THE RISE IN DEPERSONALIZATION

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Introduction

Communication between people is becoming depersonalized, "less individuated, less visible, or visible in different ways", resulting in communicators becoming more distant from each other (Myer, 2010). Depersonalization is rising at an alarming rate, especially after the year 2000, when the drastic drop in pricing for computers made them accessible to the middle class population worldwide, resulting in computer-mediated communication (McKenna et al., 2000). When humans communicate through computers, the communication process becomes more depersonalized as information such as body language is being lost. This paper will examine the impacts of depersonalization in computer-mediated communication, entertainment, and the service sector.

Depersonalization Through Online Interaction

Depersonalization occurs during everyday interactions on the internet as communicators are no longer communicating face-to-face with another, but through an electronic interface which lacks many emotional qualities such as facial expressions, body language and so forth (Spears et al., 2002). This section will focus on anonymous online chatrooms with a short overview on social media and the identity aspect of customer service.

Online communication through an anonymous chatroom allows the communicators to chat without knowing who the recipient of the message is. An example of an anonymous online chatting platform is "e-chat.co" (n.d.) where one can easily customize their username and avatar to match the online community that they are chatting with. This can be advantageous since "individual differences, such as appearance, social rank, status" and so forth will be hidden resulting in a conversation without social inequalities, biases or discrimination (Myer, 2010; Spears et al., 2002).

Furthermore, the anonymity component of this anonymous online chatroom allows the communicators to bypass social constraints on certain topics that would be inappropriate to be discussed face-to-face with strangers (Spears et al., 2002). By entering the respective groups or "topical thread", the socially sanctioned groups such as "lesbians, gay men or fringe political groups" can openly share their opinions without receiving judgement and the communicators will feel safe during the process since their true identities are hidden (McKenna et al., 1998; McKenna et al., 2000). The anonymous online chatrooms benefit the socially sanctioned groups, not only because as they are now comfortable disclosing hidden secrets or talking about socially inappropriate topics, but they also gain emotional and motivational support (McKenna et al., 2000).

The increase of depersonalization by chatting on anonymous online chatrooms result in the communicators being more open about sharing more intimate information. A study of anonymity was conducted by Gergen, Gergen, and Barton (1973), where anonymous pairs were placed in rooms that are either lit, where the test subjects can see each other, or pitch black, and they are required to talk with each other. The experiment demonstrated that communicators who are unable to see each other tend to share more intimate information about their lives and this may be because the communicators know that they cannot be identified (Gergen et al., 1973). Chatting in anonymous online chatrooms follows the same principles since the communicators are hidden under a "protective cloak" which enables them to express themselves without the judgement of others (Spears et al., 1994). In a larger sense, the increase in depersonalization of anonymous online chatrooms compared to face-to-face conversations allows the communicators to speak more freely promoting freedom of speech.

One negative impacts of depersonalization in anonymous online chatrooms is that communicators will slowly increase their expectations of what they can say during face-to-face interactions and will only result in frustration because of the social barriers on inappropriate topics (Spears et al., 2002). Another downside is that dissimulation may occur as people realize that they need to change their identities to be "taken seriously" such as females pretending to be males on the internet leading to "e-masculination" (Spears et al., 2002). Males tend to choose male avatars and females tend to pretend to be males in male topics and remain a female in female topics (Spears et al., 2002). The rationale for females is that by pretending to be a man, they will be taken more seriously (Spears et al., 2002). In a larger sense, the depersonalization of chatting through an anonymous online chatroom, allows the user to customize their qualities appropriately according to the online group they are joining; however, if they customize their qualities too much, they are no longer themselves anymore, but a totally different person.

The idea of customizing usernames is not only existent in online chatting platforms, but it is also used by customer service representatives from call centers. Customer service representatives are mainly stationed in India, with traces in the Philippines due to low wages and their ability to speak English, even though they are communicating with callers from North America and Europe (Taylor et al., 2005). They give Western Aliases and use appropriate accents to create a deeper emotional connection with the callers (Taylor et al., 2005). The emotional aspect of service workers will be further explored in the service section of the paper. In a larger sense, depersonalization found in non-face-to-face conversations allows the communicators to customize not only their names, but their embodiment to increase the effectiveness of their conversation. In larger sense, the customer is talking with a completely

different person through computer-mediated communication compared to a face-to-face communication.

Social media is also a computer-mediated communication platform; hence it is more depersonalized than face-to-face communication, but less so than anonymous online chatrooms as the identity of the communicator is not hidden removing the benefits of anonymity. The affordance of social media is that communicators have the ability to take as much time as necessary to craft their messages with the correct content which is socially appropriate and a proper syntax structure to demonstrate their level of education (McKenna et al., 2000). Certain communication technology may only be slightly affected by depersonalization such as online video calls since face-to-face communication is present. Even so, only a small section of the call location will be seen by the other allowing the communicator to craft their messages and place them in non-visible areas of the camera making it no different than postings on social media. Also, simply being in private room may affect the way you speak resulting in a totally different communication experience. On the other hand, during an unexpected face-to-face conversation, one can only prepare as much as increasing their soft skills. In a larger sense, even depersonalization in a non-anonymous level of computer-mediated communication, can still have a huge impact on the way one communicates to another. Even though they are still bound by social constraints, they still have the freedom to take their time and craft their messages without the recipient finding out.

Depersonalization in the Entertainment Industry

The increase of depersonalization is not only conveyed in computer-mediated communication, but also in the entertainment industry. In the acting industry, the term actor refers to anything that can act according to the "actor-network theory"

developed by Callon, Latour and others sociologists (Latour, 2017). They decided to replace the term "actor" with the term "actant" which means a creature, human or object who has "active roles" in a narrative (Latour, 2017; Oxford Dictionaries). In 1908, "Fantasmagorie", considered as one of the first cartoons was released (Popova, 2011) and by 1924, the animation "Oh Mabel" by Max and Dave Fleischer had a synced dialogue which marked the beginning of non-human actors (Maher, 2016). Today, cartoons including animations are increasing in popularity as cinemas are increasing their showcase compared to a decade ago (Mottram, 2017). Moreover, animations can also have character development with human qualities making the viewing experience on par or even better than conventional shows with real actors (Mottram, 2017). This results in a higher level of depersonalization than watching footage being performed by real actors. Real actors are given a set of instruction and personalities; however, they still act, speak and move, with a fragment of their own personality as suggested one of the fathers of acting, Stanislavsky, with the term he coined, "emotional memory" (Ohikuare, 2014, PBS, n.d.). Voice actors can speak with a fragment of their own emotion; however, the only main difference in animation is that human body language and movement is being tracked, exaggerated, and then programmed into an animation through motion capture resulting in extra processing (Tabarsi, 2016). This results in a more depersonalized connection between the audience and the film as human movement is tweaked to enhance the story, making the character behaviour more exaggerated and exciting compared to the real motions performed by actors.

Depersonalization in the Service Industry

Depersonalization is also happening in the service sector including activities ranging from shopping to taking a taxi. Before technology begins to replace the role

of the workers, customers had no choice but to interact with service workers being taxi drivers if they are planning to take a taxi, bank tellers regarding their bank accounts, and waiters about their food orders which already has a level of depersonalization in the sense of "emotional labour", where the service workers have masked themselves and serve you in a friendly, appealing and appropriate way resulting in the term "the embodied worker" and "emotional labour" (Morris et al., 1996). Before Grab or Uber, the customer had to phone the taxi dispatch service and provide them with details such as where they depart from and their arrival location or flag a taxi resulting in interaction between the "embodied workers" and the customer (Morris et al., 1996). Considering that this process is being replaced by technology, "emotional labour" is slowly fading away as the interaction as a whole is slowly being replaced by technology resulting in more depersonalization (Morris et al., 1996). Customers no longer communicate with taxi drivers about their destination and pickup location, they simply input data into their phones which will be sent to the driver's phone in a simple and uniform format.

In 2015, a new form of supermarket called the "Hema" was founded in Shanghai, and it uses a "new retail" strategy (Choudhury, 2017). "New retail is the integration of grocery stores, food-services businesses and restaurants" into one location that is almost fully automated (Choudhury, 2017). In other words, the restaurant section of the supermarket is almost completely replaced by machines (Alibaba Group, 2018). During the ordering process, the customer no longer need to tell the "embodied workers" their orders or gets asked how their day is, they simply place their order on their smartphone which will be sent to the electronic device of the chef in the kitchen who will prepare the customer's dish, and to the robotic waiters (Morris et al., 1996, Alibaba Group, 2018). There is no option for the customer to chat

with waiters. In a larger sense, depersonalization in the service industry has the same

benefits as anonymous online chatrooms. The chefs will not know who ordered which

dish resulting in less discrimination and biases and more equality which will affect the

quality of the dish.

Conclusion

As technology continues to advance, depersonalization continues to rise in

computer-mediated communication, the entertainment sector, and the service sector.

Through the use of anonymous chatrooms, communicators will face less biases or

discrimination, can discuss topics that are socially inappropriate, and are more likely

to disclose more intimate information about themselves. The depersonalization of the

interaction between the client and the customer service representative allows the latter

to customize their names and their accents to match with the client. Through the use

of social media, one can craft their messages carefully which is not possible during an

unplanned face-to-face encounter. As the number of animation increases, audiences

are spending less time watching actors, but animated figures. The animation is more

depersonalized than actors as movements from the actors are captured, enhanced and

then implanted into the character similar to how messages are crafted in social media.

In the service industry, customers are no longer interacting with the service workers

as the information they input is transferred into data sent to machines or the workers.

In a larger sense, depersonalization is reshaping the way one interacts with another by

making their interaction more artificial. As technology continues to develop, humans

will have less opportunities to have a more natural conversation such as a face-to-face

conversation or maybe the idea of a natural conversation will be redefined. The

increase in depersonalization results in the increase of conformity as people's verbal

communication are being converted to organized data such as in the case of the taxi

phone application or the restaurant order; however, depersonalization also masks the identity of the communicators on online chatrooms resulting in individuality at the same time as communicators they are no longer being constrained by the society. As technology continues to increase, everyday interactions will continue to become more depersonalized; hence, the interaction between humans will continue to change, for better, or for worse.

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