Human 2.0: Behavioral Dissonance between Online and Offline Personal Traits, And Implications on e-Marketing Practices

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Abstract: This research paper presents an attempt to explore the phenomenon of a consistent disconnection between the online and offline personality traits of Internet users. The research delves deeper into this notion, explores the possible drivers and stimulants, and then puts special emphasis on its implications and repercussions on various business aspects, such as online advertising and e-marketing techniques.

The research uses a variety of instruments and tools, including structured observations, face-to-face interviews, online surveys, and mock computer User Interfaces designed specifically for the purpose of the experiments conducted as part of the primary data collection for the research. The paper then proceeds to analyze the primary data and presents an attempt to understand the phenomenon and its underlying stimulants. Finally, the paper presents a set of conclusions, again with more focus on marketing and business-related issues.

The research, through its primary data analysis and rationalization, concludes that there is strong evidence that most internet users exhibit different facets of behavioral dissonance between their online and offline traits. The research also concludes that such dissonance may be induced by the social internet ecosystem and dynamics, rather than intrinsic tendencies in the users' actual characters. The research also relates these findings with common business practices of successful online businesses and sheds the light on potential ethical dilemmas pertaining to internet businesses exploiting these phenomena (albeit sometimes unknowingly) to lure their users into buying products or to generate more traffic.

Keywords: Online Marketing, e-Marketing, e-Commerce, online business, consumer behavior, technology in sales, consumer psychology.

INTRODUCTION

This research paper presents an attempt to explore an interesting phenomenon that can be observed since the advent of Web 2.0 and social media. There is an observable, consistent disconnection between the online and offline personality traits of Internet users. This research delves deeper into this notion, explores the possible drivers and stimulants, and then puts special emphasis on its implications and repercussions on various business aspects, such as online advertising and e-marketing techniques.

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Research Parameters

The research tackles a specific problem pertaining to the detection and analysis of an apparent, observable dissonance between internet users' offline (real world) and online (web-based, social media …) behavioral patterns. The main research question addressed by this paper is to find out whether such behavioral disconnection is a persistent phenomenon that is induced by the Web 2.0 ecosystem itself. The research hypothesizes that the existing ecosystem of Web 2.0 and social media, in its modern form, creates a special setting for the human personality traits where certain deviations from the user's "offline" character are induced. We hereinafter call these deviations *dissonant traits*. Our research assumes that these deviations are not permanent, do not affect the users' *offline* personalities, and do not necessarily reflect any intrinsic psychological or mental health issues in users that exhibit the described behavior.

Method

The research uses a variety of instruments to gather and analyze primary and secondary data. Ultimately, the research uses a set of structured and unstructured interview techniques with seasoned internet users. Interview questions focus on the self-observed behavioral patterns exhibited by online users, as well as users' own observations about other users. Initial findings and data collected from interviews were used to build an online survey to facilitate greater exposure to the primary data collection exercise. The survey sample size was 311 records. We tried, as much as possible, to restrict samples to a specific sampling frame consisting of seasoned internet users aged between 15 and 45, with extensive exposure to immersive online experiences, such as social media platforms, Massive Multiplayer Online Gaming platforms, virtual worlds, and popular online forums. We included a few survey questions to detect the subject's suitability for our research, with a special epistemological focus on research boundaries and the intended sampling frame. The research's own ontological commitments may be described as a far-end relativist take on a traditionally deeply positivist academic praxis. For example, we made sure all respondents were familiar with millennial-style internet acronyms to guarantee that our presented ontological premise can still be viewed via a rather pure social constructionist lens – an endeavor that has proven to render surprising results as will be shown in the last section of this paper.

Our sample's gender mix included 34% female and 66%, male. Age distribution within the sample was: 57% from age group #1 (15-25), 32% from age group #2 (26-35), and 11% from age group #3 (36-45). In addition to the above-described instruments, the research relied on observations and analysis.

Additionally, one of the most important instruments used for primary data collection in this research is an online User Experience experiment consisting of a simple, two-page static HTML maquette that simulates a music download page. The static maquette, representing the user's own perception of similar websites, offers users a variety of options, such as streaming music, downloading music, and purchasing music. A very simple Javascript pseudo-validator was used to display and report user actions and provide visual counters for a sufficient intake of data analysis.

Primary Analysis

This analysis focuses on the behavioral variance between an individual's online and offline characters. The below collection of observations summarizes our major findings from interviews, surveys and online experiments. Each one of the personality traits listed below has been found to exhibit a degree of

online/offline dissonance in a statistically significant portion of our samples. This section outlines specific findings and provides examples and cross-references to secondary data and findings.

Examples of Dissonant Traits:

Selfish: Your online character can be a bit more selfish than your normal one. If there is a website offering "limited edition" of anything, chances are you will want to grab it even more, even if you do not really need that item. In our online experiment, 60% of the sampled audience downloaded a certain piece of music *first*, simply by placing a "limited number of downloads" label and counter next to the download link.

Lazy: "Another click to claim my free surprise? I don't think so!" Online users seem to exhibit peculiarly resistant behavior regarding "doing" anything. They need to see information or finish their tasks with practically one action, or one click. That is exactly why most e-commerce sites have reengineered their "shopping basket" tools to include features such as "one-click checkout" or "express checkout," etc. Usability labs have shown that online commerce customers are not really willing to do much in order to get what they want. With every additional step required, the online store loses precious clientele.

Impatient: In addition to being lazy, online users lose patience fairly quickly. Consider a government website that allows you to pay bills online instead of wasting long hours in queues at the government offices. An online payment website will lose about 50% of its full-cycle payment users if the primary page takes more than five seconds to load fully (Nagarajan, 2012). This is quite ironic considering the fact that the same "impatient" user is expected to stay in the queue for an average of 15 minutes before making the payment, let alone commuting time and overhead. This behavior is quite intriguing, to say the least (Schaik, 2004).

Greedy: Online *greed* can be characterized a bit differently from its counterpart in the physical world. Greedy online behavior examples may include the fact that most users will prefer to download content or media for offline use, even though they might never use it. In our primary data collection, we found out that 87% of users preferred the "download" option over the "stream" option for the same piece of music. The same sample of users also admitted they would be willing to download the entire album if it was available for free, regardless of whether they actually knew all the songs listed. In a parallel experiment, we asked users to react to a similarly-designed "download page," except that the streaming feature was made free, while the downloading feature required a $0.49 per song payment. In this case, only 13% of our sample chose the download option, while 0% of our sample chose to download the entire album.

Gullible: We all know the famous, somewhat funny online story about the Nigerian prince who needs your help to transfer a humungous amount of wealth out of his country. This type of scam, known as the 419 scams, is as old as the internet itself, with its roots obviously dating back to the eighteenth century (Harris, 2012). One might think such a stupid scam cannot be successful. Surprisingly though, it is quite successful, and apparently, some people still fall for it to date (Herley, 2012). This phenomenon may be the combined effect of gullibility and greed, but the fact remains that online users, on average, aren't very clever!

Cheap: In our primary data collection exercise, one of the persistent observations that were captured was the fact that users preferred a free option to the paid option. In the surveys and interviews, we asked users if they would prefer to download a slightly lower-quality version of a piece of media (video or audio). 68% of the sample opted for the free inferior-quality version, even though the higher quality version was considered cheap. Another way to study this phenomenon was through comparing the number of AppStore downloads for three popular apps which have a free version as well as a "pro"

version. The average download ratio was a staggering 74:1. This observed behavior, however, seems to have a clear exception: a sub-sample of the audience that can be characterized as "self-proclaimed wealthy people" seem to be subconsciously projecting their wealthy status on their online presence.

Curious: With today's overwhelming social media overload, links submitted by website accounts into followers' timelines are often scrolled beyond and easily overlooked. But social media gurus seem to have found a secret formula: ignite user's curiosity. If it is a piece of news, do not reveal the "punch line" in the timeline. Instead, just put a phrase to make it sound even more mysterious. Online users seem to be far more curious than their offline selves.

Aggressive: Web 2.0 is all about the ability to express your thoughts. You can comment on a video, like a status, and tag another content author in your ideas. This freedom seems to have unlocked a lot of potential in internet users. Additionally, the fact that the user feels "safe" behind his screen gives them the freedom to do whatever they really desire. The result is often an overly aggressive attitude, which sometimes turns into online bullying.

Internet communities, in a collective form, exhibit similarly aggressive, unforgiving attitudes towards large corporations, brands, and celebrities. Perhaps one good example of this behavior is the hilarious yet harsh reaction from internet blogs and social media users towards Hershey's new redesigned logo (Wasserman, 2013).

Paranoid: People become a lot more paranoid when they are online, and perhaps they should be! With all the news we hear every now and then about hackers and governments spying on users, the internet seems to be a very insecure place. The major issue about this mass paranoia is the fact that it can be a significant obstacle in the face of doing business successfully online. For instance, 66% of the people we interviewed mentioned that they would not prefer to enter their credit card numbers online at all. When asked why, many of them presented very valid reasons, such as mediation attacks, which could sniff the valuable card information even if the user is trying to enter it onto a reliable website.

Insensitive: In addition to aggressiveness, online users exhibit a distinct tendency for lack of sensitivity towards other people's feelings. When examined closely, this phenomenon can be linked to the fact that those "other people" might not seem as real as the people they meet in the real world. Also, a person without a picture showing their face (and therefore age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) is probably going to be a target for even more insensitivity from other users.

Heroic/philanthropic: Online users exhibit a common behavioral pattern represented in their consistent tendency to "try and save the world." This behavioral pattern becomes apparent, and often brutally exploited, on social media platforms. Conspicuous examples include posts with ridiculous, obviously bogus initiatives to save starving children by hitting the "like" button or by "sharing" an image. Some posts even tell the users that "Facebook will donate $1 to the children in Africa for every *Like* given on this picture." Another screaming example is the sheer number of people who volunteer to share a photo of a missing child or a lost cat.

There is a catch, however, in this common behavior. Users who volunteer to "like" a picture or share a post are very unlikely to do anything beyond mere social activities (such as like or share). For example, if the same link requests the users to share and donate, they will often just share. When analyzing this behavior, it appears that users are motivated to indulge in it in order to satisfy their own conscience and help them feel better about themselves by doing something good.

Lustful: This trait is included as a *dissonant trait* because there is an apparent discord between most users' online and *real-world* behavior. Interviewed male subjects admitted that a street ad that includes nudity might not have the same impact on them as a Facebook post containing a similar image.

Obsessed: Obsession seems to be a common trait for online users. It is manifested in different addictive behaviors, particularly towards prominent social media platforms. There is an abundant amount of literature about addictive patterns and behaviors in social media usage forms (Griffiths, 2013). In our primary data gathering via interviews, subjects acknowledged the existence of this behavior in their usage patterns, as well as in observed remarks regarding their own kids, partners and friends. All of the interviewed subjects also confirmed that this behavioral pattern is specifically related to internet usage (sometimes more specifically to social media usage), and not to their general character. Therefore, we believe this trait also qualifies as a *dissonant trait*.

Hunts for Laughs: Internet slang is a phenomenon that requires a study by itself. It evolves in a very peculiar way. An especially curious example of internet slang evolution is the term "LuLz." According to the *Urban Dictionary* website, the term is a result of a multi-stage skewed evolution of the common term *LOL* (short for *Laugh Out Loud*), and along this transformation process, it was turned into a noun signifying the action of creating or inducing funny internet content (Urban Dictionary, 2007).
The relevant dissonant trait of online users manifests itself in the form of "hunting" or seeking funny content in a way that is inconsistent with the user's offline personality. For instance, the same user may exhibit a tendency towards watching news channels in an offline setting but still exhibit the desire to browse or watch less serious content while online.

Has a bloated self-image: This means that the online user can experience an exaggerated sense of status. Observations that support this assumption include opinionated political status updates, comments on posts that include political or other potentially controversial topics, and the expectations accompanying these actions. Typically, observed patterns show that an online user is more likely to comment or respond to an online post published by a renowned politician's official social media account than to make an equivalent action (e.g. stand up and sound their opinion) in a flesh-and-blood confrontation with the same politician discussing the same topic. Additionally, our informal discussions with interviewed subjects showed that most of them would expect the politician or renowned personality to at least read their comments, if not respond to it. When confronted with the fact that most of the politicians' social media accounts are managed by their PR teams, more than half of our subjects admitted that they assumed otherwise.

Seeks contact with celebrities: Another important observation that we were able to spot during our analysis is that users always prefer to be in touch with a famous person, rather than his or her associated brand. While 90% of our subjects confirmed that they followed and "liked" Bill Gates' social media accounts, only 28% showed the same interest in the "Gates Foundation."

Melodramatic: Internet users prefer to use the term **"*drama queens.*"** This is one of the strongest and most highly dissonant personal traits observed in our research. The trait is exhibited through exaggerated reactions and responses to online social events, such as arguments, post comments, or even private chats. Although it is widely believed that such behavior is most exhibited by teenagers and millennials, our study shows otherwise. Additionally, survey responses show with highly relevant statistical significance that the same person might exhibit a more emotional response towards an online social event than towards an equivalent offline event.

Compulsive Sharing: Social media users often exhibit another curious trait, which is the desire to "share" eerie or unverified news. This interesting trait has triggered a famous phenomenon known as *the Internet Hoax*; a virally spread piece of unverified, often obviously wrong piece of news, which is widely shared and republished. Ironically enough, too often the internet hoax would gain some credibility due to its widespread footprint. The behavioral dissonance, in this case, was so clear in our research, since

most individuals would immediately give a skeptical response to a rumor they hear offline, while still exhibiting the "compulsive sharing" behavioral phenomenon online.

A classic example of compulsive sharing took place a few years ago when a highly incredible rumor took the internet by storm in 2011, and social media users aggressively shared an image of a candy bar (branded as Tim Tam) with a printed disclaimer stating that the candy "may contain traces of peanuts and human flesh". Despite the fact that the rumor defied any kind of logic, and with most users fully aware of how easy it was to forge such ridiculous images using simple photo editing programs, the image was often passed on personal timelines and feeds as an authentic "horror story." Ironically, the more it was shared and retweeted, the more people believed it was real.

Characterization of Online Dissonant Traits

In an attempt to understand the nature of online-offline dissonant behaviors, we created a two-axis spectrum based on two properties for each trait: **Good-Bad**: describes how the behavior is perceived intrinsically, and **Extroverted-Introverted**: describes whether the behavior affects only the user or other individuals around them. By assigning approximate empirical scores to each trait, we were able to plot the traits included in this study on one graph, showing the general characteristics common to each group.
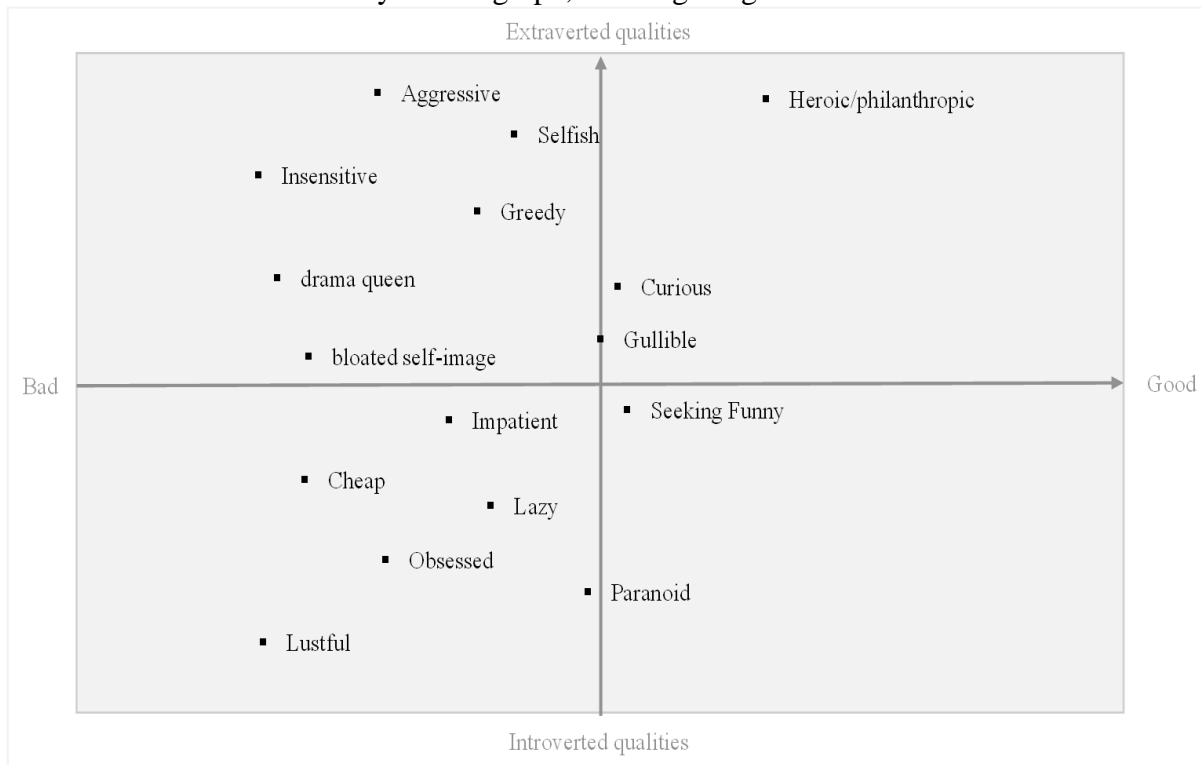
The graph analysis shows that the highest tendency for online dissonance is associated with traits that negatively affect other users, such as aggressiveness and insensitivity. The second highest group of traits includes ones that negatively affect the user internally, without much impact on others. Although the graph analysis indicates the existence of a clear pattern, further research may be required to prove or reject a hypothesis correlating the tendencies for dissonance with behavioral characterization based on the above-presented four quadrants.

Business Implications of Online Behavioral Dissonance

Most successful Internet businesses and websites seem to have already developed some sort of undocumented understanding of the dissonant trait phenomena. It can be argued that success in the Web 2.0 world may not even be possible without a thorough understanding of the unique online behavioral patterns of internet users. The business significance of this research paper is chiefly characterized by the fact that it serves as a platform of guidelines for designing internet services, online advertising campaigns, and interactive, web 2.0-style communication channels with users and customers.

The main lesson learned here is that online businesses must practice extreme caution when designing their campaigns, online identity, and interaction channels. The previously discussed case of Hershey's logo is a great example of how easily things can go out of control, or even backfire, if not thoroughly planned and tested for online community reactions. Moreover, it is now essential for internet businesses to continuously probe the public's reactions and responses, and plan for a fast response whenever needed. There is a potential ethical concern, however. In addition to benefiting from understanding the unique behavioral patterns of users, online businesses can also exploit those behavioral patterns. Unfortunately, this seems to be an already prominent fact in the world of internet businesses.

Conclusions

The research, through its primary data analysis and rationalization, concludes that there is strong evidence that most internet users exhibit different facets of moderate, relativist behavioral dissonance between their online ontological reflections and offline epistemological traits. The research also concludes that such dissonance may or may not be induced by global social phenomena such as federal elections, economic crises, and the social internet ecosystem dynamics, rather than intrinsic tendencies in the users' actual or innate characters. The research also correlates these findings with unusually common business practices of most successful online businesses and sheds some light on potential ethical dilemma pertaining to internet businesses exploiting these phenomena (albeit sometimes unknowingly) to lure their users into buying products or to generate more traffic.

Further Work

This research serves as an exploratory study and an introduction to the topic of dissonant personality traits for online users. The research presents an original method for analyzing online user behavior. This method can be further expanded and built upon in many ways. We suggest additional work based on this research to include the following areas:

- Further in-depth analysis of the sample, with more analysis parameters, such as gender, age group, ethnicity, and education level.
- Further analysis of the ways advertising and marketing agencies may be exploiting the described dissonance to their benefit.

In addition to the above, including other framework parameters, such as the geographical dimension, and enhancing the sample size, sample frame, and analysis methods can also represent ways to improve and expand the research.

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