The online medium offers many opportunities for people to explore their identity. In particular, text-based communication enables users to present themselves in ways that may not be possible in face-to-face contexts because of the lack of physical appearance cues. Two such online communities, which operate textually, and in real-time, are Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). IRC offers users access to hundreds of chatrooms on a vast range of topics. Users are identified by their choice of nickname, dissimilar to real life names, in which “users can appear to be, quite literally, whoever they wish” (Reid, 1993, p. 63). MUDs are virtual reality, role-playing environments where users create their own character by selecting a name, a gender including neuter and plural, and a description of their physical appearance (Curtis, 1997). Text-based communication forums offer users unprecedented freedoms for identity alteration through the anonymity of the online medium, which enables users to break free from social norms. However, online users’ capacity to alter their identity is also constrained by gender norms, including gender socialisation differences in risk-taking online.

Research has reported the unprecedented freedom of identity exploration online. Turkle’s (1995) observations on MUDs identified how role-playing allows users to explore various aspects of their identity, as well as the capacity to take on other identities. This included opportunities to explore a wider range of roles than those available in real life, such as experimenting with radically different personae and transcending to a higher power, in addition to adopting multiple characters with different genders simultaneously. Similarly, on IRC users have the ability to take on multiple identities, signified through user nicknames.
simultaneously (Reid, 1993). Such activities demonstrate the freedom users have in constructing identities online as the constraints of physical reality are suspended (Calvert, Mahler, Zehnder, Jenkins, & Lee, 2003). This evidence indicates that the capacity for identity alteration online is vast.

Underlying users’ capacity for identity alteration may be the anonymity of online communication. Researchers have argued that users alter their identity because of the anonymous features of the online medium, in which physical appearance cues are unavailable. This allows users to break free of social norms. For instance, Reid (1993) argues that the anonymity “and therefore invulnerability” (p. 403) surrounding one’s real life identity enables users to experiment with gender identity norms online by letting go of their social and cultural inhibitions. Literature exists about men and women masquerading as the opposite gender online (Curtis, 1997; Reid, 1996; Turkle, 1995). Consequently, as Calvert (2002) confirms, the anonymity of online interactions enables participants to freely express themselves in ways that are not as constrained by real world expectations.

Further, the physical distance between IRC participants, combined with the anonymity surrounding users’ real life identities, means few consequences exist for acting inappropriately and breaking social norms (Reid, 1993). According to Calvert (2002), the lack of consequences for breaching social norms permits users to explore more about themselves, compared to real life. Indeed, the popularity of experimenting with sexual identity on IRC may be indicative of the proportion of adolescent and young adult users able to safely explore their sexuality without the behavioural taboos of real life (Reid). Also, Calvert suggests how assuming other identities online may offer users, particularly adolescents who are less popular in real life, the chance to gain social importance. Hence, removing the rigid identity boundaries of such factors as age, ethnicity, and gender, which
circumscribe behaviour offline, enables the reconstruction of identity online, where the only limits are those created by the users (Reid).

So far then, the research evidence indicates that text-based communication forums offer users unprecedented freedoms for identity alteration. This is made possible through the anonymity of the online medium, which enables users to break free from social norms constraining offline behaviour. Further, the lack of social consequences for breaking free of social norms, as a result of anonymity in conjunction with the geographic distance between online users, provides additional support for users’ identity alteration online.

Nevertheless, while online users have the capacity to alter their identity and interact as other than themselves, Baym (1998) argues that, in reality, many probably create identities consistent with real life. In support of this, Baym points out how online norms develop out of pre-existing norms within contexts external to online environments. For instance, according to Reid (1993), IRC users consistently prefer being identified under one nickname – which is consistent with identifying under one name in real life contexts – as opposed to multiple nicknames.

Other research reinforces the view that online users may also behave much as they do in real life and conform to identity norms common in face-to-face contexts. For instance, a posting to a discussion group about online personae highlighted equal numbers of participants acted the same as real life versus being different (Turkle, 1997). While MUD users can adopt a character as near or as distant from their real life self (Turkle), with neuter, plural, and hermaphrodite choices available, a number of MUDs have restricted gender to male and female only (Reid, 1996). Similarly, Curtis’ (1997) observations from a 12-month longitudinal study of LambdaMOO, a highly populated MUD, indicated gender identity comprised the fewest choices available. Further, even when players identified under a non-
traditional gender, other users still requested real life gender identity disclosure. This evidence suggests that despite the opportunities for identity alteration, some online users, at least, are choosing to retain offline identity conventions, which constrains their identity construction.

Another study, conducted by Danet (1998), also offers further evidence in support of online users conforming to real life identity conventions. Danet’s analysis of gender identities chosen on two MUDs (MediaMOO and LambdaMOO), constituting 1055 and 7308 players, revealed that a majority chose male or female, while only a minority adopted unconventional identities encompassing neuter and gender neutral. Further, far fewer players (3% and 4%) chose to create unique gender identities.

Although it was not possible to verify the real life gender identity of the players in Danet’s (1998) study, Danet estimated, based on current internet user population statistics recording 70% male and 30% female participation, that many male players were likely to be identifying under a female or unconventional identity. In support of males’ likelihood to explore identity boundaries, Reid’s (1996) survey results of LambdaMOO showed a majority were male (76.6%). Similarly, Turkle’s (1997) observations on the MUD, Habitat, revealed that while there was a 4:1 ratio of male versus female real life participants, the ratio of male to female presenting players was actually 3:1, indicating a greater proportion of males altering their gender identity. This evidence also suggests that while some users’ may participate in identity alteration, male users may be more likely to do so than females.

Researchers have proposed several reasons for males altering their gender identity online. For instance, according to Curtis (1997), males are the most common MUD participants, which leads to a lack of female (presenting) players. This scarcity heightens the novelty of interacting with females online, leading real life males to present as female to gain the same...
attention. Another prominent reason for males’ altering their gender identity is to find out what it is like to be treated as a female. Males are also attracted to the fun in deceiving other males and enticing them into sexually explicit interactions by taking on a female gender identity (Curtis).

However, females also alter their gender identity, but typically for a different reason. Due to the proportion of males gender-switching, many females have been required to “prove” their real life gender. Consequently, many females alter their identity from female to neuter, gender-neutral, or male (Curtis, 1997). Similarly, other research indicates that females alter their identity to avoid harassment, including sexual harassment (Turkle, 1995).

Research investigations indicate that when it comes to identity alteration online, it is not a simple case of observing whether or not the behaviour occurs. Rather, researchers also need to consider the reasons for users engaging in identity alteration, to better understand the extent to which online users actually alter their identity. Indeed, the evidence indicates that males and females may alter their gender identity for very different reasons. While males may do so for a range of reasons, including general identity exploration, gaining attention, and deceiving others, the research suggests that females typically do so to avoid harassment. Furthermore, this contrast in reasons may reflect effects of gender socialisation differences in risk-taking behaviours, learnt in real life, face-to-face contexts.

In support of gender socialisation differences in risk-taking behaviour, underlying gender socialisation theory is the notion that males learn to engage in risk-taking activities by extending behavioural boundaries. In contrast, females learn to stay within appropriate behavioural conventions, maintaining their safety (Spender, 1995). The disorientation
surrounding the adoption of masculine identities by real life females, evident in Bruckman (1996) and Reid’s (1996) gender-switching encounter, in contrast to the liberation from the restrictions of gender appropriate behaviour experienced by a male when gender-switching (Reid), together, may provide some support for the influence of gender socialisation differences in risk-taking online.

Further, the anonymity created by textual communication forums online provides a protective mechanism, reducing social risk. If social errors occur, players can easily log on as another character without redress. Hence, the shield of anonymity relieves players of any accountability for their actions, eliminating the physical consequences of irresponsible and offensive acts (Curtis, 1997). Subsequently, it is argued that those more likely to engage in risk-taking, namely males (Coet & McDermott, 1979), may also be more likely to utilise online environments for identity exploration, including identity alteration, compared to females.

Indeed, the evidence indicates that while males and females may alter their identity online, they do so to different extents. Males engage in identity alteration for a variety of reasons, not least of which includes identity exploration. This supports males’ predisposition to engage in risk-taking behaviours as a consequence of their gender socialisation. In contrast, females engage in identity alteration to stay safe, by escaping harassment. In support of such normative behaviour practices online, Curtis (1997) argues that although MUD players may create a character vastly different from how they are in reality, many conform to their real life behaviours and personality.

In conclusion, the extent to which online users alter their identity is a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, evidence demonstrates the unprecedented freedom of identity exploration online. The anonymity of online communication forums enables users to break free of social
norms because of the lack of physical appearance cues, which may constrain behaviour in face-to-face contexts. Secondly, the physical distance between users, in conjunction with the anonymous nature of the online medium, means there are few social consequences for breaching social conventions, which offers further support for users to freely engage in identity alteration online. Yet, despite freedom from the constraints of social norms governing online behaviour, leading to increased opportunities for identity alteration online compared to real life, the extent to which online users freely alter their identity may be influenced by the reproduction of gender socialisation norms. Indeed, the literature suggests that males and females’ identity alteration may be linked to their gender socialisation differences in risk-taking, leading males to be more likely to take risks in exploring their identity online. This finding has implications for research into cyberpsychology, in which gender socialisation differences may influence other behaviours of online users, beyond just identity alteration.
References


Comment [n43]: Notice that book chapters make up a significant proportion of the references. There is much less to read in a book chapter versus a whole book.

Comment [n44]: Within the references, two more recent (at the time this book was printed) publications have been sourced, which indicates that up-to-date ideas have been found.


*Comment [n45]:* Interestingly, while the essay topic focuses on the online medium, no references present online documents. Rather, they have all been sourced from traditional hard copy sources – which may add credibility to the research for the essay because the ideas identified have been peer-reviewed, which is not always the case with online sources.