

# Personal Identity and the Self in the Online and Offline World

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**Abstract** The emergence of social networking sites has created a problem of how the self is to be understood in the online world. As these sites are social, they relate someone with others in a network. Thus there seems to emerge a new kind of self which exists in the online world. Accounting for the online self here also has implications on how the self in the outside world should be understood. It is argued that, as the use of online social media has become more widespread, the line between the two kinds of self is becoming fuzzier. Furthermore, there seems to be a fusion between the online and the offline selves, which reflects the view that reality itself is informational. Ultimately speaking, both kinds of selves do not have any essence, i.e., any characteristic inherent to them that serves to show that these selves are what they are and none other. Instead an externalist account of the identity of the self is offered that locates the identity in question in the self's relations with other selves as well as other events and objects. This account can both be used to explain the nature of the self both in the online and the offline worlds.

**Keywords** Self · Social networking media · Metaphysics · Virtual world · Identity · Externalism · Buddhism

## Introduction

The rapid advances in information and communication technologies have created tremendous changes all over the world, not least among which concern a number of new philosophical problems and ways to solve them. During the last few years social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter seem to throw much of the traditional thinking about the self and the object into confusion. A main

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characteristic of social networking is to form webs of links among “persons” whose identities are there on the social networking websites. It is typical for a member of Facebook to have hundreds of “friends.” It does not matter how many of these “friends” are those whom the member actually meet and interact in real life; what does matter is that the interaction is taking place more and more online. The line between the real person (or the “offline” one) and her projection onto social networking sites (her “online” self) is becoming blurred. There are situations where a real person has multiple accounts on Facebook, each with a unique personality. For example, the person might appear as a serious professional in one account, and a completely different personality in another. These accounts, or to put it better these personae, seem to be on a par with the real person herself when it comes to the question of identity. So the questions are how one can distinguish between the offline, real-world self and her online projection onto social networking sites?; how are the two different or similar to each other?; and who is the real person behind all these personae and façades?

This paper contends that a fusion between the offline and online is taking place in the area of the self and the person. This fusion also appears to reflect the view that even reality itself is informational; that is, it is constituted by information (Wheeler 1990: 5; Floridi 2008). I will argue that both the offline and the online selves are ultimately constructions and do not have any essence of its own. This argument reflects my own Buddhist inclination, which is based on the idea of the Non-Self, namely the view that what is commonly understood to be the self is nothing more than a convenient label one puts on a myriad of mental and physical episodes.

More specifically, I would like to argue that the so-called online self, in other words the putative self existing on profile pages and updated timeline or news status on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and others, is essentially no different from the real self that is already there in the “offline” world. As the offline self is a construction (as I shall show in the paper), so is its online counterpart. The online self functions as a persona, a front used by the underlying person when she faces the public world, and there is a degree of freedom within which the person can create her persona the way she likes. Moreover, the constructed nature of the online self also shows that privacy tends to be as valued in the online world as in the offline one. This seems to contradict a widely held view that users of social networking sites tend to be more open toward one another and perhaps value their privacy less in social networking situation than in others. However, it is not the aim of this paper to discuss privacy in any detail; it is only my aim to note that if the argument about the identity of the self and the person presented here is tenable, then this will have a far reaching effect on discussions of privacy.

Where there appear to be persons, there arises the traditional problem of their identity. How should the identity of a person be understood? Here I propose a more externalist version of identity where identity is constituted more by external factors rather than solely on the subject’s own mental content. Then I discuss Kant’s famous Transcendental Unity of Apperception (TUA) and try to find out whether this mechanism succeeds in securing identity of the self or the person. What I find is that Kant’s TUA succeeds only in securing unity of a person, but not her identity.

So the section arrangement is as follows: In the following section, I discuss an empirical situation of what is happening in Thailand, an Asian country that is fast embracing social networking sites into its social and cultural milieu. Then in the next two sections I discuss the philosophical problem of personal identity in the online world, arguing for an externalist version of identity construction. The last section then concludes the paper.

### **The Putative Self, Social Networking Websites, and Thai Culture**

When we look at the popular social networking websites today, we are struck by the sheer number of the people who are connected to one another through them. Facebook has more than 500 million users at the last count (<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>), and the number far exceed the entire population of many countries. Twitter has around 75 million (<http://www.numberof.net/number-of-twitter-users/>) (There are certainly other social networking sites, such as Google Plus, Hi5, MySpace, and so on, but these two are the most popular). These users put up their “profile pages” on the websites, which are essentially a projection of their own identities in the online world for their peers, colleagues and friends. In most cases the profiles actually represent the persons behind them; in other words, the profiles are mostly intended to refer to the persons themselves. This can be useful when, for example, I would like to find out whether my long lost high school friend is on Facebook or not and can get reconnected with her again after I have seen her profile. In this case there is a clear link between the profile and the person. However, in some areas, especially in Thailand, the profiles on Facebook serve another function. Many Thai Facebook users opt not to show their faces or their real names on their profile pages. Instead they are very creative in inventing new names for themselves which effectively prevents anybody from knowing who the real person behind the Facebook persona is. So unless the person herself tells her friends who she really is, nobody would know who she is. Instead of putting up their own portrait on the profile as is originally intended by the very name “Facebook,” many in Thailand are putting up all kinds of pictures: Some put up pictures of their favorite pets; some put up a political banner complete with the Thai national flag; some use pictures of well known cartoon personalities such as Winnie the Pooh, and so on. Furthermore, they are not using their real names in the profiles. Some call themselves “Laughing out Loud throughout the Field,” “Red Linguist,” “Dragon from the Plateau,” and so on. A recent practice has a result of the ongoing political conflicts in Thailand is that many put up the phrase “love the King” following their names to show their support for the King. Someone else who stand on the other side of the political divide then say something like “Love Everybody” or “Love my Parents” or “Love Humanity,” to mimic those who declare their love for the King. They cannot say outright that they do not love the King because according to the draconian law against criticizing the King in Thailand this might be interpreted as insulting to the King himself.

This practice of putting up anonymous or alternative profiles on social networking sites, then, is common in Thailand. The practice is rather different