even then she wouldn't come back. Why does life suck so much. Why us why us why us? We were so happy for crying out loud. . . . We had projects. We were so similar. We liked the same things knew many same things laughed at the same stuff We thought so alike that we could end each others sentence on the phone. We talked just last night I never got a chance to say goodbye.

Why o why o why o why is life so damn unfair???

Many members of the community expressed shock and grief, a reaction that continued for many months. The username and icon used by NWM were retired by the moderators of the community. During the next year, the loss of NWM was often referred to in discussions—and DF was given the role of protector of her memory. Some members of the community also set up a memorial web page to NWM (real name Lili Marlene Maltese). However, a small number of members of the community began to investigate NWM's death further. They found no records of her death in local papers, and began to question her actual identity. On May 16, 2001, DF posted the following confession to the Off Topic forum:¹

I, DF, come here today to reveal that I have deceived this community and deceived myself into believing that I was doing the right thing.

In October 1999, I created a cyberpersona called NOWHEREMOM partly out of elements from real people I had encountered, partly out of my imagination. I started this simply as a joke and to see what it would be like for a woman to post on the forums. Women were really scarce on the forums at that time and, as time went by, I deluded myself into thinking that this portrayal of a strong woman would help female lurkers be less afraid of overwhelming male presence and what I perceived as strong misogyny on the boards. NOWHEREMOM was hit on instantly by a couple of male posters in emails, so I decided to make her flirt with me to prevent this by having us be a declared couple. These male posters need not be afraid. Their identity is and will remain secret.

Throughout November and December 1999, I engaged in a banter with this persona. At that time, I wanted mainly to bring some humour and entertainment to the forums. People were indeed entertained during those two months and some called it a soap opera. As time went by, NOWHEREMOM started to take an air of reality even to me. Once again, it never was my intention to hurt anyone. I simply had not realized how much people and even myself had become attached to her.

In early January 2000, after Ornery mentioned the word "marriage", one day I simply panicked and in that instant, my mind was clouded enough that, instead of simply revealing that it was a hoax, I killed her.

I had never expected the grief that overcame this community. It even overcame me and I sobbed for three days as if she had been real. I came to the conclusion that to reveal the hoax would hurt too many innocent people and I was hoping that the whole thing would simply fade away. It was not meant to be.

In July 2000, a member named vapor uncovered evidence of the hoax and revealed it to a few people. Instead of coming clean, still believing that the hurt to our community would be too great, I denied the whole thing. vapor was vilified and ostracized for this. To him, I can only offer my sincere apology for I am truly sorry for the way he was treated on this matter. I lied to some people closest and dearest to me because I thought that, in doing so, I was protecting them from becoming accomplices in my cover-up. Unfortunately, many came to my defense in a spirited fashion and ended up unknowingly defending a lie.

The matter never rested and many of my friends and acquaintances ended up being divided into two clans. In particular, I know some outside individuals who would be pleased to no end watching the fabric of this community unravel over this. The well-being of this community is paramount in my book for I do consider you my Internet family

It was simply a hoax which I thought was harmless and which got out of hand when I panicked 16 months ago. I sincerely apologize to everybody involved or hurt by this matter.

Before the thread was locked by the moderators of the conference, 458 messages had been posted in reply to the confession between the first (6:29 p.m. on May 17) and the last (2:03 a.m. on May 18) posting.

Explanations of Online Deception

Explanations of deception on the Internet tend to focus on either category deception like gender switching (e.g., Bruckman, 1993; Donath, 1999) or misrepresentation (e.g., Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001), or the presentation of an idealized or true self (McKenna et al., in press; Turkle, 1995). The literature on category deception is based almost entirely on behavior in MUDs and Internet Relay Chat (IRC), where gender is often considered malleable and part of the game (Bechar-Israeli, 1998; Reid, 1995). Rarely are the reasons for category deception examined, except for pronouncements on various postmodern or fragmented aspects of the self online. Among the explanations for category deception considered here are psychiatric illness, identity play, and true self.

Psychiatric Illness

One possible explanation for category deception is that it is due to a preexisting (i.e., real life) psychiatric illness that is expressed online through attention seeking and deception. To be sure, the Internet would seem to provide an ideal playground for those with sociopathic tendencies, and cases of people claiming various illnesses in support groups have been termed *Munchausen by Internet* (Feldman, 2000). When a deception is seen as anti-normative, there may be attempts to label the protagonist as mentally ill. For instance, in the ensuing discussion following DF's confession, a number of postings alluded to his mental state and need for help:

dot you think Hess kind sick? why in the world would you start to impersonate a lover. i think its just plain weird. get some therapy and leave tot for a while, you need to get a grip.

Really sick . . . You ought to seek some professional help. Many of us felt badly for days because of your little game.

Loneliness does make people do some crazy stuff, and he probably didn't mean to cause any harm when he created the persona. Probably a few people here have been depressed or lonely enough where they've contemplated suicide before so they can understand where he's coming from. In his case, he just created another persona instead

Although no doubt most Internet users who engage in multiple persona generation are not mentally ill, the seeming willingness of other users to label their behavior as such suggests that in general such category deception is seen as unacceptable.

Category Deception, Game Playing, and MUDs

In the environment of MUDs and IRC, playfulness and, particularly, playfulness with identity form a large part of the attraction for many users (Bechar-Israeli, 1998; Curtis, 1997; Reid, 1995). The most hotly debated form of identity play in MUDs is gender switching. Bruckman (1993) noted that "without makeup, special clothing or risk of social stigma, gender becomes malleable in MUDs" (p. 4). A number of educated guesses have posited that most IRC and MUD usernames are gender neutral, thus allowing for gender-bending (Danet, 1998). Similarly, it is also estimated that more men gender bend than women. For instance, Stone (1991) reported that the ratio of men to women on a Japanese site was 4:1, but that on the actual site the number of male presenters to female presenters was 3:1.

Danet, Ruedenberg, and Rosenbaum-Tamari (1998) described five frames in IRC: real life, the IRC game, party, pretend play, and performance. Movement through the frames is in part determined by the design and assumptions of the specific environments (e.g., meta-messages or room descriptions) and through the process of interaction (see also Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000). Danet et al. also noted that the type of play witnessed on the Internet is usually allowed only in children or in adults during masked balls or carnivals. So, whereas category deception can be an accepted part of play in virtual interaction, its acceptability is socially constructed and controlled by the norms of the group and the environment itself. In environments where the implicit assumption is for participants to be themselves, such play would, it is hypothesized, be unacceptable. Many of the posts in response to the NWM confession mentioned the word *hoax*. In general, the game of the hoax was (just about) acceptable, but the manipulation of other members' emotions was not:

He had us (well, those of us who were here then) completely fooled. I'm torn between congratulating him on a hoax well done, & flaming him for playing with our emotions like that.

Heh, whatever guys, it's the internet, stuff like this is to be expected. Congrats on a hoax well done, shame on you for toying with people's emotions, but either way, it shouldn't be a big deal.

We would argue that responses like those above reflect the general acceptability of persona play on the Internet, but also that such play should be negotiated with other group members. We also note in the above quotes that the line is drawn at playing with emotions, not with deception per se. However, in communities where the local norm is for trust and candidness, persona development or identity deception might inevitably lead to an emotional reaction.

Expression of an Ideal or True Self

Turkle (1995) discussed a number of cases in which the development of an online persona seems to be an exercise in self-completion and attempts to achieve a desired identity rather than outright deception. For instance, Bruckman (1993) characterized MUDs as identity workshops. When discussing MUD devotee "Gordon," Turkle (1995) noted that "on MUDs, Gordon has experimented with many different characters, but they all have something in common. Each has qualities that Gordon is trying to develop in himself" (p. 190). In a similar case, Turkle discussed the high levels of Internet use by Stewart:

In real life, Stewart felt constrained by his health problems, his shyness and social isolation, and his narrow economic straits. In the Gargoyle MUD, he was able to bypass these obstacles, at least temporarily. Faced with the notion that "you are what you pretend to be," Stewart can only hope it is true, for he is playing his ideal self. (p. 196)

Perhaps, then, the use of online persona can serve a useful purpose for expressing and understanding our core selves unfettered by shyness, social anxiety, and physical states. Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (in press) argued that the Internet may allow people the freedom to express what Carl Rogers called the true self. According to Rogers (1951), a goal of therapy is to discover the true self to allow its more full expression in everyday life. In comparison, the self we express in everyday interaction is the actual self, the social persona we adopt that might not be what we truly are but is used to protect the self from vulnerability. In a series of experiments, Bargh et al. (in press) found that the salience of the true self was

heightened (as measured by reaction time) following computer-mediated interaction compared to face-to-face interaction (where the actual self was most salient). McKenna et al. (in press) also reported that people are better able to present their true self online compared to face-to-face, and McKenna and Bargh (1998) found that participation in newsgroups can lead to the demarginalization of stigmatized identities.

Curtis (1997) noted that a large number of personal descriptions in MUDs were of "mysterious but unmistakably powerful" (p. 129) figures, suggesting that the development of personas in virtual worlds may well be an exercise in wish fulfillment. But at least for some users, the Internet also allows them to elaborate and practice their hoped for possible selves or even to express a true self normally suppressed (McKenna et al., in press). In another sense, the Internet may provide an incentive for people to change in their real life existence—if one can act (and be perceived) as a certain type of person online, this may well serve as an incentive to achieve a similar state offline (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

There have been some claims that category deception involves the exploration of a true self (e.g., of a feminine side of the self or perhaps a chronically ill side). Reid (1995) quoted one MUD user saying,

Um, I mud primarily to socialize. I also play female characters, despite being male. I don't think I'm the only person who's like this. I don't give my real gender to people very often . . . I'm exploring aspects of human interaction that are denied me in real life because I am male. (p. 180)

To be sure, the demarcation between an idealized or true self, identity exploration, and outright deception is fuzzy. However, we would argue that in the vast majority of cases, category deception of the kind seen in the cases above is not representative of the exploration of a true or ideal self. We would further argue that virtual communities, as opposed to MUDs, rely on a degree of honesty and trust. As the discussion of the Nowheremom deception continued, a number of postings referred to the integrity of the community and the presentation of self online:

I have never, nor will ever, portray myself as anything more or less than myself; online or otherwise. Come down to my pad and meet me. If I hate you, I will kick your @ss. If I like you, I will pull up my best chair and make a kick @ss dinner for you.

I happen to take these forums very seriously. I'm not one to deceive people, & I anticipate the same in return. I'm not a critical person, I take people at their word until I have reason not to. While some people may view this as "only" the internet, it's a community of real people.

But internet forums are NOTHING if we can't have a degree of trust. What he did cannot be tolerated, not because any of us are perfect, but because it undermines EVERYTHING that an internet community is supposed to be. We can't walk around saying "Anandtech is the best community on the net—we have over 50,000 members! But some of them are fake . . ."

Explanations for Community Members' Reactions to a Revealed Deception

Of particular interest are the reactions of other community members to the revealed identity deception. Community members' reactions were not quite as predictable as one would expect on the basis of previous cases (e.g., "Barbara/Amy" case, Jenny MUSH). There were clear indications that community members did not approve of DF's actions (e.g., "Wow, you're a sick dude. Get a life buddy"; "I can't believe you. I read all the stuff about you, and

what happened to her and I truly felt upset. You Denis, have lost all of my respect.”). But there were also a surprising number of messages showing support and forgiveness (e.g., “I, for one, forgive you”; “I would like to take a minute to remind everyone that, while what he did was dreadfully wrong, do not forget what he has done to help people on the forums either. Weigh his character on his good and bad deeds”). As such, there is perhaps no single explanation which could account for the diversity of reactions to this revealed identity deception. Instead, the reactions can best be explained by examining them in the context of three related explanations: social identity, deviance, and norm violations.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

When people are categorized into groups, their perceptions of and behavior toward their own group and other groups are often biased. People assign more rewards to members of their own group than other groups (e.g., Brewer, 1979), assume that actions taken by their group are correct (Abrams, Thomas, & Hogg, 1990; Turner & Oaks, 1989), and are more likely to help members of their own groups than other groups (Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981), for example. Social identity theory suggests that group members are biased in favor of their own groups over other groups because group members derive esteem from the favorable comparisons that they can make between their in-group and relevant out-groups. In other words, people have a need to feel good about their groups so that they can feel good about themselves.

When an in-group member engages in behavior that is unfavorable or bad, group members' positive social identity is at risk. When one in-group member is bad, this reflects badly on the entire in-group. Research suggests that group members can respond in several ways when their social identities are threatened (Dietz-Uhler, 1999). For example, group members can attempt to change their connections with the group (Doosje, Spears, & Koomen, 1995; Finch & Cialdini, 1989), derogate an out-group member (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986), make more group-serving attributions (Dietz-Uhler & Murrell, 1998; Wann & Dolan, 1994), and increase their commitment to the group (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997). Related research (Biernat, Vescio, & Billings, 1999; DeCremer & Vanbeselaere, 1999; Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Hogg, 2001; Marques, Robalo, & Rocha, 1992; Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988; Matthews & Dietz-Uhler, 1998) showed that when an in-group member engages in positive behavior or is described in positive terms, he or she is evaluated more favorably than an out-group member who engages in the same behavior or is described in the same positive terms. But when an in-group member engages in negative behavior or is described in unfavorable terms, he or she is evaluated more extremely unfavorably than an out-group member who engages in similar behavior or is described in unfavorable terms. This effect has been termed the *black-sheep effect* (Marques, 1990). Group members might derogate a “bad” in-group member so that they can distance themselves from him or her, thus restoring their sense of positive social identity.

In the current case of a revealed identity deception, there is ample evidence to suggest that community members attempted to “black sheep” DF. Interestingly, there are at least two ways in which DF and his actions could have been derogated: DF's character could be derogated or DF's actions could have been derogated. The majority of the community members who engaged in some form of derogation chose to derogate DF's character more than his actions:

I think you got a little wrapped up in this imaginary persona you created. I suggest you start thinking about taking a little bit more time away from the boards.

Dennis, I expected better of you, I am somewhat disappointed.

jesus man, this is intollerable. I to have lost all respect for you.

I think you will never have the same level of trust and respect from the general membership.

Man, I Fcking cried when you told that story. I'll never believe another word from you.

Derogation of an in-group member's character is perhaps the most serious form of derogation. The seriousness of group members' responses likely parallels the seriousness of DF's infractions and allows group members to effectively rid the community of DF ("You are a weird, twisted, and demented person to run this, so . . . I just ignore you in the near, present and forever future"). By derogating DF, community members can restore their sense of positive social identity. Several members of the community did not derogate DF. Instead, they forgave him or excused his behavior:

Nowheremom was before my time, so I was unaware of the whole thing, but as the saying goes, to err is human.

I never hold grudges, it is bad Karma . . . and besides, Dennil has to live with this one on his conscience, that is enough punishment in my book.

Dennilfloss has repeatedly proven himself to be a benefit to these forums. So I have no reason to think of him as being anything but a benefit to these forums.

Social identity theory can also explain these reactions. When group members identify strongly with their group, they tend to derogate an errant in-group member (Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993). But when group members identify weakly with their group, they tend not to derogate an unfavorable in-group member because they have less to lose (Branscombe et al., 1993). Some of the community members who forgave DF admitted to "not being around" when this happened, so they are likely to identify less strongly with the forum.

REJECTION OF DEVIANT GROUP MEMBERS

In effect, DF, who has become the black sheep of the online community, has also become a deviant group member. Briefly, deviance refers to something about an individual that sets him or her apart, thereby making him or her different. There are at least two bases on which a group member might be assigned the status of deviant (Pfuhl & Henry, 1993). A person's behavior might be perceived to be objectionable. Another is that the person's character might be perceived to be objectionable. The former refers to deviance that is achieved. In this case, the person could have avoided the label of deviant if he or she had not engaged in the objectionable behavior. Deviant status can also be ascribed. People might possess offensive traits or personality characteristics that are unavoidable.

Much has been written about ascribed deviance, most notably under the label of stigma. Stigma refers to an attribute or marking of a person that reduces him or her "in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Groups of people who have often been considered stigmatized include women, African Americans, the

hearing impaired, homosexuals, cancer patients, people with AIDS, Christians, Jews, and the overweight (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). It is important to recognize that the concept of stigma can be quite different from the concept of deviance. Deviance can either be valued or devalued, whereas stigmas are always devalued. For example, being extraordinarily rich and extraordinarily poor are deviant, but only one is valued (Crocker et al., 1998). In the current case, DF has been given the status of deviant, a clearly achieved status. Some members of the community perceived DF's deviance in a negative light:

You have NO idea how real dennisd*ck made her seem! He told everyone he got a call from her father and made up this mile long story about how she was killed. Everyday after that, he would post about how much he missed her, looking for everyone's pity. If he just made her up and then came clean it wouldn't be a big deal, but he dragged it on for months, repeatedly bringing it back to the top, looking for more attention.

Other members of the community perceived DF's deviant actions in a more positive light ("i must say, i can understand exactly why you'd do such a thing. i was reading some of the old posts, and i also have to say congratulations on a hoax well done").

There is vast literature on how group members respond to a deviant group member (Levine & Moreland, 1994). For example, Schachter (1961) had confederates play the role of a deviant, agreeable, or partially agreeable group member in a group discussion. Other group members reacted to the deviant member by refusing to communicate with him, evaluating him less favorably, and appointing him to a low-status position in the group. In another study (Earle, 1986), a deviant confederate in a small-group discussion was rejected by the other group members. These investigations suggest, much like in the case of the black sheep, that group members derogate a fellow in-group member who does not go along with the group. In the NWM case, group members reacted to DF in much the same way as the participants in Schachter's (1961) and Earle's (1986) investigations:

In the end you did the right thing, but I'm not even going to give you much credit for that because of the corner you backed yourself into.

The killing off of the persona is a little bit tougher to take. I was really affected by that as were so many others here. It would have been less traumatic to just have had an imaginary argument with her then have her leave the forums.

You, DF, is one crazy mofo.

VIOLATION OF GROUP NORMS

For a group to be able to reject a deviant group member, there must necessarily exist a group norm or norms that the deviant group member violated. Norms are sets of rules, guidelines, or procedures that prescribe the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of group members. The norms that form and exist in groups are functional; they help people to decide what they should think, feel, or do. When people are uncertain about how to respond, they tend to look to those around them for information. Informational social influence refers to the influence that others can have via the information they possess (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). In his classic study, Sherif (1935) found that in ambiguous situations, people look to the opinions of others for information. When people are motivated to gain approval or avoid disapproval by others, they might be influenced by normative social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Asch (1951, 1956) learned that in unambiguous situations, people will often conform to the group to avoid their disapproval.

There is evidence to suggest that the anonymity afforded in computer-mediated communication (CMC) groups increases the amount of influence that groups can exert on a group member because it enhances a group member's susceptibility to influence (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1999). For example, Spears, Lea, and Lee (1990) found that when participants discussed an issue in a CMC environment, they complied most strongly with group norms when they were isolated than when in the same room with other participants.

Clearly, group norms, whether constructed over time (e.g., Postmes et al., 2000) or evident from the outset, exert a powerful influence over group members' behavior. As such, it is interesting to examine the consequences of a norm violation. Norm violation by a member of the group leads to negative attributions, negative intergroup behavior, and eventually mutual distrust (DeRidder & Tripathi, 1992). Of course, norm violations can be positive or negative. Imagine that someone is asked to do something for his or her supervisor. The person might decide not to do it at all (negative norm violation) or the person might do much more than he or she was asked (positive norm violation).

In the case of NWM, DF clearly engaged in a negative norm violation. Community members were not expecting this type of behavior from one of their members ("He had us completely fooled"; "Denni has now compromised his credibility, so there is reason to take all his posts with a grain of salt"). DF clearly violated a norm of the online community and they responded by derogating him and his actions (as the previous samples have already shown). However, there was another norm that applied to this online community that DF's actions may not have violated. In online communities (and the Internet in general), it is sometimes normative for users to engage in identity play, whereby users pretend to be somebody they are really not. In NWM, DF made up a character and attempted to play the character's role. In effect, he intentionally deceived the members of the community. Many members of the community perceived DF's actions to be normative and in turn decided to forgive him:

This is the net and lots of people use it to escape from their jobs or life for a second and so something else or be someone else. I see how some people get carried away but this really isn't a harm towards anyone just someone who tried to do something and he didn't like the end result.

Denis, I don't blame you at all for the part about creating NOWHEREMOM, it's so easy and tempting to do something of that sort especially in a forum like this one where so much kidding goes on.

i must say, i can understand exactly why you'd do such a thing.

I certainly won't hold it against you, at least not too much. Other than just a simple hoax to see what something was like that got out of hand. That's it.

I feel that ANYONE who holds ANY type of grudge against anyone over these forums is taking things too seriously here.

I applaud you DF for perfectly perpetuating such a hoax, but like all great hoaxes they come to an end.

This case is especially interesting because the members of the online community are also part of the larger Internet community. From the perspective of the online community, important group norms were violated and DF was derogated as a consequence. But from the perspective of the Internet community, a group norm was confirmed and DF was not derogated or was congratulated for a "hoax well done."

CONCLUSIONS

Most discussions of deception in online communities have, quite naturally, focused on either the reasons for the deception or the reaction of the community (e.g., MacKinnon, 1997; Reid, 1998). We would argue that both aspects of the deceiver and the deceived, alongside the technology itself, need to be conceptualized as interdependent. In the case of NWM, the deception was afforded by aspects of the technology, specifically visual anonymity and a lack of other controls. However, the varied reactions of the group suggest the existence and application of both local and wider group norms for the acceptability or otherwise of persona generation. Often, the condemnation of DF's actions were not based on the development of an alternative persona per se, but rather on its killing off and the subsequent effect of this on people's real life feelings. Thus, the impact and reaction to the confession were seemingly grounded not only in the norms for the specific community but also in a consideration of the wider norms of Internet behavior and the real life implications of the deception. Early theoretical discussions of psychology and the Internet tended to conceptually separate online and offline identities (e.g., Turkle, 1995). The case of NWM demonstrates that this approach is untenable, in that the reaction of the community was based on both local and Internet-wide norms and the effect of the deception on members' real life emotions.

The case of NWM also illustrates the potential strengths of studying virtual communities in their natural setting. It also highlights the value of identifying cases of virtual communities as they react to potentially community-threatening events. Perhaps only when faced with such threats does the true nature of a virtual community reveal itself.

Future research in this area could focus on several group process variables as they relate to a revealed deception in an online community. For example, the continued development of the group could be examined. In the face of the threat supplied by the revealed deception, does the community grow weaker or stronger? Cases of identity deception might also permit the investigation of norm development. When one community member deceived the community, do the norms surrounding identity deception change? Cases of a revealed identity deception in an online community provide unique opportunities to study these and other group process issues.

NOTE

1. This confession has been abridged. Contact the authors for the full text.

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Adam N. Joinson is a lecturer in educational technology at the Open University. He completed a Ph.D. in social psychology in 1995 and has been researching psychological aspects of the Internet since 1994. His research interests are computer-mediated communication, Internet research methods, and educational technology. He may be reached via e-mail at A.N.Joinson@open.ac.uk.

Beth Dietz-Uhler is an associate professor of psychology at Miami University. Her research interests include social identity theory, sport fans and spectators, and computer-mediated communication. She may be reached via e-mail at uhlerbd@muohio.edu.