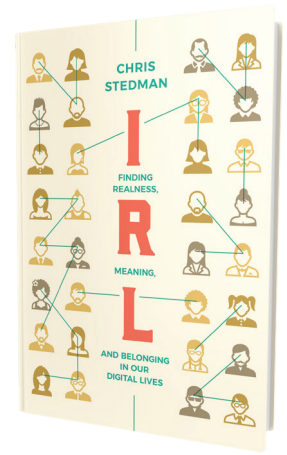


IRL READER GUIDE

BY CHRIS STEDMAN



Welcome to the Reader Guide for Chris Stedman's *IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives*. In this guide, you will find three main sections:

1. The first and largest is a series of chapter-by-chapter questions and activities for *IRL*, split into nine subsections (one for each chapter).
2. The second is a short series of broader questions for the book as a whole.
3. The final section is broken into four subsections, each with specific prompts for a different context: book groups; colleges and universities; humanist, religious, or other meaning-based communities; and individuals.

Of course, most of these questions and activities can be used in any setting, even if they're suggested for a particular context. So feel free to look through it all, whether you're using this guide as a group or individually.

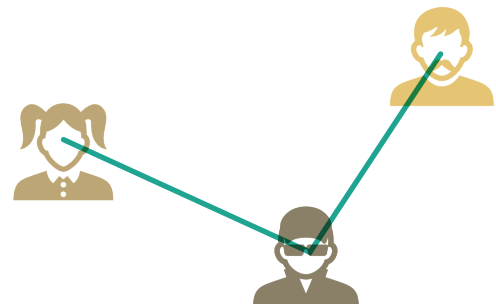
If you haven't read *IRL*, this isn't CliffsNotes for the book. We recommend the read, really. Even dipping into the first chapter, you'll find so much to think about and engage with.

We know some groups and individual readers like a chapter-by-chapter approach. Section 1's got you covered as you make your way through the book.

But the final two sections dig into larger themes of *IRL*, so you might want to wait on those until you've finished the book.

Happy reading and discussing!

Note: If you're a book group or university representative and would like more information about bulk order rates, please contact Broadleaf Books at 877-373-0706 or info@broadleafbooks.com.



SECTION 1: QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES BY CHAPTER

CHAPTER 1: AMATEURS

QUESTIONS:

1. Our digital lives are still very new. What about their novelty feels like an opportunity to explore what it means to be human in new ways? What about it feels scary, intimidating, or overwhelming?
2. One way our digital lives present an unprecedented opportunity to reconsider essential questions about what it means to be human, Chris argues, is by making us amateurs. In our clumsy attempts to be human in this new space, we can encounter unexpected and important things about ourselves. Can you think of times you've learned from being bad (or at least not good) at something, online or off? What did you gain from that experience? How might that apply to how you think about life online?
3. Near the end of "Amateurs," Chris writes about realizing that not everyone knows what "IRL" means, and about the assumptions we make that we're all on the same page online. What are some assumptions you've made about digital life that might not be shared by others?

ACTIVITY: In "Amateurs," Chris draws on his experiences attending a drag show and running cross country in high school to explore how being an amateur—trying something you're not yet good at—can help you learn about yourself, comparing that to our still-new digital lives. For this activity, try doing something you're not good at, online or off: an art project, a sport or game, or a social media platform, for example. After, ask yourself: What did this teach me? Did I see anything new about myself in the process? What went wrong, and what can I learn from it?

CHAPTER 2: ANXIETWEETS

QUESTIONS:

1. In "Anxietweets," Chris writes of the shifts in his digital life over the years, how he found himself online more and less at different points in his adulthood. How has your digital life changed over the years? Can you identify some possible reasons for these shifts?
2. When did you realize your online presence wasn't something that exists separate from the rest of your life, but is actually a place where *life* happens?
3. Chris identifies the "gaps" in our digital life—the things we leave out of what we share online. He says that by looking at what falls into those gaps, we can learn from them. What do you not share online? Why, and what does it reveal about you?
4. Can you think of a time you've had a "digital slip of the tongue," when you (or someone else) disclosed something you would normally have kept private? What happened, and what did you learn from it?

ACTIVITY: In "Anxietweets," Chris describes taking and posting a selfie that stood out from many of his other ones because it deviated from his usual aesthetic standards and was less "composed." Take a "bad" selfie of yourself and post it online. As you post and after, ask yourself: How does posting it make me feel? Do I feel myself resisting? How are people reacting? Is it different from how they normally do? Was it really a "bad" picture, or just less good than the ones I usually post? Do I feel a desire to edit it at all? To take it down?

CHAPTER 3: IN THE STARS

QUESTIONS:

1. What does the word “institution” mean to you? What institutions are you a part of, if any, and what role do you expect them to play in your life? Where do you find community?
2. In “In the Stars,” Chris writes of the increasingly individual journeys we undertake on the search for meaning. What has your journey been like? Is it something you’ve done inside or outside of communities and institutions? How much of it has happened online?
3. Chris explores the anxiety some people feel about the decline of old forms of relating and belonging—for example, the erosion of the “responsible” and the rise of the “fickle” or “fleeting.” Do you feel this anxiety? What’s gained or lost in this change?
4. In “In the Stars,” Chris talks about his research with a group of sociologists, and how they found that even though people mix their search for community and meaning between online and offline spaces in practice, they tend to *think* of them as being split. For example, respondents who reported finding meaning offline were more likely to report finding belonging offline than online, too. Do you typically find meaning and community online, offline, or a mix of both? Why do you think people feel split even if they in fact mix the digital and the analog in practice?
5. Chris writes about how meaning is often found at surprising intersections. Can you think of times this has been true for you, online or off?
6. “In the Stars” explores the trust we put in our digital platforms, the leaps of faith we take. How have you felt that play out in your digital life? Do you find yourself trusting what you see or experience online, or are you suspicious of it?

ACTIVITY: At the beginning of “In the Stars,” Chris writes of going to a tarot reading, even though he doesn’t believe in tarot. Ultimately, trying something he normally wouldn’t do ended up helping him begin to explore his digital life. This idea—trying things you aren’t sure will work but putting faith in the idea that they have something to offer anyway—is known as *experimental certainty*. It’s a willingness to enter into an experience you usually wouldn’t with the idea that it can teach you something that you can’t anticipate. For this activity, think of something, online or off, that you typically discount—some practice or way of making meaning—for example, a tarot reading or social media platform. Try to go into this practice with open-mindedness and wonder, like Chris’s friend Carrie does in her investigative reporting. After, ask yourself what you learned. How was it different from what you expected?

CHAPTER 4: MAPPING THE TERRITORY

QUESTIONS:

1. In “Mapping the Territory,” Chris talks about the near-invisible power structures and norms in both maps and the internet. These unseen rules typically reflect the interests of power, like the invisible norms that guide cartographers in mapmaking. What are some of the norms and conventions you haven’t always recognized online, and how did you come to see them?
2. Chris explains that mapmaking is a process of reduction and selection, where cartographers have to decide what to show and what to leave out. In other words, the map can’t include every detail or it would be the size of the territory itself. What do you leave off your digital map, and why? In what ways do you think these choices are guided by conventions established by people in power?
3. Near the end of “Mapping the Territory,” Chris talks about the Mahayana Buddhist idea of the finger pointing at the moon—how we often mistake the finger for the thing it’s directing us to

see for ourselves. In what ways have you mistaken online representations for the things they are representing? How might you correct this in the future?

4. In mapmaking, some distortion is necessary to represent a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. In what ways are some of our online distortions perhaps necessary? How can you tell the difference between what's a necessary distortion and what's a currently unchallenged norm that reflects the interests of power?
5. Chris writes about the colonizing that occurs online, including the co-opting of memes and slang. Can you think of times you've unknowingly (or intentionally) colonized something, with or without knowing where it came from?

ACTIVITY: Using either paper and a writing utensil or a digital illustration program, create a “map” of your digital life—a visual chart that communicates and represents your life online. Use whatever symbols you'd like, and make a key for what those symbols represent. Have fun and be creative, and don't worry too much about it being perfect. But do try to create it in such a way that someone else could use it to understand the digital pieces of your life. After you finish, reflect on what you've created. What things did you choose to highlight, and what did you have to leave off? How did you represent relationships? What do these things reveal about what you value online and off?

CHAPTER 5: DRAFTING DISTANCE

QUESTIONS:

1. One function of distance is perspective: taking distance from your circumstances, like going on a retreat, can help you see things you might not have recognized before. But, Chris argues, those retreats—like taking a short break from your digital life—should bring you back to the world, versus staying in seclusion. Have you struggled with feeling like you want to retreat from your digital life? What perspective do you get when you step away? What brings you back?
2. In “Drafting Distance,” Chris explores the distances we can close online, particularly the ways social media enables us to maintain “weak ties,” which can help connect us to varying perspectives and expand our worldview. Have you experienced this online?
3. What did you learn from Zain and Olivia's stories?
4. There's a power in being able to go invisible, as Chris learns from interviewing people like Olivia, but invisibility isn't always a choice. Has life online ever made you feel invisible when you didn't want to?
5. One of the challenges of digital distance is the gap we can experience between how we feel and how others perceive us. How has this shown up in your digital life?
6. Chris writes of the distortion of scale—how the internet can feel like the entire world even when it isn't. Have you experienced this phenomenon online?

ACTIVITY: In “Drafting Distance,” Chris reaches out to Zain, someone he'd followed on Twitter for almost a decade but actually knew very little about. For this activity, go to your friend or following list on a social media platform and scroll through it. Is there someone in this list you don't know much about? Why do you think that is? If you're comfortable doing so, reach out and ask if they'd be willing to tell you more about themselves.

CHAPTER 6: INKED

QUESTIONS:

1. In “Inked,” Chris talks about updating an old tattoo—not to cover it up, but to add more detail—and how it became a symbol of the fact that we can grow and change. But changing in an age of permanence and documentation can be difficult. Does it feel like you can change online? Have you ever updated your digital presence in order to add more detail?
2. Chris explores the strange semi-permanence of the internet in this chapter: how things feel fleeting and forever simultaneously. Do you feel this tension? Do you get any anxiety about how permanent or ephemeral it can all feel?
3. Our posts can help us remember, but they can also distort our memories, causing us to give more weight to experiences that receive positive feedback or to the kinds of things the internet has made us think are worth posting. How has the internet impacted your memories? Can you think of a specific time when your memory of an experience—a vacation, a protest, a concert—was impacted by what you posted about it?
4. The internet can help us be more accountable to ourselves, Chris argues, comparing our online posts to a mindfulness exercise that helps you notice patterns and adjust accordingly. Have you ever seen a pattern in your status updates and posts, and made an adjustment, either addressing a problematic pattern or creating more space for something that makes you happy enough to post about it? How did you recognize it?
5. Chris writes of the digital demand for coherence—how our inconsistencies sometimes get turned against us, or how we flatten ourselves out in order to be everything for everyone. Have you experienced this pressure to be coherent for an audience made up of people from many different parts of your life? How has that impacted what it means to be you, to feel real?
6. If your social media posts were tattoos on your skin, what would they look like? How would your digital presence be relayed in images? What would these images represent and communicate to the world?

ACTIVITY: In “Inked,” Chris writes of our digital profiles as real-time memoirs or diaries. For this activity, go to your social media profile(s) and look at your recent posts. Pick out a few recent tweets, Instagram posts, or Facebook statuses, copy their text into a composition document, and try to build a “journal entry” out of their content (similar to a collage exercise where you cut words and phrases from a magazine and build a story out of them). Is it coherent? Does it make sense, or are there gaps? What’s missing? What story does it tell? Taking in the full story, what do the posts that comprise it communicate about what you value and what’s important to you?

CHAPTER 7: THE ROLES WE PLAY

QUESTIONS:

1. In “The Roles We Play,” Chris highlights the difference between *deep play* and *passive play*. Can you think of experiences you’ve had with both? How do they relate to the ways you experiment with and explore your sense of identity online and off?
2. What did you learn from Merisa and Steve’s stories?
3. Chris talks about how he once thought of the identity play and experimentation that occur in the furry community as means of hiding, but that he came to understand them as ways of exploring and expressing identity instead. Can you think of times you’ve thought of the ways you or other people play with identity as fake or as ways of hiding? Is it possible they were actually ways of expressing something real?

4. Play can be a tool for taking a break from responsibility. But our digital lives are also often places where we are expected to be “responsible.” How does this tension play out for you?
5. Play can be a vehicle for escapism. But while the word often has negative connotations, escape can be hugely positive. Sometimes we play to escape a world that doesn’t let us be ourselves. How does this relate to your digital life? Have you experienced others trying to police your identities, and have digital spaces helped you find reprieve?
6. Chris writes of the differences between the more mindless digital play he’s experienced and more purposeful play. Which do you think you do more often?

ACTIVITY: Play the IRL game at game.irlbook.com. Before and after, ask yourself how you’re feeling. Do you feel different after playing than you did before? As you play, pay attention to how it *feels* to play. Does it feel expansive? How would you describe the sensation of play?

CHAPTER 8: UNCERTAINTWEETS

QUESTIONS:

1. In “Uncertaintweets,” Chris argues that we sometimes use digital tools to try to feel safe and secure, and to rid ourselves of uncertainty. When motivated by these impulses, he says, our digital actions are often reflective and mindless. Does this feel true to you? How have you experienced this yourself?
2. Our digital attempts to find meaning and connection reveal that life is uncertain, Chris writes. No matter how many apps we use, we can’t optimize our way out of uncertainty. We can use digital tools mindlessly, yes, but when we use them honestly and carefully, they can reveal us to ourselves and open us up to life’s unknowns. Have you experienced this online? What has your digital life taught you about uncertainty?
3. In “Uncertaintweets,” Chris writes about the challenges caused by a profit-driven internet that drives us in the direction of thinking of ourselves as consumers—that our worthiness is shaped by status and stuff. Have you felt this in your digital life?
4. Chris explains that his process of writing *IRL* began with a search for answers, but by the end he arrived not at answers but at habits, ways of being in the world. The things that make us who we are aren’t big changes, he says, but our everyday routines—which makes life online a great place to understand ourselves and build ourselves into being. How are your tweets and status updates making you who you are?
5. What does “negative capability” mean to you, and how does it apply to your digital life?
6. Chris distinguishes “uncertaintweeters” from optimists, pessimists, and utilitarians by arguing that the uncertainty of our digital lives can actually be an asset in our search for realness. Can you think of a time when uncertainty helped you understand yourself better?

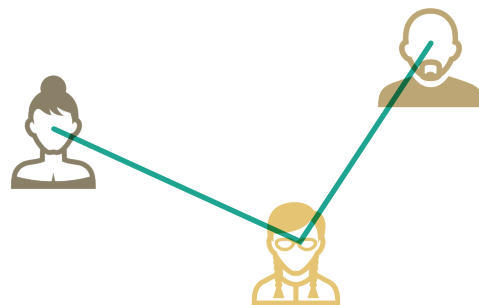
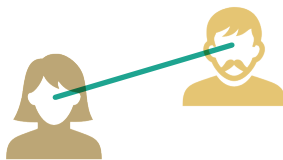
ACTIVITY: We often optimize our lives or distract ourselves with digital activity in order to try to rid ourselves of uncertainty. The questions that can arise in stillness and silence are frequently those about the unknowns in life. In an age of being constantly connected, these questions and uncertainties can be easily avoided if we wish to dodge them. For this activity, take thirty minutes to do literally nothing. Just find a quiet place to sit and be still. After, ask yourself: How did it feel? What arose? Was I uncomfortable?

OUTRO: THE VELVETEEN HABIT

QUESTIONS:

1. In “The Velveteen Habit,” Chris argues that some of our greatest learning happens where things overlap and intersect. We’re currently in a time of transition between the predigital and digital age, and the internet itself is a place of transition—one where the real and the fake mix and intermingle. In this liminal space, we can better understand timeless questions about what it means to be human and to belong. What’s something the transitional nature of this moment and of the internet itself has taught you?
2. Transition can be painful; it involves gain but also loss. We must embrace this fact about our digital lives, Chris says—that we are losing and gaining things simultaneously—in order to harness the internet’s ability to help us come to feel more real. What are some things you’ve lost? Gained? Has it felt balanced? Have the gains been worth the losses?
3. Noticing what’s been lost gives us an opportunity to recognize its importance and seek it out again. What are some things you’ve lost in the digital age that you’d like to commit to prioritizing, and how might you do so?
4. A “velveteen habit” is a practice that allows us to both connect and disconnect—something that takes work in the digital age. Do you struggle with this? How might you get better at it?
5. Chris argues that what we pay attention to shapes what matters to us and determines how we become attached to life and other people. What do you pay attention to? What are you attached to?

ACTIVITY: In “The Velveteen Habit,” Chris reflects on revisiting a childhood story with a new perspective informed by the digital age. For this activity, go back to a cherished childhood story you haven’t read in ages. What about it feels different to you now, given the very different world you live in? What new things do you see in it that you didn’t before? What lessons can you take from it and apply to your life today?

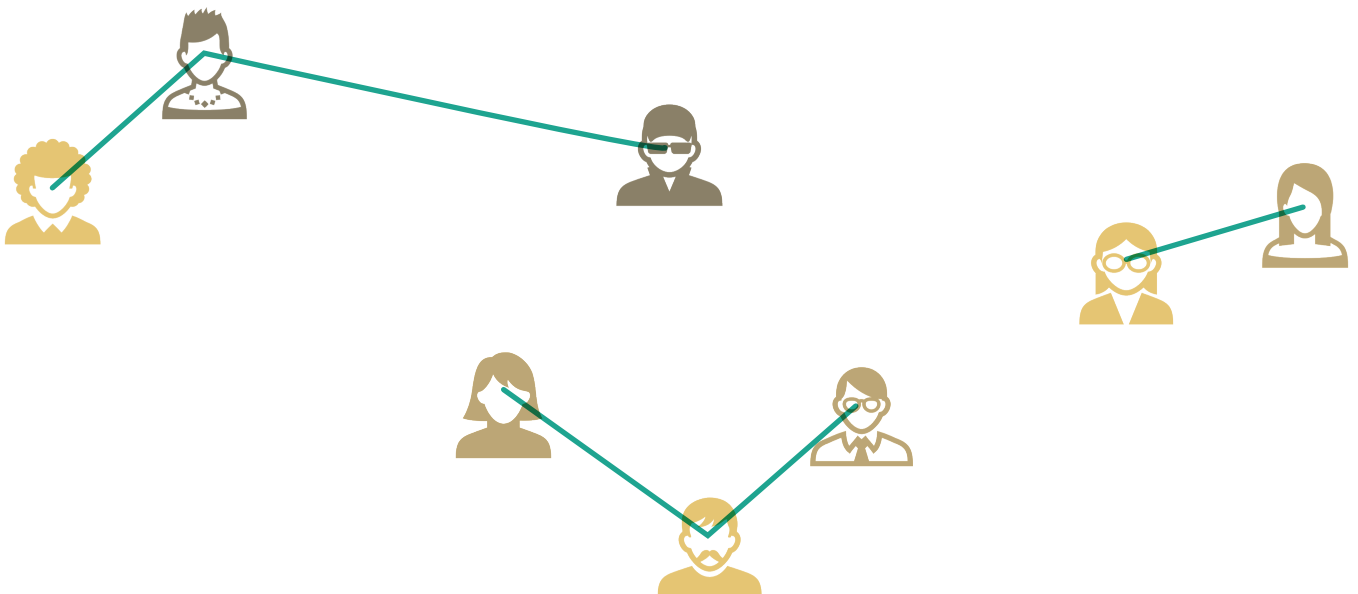


SECTION 2: BROADER QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

QUESTIONS:

1. What does “realness” mean to you? What did it mean to you before reading the book, and what does it mean now?
2. Did *IRL* change the way you think of your online identity? How? Will you approach your digital life differently now?
3. Where do you find meaning in your digital life?
4. Where do you find a sense of belonging?
5. What was one thing that surprised you in this book?

ACTIVITY: Throughout *IRL*, Chris interviews numerous people about their digital lives. Many of the people he speaks with talk about having “alt” or private accounts that aren’t associated with their government name and where they don’t use photos of themselves. If you don’t already have an “alt” account, create one. Try posting some things, and ask yourself how it feels. Do you feel more or less able to speak openly, without worrying what others will think? Do you feel more or less “split” or disconnected from yourself? What are some of the pros and cons about having a private account as a vehicle for self-expression? What do you gain and what do you lose?



SECTION 3: QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

FOR BOOK CLUBS

QUESTIONS:

1. What were some of your favorite parts of the book? Was there a particular story or moment that resonated with you? Challenged you?
2. Break off into pairs or small groups by chapter, and discuss what your biggest takeaway was from that part of the book. Then, regroup and share with the full group.
3. Was there anything in this book that caught you off guard? Were you expecting it to be different? Why and how?
4. If you were going to tell someone about this book, what would you say?

ACTIVITY: Reach out to Chris to set up a short video Q&A with your book club! Visit chrisstedmanwriter.com/contact to send him a message. Be sure to include information about when and how you'd like him to call in, and how many people are in your group.

FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (COURSES, STUDENT GROUPS, OR COMMON READS)

QUESTIONS:

1. In “Inked,” Chris writes of the challenges posed by the digital demand for consistency. How does this demand show up as you consider your online life and your life as a member of an academic community?
2. Colleges and universities are committed to the education and formation of the full person. In a world that says our online and offline lives are separate, it's easy to feel split between selves. When thinking of the person you are becoming—the formation you're undergoing as you cultivate a sense of vocation, or the work you want to commit yourself to doing in the world—how much of that person shows up in your digital life? How much does your online life influence your sense of vocation?
3. Do you worry about what your professors, peers, or parents might think if they saw various pieces of your digital life? How might you integrate these parts of your life? How fair or unfair does it feel that online you're expected to be everything for everyone?
4. Where do you find meaning and purpose in your life, online and off? How does that relate to the things that you do and study?

ACTIVITY: Chris has spoken at hundreds of colleges and universities, previously worked with students at Harvard and Yale universities for the better part of a decade, and currently teaches at Augsburg University. He also regularly consults with universities that are thinking through how to support students in an increasingly digital and secular/religiously diverse age. Visit chrisstedmanwriter.com/contact to inquire about setting up an event with him.

FOR HUMANIST, RELIGIOUS, OR OTHER MEANING-BASED COMMUNITIES

QUESTIONS:

1. In “In the Stars,” Chris explores the broad cultural shift out of traditional institutions, and how the search for meaning and belonging has become a more individual journey for many people. Have you felt this shift in your community? In yourself? What do you think of it? Is it positive? Negative? A mix? What is your community doing to try to support people as they go on more individual journeys? What is gained and lost in this shift?
2. Many humanist and religious groups are trying to reach the “nones” and help them find a home in their communities. Is this something your community is trying to do? How have you tried to do so? Have you struggled with the sense that many of the “nones” see their journey to find meaning and belonging as a more individual one, rather than one rooted in a particular community?
3. In “Uncertaintweets,” Chris writes about the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who argues that Christians should live as if there is no God. Ultimately, whatever we think of our digital lives, Chris argues that we would be wise to treat them as *if* they are as real as any other part of our lives—to work to bring the same values we practice elsewhere to our online presence, and to see it as a space that can teach us vital things about ourselves. What values do you try to bring to digital space? How can you better live your values online?

ACTIVITY: Chris is an experienced humanist community builder and interfaith activist and has an intimate understanding of many different kinds of secular and religious communities, rooted in years of speaking in and working with these communities. Visit christedmanwriter.com/contact to inquire about setting up an event with him.

FOR INDIVIDUAL READERS

QUESTIONS:

1. In “Inked,” Chris writes of our digital profiles as real-time memoirs. How have you used your digital tools to narrate your life? What has doing so taught you?
2. One positive thing about social media platforms like Twitter is that they encourage us to be more concise, Chris argues. But we’re also writing for an online audience, which can change what and how we write. Try writing a journal entry in the form of tweets, in small chunks. How does trying to communicate more concisely change the way you write? Does it force you to try to get more to the point, or do you feel restricted, like you can’t dive deeper into the emotions and experiences you’re reflecting on? How does “tweeting” privately, for no audience, feel different from posting online?
3. In “In the Stars,” Chris writes of the increasingly individual journeys we undergo in our search for meaning and belonging—journeys that are more and more separate from the spaces where we’ve historically grappled with who we are and what our responsibility is to the world around us. There are advantages and disadvantages to these increasingly individual journeys, he argues. As you explored this book alone, what were some positive things about the solitary nature of doing so? What were some things you wished you could have explored with others? Have you had similar thoughts about the opportunities and challenges of life online?

ACTIVITY: Reach out to someone who knows you both online and off, and ask them for their honest opinion on your digital presence. Does it feel like you? Why or why not? After, ask yourself how their assessment made you feel. Did it seem correct? If there were things that felt inconsistent with who you are or how you’re trying to share yourself, what might you do to address that?