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1. Introduction

In a recent episode of the television sitcom *Frasier*, the character Frasier takes on the role of an artistic mentor. He teaches his student art, literature, and style. Frasier's student begins to dress like him. At first, Frasier is flattered but then he realizes that the student has gone too far and completely replicated the décor of his apartment: from the furniture to the art. It is unnerving and unsettling. To the dismay of Frasier, the student's apartment is later featured in the magazine, *Interior Decorator*.

Similar to Frasier, people in an online community can be emulated, or "cloned." Their identities can be stolen in unique ways; for example, my Stanford username is johnwong and thus I can be cloned as JohnWong, JoHnWoNg, or john_wong. A person's username is important because it shows creativity, it protects the user, it is convenient, and more importantly as the online user Puzzle[1] states, "it is afterall (sic) what gives you your identity."

Identity is one of the more interesting facets of the Internet because we live in a postmodern world. We are constantly bombarded with different types of reality. We must choose who we are.

> The individual personality…must choose and keep choosing, whether or not he or she knows it or wants such freedom: must determine who to be, what to believe in, how to live. The individual in search of self-identity becomes a consumer of reality. (Anderson, 1990)

One form of online identity is our "handle" or username. It is normally the first choice in constructing our online identity. An individual's handle is limited only by the constraints of the system, which typically include a character limit and the requirement that the handle be unique (no two users can have the same handle).

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[1] My setting and the users in my setting have been given pseudonyms.

Sherry Turkle (1995 and 1998) further examines the importance of a person's handle and concludes that "it gives people the chance to express often unexplored aspects of the self." In other words, people can take on multiple identities and become different personalities or people with those identities. Therefore, if a person wants to explore his sensitive side he can use a different handle specifically for that reason.

Another form of identity is what we type in our messages. Lynn Cherny (1998) coined the phrase, WYSIWIS, or "what you see is what I say." Elizabeth Reid (1998) further explains that "users are free to project only what they desire others to see." And Annette Markham (1998) believes that "if I control the text, I have control over the presentation of self." Examples of this include: our writing style, tone, use of emoticons (small graphic depicting emotion), and signature file (conclusion to your message that is as simple as your name or can be more elaborate).

Katie Argyle and Rob Shields (1996) argue that what you type are extensions of your body. Emoticons, for example, project your facial expressions and is one way "that physical expression is captured on the computer." They argue that this is a form of face-to-face communication because it is important for humans to project their physical self or they are not considered "real" and it is difficult for other people to talk to them.

Online identity is obviously important and has been frequently researched; however, stolen identities is an area lacking in study.

> Ok, just how many SUPERCHIC's are there? Besides the first and REAL Super Chic, why are there 86 different ones? Whats the joke? I must be out of the loop or something, cuz I dont get it!! (Omen)

How are identities stolen? What are the ramifications? How can this phenomena be explained? I will first describe my setting and the people in it and then I will analyze and attempt to answer the above questions.

2. Setting

MusicNow's online forum was the setting I chose. MusicNow has been in the media quite frequently regarding their music sharing program and I wanted to see if people would debate the "issues." In other words, I wanted to see if this online forum was "successful" or did it degrade to shouting matches and threats (flaming). In terms of gaining users, I think the forum is successful. Initially, when I began observing the forum (October 15, 2000) there were slightly over 39,000 registered users and now there are over 53,000 users (November 27, 2000). Moreover, I wanted to learn more about the "issues" because many technology gurus feel that this software program is going to change the way people use computers. Lastly, the music sharing program is itself a community tool. The premise is that people have music on their machines that other people want and vice versa. People will "swap" songs from one machine to the other. It is also a way for people to communicate with each other one on one via online chatting or instant messaging. Although it would be interesting to study if the forum was "successful" or the one on one communication, it would have been difficult given the limited amount of resources and thus I chose the online forum.

3. Methods

I observed 30 threads (topics) before I came across a posting about "cloning." Of

the 30 threads I felt that 10 of them were interesting enough and I saved them to my computer. The main criteria for reading the message was the amount of replies. Next to each main topic is a number indicating the number of replies. If it had over 10, I would read it. For the most part, the topic heading didn't sway me from reading it or not. Topics ranged from "MusicNow Sucks" to "What's your religion?"

There are 7 main discussion areas in the forum:

General – "How do you think this model will change the way that music is experienced in the future?"

Technical Support – "With over 30 million MusicNow faithfuls, someone has got to have an answer for you, right?"

General Help – "Have you just opened MusicNow for the first (or maybe second) time and just can't seem to grasp all of the mind-blowing features you have found?"

Speak Out – "The future of MusicNow and peer-to-peer file sharing has been called into question. What are you going to do about it?"

Recording Artists – "What does the future hold for recording artists?"

Unsigned Artists – "Are you a new artist struggling to get your music heard?"

Colleges and Universities – "Are schools justified in cutting off access? Does disabling MusicNow constitute censorship? What steps can be taken to allow MusicNow to coexist with other network applications?"

I mainly focused on "Speak Out" because it was the most active. As of December 3, 2000, there were triple the amount of responses than those in other discussion areas. I also read messages in "Colleges and Universities."

I had a lot of interesting data, but, I did not have a clear focus. I re-read the messages that I saved on my computer and noticed the term "clone" being used. A great feature of the forum is that you can easily find a message or topic by searching by author or by words in a message. So I entered the search term "clone" and I received the maximum number of hits (200). I then went through all of the messages. Any

message that dealt with "cloning" or my interpretation of a stolen identity, I saved it to my computer. This led to fifteen threads being saved.

After reading the messages on cloning, I noticed who were the clones and who were being cloned. I did a search on the name of the clones and received various hits which depended on the number postings. Any conversation between the clone and original were saved on my computer. This led to an additional ten threads being saved.

Of the twenty-five threads I saved on my computer, there were two threads that dealt with "cloning." Unfortunately, they were inactive for at least a couple of days. One thread was posted on October 23, 2000 and it was a message to all clones to announce themselves. The other thread was posted on November 20, 2000 and it was a message questioning how many clones of a popular user were there. At this point, I was a non-participant observer because I did not feel it was necessary to post any messages. Later on, I changed my strategy because I wanted to further explore the "cloning" topic by getting replies from the originals and the clones.

3.1. People

Over time, I began noticing a variety of postings from a handful of people. One of the great features about the forum is that it highlights the number of messages each person posted. There were some people who posted over two-thousand times and were considered "Senior" members of the forum. To gain Senior status, a user must post at least fifty times. I started reading messages from people who posted quite frequently. Below is a description of a handful of them.

Super Chic, is one of the most popular. This is partly because of her handle and also because of the frequency of her postings (close to two thousand). She is by far the most cloned user. She is outspoken and her postings are usually of substance. Her posts are generally not one word or one sentence postings. She's been a forum member since July 2000.

Another user, Puzzle, also posts frequently (over two thousand two hundred). He responded to one of my survey/interview postings. He's been a forum member since April 2000.

Omen is a third user that has over two thousand postings. He also replied to my online post. Most of Senior members respect him because of what he says and would be elected to the "Forum Hall of Fame." The MusicNow "Forum Hall of Fame" is a posting by a user to nominate users who have "contributed to the forum in a positive and meaningful way." He's been a member since July 2000.

Ant is a user who initially didn't trust who I was and thus posted messages questioning my identity.

> If you were serious, I would think you'd keep your email address available
> to any people who wanted to answer anonymously. Who are you for real?

Admittedly, he was right and I posted my email address for those who wanted to protect their privacy. He's been a member since July 2000.

Cal is a "lurker," somebody who normally just reads other people's postings, but, does not normally participate in the forum. He usually goes to the forum once a week for about ten to fifteen minutes. He was the only one who I was able to interview face-to-face.

Tim3 is a Senior member who has been cloned by Tim4. Tim4 is also a Senior member and declares that "I would never clone… cuz its not right! Plus I registerd first. You damn clones!" The differences between them are registration date and the number in their handles.

Super Chick and Super Chik are clones of Super Chic. For the most part, they antagonize Super Chic to be funny. They usually post messages that are inflammatory or sexually explicit. Super Chick has been a member since August 2000 and Super Chik has been a member since November 2000.

3.2. Interviews

I tried to be a non-participant observer in the forum because I didn't feel the need to disturb the forum by posting to it. But, posting a couple of messages to the forum was a good way to explore the cloning issue. As a result, I obtained some interesting data.

I posted two messages within two different threads on cloning. The first thread was started by a Senior member. He was shocked to see so many Super Chic clones (See Appendix 1). The second thread was started by a clone asking for all clones to reply and introduce themselves (See Appendix 2). I wanted to see who would respond to my messages. Most of the replies were from Seniors. The only clone who replied was censored because of the content of his message. The response seemed to be quite disturbing and aimed at Super Chic. Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to read the message and this will be discussed in the limitations section below.

I interviewed approximately five people online and one person face-to-face. Online interviews included those conducted over email or in the forum. My only face-to-face interview was conducted with Cal. I wish that I had completed more face-to-face interviews because I wanted to analyze the differences or similarities between the two groups and also to gain more balance.

3.3. Limitations

As I mentioned before, there were a few things I regret with the online forum interview. One of the problems I experienced was not being upfront with my forum identity (the forum allows users to hide their email address). As a result, users might have felt that I was hiding something or that I was a clone masking as somebody else. I posted my email address to alleviate any fears or doubts people had, but, I haven't received any more postings. I assume that this was not important or I would have received some emails responding to my posting.

Another problem developed when a clone who posted a message that had some

questionable content and consequently diverted people from responding to my message. After I posted my message there were nine replies to me and eight replies to the clone's message. Furthermore, the clone's message was removed from the forum so I could not read his message. This problem is further explained in the Rudeness section.

The last problem was gaining permission from the parent of one of the Moderators. It would have been beneficial to interview an administrator regarding cloning and what happened with the message from one of Super Chic's clones. Unfortunately, due to time and distance I was unable to gain permission.

4. Stealing an Identity

As I began reading messages on the forum I realized that there were a handful of users who posted quite frequently. They were beyond Senior level and posted at least 1500 times. I then began to read postings from Super Chic. This was because her handle was unique, her messages contained valuable content, she had the respect of the other forum members, and she posted quite frequently. Then I became confused.

I thought I was reading a posting from Super Chic, but, I noticed that that person was only a Junior member. Huh? Almost everything looked the same: the username, the signature file (content users put at the bottom of their postings and is similar to an email signature file), and the use of emoticons (small graphic depicting emotion). But, something was not right. Super Chic had been cloned. Below are the ways in which a person can be cloned.

4.1. Handle

A person's handle is more than a username. It can embody your name, it shows your creativity, and it usually has more levels of meaning beyond the text display. An interesting way of copying someone's identity is the use of capital i and lowercase L. For example, Omen stated that the username Petal Whirl (spelled with lower case L) can be cloned as Petal Whirl (upper case i, lower case L), Petal Whirl (lower case L, upper case i), or Petal Whirl (upper case i). All three "look the same, but have different spellings."

Another way of cloning a user's handle is to make a subtle change. For example, Tim4 is a clone of Tim3. All Tim4 did was change the number. Omen replied to one of my questions on why people cloned and he answered, "when you see a johnw1998 you'll know all the answers." My handle was johnw1997. Users can easily be misled.

4.2. Signature

A person's signature can also be cloned. Cloning a signature is fairly straightforward and involves copying and pasting the original author's signature file into the clone's signature file. The clone can even keep the formatting (italics, bold, etc.) or he can "distinguish" himself by leaving it unformatted. Super Chic expressed her feelings in a posting:

> My favorite part is how they copy my sig, are they that idiotic to think that just because they can copy/paste a persons sig, others will think it's me?

This is more subtle than copying a user's handle.

4.3. Emoticons

Super Chic distinguishes her postings by using different emoticons in a row. Normally a user will just use one emoticon to express emotion. Super Chic will use

numerous emoticons in a row 😁😊😁 to either show expression and/or because of how it looks. As far as I can tell, she is the only one who uses emoticons in this way and as a result her clones copy it as well.

5. Ramifications

Users can distinguish the original author and the clones by looking at the registration date, the number of postings, and observing the style and tone of the messages. The latter is the most difficult. Even Super Chic expressed her confusion:

> I just hope most people wil (sic) take notice of the date of registration and not confuse us. This new one even fooled me though.

The ramifications of a stolen identity include: confusion, misrepresentation, and rudeness.

5.1. Confusion

Super Chic also has another clone that was meant to parody her name: Subpar Chic. Super Chic feels that this clone is funny and a good one. On the other hand, Super Chik and Super Chick are clones that trouble Super Chic because they look and sound like her; making it difficult to distinguish between them. Here is an exchange between Super Chic and Super Chick:

Clone: LIFE SHOULD NOT BE A CA-CA SANDWICH!

Super Chic: Back! I say, Back in the cage you!!! 😡

Clone: WHAT THE F***??? WHATS GOING ON? WHY IS THERE ANOTHER PERSON WITH MY NAME?!?!?!?! 😕 GET BACK IN MY CAGE?!?! WILL YOU PLEASE STOP IMPERSONATING ME AND THINK UP YOUR OWN NAME?!?!?! I AM SO TIRED OF THIS!!

When the usernames look the same, people can easily be confused. As mentioned

before, Petal Whirl, Petal Whirl, Petal, Whirl, and Petal Whirl all look the same, but are

spelled differently. Confusion can lead to misrepresentation of who you are.

5.2. Misrepresentation

Cal indicated that being cloned would be "scary" because "you wouldn't know

what to do" to protect yourself; especially, if the clone started flaming other people or

doing things that you would not normally do. Some users may not notice the little things

that distinguish a clone from the original user and thus they may make conclusions

about the original user that are not true.

> …you post with my name with only a number different to tell the
> difference! I was having fun with this but now frankly I am getting pissed
> off a bit about it. I don't want anyone thinking you are me when you say
> something that I wouldn't say. (Tim3 on clone Tim4)

Being misrepresented can lead to unforeseen consequences such as users ignoring

and flaming the original user because they think the clone is the original user. Another

consequence of cloning is rudeness.

5.3. Rudeness

Gary Marx (1994) explains that "new technologies require new manners" and

that identity is especially vulnerable to "interception by third parties."

> New opportunities and temptations for deception and rudeness are
> provided by technologies that offer remote access and anonymity. The
> absence of visual or auditory cues makes it easier to conceal, deceive,
> and manipulate. The isolated individual sending messages at a computer
> terminal or responding to the requests of an electronic voice may make it
> hard to remember that there is (or will eventually be) a human being at the
> other end. The emotionless quality of the medium, the invisibility of the
> other, and the anonymity of the sender are not inherently conducive to
> civility.

Cloning is a form of anonymity that has led to rudeness on the forum. A clone of Super Chic posted some disturbing content.

> I'm told he referred to my daughters underwear. This guy is one big f****** SICKO!!! (Super Chic)

Disturbing enough so that the Moderators of the forum deleted the message and an apology was posted:

> Dear Super Chic...
> I am a regular forum member who has been away on business for the past month. I would rather keep my ID a secret for obvious reasons.
>
> On getting back home today my younger brother bragged to me that he had set up the clone member name of you and been "having a laugh". Upon a bit of a wrestle and slapping he finally told me what he has been doing.
>
> He has been severely dealt with and I have taken steps to not let this happen again.
>
> I offer his apology and my own for giving the little idiot access to my
>
> system.

Other forms of rudeness include flaming and lying. All of which lead to the original user's representation being tarnished.

6. Discussion

Why do people clone? The most common answer is to antagonize, annoy, and make fun of the original user (Omen and Puzzle). For the most part, it is a prank a person plays on another user. Another answer is similar to the character in Frasier. It is a way for another user to emulate and idolize the original user. Furthermore, Puzzle theorizes that because of the handle Super Chic, it is a way for some people to flirt with her because her handle implies "happenin" or "party gal."

Another explanation is Ervin Goffman's theory of "front stage," and "back stage." He suggests that people are constantly trying to "present themselves to others in ways that are most favorable to their own interests or image." (Goffman, 1959) Front stage "is the area where a player performs a specific role before an audience." And back stage "is the area where a player is not required to perform a specific role because it is out of view of a given audience." Due to the uninhibited nature of the forum and of the Internet in general, a person's "back stage" can be brought to the "front stage." The Super Chic clone went beyond what was appropriate in the forum. Here is a response from a user:

> Whoever Super Chic's clone is, you're s***. Your mind is s***, your body is s***, everything about your posting is s***. It ain't nice, it ain't clever... and if you did refer to Super Chic's daughter you're the s*** of s***. Are you so bored of porn that you have to come here, or have your parents/guardians got cybersitter or netnanny stopping you from getting your daily dosage? You are SUCH a p****, would you do such things in REALITY, I don't think so... go away sad person.

"Would you do such things in REALITY?" A clone is really trying to be a clown and uses the cloned identity to be funny. Like some clowns, however, they can be scary and can go beyond what is suitable.

A third explanation is put forth by Turkle which argues that one person can have multiple handles that might embody different personalities of a person. Having multiple handles may not be used "to impersonate anyone, but to simply have different names under which to post certain subject matter that they do not want to identify with their main username." (Ant) This allows users to explore other aspects of their personality in an environment that easily allows for multiple personalities.

On the other hand, Elizabeth Reid (1998) believes that fragmented and multiple

selves hurt online communities. Many of the Senior participants believe the same:

> …Please try to ignore them, we are all aware of that fact and they are the
> reason for this forum degraded for the last days. There can be only one
> SC (Super Chic). – Ant

As a result of anonymity, online communication can degrade to flame wars, deception

or rudeness. Cloning can be funny and "a lot of times it is." (Omen) Even Super Chic

feels the same way with Subpar Chic.

> I don't paticularily mind the clones, some are funny. I especially like my
> other one "Subpar Chic." But the ones who clone to be nasty are annoying
> as hell and I'm not gonna let one of them insult me in Any way, shape or
> form without getting a shot back in there, lol (laugh out loud).

For the most part, cloning is done to annoy the original user and is apparent in Super

Chic's tone.

Further Research

The research for this project spanned a month. Moreover, data was collected

only at MusicNow's online forum. It would be interesting to compare multiple forums

and chat rooms for an extended period of time to see if 1.) there are other ways to steal

an online identity 2.) further research on why people do it and 3.) how related are other

forms of deviance (stalking, flaming, etc.).

Different types of medium allow different ways of identity theft. MusicNow's

forum allowed clones to mimic people's usernames, emoticons, and signature files.

Some of the Instant Messaging software have icons that are customizable. For

example, some people can use their own pictures. I assume that cloning in this nature

would be extremely scary for the original user because it becomes more personal.

I was unable to interview any clones directly. Not many clones answered my emails and the one time a clone did, it was censored. Most of my data is from the perspective of the original user. It would be interesting to interview the people who clone in order to paint a more well rounded picture of the whole issue of cloning.

Finally, I posted a question about the relationship between stalking and cloning because I read a message that mentioned the two terms together. It made sense to me that clones were stalking the original users because they could be more effective in antagonizing them. Omen responded to my question, "Get real... OK... I guess it's possible." I was trying to search for connections between cloning and if they were related to some other form of deviance. Omen felt that this was not likely.

7. Conclusion

In Frasier's case, one solution was to redecorate his apartment. It was a way for him to "move on" and to "change things for the better." But, he realized that the original furniture and art in his apartment matched his personality and worked nicely with the layout of his apartment. He decided to return his apartment back to its original state.

Similarly, a person can feel the same way about his online identity. It can be a variation of your name or it can be more creative like Super Chic. Nevertheless, it is who you are. And when somebody copies your identity it can leave a person feeling frustrated, upset, or scared because that person has derailed and mocked the most important element in postmodern society: your identity. Cloning is an unfortunate aspect of an online community.

> Oh well, c'est la vie I soppose, all par for the course here it seems. I just
> wish that people would just be mature enough to get whatever it is that
> has them so wigged (about me), off their cheast (using their real name

that is). Instead, I feel like I've had some nasty note slipped in my locker at 'recess' and the culprit is too much of a coward to say whatever it is he has to say, to my face. It's all so STUPID!!! (Super Chic)

Super Chic is obviously fed up with her clone. She concludes: "I guess it IS true what they say, with every copy, there is a slight loss in the originality of the true 'original' ISN'T there?"

8. Appendix

Appendix 1

My name is John and I'm a student at Stanford studying the MusicNow Forum and came across this discussion about cloning. I was wondering if the users in this thread could answer a few questions? Your answers will only be disclosed to the members of my class.

1.) How important is your username/handle when you created it?

2.) What is cloning and why do you think people do it?

3.) Why do you think Super Chic has been cloned so much?

4.) Is stalking and cloning related?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix 2

My name is John and I'm a student at Stanford studying the MusicNow Forum and came across this discussion about cloning. I was wondering if the users in this thread could answer a few questions? Your answers will only be disclosed to the members of my class.

1.) What is cloning and why do you do it?

2.) Is stalking and cloning related?

3.) Is there more to cloning than having a similar username/handle?

Thank you for your time.

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