

Acting Your Age:

A Study of the Relationship between Online Social Interaction and  
Identity in Older Adults

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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## **Abstract**

This study combined quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the relationship between Internet use and identity, particularly age-identity, in older Internet users. It has a theoretical basis in symbolic interactionism – particularly the theories of Erving Goffman – and conceptualizes identities as roles that are negotiated during social interaction.

The focus on older users was motivated by the strong focus of prior Internet research on younger users. Few studies have examined older users specifically, and fewer still have examined age-identity.

Thus, the focus in this study is on how changes in social interaction that occur due to Internet use affect the identity negotiation process. The research is focused around two key areas: whether older users experience the same kinds of online identity processes as younger users, and the impact exposure to novel audiences has on identity negotiation.

The study consists of two phases. In the first, a quantitative survey was administered in which a measure of age-identity was assessed and compared with measures of audience novelty. Results showed that a significant increase in variance of age-identity is associated with communication with people from other countries. This finding supports the theory that identity is formed in negotiation with the audience with whom one communicates, and that expanding this audience may lead to identity effects.

To investigate this issue more deeply, a qualitative phase was conducted in which participants were interviewed using rapid ethnography techniques, and at the conclusion of which a model of the interaction between age-identity and Internet communication was developed. This model was then verified with follow-up interviews with key informants and with field observations from sites of online social interaction among seniors.

The model developed during the qualitative stage identifies three ways in which age-identity is influenced by social interaction on the Internet. First, the Internet is used in response to emotional or practical consequences of ageing. Second, older Internet users could take advantage of the ability to manage their personal front online to achieve agelessness, and third, the Internet is used as a backstage area to discuss age-identity issues. The context of these claims is all-important; each individual's unique circumstances, emotions and motivations influence the way in which they will use the Internet and respond to others encountered through it.

The extension of Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor to age-identity on the Internet and to include the concept of character development, in which identity evolves over time in response to inner tensions and external events, is a tentative but powerful finding. It poses a challenge for future research into the nature of identity change, both online and offline.

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All the world's a stage  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.

*As You Like It 2/7, William Shakespeare*