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Seeking Anonymity in Online Spaces: How Anonymous Motivations Predict our Social Media Usage and Online Behavior

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While past research into anonymity has focused on how situational cues and contextual factors lead to disinhibited behavior, less research has aimed to understand why some people are motivated to interact in anonymous online environments. This research explored the gratifications of anonymity through the lens of individual differences and assessed how these motivations predict social media usage and online behavior. In Study 1, 416 participants completed an Online Anonymity Questionnaire (OAQ), which addressed various anonymous motivations. Items were developed through consultation of the relevant literature and an exploratory factor analysis revealed three factors. Anonymous self-expression included self-disclosure and self-presentation strategies. Toxic anonymity included antagonistic and antisocial motivations. Finally, anonymity indifference included attitudes of people unmotivated to seek anonymity. In Study 2, a confirmatory factor analysis validated the model with 322 participants completing the OAQ and several trait personality measures. Anonymous self-expression and toxicity were both associated with a negative self-view and Machiavellian tendencies. Those with self-expression motives were also more socially anxious and self-conscious. Conversely, anonymity indifference was associated with a more positive self-view. Anonymous motivations also predicted differences in online behavior. Anonymous self-expression was associated with websites such as Reddit, and positive or benign behaviors. Conversely, toxic anonymity was associated with websites such as YouTube and 4chan, and antisocial or malign behaviors. We conclude that what motivates individuals to seek anonymity varies and can stem from a variety of individual differences. In turn, these motivations were associated with differences in anonymous social media usage and online behavior.