

Journal of • Virtual Worlds Research

jvwresearch.org ISSN: 1941-8477

Vol. 1. No. 1.

ISSN: 1941-8477

“Virtual Worlds Research: Past, Present & Future”

July 2008

Virtual World and Real World Permeability: *Transference of Positive Benefits for Marginalized Gay and Lesbian Populations*

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Abstract

This study looks at how marginalized gay and lesbian people experience social pressures to conform to hetero-normative culture, how those pressures may lead to negative states, and how positive experiences in online virtual worlds would provide benefits over time and, presumably, become transferable into real life. I will show that engagement with Second Life can be a positive experience and that this positive experience can extend beyond the virtual world to provide lasting benefits in real life. The implications for educators are impressive. In creating virtual world communities, educators, psychologists, and other researchers can provide a safe harbor in which marginalized people can more fully explore their identities and develop the positive coping skills needed to deal with real world stigmatizing influences, which originate within the social environment. For scientists and technology innovators, the creation of virtual world communities and gaming/training programs would be an exciting path to explore, especially for those interested in social justice concerns.

Keywords: virtual worlds, marginalization, positive, gay, lesbian, psychological development, broaden-and-build, educational technology.

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Virtual World and Real World Permeability: *Transference of Positive Benefits for Marginalized Gay and Lesbian Populations*

By Dr. Jonathan Cabiria, Professor of Psychology, Baker College, Flint, Michigan.

In constructionist studies, the idea that there is an objectively identifiable truth about an individual and his or her social life gives way to other concepts about multiple identities that fluidly maneuver among various socio-cultural settings. This means that behaviors and values within certain social groups cannot be effectively studied by comparing them only with a more universal norm (Cerullo, 1992; Gergen & Davis, 1985). Constructionism asks that we suspend belief about commonly accepted understandings and invites us to challenge the objective basis of conventional knowledge.

Social construction looks at the ways in which people account for who they are and how they interact with other people. It is concerned with how social phenomena evolve from the social environments in which they occur. A social construction will appear as a normal occurrence to those within a particular social group, but may appear as strange, or even perverse, to those not within that group. Social constructions are generally defined as artifacts of human activities and philosophies rather than as inherent natural laws (Hacking, 1999; Wilson & Gutierrez, 1995).

Identity is typically understood as the central psychosocial construction of the adolescent or young adult who seeks to understand who he or she is and how he or she fits into the adult world (McAdams, 1988). During the identity-forming stages of adolescence, any number of factors can influence how one's sense of self is formed. For those who feel marginalized, a sense of place in the world can be wrought with difficulties in the struggle to successfully deal with developmental stages and emerge with a more or less intact identity of self.

People's self-esteem and their self-concept change in sheer reaction to the kinds of people among whom they find themselves, and change even more in response to the positive or negative remarks that people make to or about them (Gergen, 1982). For marginalized people, withdrawal from society or anti-social behavior is a strategy of accommodating to the cultural status quo. Individuals choose these behaviors to manage what is considered a deviant identity; it makes possible social respect and integration, even if it may cost the individual his or her sense of personal integrity and well-being (Seidman, 2002).

Gay and Lesbian Identity Construction

Isolation was cited as the most frequently presented problem at a New York City services center for gay and lesbian people (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). The researchers noted that this isolation "was often quite extensive and was realized in three major areas: social isolation, emotional isolation, and cognitive isolation" (p. 31) and that "suicide ideation and attempts are sometimes major results of the almost total isolation suffered by homosexual youth" (p. 33). Plummer (1989) adds that the absence of positive role models and the development of the negative self results in social stressors that contribute to the sense of isolation and difference. These stressors are often reported by gay and lesbian people as they come to terms with their sexual orientation (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 2000).

The result of a neglected and devalued basic part of a gay or lesbian person's personality leads to a loss of self-esteem (Gonsiorek, 1995). The author notes that researchers theorize how those with severe narcissistic injuries constitute the bulk of gay and lesbian people with histories of suicide attempts, alcohol and drug use, and increased use of mental health services (Gonsiorek, 1995). As in heterosexual people, self-esteem has been consistently found to be crucial for healthy identity development. However, gay and lesbian people may hold the same stereotypical views of themselves as might the general society, and they may have internalized these often negative views without awareness (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 2000).

Self-acknowledgment of one's same-sex orientation is considered one of the most important developmental tasks for a gay or lesbian person (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Garnets & Kimmel, 2003). In an ideal world, one's same-sex orientation would become positively integrated into the developmental process. However, this process is made difficult because of a host of negative feedback upon revelation to others: potential parental rejection, peer rejection, internalization of society's prejudice, and the lack of good role models (Isay, 1996). These very real systems of suppression and exclusion cause the "suppressed and excluded to unconsciously believe in the evil image which they are made to represent by those who are dominant" (Erikson, 1980). For the gay or lesbian person struggling with a stigmatizing sexual identity, dealing with all of the life issues surrounding one's sexual identity can be a process of conflict and distress. With pressures from family and peers to be heterosexual, gay and lesbian people face unique hurdles in their efforts to develop a healthy sense of self (Savin-Williams, 1995). As we shall see, there is a place for virtual worlds in positive developmental processes, which I refer to as developmental redirection, identity redirection, and identity reconstruction.

The Importance of Community

A person strengthens one's social identity through either the expression of important personal values or the expression of values and beliefs of the group from whom one desires approval and acceptance (Herek, 1994). Ultimately, the social identity function of attitudes serves to increase feelings of self-esteem (Luchetta, 1999). Additionally, national surveys find that when someone claims to have five or more friends with whom they can discuss important problems, they are 60% more likely to say that they are "very happy" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The path to a happy adulthood depends upon a young person's ability to build authentic relationships in which they can freely discuss and explore their own sexual identities. It is clear that having access to a community that provides the support and companionship to build healthy relationships and increase self-esteem is an important factor in achieving and/or maintaining good mental health for the gay or lesbian person.

Research in social psychology has revealed different motivations for individuals to join groups. According to Social Identity Theory (Hogg & Hains, 1996; Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1978, 1985), people form a social identity that is constructed from the values, attitudes, and behavioral intentions of the social group to which they aspire to belong. These motivations for joining traditional, face-to-face groups upon which much of past research has focused can be extended to examine membership in virtual world communities (Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Virtual World Communities

Over the past two years, there has been a dramatic rise in participation in virtual world communities such as Second Life, and a similar increase in social groups in these venues. What has not been *adequately* studied is the effect of participating in virtual world communities on their members, or whether participation in virtual world communities can be a recommended activity to ease the harmful effects of real life marginalization.

In my research, I examined the differences and similarities that study participants indicated when describing their real world and virtual world life experiences. I paid particular attention to narratives that indicated changes in loneliness, isolation, depression, self-esteem, and optimism/pessimism. I attempted to arrive at theories regarding the usefulness of virtual world environments for marginalized people, especially gay and lesbian populations. I anticipated that virtual world communities could serve as safe harbors for identity exploration and that likely positive benefits derived from virtual world experiences could be transferred to real world situations.

One place that gay and lesbian people now spend a considerable amount of time is in online settings, and these online venues have been linked to identity exploration (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Turkle, 1995). Identity is often characterized as one's interpersonal characteristics (Calvert, 2002) and involves a sense of continuity of self-image over time (Grotevant, 1998). With sexual maturation come changes in the roles that one is expected to assume with members of the opposite sex, and for the young person it is increasingly expected to assume a sexual identity, one of the markers and anchors of a mature identity (Erikson, 1993; Grotevant, 1998).

While physical constraints such as the body, biological sex, race, or age can have a profound effect on self-definition and self-presentation (Collins & Kuczaj, 1991), these attributes become flexible in virtual worlds. In fact, the anonymous nature of virtual world environments allows more flexibility in exploring identity through the persona one assumes in the form of a self-constructed avatar (Calvert, 2002; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005).

During adolescence, sexual orientations often emerge (Grotevant, 1998). While the challenges of assuming a mature sexual identity occur for all youth, these challenges may be particularly difficult for those who are gay or lesbian. Historically, gay and lesbian people encountered discrimination, disparagement, and even punishment (Foucault, 1978). Even now, gay and lesbian youth face sexual identity issues that they may not be able to discuss with their families and peers (Grotevant, 1998). However, in a virtual world, adolescents may feel more comfortable expressing their sexual orientation and exploring their sexual identity. Disclosing one's sexual identity online may also provide a way for gay and lesbian youth to find others who share their sexual identity (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005).

The structure and design of virtual worlds allows users to freely explore many facets of their personalities in ways that are not easily available to them in real life. The "Art" of virtual reality environments provides users with carefully structured opportunities to allow them to explore, strategize, and generally feel some sense of control over what they are doing (McMahon, 2003). This is an important design element that allows for social problem-solving and is well-suited for young people looking to re-socialize as gay or lesbian people. Studies concerning virtual worlds have found such worlds to have great significance to players for

identity and community (Turkle, 1995). In fact, it appears that virtual worlds, such as Second Life, can function as a therapeutic tool. Research to date has shown that those with few friends in real life feel happier as they spend more hours in Second Life (de Nood & Attema, 2006).

Theory of Positive Emotions

I have seen in the narratives within my research study how gay and lesbian identity construction could have been obstructed in real life. It is conceivable that, in Second Life, it can be reformulated. Expressions of relief, sense of belonging, and feelings of authenticity, among others, provide positive affects that encourage the participants to seek out ways in real life to maintain and/or increase these good feelings that they have found in Second Life. This brings me to the theoretical underpinning of this research project, the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions.

The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions proposes that resilience and coping within stressful and negative environments can be brought about through small positive experiences. Researcher Barbara Fredrickson hypothesized that when people are exposed to negative experiences, they tend to direct their focus onto the problem (Fredrickson, 2001). This prevents them from accessing the wealth of cognitive associations that lie outside of the narrow focus, essentially reducing their ability to creatively solve the problem or to see it in a different light. Conversely, Fredrickson noted that when people are exposed to positive emotions, they tend to make better use of their cognitive associations, and are more able to engage in discovery and innovation, and to apply more creative positive solutions to their problems or situations. In this way, the person within a negative state, when exposed to a meaningful positive stimulus, can react in a manner that causes him or her to explore potential solutions that may lie outside of the problem itself. Once a solution has been achieved, the positive benefit of that solution engenders further solution-creating capabilities to be applied to other negative affects and situations.

In this study, the evidence to support this theory is quite compelling. Repeatedly, participants note how the positive experiences they gain in Second Life make their way into real lives. Some mention how they have gained hope for a better real life; others note how they found a lost part of themselves and now plan to incorporate that desirable lost part into their real lives. For some, the effects are dynamic; for others, the effects are only just now starting to become evident. Given the relatively brief duration of this study, it is not possible to predict how lasting these positive benefits would be, but it appears, at least for some participants, that real life changes are happening.

Empirical support for the utility of positive emotions has come from a multitude of studies. For example, an impressive research program (Isen, 1990) has shown that positive emotions facilitate creative problem solving. Furthermore, research has shown that the psychological processes of people experiencing positive emotions are characterized by a global rather than a local focus (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Gasper & Clore, 2002; Kimchi & Palmer, 1982), suggesting that positive emotions help to broaden the scope of attention (Fredrickson, 2003). This perspective on positive emotions might help explain why those who experience positive emotions, even during stressful situations, are able to benefit from their “broadened” outlook and regulate their negative emotional experiences (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). It is likely that engagement in virtual world communities, for some gay and lesbian people, would provide positive emotions as described by Fredrickson and others.

Research Questions

This study specifically looked at the virtual world known as Second Life. Second Life is a virtual world community that is built by its members. The activities that occur in Second Life are as varied as those in real life, and the purposes for which people use Second Life are also diverse. Of these many activities and purposes, I analyzed how my study participants utilized virtual world resources to help them deal with real-life issues. I anticipated that gay and lesbian people who experienced multiple negative effects in real life as a result of their sexual orientations would find therapeutic benefit by engaging in online virtual world social communities. I explored whether or not these benefits could then be transferable to their real lives.

In this project, I wanted to discover, using grounded theory methods, whether there was meaningful opportunity for, and support of, change in affective states for gay and lesbian people in a virtual world space, and if this led to positive emotions that could be transferred to the real world. Such investigations typically necessitate gathering "... intensive and/or extensive information from a purposively derived sample, and they involve interpretation of unstructured or semi-structured data" (Bazely, 2007). The goal was to suggest ways in which psychologists and educators could help marginalized people, such as gay and lesbian people, to discover ways in which they might explore healthy identity formation, thus opening the door toward increased capacity for cognitive improvements as a result of reduced negative affect, as theorized by Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions.

Methodology

This study utilized qualitative research methods to bring to light the value that a social outlet like Second Life provides. It sought to uncover the meaning that could be derived from the virtual world experiences of the participants. A grounded theory approach guided the analysis utilizing software analysis tools and manual coding for category creation. When exploring which methodological approach should be considered for this study, I looked at the existing literature, the study participants, the context within which the participants interacted, and the goals of the study. To help guide my decision-making, I utilized a checklist by Marshall and Rossman that indicates qualitative research is an appropriate choice because the following conditions exist (Marshall & Rossman, 2006):

- Research that elicited multiple constructed realities, studied holistically
- Research that elicited tacit knowledge and subjective understandings and interpretations
- Research that delved in-depth into complexities and process
- Research on little-known phenomena or innovative systems (p. 53)

The data was collected from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The analysis of individual questionnaire responses helped to shed more light on the meaning that participants gave to the intersection of their real and virtual world lives, and content analysis of the interviews and questionnaire open-ended responses helped me to discover emerging themes during the process of comparing and contrasting participant responses. There is a significant body of work that describes mixed qualitative analysis methods for qualitative research, as well as support for each individual component.

Data Generation

One hundred and thirty participants were in the initial population, from which thirty-two were selected to continue through the first phase of the study. Of these, fourteen participants were asked to complete the full study. All participants in the study filled out three questionnaires during various points in the process, and agreed to participate in a minimum of two, one-hour interview sessions. Once the participants had filled out the questionnaires, the data were downloaded from the survey website into an Excel spreadsheet document. The open-ended questionnaire responses were exported to a text analysis software program, SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys, for content categorization, and the demographic questionnaire responses were analyzed using SPSS for Windows v15 to show descriptive statistics. The text transcripts from the interviews were exported to SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys for extraction of meaningful terms and categorization. The text was also hand-coded. The results of hand-coding and software coding were compared and contrasted as the analysis progressed in the search for emergent themes and theories.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research activities, it is important that steps be tracked through every phase of the study. This provides the transparency that allows other researchers to understand how conclusions are made. Called an *audit trail*, the recording of my actions included process notes, intentions notes, personal reactions notes, and instrumentation notes. In addition to the journal and memo notes, the textual transcriptions of the interviews were interpreted. The textual data were combined into one composite text and analyzed. They were also analyzed individually.

Grounded theory is an iterative process in which interviewing, coding, and analyzing will occur in overlapping phases as new data become available. Once the initial data have been collected, it is analyzed for emergent themes. Participants were selected after an initial screening, and the interview process was adjusted in order to further explore the ongoing analysis, broaden the explanation, and to deepen details through a process known as saturation. Saturation occurs when no new substantial information about a topic is revealed through the interview and analysis process.

Summary of Results

This study looked at two areas of the participants' lives – their real world experiences as gay or lesbian people and their virtual world experiences as gay or lesbian people. The purpose of the real world study was two-fold: 1) to see if the participants' experiences as gay or lesbian people were similar to those reported in various studies conducted over the past few decades, and 2) to establish a point-of-reference in comparing real and virtual world experiences. The results of the real world portion of this study indicated that the participants' experiences were in line with prior accepted studies, and that these experiences led to the expected emerging themes of loneliness, isolation, depression, low self-esteem, withdrawal, lack of authenticity, and lack of useful information. Specifically, these expected results dealt with developmental obstruction, negative psychological affect of being in the closet, the power of hetero-normative forces, and compartmentalization, to name a few. While not every participant indicated all seven emergent themes, each participant experienced multiple effects in meaningful ways, as demonstrated by the representative excerpts from the interview transcripts and the questionnaire responses.

The purpose of the Second Life portion of the study was also two-fold: 1) to see if there was any difference between stated real world and virtual world experiences with regard to being gay or lesbian, and 2) to see if the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions had applicability. It appeared from the analysis that there were several differences between real and virtual world experiences, and that seven main themes emerged from the data, namely belongingness, connectedness, improved well-being, higher self-esteem, optimism, sense of authenticity, and evidence of transferable positive benefits.

In addition, I found a clear juxtaposition in constructs of real and virtual when several participants indicated feeling more “real” in their “artificial” lives and more “artificial” in their “real” lives. I also found evidence to support the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions when participants indicated how discrete positive events in Second Life empowered them to seek positive change in their real lives. Overall, the research questions, which served as the foundations of the development of the questionnaires, semi-structured interview process, and analysis process, were well-served by this study. I wanted to discover, using grounded theory methods, whether there is meaningful opportunity for, and support of, change in affective states for gay and lesbian people in a virtual world space, and if this leads to positive emotions that can be transferred to the real world.

Many of the real world responses indicated a sense of loneliness, isolation, and depression as a result of being closeted. Additionally, due to the negative attitudes of society toward gay and lesbian people, many of the participants indicated through their stories low self-esteem. Several of the participants noted in the general comments boxes in the real life questionnaire how reflecting upon their real lives as gay or lesbian people (when answering the questions) was causing them to feel increasingly sad or depressed. However, there is a clear change in attitude when discussing Second Life effects.

The data appear to show some very compelling evidence that there are significant changes in affect when many of the participants are discussing their real world lives and their virtual world lives. Part of the reason for this appears to stem from a sense of personal authenticity that seems to be missing in their real lives. In fact, it was such a major emerging theme throughout all of the questionnaires and interviews that I wanted to address it separately. The theme of authenticity can be seen as the instigator for the other emerging themes, such as sense of belongingness, connectedness, higher self-esteem and better sense of well-being. In fact, all of the participants note, at various points in their narratives, words and phrases that are implicit or explicit in meaning with regard to acting unauthentically or authentically. Even those who have heavily compartmentalized their lives in order to have some level of comfort in a hetero-normative society had expressed how authentic they feel in Second Life.

Along with this expression of authenticity are the positive effects some of the participants indicated as a result of their Second Life experiences. Not only do we see the participants acknowledging positive effects and making explicit remarks about how these effects are not present in their real lives, we also see indications of comparisons between their real and virtual world lives, including a few very telling statements that seem to juxtapose the real and the virtual.

The participants’ expressions of authenticity, positive benefits, and juxtaposition of real and virtual events also convey their desire to experience Second Life not as a unidirectional

source of real life improvement (from Second Life into real life), or as a unidirectional source of real life escape (from real life into Second Life), but as a bidirectional experience in which there is constant transference of benefit from and to each.

Implications

In the real world, it is not always possible for some people to either gain easy access to gay and lesbian communities, or they are just simply too afraid to make face-to-face connections in what may seem like a very hidden and unfamiliar culture. Certainly, those who work with marginalized populations have a variety of suggestions and resources that they can provide to them to help ease them into a supportive environment. For some, Second Life may be a good intermediary step toward the goal of living wholly and authentically. I have seen how some of the participants entered Second Life, timid and non-committed, only to eventually embrace what it offered them. Some of the stories showed how they evolved from thinking about their sexual orientations as behaviors, only to emerge from their Second Life experiences with a sense of healthy identities.

The positive benefits that participants gained, and which they have carried over into their real lives, suggests a certain degree of permeability between the two environments. As a study participant implied, perhaps I should not be thinking in terms of two unconnected places, real and virtual, because it creates a social construction that places an artificial membrane between the two. Perhaps, due to the high permeability, I should consider real life and Second Life as simply “one life.”

Ultimately, this is a study about positive media effects and their influence on marginalized populations. Many research studies and discussions about online social communities focus on negative effects. They discuss findings that deal with addictive behavior, anti-social engagements, violence, sexism and racism, distraction from other learning opportunities, the decline of meaningful social interactions, and concern about the blurring of real and virtual, to name just a few. However, in Second Life, there is a strong and active group of educators and researchers, almost 6,000 strong, who are looking at the use of online social environments from a positive perspective. Because it is a new environment, there is much research to still take place before we can conclusively argue its value over other forms of social interaction and learning, and its functionality as a means of social interaction and learning. While this study presents some initial conclusions, it is by no means definitive. There is further need for more research and for research that approaches the same issues from a variety of perspectives and methodologies.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based upon this study, I propose that some gay and lesbian populations would find positive benefit from engagement in Second Life and other virtual worlds as it pertains to their developmental paths. Additionally, I offer that engagement in Second Life or other virtual worlds can provide the means to live a more authentic life, and can reduce real world stigmatizing effects of loneliness, isolation, depression, low self-esteem, and pessimism. I would theorize that Second Life, due to the safe harbor it offers gay and lesbian people, sets up an environment in which positive effects such as sense of belonging and connection, enhanced well-being and self-esteem, and transferability of positive effects can occur.

Research into the effects of virtual world experiences on marginalized groups, such as gay and lesbian populations, is in its infancy. To my knowledge, as of this date, there has been no formal research exploring the positive benefit of the redirection of their developmental paths using virtual world environments, or of the transferability of their positive effects from their virtual world to their real world lives. This current study is just the beginning step. As future researchers build upon this information, the collective body of research will, at some point, be able to claim findings that are generalizable to larger populations, as well as provide insights into the uniqueness of each individual experience. Of special interest would be studies looking at other marginalized populations, including stigmatized students with learning difficulties, geographically isolated groups, differently-abled persons, and those with social disorders, to name a few.

The self is not something that one finds. It is something that one creates.

-- Thomas Szasz (1920-) American Psychiatrist

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