

One true online identity?

Technology writer Nicole Lee has five accounts on Twitter, two on Instagram, and one on Facebook—and, she says, a different identity on each of them. She uses some of her accounts to focus on specific topics. Other accounts are a kind of joke, like one where she pretended to be tweeting for a hair salon, just to make people laugh.

Does having several different online identities make her a bit strange? Not according to author and social media researcher danah boyd (who prefers her name to be written without capitals). According to boyd, for almost the whole history of the internet people have had more than one online face. “Different sites, different audiences, different purposes,” she says. “I interviewed a young person last week who was very clear about the need for multiple profiles,” boyd continues. This person used one social media platform to share serious information about current events, another to share photographs with classmates, a third to communicate with “everyone she’s ever met,” and text messages to chat with close friends and family. Each platform, it seems, showed a different side of her personality or a different part of her life.

In her article *Having multiple online identities is more normal than you think*, Lee quotes an unnamed Twitter user who strongly believes that most people have more than one identity, saying, “The life I lead in front of my family members is not the life I lead when I’m with my friends, which isn’t the life I lead...online.” Lee’s colleague Mallory Johns also has different social media accounts that show different sides of her personality.

How does our online behavior compare with real life? With regard to identity, the two worlds are similar. Each of us in some way becomes a different person depending on the situation we’re in. At home, you might be a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, or sister. At work, you become an engineer, manager, or nurse—a very different identity with its own activities and responsibilities.

“Think of it this way,” says danah boyd. “Would you invite everyone you’ve ever met to your birthday party? To your office? To your wedding?” Different events include different groups of people and different identities. It shows that people are amazing because they have so many sides.

An alternate view

“You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly. Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity*.” —Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook

*integrity = honesty