

Dr. Jekyll in life, Mr. Hyde online

Young folks split real, virtual selves

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Step 1: Hit a bong. Step 2: Take a shot. Step 3: Shotgun a beer. Step 4: Exhale. Step 5: Repeat as necessary.

The above regimen leaves out the newly obligatory Step 6: Record the process and post video of it to the Internet so that your stoner fortitude can be seen around the world, in perpetuity. Why? It's a teen thing you grown-ups wouldn't understand.

Well, not all grown-ups. Dianne Lynch, dean of the School of Communications at Ithaca College who has spent three years researching a book on the generation that has grown up with the Internet, said today's young people have developed a clear disconnect between their real lives and the online versions of themselves.

Other experts agree: Today's teens and young adults have little trouble compartmentalizing their lives online and off. And that's why you see so many youngsters doing stupid, outrageous, dangerous and sometimes illegal things in online videos. Beat someone up at school, pose for pictures in your underwear, vandalize your school, snort some cocaine.

Let's go to the video.

"Kids who grow up in virtual space really accept the notion that I can have several different identities," Lynch said. "My research suggests that kids have this belief that it's not who I am all the time, it is who I am in a given space. The consequences are not very real to a 17- or 16-year-old.

"So I'm online and I've a got movie of me doing something inappropriate. I still get up in the morning and go through life and I don't see that it has an impact on my everyday experience. That's the mind-set these kids have," she said.

"Wash your car, you filthy skank!" screams Johnny from the passenger window of a car as he and his buddies cruise the streets around Union, digitally recording the whole time. The woman, who is indeed washing her car, appears more startled than offended, but her reaction causes uproarious laughter as the group sallies forth seeking its next victim.

Many of the insults hurled by the New Jersey "drive-by video" group cannot be printed here, but you can find them easily enough on YouTube. Some are profane, many cruel: "There's no such thing as Santa Claus," to a group of little kids; "Go back to Sea World, Shamu," to an overweight woman; "Nice

hair, Tarzan," to a fellow with dark flowing locks, are a few of the tamer examples.

Why do they do it? Because they can. Because it has earned them a fan base of thousands. And, as Johnny says in his MySpace blog: "We will continue to make these videos until we grow bored with them, which most likely won't be for a while. We have been doing this for kicks for the past few years and have not grown bored of it yet."

The real-life Johnny is a 22-year-old from Union, who says he's a student and not some miscreant tough guy. It's just that the videos, which initially were meant only for friends, made a YouTube celebrity of him. "Tons of people said they thought it was funny, and tons said it was horrible and just made fun of us for it," he wrote in his blog.

Greg Hall, a psychologist who teaches a course in cyber-psychology at Bentley College in Massachusetts, said it is not at all unusual for individuals to disassociate themselves from their online behavior.

"There is a sense of anonymity that people, especially young people, still have in the online world. The normal social inhibitions that exist in face-to-face communications don't exist in the virtual world," he said.

Frank Farley, a psychologist at Temple University who studies risk-taking behavior by young people, said the immediate payoff of having a hot video on YouTube often outweighs or even negates the potential consequences the recorded bad behavior can have for young people later on.

"Teenagers sometimes weigh the benefits more than the costs," Farley said. "Older, more experienced persons will bring those more into balance. They (younger people) may not see the costs to them of this, or not weight it very heavily. The idea that whatever they put there is going to be there forever is hard for them to imagine."

Coming at this issue from a different perspective is John Toomey, the Long Beach, Calif.,-based producer of the fledgling Crystal Awards, which recognize the best in short-format Internet video. Unfortunately, he said, for every piece of video art that is submitted he gets about four "Jackass"-type videos that involve things like "throwing their brother off the roof or simulated drowning."

"It's not that human nature has changed, it's that technology lets all of our impulses be made immediately available in living color and put on the Internet for everyone to see," he said.

Last month, the online and offline worlds collided when a video of three girls beating up another girl in Suffolk County, N.Y., was broadcast on mainstream media. Fight videos have been popular on the Internet for years, but this was the first to capture the offline public's attention. These girls, unlike many others, paid immediate consequences: They were arrested for assault.

John Suler, a psychologist at Rider University, said that since the current generation of teens is the first to grow up with the Internet as an integral

part of their everyday lives and the first to present so much of themselves publicly, there has been little research on what impact these online video pioneers will feel later in life.

"It's still relatively new. Years from now, when they're in college or an employer Googles their name, they're going to find these things they posted in middle school," he said.

On the other hand, Suler said, inappropriate postings might be a temporary problem, confined to this generation. "When they become adults, unlike their own parents, they'll be a lot more Internet savvy and they'll be able to supervise their kids in a more effective way."