



Psychosocial impacts of engaging in Second Life for individuals with physical disabilities



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ABSTRACT

The psychological experiences associated with engagement in virtual worlds have been well documented in the existing literature. The current study aimed to explore the motivations, experiences and psychosocial impacts of engaging in the virtual world “Second Life”. This aimed to extend previous findings by specifically exploring the phenomenological experiences within a sample of individuals with physical disabilities. This was achieved by conducting in-world interviews with five participants, comprising a range of physical disabilities. Through thematic analysis of the interviews transcripts, a number of themes were identified. Quality of life, self-esteem and recreational therapy were identified as positive psychological outcomes of engagement in Second Life. These were found to occur through a number of processes such as self-discovery, relaxation, and perception of in-world equality. Further, the social and environmental opportunities emerged as key motivations for engagement in Second Life. These findings extend the current literature by providing evidence for the way in which Second Life provides important leisure opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities, and the way in which these experiences are associated with positive psychological outcomes. The implications of these findings highlight the clinical relevance of such platforms for this particular population of individuals.

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1. Introduction

Second Life is an online virtual environment, in which its users build their own worlds, and are provided with endless opportunities to engage in a range of activities, including sky-diving, dancing and shopping. The nature of the online world provides users with the opportunity to socialise with others in a variety of settings. The range and diversity of these experiences suggest reasons why individuals may be motivated to engage in Second Life, and how these potentially positive experiences may be associated with a range of positive psychological outcomes. In particular, we consider these issues for those individuals with physical disabilities who may derive distinct opportunities from such experiences compared to typical populations of users. In particular, we consider the key motivations for engagement in Second Life, its function in providing enjoyable leisure and the impact on positive psychosocial outcomes for this particular population of users. As previously noted, participation in leisure constitutes a basic human right and is key within quality of life (Yalon-Charmovitz & Weiss, 2008). Therefore, considering the extent to which virtual worlds may

function as enjoyable leisure is a critical consideration. A review of the existing literature is detailed in the following sections.

1.1. Motivations

A substantial amount of the existing research on motivation in virtual environments is focused on motivations for online gaming. Within this, socialisation has been found to be an important factor in motivating individuals to play online games (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Hussain & Griffiths, 2009; Taylor & Taylor, 2009; Yee, 2006, 2007). For example, Hussain and Griffiths (2009) found that more than one in five gamers preferred socialising online compared to offline. These findings reflect those of Yee (2006) who found that a substantial proportion of participants stated they had better relationships with their online friends than offline ones. It has been suggested that this preference for socialising online compared to offline can emerge from the fact that online environments can foster a clear sense of equality between users (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009). Further evidence for the motivating nature of online socialisation is highlighted by research evidence showing that gamers enjoy opportunities to meet new people and learn about new cultures through their engagement with online environments (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009). This evidence suggests the way in which these online environments provide positive social

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experiences for individuals and explain their motivations for engagement.

Regardless of this evidence demonstrating these positive social dimensions of online environments, there is contradictory evidence supporting the “weak ties” argument for (online) relationships (Granovetta, 1973). Here it is proposed online relationships to be superficial with easily broken bonds (Leung & Lee, 2005; Nie, 2001). This is supported by suggestions that text-only communication and the anonymity of online communication lack the richness of face-to-face communication (Nie, 2001). However, others have questioned these assertions. For example, one study found a large majority of online gamers developed particularly close relationships with other gamers, and most were happy to disclose off-line personal issues (Sanders, Dowland, & Furnell, 2009). This has been proposed to arise through the anonymity within these environments, in creating hyper-personal interactions, which can invoke greater self-expression (Sanders et al., 2009), consistent with Walther’s (1996) hyper-personal model in computer-mediated communication (CMC). This theory proposes that the nature of the communication channel allows individuals to present themselves more favorably, resulting in enhanced idealised perceptions of others (Walther, 1996). This notion is supported by evidence that initial online relationships can result in offline co-habitation and even marriage (Joinson, 2001).

Regardless of the debate surrounding the outcomes associated with socialisation in virtual worlds, the appeal of such opportunities emerges as a consistent theme across a range of studies, highlighting its function in motivating engagement. Given the nature of Second Life, it is highly conceivable that individuals will be motivated in equivalent ways to that of other virtual worlds. Additionally, other evidence suggests this platform to provide need fulfilment (Barnes & Pressey, 2011), and that users are motivated by its function as source of self-expression and liberation (Partala, 2011). This is consistent with other research exploring the appeal of self-representation and exploration of self within virtual worlds. For example, Hussain and Griffiths (2008) demonstrate the function of online games to provide opportunities for gender-swapping. Similarly, other research highlights how virtual worlds can allow users to explore different self-representations, which may represent their “ideal self” rather than “actual self” (Bessiere, Fleming, & Kiesler, 2007; Seung, 2009; Suh, 2013). This supports further commentary about different forms of embodiment and the extent to which different virtual platforms may promote these experiences to greater or less extent than others (Biocca, 1997). Based on the characteristics of platforms such as Second Life, they have potential to enhance physical embodiment through avatar generation, relevant in expression of “self” (Biocca, 1997). It remains unclear, however, the extent to which these unique opportunities are related to psychosocial benefits for users. Namely, when used as a form of enjoyable leisure, whether this is associated with typical leisure-related benefits to that of other leisure activities. A review of the literature exploring psychological outcomes of virtual worlds is provided in the subsequent section.

1.2. Psychological outcomes

A vast majority of psychological research has focused on negative outcomes of virtual environments, including the development of addiction, and the influence of violent content on aggressive behaviour (Anderson et al., 2010; Greenfield, 2010). There is a need for further examination of the potential positive outcomes of engaging in these environments. Leisure theory can provide a useful theoretical framework through which to examine the way in which Second Life can function as a form of leisure, in promoting such positive outcomes. The fact engagement in Second Life is

largely autonomous, characterised by users experiencing a perceived freedom in the activity suggests its definition as leisure. Indeed, previous research has highlighted benefits of Second Life and other multi-user environments through their capacity to enhance social networks through interest groups and services as well as being immersive and open-ended to enhance these experiences (Zhang, Zhang, de Pablos, & Sun, 2014; Zhang et al., 2014). This can therefore be used in examining the way in which individuals may experience Second Life as a form of leisure activity which may hold equivalent positive psychological benefits to those of other leisure pursuits. That is, the theoretical and empirical literature presents consistent evidence for the relationship between leisure engagement and dimensions of well-being. For example, studies typically show leisure engagement as a necessary component for enhanced quality of life, self-esteem, and positive mood (McAuley, Courneya, & Lettunich, 1991; Morgan & Bath, 1998; Pressman et al., 2009; Tinsley & Eldredge, 1995). Theory posits that the underlying mechanism for these benefits can derive through the enjoyment and positive experiences of leisure engagement, in enhancing positive perceptions of life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Haworth, 1997; Haworth & Hill, 1992).

Researchers have also suggested that leisure can be a means of stress-relief (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Iso-Ahola, 1988). Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) explain the stress-reducing properties of leisure through three mechanisms. Firstly, leisure can be an escape strategy from adverse negative feelings. Secondly, leisure can enhance mood through tension reduction. Thirdly, leisure can offer opportunities of social support which can aid the stress management processes. This notion is supported by research showing that social support in leisure can reduce feelings of loneliness, and enhance well-being (Caldwell & Smith, 1988). Given this evidence, it is conceivable that Second Life can have equivalent outcomes for participants.

Research on virtual worlds shows some evidence in support of these findings. For example, Hussain and Griffiths (2009) found Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing game (MMORPG) players reported that online gaming helped to alleviate negative feelings, such as reduced stress, anger and frustration, which, in turn, promoted positive feelings. Additionally, they found that online gaming was an effective means of distraction from everyday problems, and could enhance self-efficacy. The therapeutic properties of this particular virtual environment are therefore apparent. Further evidence for the positive outcomes of engaging in virtual environments is provided by Taylor and Taylor (2009). These authors found that online gaming could provide individuals with a sense of personal control which was found to be associated with increased self-esteem.

Although previous research has identified such positive psychological outcomes, these findings are largely related to digital gaming, rather than to other environments, such as Second Life. The extent to which these outcomes are equivalent remains unclear, given the qualitative difference between them. However, given the fact that socialisation opportunities emerge as a key similarity between online gaming and Second Life, it could be suggested that the positive experiences and outcomes associated with social dimensions of the activities could be equivalent. That is, strong social support in online environments has been found to result in enhanced quality of life (Leung & Lee, 2005). Similarly, greater involvement in online communities is associated with lower perceived stress (Wright, 2000). Additionally, other research has found that access to the internet and email is associated with lower loneliness and improved psychological well-being (White, McConnell, Clipp, Bynum, & Teague, 1999). This indicates that the social support and connectedness with others through virtual environments is generally associated with positive psychological outcomes, namely for well-being. This suggests that equivalent

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