

# Variations in role-playing and Personality "Leakage" as a Function of Communication Medium

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It has been argued that the relative anonymity of interactions on the Internet permits users to assume new identities and to display personal attributes otherwise lacking in their behavior. Thus, for example, individuals constrained by their social roles or personality in face to face (F2F) conversations may be more active and outgoing in media where there is less social presence.

The present study focussed on the dimension of Introversion/Extraversion (I/E) and examined dyadic interactions in four media, F2F, telephone, videoconferencing and chatline. We examined three basic questions: 1) Can introverts and extraverts successfully adopt their opposite type in brief conversations with others? 2) Will there be personality "leakage," i.e., will the partners of introverts and extraverts correctly identify them as such even when they are playing an opposite role? And 3) Will the effectiveness of the role-playing and the degree of leakage differ from medium to medium?

Method: Participants were run in groups of four, but before meeting as a group, each pair of subjects engaged in a getting-acquainted conversation for five minutes. After the first conversation, two of the participants were instructed to play roles in their next two conversations: to be (in counterbalanced order) as extroverted and then as introverted as possible. The other two participants were ignorant of the instructions and received none themselves. All participants were assessed on I/E before the conversations began. After each conversation, each participant

rated his/her partner on a number of personality attributes, including I/E. They also rated on the same scales how they thought they were seen by their partners. Twelve groups of undergraduates were run in each condition (total N=192).

Results: 1) As indicated by their partners' ratings, extraverts and introverts were equally successful at playing their assigned roles, i.e., for both groups, introversion scores fell when they were instructed to be extraverted and rose when they were instructed to be introverted. 2) Evidence of "leakage" was obtained: Regardless of which role was being played, mean introversion scores were higher for introverts than for extraverts. 3) Participants were equally effective in their role-playing in the four media; leakage, however, was greater in the video and phone than in the F2F and chat conditions. Overall, the extraverts, unlike the introverts, seemed little affected by the variations in the medium of communication. This pattern of results held as well for the participants' ratings of how they thought their partners saw them. They believed, that is, that they had enacted their roles successfully but also that their actual personality had been detected.

It appears, in sum, that at least with respect to this one central personality trait, individuals can assume a new behavior pattern on line, though there is no evidence that they can do so better on line than in other media. As expected, actual personality leaked through the role playing least on line.