



A motivation-based typology of social virtual world users



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ABSTRACT

The past years have witnessed a rapid increase in the use of social media networks, including virtual worlds, across broad segments of Internet users. Several researchers have investigated the motivations behind social media use, however, few studies have attempted to explain the use of free-form/social virtual worlds (SVWs). Using both, qualitative and quantitative approaches, the current study aims to identify these motives and classify SVW users according to motivation-based user segments. Furthermore, the current paper examines the link between SVW users' motivations and their demographics. Our findings suggest that SVW users are motivated to use the platform seeking the following: 'Friendship', 'Escapism', and 'Role-playing'; followed by 'Achievement', a 'Relationship' and 'Manipulation'. Seven types of SVW users were identified based on their motivations, namely, 'Role-Players', 'Relationship Seekers', 'Manipulators', 'Achievement Seekers', 'Friendship seekers', 'Uninvolved', and 'Escapists'. Users' motivations to use the platform differ based on their 'age' and 'gender', and some notable differences in demographics among user types were identified.

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1. Introduction

Virtual worlds (VWs) are three-dimensional (3D) environments in which users either have a goal to achieve, called "game-oriented" VWs (e.g., World of Warcraft), or are left free with no specific goal imposed by the VW, called "free-form" or "social" VWs (SVWs), such as There and Second Life (Bainbridge, 2007). According to VW research firm KZero (2012), in the fourth quarter of 2011, the total number of registered users of VWs amounted to 1700 million people. In Second Life (SL) alone, 36 million users are currently registered, including more than 1 million active users (Linden Lab, 2013). There are not only a lot of users of VWs, but also a lot of hours are spent in-world. For instance, during the last 10 years, SL users spent the equivalent of 217,266 years of time in-world (Linden Lab, 2013).

While some previous studies have examined users' motivations for using game-oriented VWs (e.g., Bartle, 1996; Yee, 2006), few studies have attempted to explain the motivations for using SVWs. As up until now only qualitative inquiries on the subject have been conducted, the focus of the current study is to identify SVW users' motivations employing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This will allow us to (1) determine the prevalence of the SVW motivations identified, (2) classify SVW users according to motivation-based user segments, and (3) explore the link to user demographics, such as gender.

SVWs are 3D environments that mimic the real world to a large extent, allowing for live interactions between users' avatars and providing unlimited possibilities and experiences. Users are empowered to freely create and control their environment. Users can create, buy, and sell products and services, marry, dance, eat, and so forth; that is, they can live a whole virtual life. SVWs also possess their own currency, which is exchangeable for real-life currencies, making VWs a viable economy. These characteristics have attracted the attention of several different entities, who explore these VWs and use them for different purposes. Many real world businesses, for instance, are increasingly having a presence in SVWs to build their brands, and/or to grow their revenues (Arakji & Lang, 2008). Universities, political parties, international organizations, and even embassies can be found in VWs. To successfully achieve their objectives, understanding SVW users is crucial. This has urged researchers to study avatars and their in-world behavior (e.g., Andrade, 2009; Guo and Barnes, 2009; Banakou & Chorianoopoulos, 2010; Hassouneh & Brengman, 2011; Lam & Riedl, 2011). SVWs also provide an interesting platform for researchers to conduct experiments, carry out observations, and analyze economic markets and social networks (Bainbridge, 2007). Castronova (2006) demonstrated that VWs are effective and attractive venues for conducting social science studies.

The current study aims to extend our understanding of VW users using qualitative and quantitative approaches. Motivations for using SVWs are first explored qualitatively by means of in-depth interviews with 20 active SL users. Subsequently, a survey is carried out among 455 active SL users to assess the prevalence of

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these motivations and classify users based on their motivations. Furthermore, the current paper examines if a link exists between users' motivations and their demographics (e.g., gender).

This paper is organized as follows: first, related literature from the social media field is reviewed and the objectives of the current study are presented. Subsequently, the methodologies used for the qualitative and the quantitative studies are explained thoroughly. The results of both studies are then reported and discussed. Finally, some limitations are addressed and some topics for future research are suggested.

2. Motivations for using social media: a literature review

The past years have witnessed a rapid increase in the use of social media networks across broad segments of Internet users. This popularity has fostered researchers to study this growing communication channel and its users. Social media can be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, pg. 61). As such, blogs, social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), game-oriented VWs, as well as SVWs are all considered social media.

Several researchers have investigated the motivations behind social media use, concentrating on one kind of social media (e.g., social networking sites), on a particular site (e.g., Facebook), or even on an application provided by a site (e.g., joining groups within Facebook). Many of these studies have employed the “uses and gratifications” (U&G) theory to address why people use a particular media channel and what types of gratifications they experience from that use. This theory assumes that users are motivated to use a particular media channel to fulfill existing needs, which in turn drive their actions/uses (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004), for instance, used the U&G theory to examine drivers behind participation in virtual communities. The authors identified five motivational factors: *'purposive value'* (i.e., value derived from a predetermined purpose such as receiving information), *'self discovery'* (i.e., self knowledge), *'maintaining interpersonal connectivity'* (i.e., keeping in contact), *'social enhancement'* (i.e., the status the user has within a community), and *'entertainment'* (i.e., fun and relaxation).

Joinson (2008) investigated the uses of social networking site “Facebook”, and the gratifications derived from these uses. The authors surveyed 241 Facebook users and identified seven unique uses and gratifications: *'social connection'* (i.e., keeping in touch), *'shared identities'* (which relates to joining groups, organizing events and meeting ‘like-minded people’), *'photographs'* (posting and viewing of photographs), *'content'* (applications and quizzes), *'social investigation'* (the use of Facebook to meet or view new people and to find out more about people met offline), *'social network surfing'* (the ability to view other people's social networks and friends) and *'status updating'* (related to the newsfeed and status updates within Facebook).

Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) found that users of the social network site “Facebook” are motivated to participate in groups for the following reasons: *'socializing'* (meeting and talking with others as well as getting peer support and a sense of community), *'entertainment'* (seeking leisure and amusement), *'self-status seeking'* (making themselves look cool, and to develop their careers), and *'information'* (learning about events and details regarding specific products and services).

Rafaeli, Hayat, and Yaron (2009) investigated the motivations behind contributing to Wikipedia, and defined three categories of drivers: *'getting information'*, *'sharing information'* and *'entertainment'*.

Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl, and Sapp (2006) noted that *'self expression'* is the main motivation for using blogs, where users express their feelings and thoughts rather than their hobbies or interests.

Bartle (1997) identified four motivations for using game-oriented VWs: *'achievement'* (to achieve game goals), *'exploration'* (to find out as much as they can about the virtual world and its physics), *'socializing'* (interacting with other players), and *'imposition'* (to cause distress to other players).

In a large scale study, Yee (2006) identified five motivational factors for using game-oriented VWs (listed in order of importance to users): *'relationship'* (the desire to interact with other users, and to form meaningful relationships), *'achievement'* (the desire to become powerful in the context of the virtual environment through the achievement of goals and accumulation of items that confer power), *'immersion'* (to enjoy being in a fantasy world as well as being someone else), *'escapism'* (to temporarily avoid, forget about, and escape from real-life stress and problems), and *'manipulation'* (to objectify other users and to manipulate them for personal gains and satisfaction).

As for the SVWs, Wood, Chaplin, and Solomon (2008) have interviewed seven VW users to explore their motivations. Four motivations were revealed: *'meeting real and virtual friends'*, *'to escape real life or find a better one'*, *'to behave in a way that they cannot, or do not feel comfortable with in real life'*, and finally, *'role-play'*. According to Book (2004), the VW offers users a way to free themselves from offline limitations of gender, race, or class, and provides an opportunity to “try on” a different experience of personification.

Based on past research on immersion in VWs, Hinsch and Bloch (2008) proposed four main drivers of interaction seeking in the VW SL: (1) interaction in the VW is *'inexpensive, painless and simple'*, (2) *'escapism'* (including role-playing), (3) *'power'* (users are not accountable to anyone when in-world), and (4) *'safety'* (the dogmatic rules of the game do not allow for a wide range of illegal activities). Based on related prior literature, Shelton (2010) developed a preliminary taxonomy of nine user motivations for using SL, namely, (1) *'fantasy'* (i.e., to do things that one cannot do in the real world); (2) *'customization'* (i.e., having an interest in customizing the appearance of their avatar); (3) *'role-playing'* (i.e., creating a persona with a background story and interacting with other users to create an improvised story); (4) *'relationship'* (i.e., to form long-term, meaningful relationships with other users); (5) *'socialization'* (i.e., to interact with friends, family, etc., learning the personalities of others, and having an interest in helping and chatting with other users); (6) *'escapism'* (i.e., to avoid thinking about real world problems); (7) *'relaxation'* (i.e., to relieve stress); (8) *'advancement/challenge'* (i.e., to push one's self to higher levels of skill/personal accomplishment); (9) *'competition'* (i.e., the desire to challenge and compete with other users).

Two recent studies attempted to empirically assess the motivations behind SVW use. To understand user goals and to explain the relationships among them, Jung and Kang (2010) interviewed 54 users of the SVW “There”, by means of three open-ended questions, applying a laddering technique. The reasons determined to be behind using SVWs were ordered as follows: *'social relations'*, referring to social interaction, attending social events, chatting, dating, and helping people; *'amusement'*, referring to enjoyment, relaxation, and joining fun activities such as gaming, movies, music, and to kill time; *'creating'* virtual objects and decorating their own avatars based on the tar and virtual space; and *'technical features'* of the SVW that attract use such as being a 3D environment, human-like avatars' behavior, communication tools, and so forth. These reasons were followed by *'escapism'* from one's reality; *'exploring'* the VW and walking around; *'knowledge acquisition'* to

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