

Do You Know Who You're Talking to Online? Alternate Identities on Social Networks

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### Abstract

Over fifteen million people have created an alternate identity in social virtual worlds that resemble reality in many aspects (Sanchez, p.9). Why do millions of people sign on daily to play in a social virtual world and what do they feel they gain that they cannot receive in reality? In this research paper, the various reasons people create alternate identities are explored and applied directly to the virtual world Second Life. First, people who are residents of Second Life achieve the stability of always having their virtual world and online friends accessible. Second Life also allows for a kind of diversity to meet people from all over the world and the ability to travel anytime; which is not always realistic in reality. Second Life gives people a fair chance of being accepted and an opportunity to explore various aspects of one's personality or relationships. (Cartarescu, p.82-83) For some people, participating in Second Life gives them the freedom of speech that they are not allowed in reality (Hongladarom, p.537). Alternate identities online allows a person to deal with loneliness, escape reality and relax, or achieve a sense of community (Shelton, p.1224). Second Life allows people to fulfill their fantasies, like flying or teleporting, and achieve satisfaction in a similar way to the way they achieve satisfaction in reality (Lin, p.19). Together, these findings prove that Second Life and creating an alternate identity can be beneficial to those who play if they use it in a healthy and constructive way.

*Keywords:* Second Life, alternate identity, reality, residents, virtual world, social

In modern America, over fifteen-million players create an alternate identity in social virtual worlds that are not that different from reality; and in some cases, these alternate identities and virtual worlds become a person's reality (Sanchez, p.9). How did we get from the first virtual world, which was at most a fantasy, into a world of virtual, social worlds that matched reality in many aspects? In 1979, the first virtual world was created and since then many changes and developments have been made to this original virtual world (Sanchez, p.9). The first virtual worlds are a product of Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), a computer program created in 1979. MUDs had directional cues that would guide the players through the virtual world in pursuit of a goal. These directional cues were said to be "so precise that a user could construct a map on paper to get a physical sense of the world" (Sanchez, p.10). Ten years later, James Aspnes created TinyMUD, a virtual world where players would interact with each other and had the ability to make objects, unlike MUDs where a player was pursuing a certain goal. Instead of being players in a virtual world, James Aspnes made it where the players became "active developers of the world" (Sanchez, p.10). In 1990, Stephan White released the first Multi-User Dungeons Object Orientated (MOOs) virtual world (Sanchez, p.10). MOOs expanded James Aspnes' development of allowing players to create objects by allowing players to use and give the items they made to other players.

After MOOs, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) were developed and "the next phase in the development of virtual worlds came with the success and popularity of MMORPGs, beginning with *Meridian 59* in 1996" (P.10). Similar to the original MUDs, players in MMORPGs are pursuing a goal or trying to complete a task; however, in MMORPGs players have the opportunity to create a certain character to role-play and interact with other people playing the game. Before this point, all of these virtual worlds only charged a

onetime fee to participate in; in contrast, one MMORPG, *Ultima Online*, changed this by being the first game that had a large number of players that paid a fee monthly to participate in this virtual world. *EverQuest*, a MMORPG, required “team or collaborative play in order for players to succeed” (Sanchez, p.11) which led players to communicate in online discussion and this took the game further than just playing the game. *World of Warcraft* is a MMORPG that has ten-million players that participate in the virtual world. Not only do ten-million participants take place in this virtual world monthly; but they actually pay a monthly fee to participate and play this virtual world.

Koles and Nagy explain there are two different types of virtual worlds; “game-oriented virtual worlds, such as World of Warcraft or Everquest, and socially oriented virtual worlds, such as Second Life” (p.2). However, game-oriented virtual worlds set the stage and environment for 3-D social virtual worlds by creating a social system that was strong, the players getting involved socially outside of the game itself, and “the emergence of residential broadband Internet connections and high-end personal computers” (Sanchez, p.11). I will be focusing on socially oriented virtual worlds; specifically Second Life, to discuss the various reasons people create alternate identities online.

Linden Research, Inc., a company based in San Francisco, created Second Life in 2003 (Koles, p.2) and today it has over fifteen million users (Sanchez, p.9). The question is: why do over fifteen million users partake in this social virtual world? What do these players or residents obtain and what advantages do people take away from signing onto this alternate world daily? The answer is complicated and it differs between individuals. Each individual is different; therefore, they choose to live through alternate identities for different reasons. The people who participate in these virtual social worlds may participate because they are able to explore their

identity (Cartarescu, p.86) and test the waters of different personalities and personas in a controlled environment (Turkle, p.190). Alternate identities gives people a fair chance of being accepted, an opportunity to explore various aspects of relationships, and a way to cope with loneliness, relax, and experience satisfaction (Cartarescu, p.83; Shelton, p.1224; Lin, p.19; Leung, p.382).

Second Life is a social virtual community that has a very realistic look about it. Second Life matches reality in many aspects; including churches members can attend and libraries or classrooms for educational purposes. Dave Harmeyer, of Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California, created an alternate identity online, known as Carpe Writer, in order to obtain a reference interview (p.89). Harmeyer interacts with his interview in the article *My So-called Second Life* and this journal article explains a lot to us about Second Life and how it works. First of all, Second Life is a place where people simply live and they can “explore the virtual cities and landscapes, meet and socialize with other residents, join in individual and group activities, and create, buy and sell products” (Shelton, p.1223). People move about through the virtual community of Second Life via flying, walking, or teleporting (Harmeyer, p.90) and other players are represented as “small green dots” (Harmeyer, p.90) in a certain community area until they are within view of another person, at which point they can see their character. The resident’s name is displayed hovering over his head and this community allows residents to both communicate through talking using their computer’s microphone or through typing (Harmeyer, p.90).

Second Life includes activities similar to real life activities that people can participate in; for example, “socializing with friends in bars and discos, viewing art, selling and buying products, conducting classes, research, attending virtual conferences, and job recruitment” (Stendal, p.80). Interestingly, the people who participate in Second Life do not like to be referred

to as “players”. As Perrie Juran, a resident of Second Life, stated, “play? I don’t play it. Do you think this is just a game?” (Juran, 2012) This shows how people who participate in Second Life do not see it as a game; but they see it literally as a “second life”. Second Life is as close to reality as possible, the way the creators of the community wanted it and designed it. Elflin points out “as in real life, the people make the place” (p.51) referring to how the residents of the game are the ones who build the community, run, and are responsible for everything in the community.

Ioana Cartarescu, faculty of Sociology and Social Work at the University of Bucharest, follows a certain order when discussing the benefits of online communities; similarly, I will apply these advantages to why people chose to create an alternate identity directly to the virtual community Second Life. The first advantage to creating an alternate identity online, Cartarescu discusses, is stability; referring to the ability of a player or resident of a virtual world to always have their virtual community and online friends in the palm of their hands, no matter where they go or move to (p.82). Second Life is a social virtual world; its main purpose is to be social, not to obtain some goal or purpose, but to build communities, make friends, and socialize with people. Second Life displays stability in the fact that people have complete control over the virtual community they live and participate in. For example, they can choose to leave one community or neighborhood and move if they chose to; they do not have to because of the economy, jobs, school, or other factors in reality. However, if in reality, they are forced to move because of a variety of reasons, their virtual community is right there with them; their virtual community comes with them on their laptop or computer (p.82). They do not have to go through saying goodbye to lifelong friends when they move, because those online friends move with them. Second Life is a social virtual world that people can log onto in any place or on any computer.

The second advantage or reason to participating in a social virtual world over the offline world is diversity. Cartaescu explains that online worlds allow you to “meet people from all over the world, of any kind, belonging to any offline culture” (p.82). In the real world, location, money, and time are constraints against travelling around the world and meeting people in different cultures. However, many different cultures participate in Second Life and you could be a member of a completely different culture in the touch of a button. Cartaescu explains that in the real world, people are often “friends with others in the same field of work (co-workers) or the same geographic location (neighbors)” (p.82). Second Life is different in this way because you can travel anywhere you want in the blink of an eye, live anywhere you wish, and meet whomever you wish. Cartaescu explains that we are often friends with people that live where we live or work where we work; however, what if we had the ability to work anywhere we wish or move anytime we wish? Second Life gives individuals the opportunity to choose any occupation and reside anywhere they wish.

Those that participate in social virtual worlds have a fair chance of being accepted, liked, and making friends. Cartaescu explains that people can chose what information they wish to share with others and everyone starts off as “just people and whatever impression they make on others from that moment on is based solely on their abilities and personality” (p.83). The way people perceive others online is how people chose to show themselves. In Second Life, you can choose whatever character you wish to be. If you want to have blonde hair in the virtual world, you can in no time. The personality and abilities you wish to display in the virtual world is your decision and you can chose to share or withhold as much information as you wish. Along with a fair chance, residents of Second Life have the possibility to test the waters and “explore every

aspect of his/her personality” (p.83); something that is difficult to do in reality “without attracting ridicule or disapproval from others” (p.83).

Sherry Turkle, author of *Life on the Screen*, tells us a story about a 23-year old named Gordon, who dropped out of college to pursue a computer program without a college degree, and how he uses virtual communities to explore possibilities (p.189). Gordon describes himself as “unpopular, overweight, unathletic, and unattractive,” (p.189) and he feels as though he never fit in in his family life or social life. In high school, he went on a trip to India and because the people in India did not know he was not popular, he fit in. Gordon liked going to India and getting a “fresh start” (p.190) and he found that he can achieve that same fresh start in virtual communities. He uses the avatars he creates to test the waters of “different qualities that Gordon is trying to develop in himself” (p.190) and he can change personas or create a new character anytime he wants. This allows Gordon with the possibility to explore his personality and test the waters of different aspects of his personality without the fear of being permanently ridiculed for it. Second Life allows residents the same possibility; many people have multiple accounts, are allowed to change their avatar, and explore who they are by changing, adapting, and exploring through the lens of their avatar.

Gordon used virtual communities to explore aspects of his personality. Bernadett Koles and Peter Nagy explain that people who participate in virtual communities have the opportunity to “create their virtual selves to be as similar to or as different from their real life selves as they wish in a variety of physical or other attributes” (p.4). This allows people to explore the possibility of different personality aspects they chose not to display in reality. Koles and Nagy explain that people can make avatars different from their personality in reality; in contrast, I do not think those avatars are all that different from who they really are. If they express themselves



as a certain religion, culture, or personality in these virtual communities; these aspects are already part of the person's personality. They are testing the waters to see how people react in an online community to these aspects of their personality. For example, a person who is exploring a different religion, may express those religious values and new lifestyle in Second Life to see how people respond before expressing their new beliefs in reality. Perrie Juran explains that Second Life gives him "the ability to explore other lifestyles in ways that I can't in the real world in a safe environment" (Juran, 2012).

Virtual communities offer an easier integration than real life. Cartarescu explains "there are so many types of online communities that anyone can find one suitable to his/her needs, much quicker than if he/she tried to search offline for people who share ones passions" (p.83). In the same way that there are so many types of online communities, in Second Life there are so many different places to live and people to associate with. It is a lot faster and easier to find someone who is similar to you or a place that you feel suitable to reside. Not only is it easier and faster to fit in online, people also create alternate identities online because it is safe. "The internet provides a safer way of relating, especially for shy people who don't socialize out of fear of not being accepted" (Cartarescu, p.83). On Second Life, a shy person can interact and socialize with other residents without fear of not fitting in or a person who has been picked on in real life can interact without fear of being picked on in this virtual world. However, if they do not fit in or they are picked on in one virtual town; they can move to a different area in Second Life, create a new avatar, and never have to speak to those residents again (Cartarescu, p.83). This is different from reality, in real life a teenager cannot pick up and move when something does not go right or change their persona.

Soraj Hongladarom, faculty of Arts in the Department of Philosophy at the Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, explains another advantage to creating alternate identities online is the freedom to say or do things you cannot in reality. “Thailand still has very limited freedom of speech” (p.537) and “newly created persona, then, allows the person behind to say things in such a way that would not be possible if the person revealed who she really is to the world” (p.538). The people in Thailand or places where they are limited on their freedom of speech may use virtual online communities to express their beliefs and opinion about events going on in their real life that they are not allowed to express in reality. People can create avatars on Second Life and express who they are, their beliefs, and their opinions without fear of getting in trouble because they are allowed freedom of speech on Second Life. For example, a teenager may not have freedom of speech in their household; however, a teenager can express how she feels or create an environment or household where she does have freedom of speech in Second Life. The people from Thailand may make a county or island where they have complete freedom of speech on Second Life.

An alternate identity online or interacting in a virtual community is a way for individuals to deal with loneliness. Louis Leung, of the School of Journalism and Communication at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, explains that people “may prefer online social interaction to obtain emotional support and affectionate companionship” (p.382). Leung conducted a study on 718 children or adolescents and concluded that people who are lonely valued “experimenting with identities or a fantasy online” (p.389). Therefore, Leung is expressing that those who are lonely are more likely to create alternate identities online as a way to deal with loneliness. Second Life has millions of members because it is a way for those who are lonely to get involved with other residents, explore who they are, and a way for them to socialize and not feel as lonely.

A person may feel lonely in reality; however, when they sign online they are surrounded by tons of people to interact and socialize with; therefore, reducing their loneliness. Leung also found that those who do not have as much support in reality, both emotional and affectionate, tend to want to create alternate identities online to explore their identity more than those who feel supported (p.391). Second Life allows people the ability to explore their identities and get support from other residents partaking in the virtual community.

Ashleigh K. Shelton, of the School of Journalism and Mass communication at the University of Minnesota, explains that fantasy, customization, role-playing, relationship, escapism, and relaxation are reasons or motivations people have for creating alternate identities on Second Life that Shelton came across in prior literature review she conducted (p.1224). Shelton describes fantasy as “using Second Life to do things that one cannot do in the real world” (p.1224). People create alternate identities for many reasons; including for the ability to do things in the game that they cannot do in reality. For example, people in Second life “can fly and even teleport to different locations for virtual activities” (Elflin, p.51). People often state that if they were to have a superpower they would choose to fly; well Second Life makes their fantasy come true by giving them the ability to fly to different destinations in the community. Residents of Second Life can also fulfill their fantasies by sporting or wearing outfits or a certain look that are not usually worn in reality (p.81). People can dress their avatar up in any outfit they wish and at times the outfit, hair, and overall appearance they chose are not something they would wear in reality.

People create alternate identities for a sense of community that they cannot find in the real world. This is especially true for those individuals with lifelong disabilities. Karen Stendal, Susan Balandin, and Judith Molka-Danielsen explain that “individuals with lifelong disability

may experience physical, financial, and transport difficulties with community access in real life; a virtual environment promises the possibility to establish and experience social interaction from the safe environment of a person's own home" (Stendal, p.81). Second Life allows people with disabilities to make an avatar with the same disability they have in their real life. Second Life has many different communities for people with various disabilities. For example, Second Life has an island for people with autism and Asperger's called "Brigadoon" and "Wheelies" which is a nightclub for people who are in a wheelchair (Stendel, p.81). There are also virtual communities in Second Life for people with MS. For example, the MS Pavilion and the MS Island VUMC are communities for people with MS on Second Life (Elflin, p.51). Kat Klata, who co-founded an MS support group on Second Life, explains "if I didn't have Second Life, I would probably be staring at the wall or at the TV" (p.51); instead, however, Kat Klata gets to participate and partake in a community and support group.

In real life, many people use their clothing and what they own as a sense of communicating to one another about who they are or what they want others to know about them. A. C. Lin explains that "consumption is often an act of communication. What we consume can say a great deal about who we are: the car one drives, the neighborhood one lives in, the clothes one wears, and the leisure activities one pursues all serve as markers of one's identity" (p.10). Residents of Second Life can buy things using "Linden Dollars", which currently "the exchange rate is L\$270 per U.S. dollar" (Shelton, p.1224). Buying objects, cars, houses, and clothing on Second Life is much more reasonable than buying those things in reality. People try to buy fancy cars and things in reality to communicate who they are to people; but people can do that same thing on Second Life and express the same thing to residents on Second Life and it "costs almost nothing" (Lin, p.19). The cost of a car or a house on Second Life costs barely anything compared

to those things in reality. Companies like Toyota “make virtual models of its new Scion available for avatars to test-drive, and athletic shoe manufacturers sell shoes for avatars” (Lin, p.17) in Second Life. These virtual cars and shoes are much less expensive than they would be in reality; allowing people to use their alternate identities to communicate through the things they consume on Second Life without the extreme expenses. However, this could affect a person’s desire for these goods and this same support of their identities in real life. For example, if someone buys a fancy new car on Second Life and people react extremely supportive of the way they are communicating their avatar through this new car; that person might want to buy that same car in reality. The question is, does buying the new car in Second Life satisfy their want to communicate who they are to others or does the support they get in Second Life lead them to want those material objects in reality? The answer to this question depends on how the person views Second Life and how active they are in Second Life. If a person resides in Second Life and sees it as a “reality”; this purchase might satisfy them. In contrast, some people may not be satisfied by this and have a desire to receive the same social recognition in reality.

People create alternate identities for a sense of satisfaction and to experience satisfaction; one way people can experience this satisfaction is through “Linden Dollars”. For example, Lin explains that some residents of Second Life “find the satisfaction of spending money in Second Life to be equivalent to the satisfaction of spending money in real life” (p. 19). These activities that are enjoyable in reality are equally exciting in Second Life and bring about a satisfaction that people are searching for. In reality, people find it fun and satisfying to shop and “simply go around and collect information about qualities and prices and then make a choice about which thing to buy” (Lin, p.19); something that Second Life gives people the ability to do in the virtual community. Shopping is not the only place people search for satisfaction on Second Life, there

are many activities that bring people satisfaction through their alternate identities such as clubs, test-driving cars, going to a library, or socializing with others. People can act and go about these activities as their alternate identities and participate in activities that they would not be able to in reality; allowing them to explore activities they think they would like or they think would bring them satisfaction before testing them in reality.

In the same way people create alternate identities to explore their own identities, people also create alternate identities to explore love and relationships in virtual communities to explore what they are looking for in a partner and for satisfaction. Anastasia Salter explains that people “can fall in love very quickly over the Internet” (p.1121). People explore various aspects of relationships and form relationships with other residents in Second Life. Residents of Second Life can also explore and partake in relationships that are not socially acceptable but that they would like to explore, for example men who are attracted to paying for sex and explore with the “paid escorts working out of various clubs” (Salter, p.1124). Exploring these aspects can help them to form what they want in reality or to find satisfaction in these things online. Men might want to explore these aspects of a relationship in order to feel more fulfilled in real life without interrupting their relationship in reality or to fulfill their desire for a certain relationship.

Alternate identities are a way for people to escape or “using second life to avoid thinking about real world problems” (Shelton, p.1224) or to relax and relieve stress through their alternate identities (Shelton, p.1224). The residents on Second Life can escape their real life problems by creating an alternate identity that doesn’t have those problems. Turkle discusses a young lady, Julee, who dropped out of college because she had a rocky relationship with her mother (p.186). Turkle explains “in Julee’s real life, her most pressing concern is the state of her relationship with her mother” (p.186) and Julee would escape from this reality by playing role playing games

in person with friends. Although Julee did not play Second Life, she played a different role-play game to escape the reality of her real life and in this alternate identity Julee “had the conversation with her game daughter that her own mother had been unwilling to have with her” (p.187). Julee escaped from the reality of her relationship with her mother by creating an alternate identity where she fulfilled the role of the mother and did what her mother was unwilling to do for Julee. Second Life is similar to this role-playing game and allows characters to create an alternate identity without the problems they face in reality.

The development and changes in virtual communities over the past five centuries have allowed for people to create, communicate, and live through alternate identities they have created to participate in these virtual communities. Why do people create identities that differ from reality in these communities? The answer is complicated and it differs between individuals. Cartarescu explains that stability, diversity, having a fair chance, easier integration, and possibilities are advantages to creating alternate identities online (p.82-83). A person could create an alternate identity because of the people they get to meet, the stability of always having the virtual community in the palm of your hands, or the possibility to test the waters on different aspects of one’s personality. People also create alternate identities as a cure for loneliness (Leung, 382), to be a part of a community, to satisfy their fantasies or for general satisfaction (Shelton, p.1224), and to relax or escape from reality. Everyone has different needs and desires; therefore, people create alternate identities for different reasons. For example, as Turkle explained, Gordon created his alternate identity to test the waters of “different qualities that Gordon is trying to develop in himself” (p.190). Each individual is different; therefore, they choose to live through alternate identities for different reasons.

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