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How online anonymity affects discrimination and mental health

The virtual world of online chatting has become an integral part of society's everyday life. It boasts a perk of anonymity – should one wish to, it is possible to hide their identity. However, behind the flashy colours and profile pictures lies a profound issue deeply rooted in everyday life: discrimination. Possibly without the intent to, this can have a severe effect on the mental health of individuals, lowering self-esteem or making people apprehensive when it comes to interacting with others both online and in the real world. This essay aims to discuss the effect that anonymity has on discrimination and how that impacts the wellbeing of users. While identities can be hidden, personalities cannot.

How does discrimination still exist if no one knows anyone else? Interestingly, while identities are hidden, personalities are not. This leads to a problem, where the people behind the screens can still target a specific group of people. While identities are hidden and potential language filters can be put into place, statements without foul language can still be made about a group of people. Often, this leads to victims feeling helpless and unsure of whether to call them out. This feeling of helplessness can easily seep into the victim's everyday life, and over time, could build up to become detrimental, and this all stems from just a few harsh statements online.

The aspect of anonymity actually encourages some people to do what they know is wrong. Known as the Online Disinhibition Effect, some users feel that there are no consequences to their actions, leading to potentially nasty or insensitive comments which hurt another individual. This may seem like a situation where one individual gets hurt and another feels free from the constraints of life, but in reality both sides get hurt. The victim feels hurt, and the writer would feel good to have said something without repercussions, only to go back to the real world with a warped perception of what they can get away with. This leads them to say or do something and then suffer the consequences such as losing friends, and by the time they might realise what they did was wrong, it's too late.

There are many ways that people online can change the way they approach anonymity that would benefit the wellbeing of everyone around them. Initially, it's important to recognise that discriminatory remarks will inevitably surface here and there. However, fostering a sense of community is a good first step to minimise this. With a collective effort, people online can recognise that they live in the same world — at the end of the day, every username has a human behind it. With this, it's also relevant to note that everyone has their own unique story and therefore their own unique view, and accepting this is a fundamental step towards making less comments and assumptions about an individual or a community.

The virtual world gives people the opportunity to hide their real world identity. Some people, through the Online Disinhibition Effect, see this as an opportunity to make nasty comments about a group of people. This can be incredibly hurtful towards the receiving

end, and could massively impact their real life. In order to reduce this, it's convenient to foster a sense of community. Furthermore, it's valuable to understand that people may not have intended to mean what they've sent, and it's helpful to consider patterns in behaviour and avoid interaction with a user if needed, acting on the premise that it is better to be safe than sorry.