



Even in virtual environments women shop and men build: A social role perspective on Second Life

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined whether traditional gender role expectations (Eagly, 1987) influence behaviors in non-traditional contexts such as online virtual environments. Participants were 352 Second Life users who reported their activities and experiences in Second Life. Results indicated that men and women differed in the types of activities they engaged in a manner predicted by social role theory. Specifically, as compared to women, men were more likely to report building things (e.g. objects), to own and work on their own virtual property, and were less likely to change their avatar's appearance. Women, as compared to men, were more likely to meet people, shop, regularly change their avatar's appearance, and buy clothes/objects for their avatar. The present study adds to our understanding of how traditional gender role expectations may carry over to online virtual worlds and influence online behavior.

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The ability to control the way an individual represents him- or herself is one of the key features of the Internet (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Indeed, since the early days of the Internet, individuals have been interacting with others through virtual representations of themselves (See Turkle, 1995 for a review). The particulars of the online forum and type of virtual representation range from chat rooms (text-based screen name identity) to massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), such as *World of Warcraft* (3-D virtual representation of a humanoid called an avatar). The prevalence of the latter type of virtual representation is the focus of the present investigation. Specifically, this study examined how individuals spend their time in the online virtual environment called Second Life (Linden Research Inc., 2008) to determine if men and women differ in their activities and experiences.

1. What is a virtual environment?

Broadly defined, a virtual environment is a synthetic representation of a natural or imagined environment (Biocca & Levy, 1995; Blascovich et al., 2002; Kalawsky, 1993; Lanier, 2001). Digital virtual worlds can be two- or three-dimensional representations of a space (planet, room, meadow, etc.) containing objects (car, flower, table, etc.) and representations of humans. The latter can be online representations of actual persons (called avatars) or computer

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algorithms simulating persons (called agents). Individuals in an immersive virtual environment (IVE) typically experience visual aspects of the virtual world via a computer screen although they can also be immersed in the environment by wearing a controlled head-mounted display (HMD) that projects the world stereoscopically.

2. Second Life

Second Life is a fictional 3-D virtual world entirely created by its users (Linden Research Inc., 2008). It provides an advanced interactive level of social networking where individuals (through embodied virtual representations of themselves called avatars) can explore virtual worlds and properties, socialize, and participate in individual and group activities. While Second Life has the ability to be used as an online game, it is primarily a virtual social networking environment where individuals can engage in a wide variety of activities: attend concerts and lectures, shop, take classes, engage in religious worship, and meet new people (Boellstorff, 2008).

3. Gender differences in online behavior

Research generally indicates that men and women differ in the way they spend their time online (Li & Kirkup, 2007). For instance, Weiser (2000, 2001) reported that men, compared to women, are more likely to use the Internet to search for dates, read the news, look for job leads, get sports and financial information, read politics, and to play games, whereas women, compared to men, are

more likely to use it for interpersonal communication (email, chatting, etc.) Similarly, Fallows (2005, December) replicated the above results and also reported that men are more “intense” users as illustrated by the findings that men, relative to women, are online more often, have faster Internet connections, are more likely to access the Internet from home, search for a wider variety of information, and play more online games.

Research on gender differences in virtual environments such as MMORPGs indicates that women and men have different goals and engage in different activities while interacting with virtual humans. Specifically, women engage in more social interaction and cooperative activities than men (Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Yee, 2006b). Other research has revealed that men and women differ in their motivations for spending time in online virtual environments such as MMORPGs. Specifically, Yee (2006a) reported that in a survey of MMORPG players, men scored higher in achievement motivation (advancement, game mechanics, competition) for playing, whereas women scored higher in social motivations (relationships, teamwork) for playing. There was no difference in the amount of socializing. However, they reported that men and women’s reasons for socializing differed. Finally, Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee (2009) replicated the gender differences in motivations for playing and also reported that women gamers spent more hours playing than did their male counterparts.

4. Social role theory

What can account for the gender differences in online behavior reviewed above? These behaviors are consistent with expectations for gendered behavior according to social role theory (Eagly, 1987). Social role theory indicates that men and women occupy different roles in society with men primarily serving the role as provider and women primarily serving the role as caregiver. Through these roles, men and women learn different skills and beliefs that impact their social behavior. Because of these different social roles, men and women are also subject to different normative expectations for behavior. These factors lead to gender differences in actual behavior. Specifically, men typically behave and are expected to be more *agentic* (e.g., assertive, controlling, independent) and women typically behave and are expected to be more *communal* (e.g., concerned for the welfare of others, interpersonally sensitive, emotionally expressive). Related to gender differences in online behavior, social role theory (Eagly, 1987) provides an explanation for why women report engaging in more social behavior online: forming and maintaining relationships is a communal activity. Conversely, the online behaviors men report engaging in are focused on independence and competition, which are agentic activities.

5. The present study

To date, we are unaware of any research that has assessed whether or not gender differences in behavior exist in Second Life. As such, the present investigation sought to examine this question. Specifically, we analyzed data from a survey collected by the New Media Consortium (NMC) in 2008 to determine the interests, demographics, and activities of more than 300 educators involved with Second Life. In examining these data, we refer to different expectations in social role as gender differences. This differentiates from sex differences in that sex refers to the physiological and biological aspects of being female or male, while gender is indicative of the non-biological characteristics (i.e., cultural and social expectations) of being a woman or a man (Unger, 1979).

5.1. Predictions

Based on the literature reviewed above, we expected to find gender differences in online behavior experiences that were consistent with social role theory (Eagly, 1987). Specifically, we expected to find that men and women would report differences in their behavior while in Second Life that correspond to gender differences in behavior typically found outside a virtual environment. As a result, we expected to find a greater proportion of men than women engage in agentic behavior that involved more independent and task focused activities. Similarly, we expected to find that a greater proportion of women than men engage in communal behavior that is oriented toward socializing and other communal activities.

5.2. Participants

A total of 352 participants completed the NMC survey (143 men, 209 women) completed the New Media Consortium (NMC) Second Life Survey. Participants’ ages ranged widely from 18 to 55 or greater, with most participants’ ages ranging between 46 and 55 years. Ethnicity was unreported. All 352 participants were Second Life users.

5.3. Procedure

During May 2008, email invitations were sent to individuals on the New Media Consortium’s (NMC) list of contacts, the Second Life Educators Listserv (SLED) and to individuals who had elected to be listed in the NMC Campus Online Directory (<http://sl.nmc.org/directory/>). In addition, notices were sent within Second Life to the members of the NMC Guests and NMC Members groups. Participants were sent an email inviting anyone involved with Second Life to complete the NMC’s annual survey of Educators in Second Life. The email informed participants that the goal of the survey was to help learn more about the people, projects, and interests of those using Second Life for teaching and learning. Participants were then directed within the email invitation to a hyperlink leading to the online survey. Participants volunteered to complete the survey from a computer of their choice.

5.4. Measures

*NMC Second Life survey*¹. The NMC Second Life survey was a comprehensive survey designed to gain insight about the work of individual educators, specifically in the context of a new-media-related topic (Second Life). The survey was designed to gather information on the activities, attitudes, and interests of educators active in Second Life. It consisted of 42 questions pertaining to individuals’ use of Second Life for teaching and learning purposes. The survey covered a variety of topics involving the use of Second Life, including demographic variables (e.g. gender) and general technological questions (e.g. “How many computers do you own?”). More importantly, it assessed individuals’ experience level with games/technology (e.g. “Other than Second Life, have you participated in other virtual environments?”), individuals’ experience level with Second Life (e.g. “What kinds of educational activities have you done in Second Life?”), and how individuals use Second life in general (e.g. “What kinds of general activities have you done in Second Life?”). Additionally, the survey contained questions about personal experiences in Second Life (e.g. “What kinds of items have you purchased in Second Life?”), professional experiences in Second Life (e.g. “Please describe how your pro-

¹ We were interested solely in gender differences in Second Life behaviors and activities. Therefore, the results reported only pertain to survey questions relevant to Second Life usage.

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