

Second Life and Virtual Environments: Uses and Gratifications and Identity Effects

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Abstract:

This study aims to discuss the virtual world in cyberspace and its effects on its users by focusing on Second Life (SL) platform as a case. A focus group is conducted in order to understand the effects of SL based on the theory of users and gratifications which will be the theoretical foundation of this research.

Additionally, the study portrays how second life has become a powerful tool for advertisement and a significant platform for education. Hence, the literature on the impact of Second life on society will be examined in order to draw roots for the study.

The findings of the study about the users' practices and gratifications of second life have shown that virtual worlds have a significant potential in affecting one's identity in real life.

Keywords: Cyberspace, Second Life, advertisement, education, effect on one's identity

ملخص الدراسة:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى مناقشة العالم الافتراضي في الفضاء الإلكتروني وتأثيراته على مستخدميه من خلال التركيز على منصة Second Life (SL) كحالة. يتم إجراء مجموعة التركيز من أجل فهم تأثيرات SL على أساس نظرية المستخدمين والإشباع والتي ستكون الأساس النظري لهذا البحث.

بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، تصور الدراسة كيف أصبحت SL أداة قوية للإعلان ومنصة مهمة للتعليم. وبالتالي ، سيتم فحص الأدبيات المتعلقة بتأثير SL على المجتمع من أجل استخلاص جذور الدراسة.

أظهرت نتائج الدراسة حول ممارسات المستخدمين وإشباعهم لـ SL أن العوالم الافتراضية لديها إمكانات كبيرة في التأثير على هوية الفرد في الحياة الواقعية

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفضاء السيبراني، الحياة الثانية (Second Life)، الإعلان، التعليم، تأثير على هوية المرء

Introduction

Professor and Researcher Jukka Jouhki (2010) states that: “We are, in fact, all living in a virtual world... In a way, we have always used avatars to communicate and move around in our real world. We have different avatars for different situations, and every day our avatar is dressed, fed, groomed, viewed, shaved and made up a bit differently to represent our personalities or us as individuals.” It must be noted that Joukhi’s studies are based on Benedict Anderson’s work regarding reality and virtuality. But what is virtuality? And does the word “world” truly apply on the concept of virtuality?

During the past two decades, the internet became an indispensable factor in our lives- a factor that has surely enhanced and simplified our daily habits, but has also been a vice disguised in so many ways. Baudrillard (1985) states that the media is a speech without response, and that the silence of the masses to the media is becoming more and more obscene. It would be difficult to assume that media’s drawbacks have overruled its positive influence, nonetheless, media-in all its forms has had negative implications on societies. Cyberspace which is a new platform for on-line media, has become a significant method in communicating, working, advertising, etc...One of the concepts that emerged in relation to cyberspace is the virtual communities. Rheingold (1993) states in his book “The Virtual communities” that “people in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but they leave their bodies behind” (p. xvii). People in virtual communities use phrases on screens to converse, argue, engage in intellectual discourse, fall in love, find friends, among other things, all within the boundaries of the screens (Rheingold, 1993).

Second life is one of those virtual worlds that have transformed the experience of the self in contemporary society, into a virtual world resident. Created by San Francisco-based Internet firm Linden Lab, Second Life is an online application that connects millions of users in a virtual world where seemingly anything is possible. Launched in 2003, Second life is a three-dimensional virtual world that was created to be an environment constructed by its users.

“From the shape of their avatars to the design of their homes, from how they spend their time to what types of affinity groups they form; Second Life’s design was focused on fostering creativity and self-expression in order to create a vibrant and dynamic world full of interesting content” (Ondrejka, 2004, p. 1). Second life provides individuals who wish to create new lives free from limitations such as physical, ethnical, sexual oriented, societal, etc... an opportunity to create an avatar that reflects them (or not) depending on how that want to be perceived in this community. The users of second life are able to build a virtual life, with virtual bodies, objects, and homes and that in turn can have a significant value, but also have ramifications on those users. Hillis (1999) considers that virtual communities are part of postmodern technology (p. 164), and these technologies blur and fragment the boundaries and senses of self and place and function as a virtual microcosm for cultural economic and identity recombination (Hillis, 1999). Therefore, these avatars created by Second Life surely challenge the concept of reality and humanity. What was imagined once, have become a reality. And as Bauldrillard (1985) states: “we are a part of a contemporary cultural mutation, part of the era of simulation”. Indeed, virtual communities such as Second Life have given people the opportunity to “let it all out”, to commune without being judged, and an opportunity to socialize and create new friendships and perhaps commitments.

Research goal and importance

These virtual worlds have “real” ramifications that might affect it users on so many levels especially the psychological one in which the second life becomes the “real” world for the user. For this reason, the significance and purpose of this study is to investigate second life through an in-depth analysis and to explore its impact on one’s identity. Even though many studies have been conducted to research second life and the exploitation of the latter in many fields mostly in education, however little research has been done to affiliate between SL and the user’s identity in real life.

Research Questions

RQ1: what are the uses and gratifications of second life?

RQ2: Does the gratification sought from Second life affect the user’s identity in real life?

Literature Review

Many studies conducted during the past years have examined Second Life in an attempt to understand how it works and how it affects its users. Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) focused on the “killer implication” of virtual communities. They argue that the significant aspect of such communities lies in their effect on the future. Their study is based upon McLuhan’s postulation that “the medium is the message” and that all mediums begin with something and transform over time to become something else which has a “killer impact” (Bakardjieva & Feenberg, 2004). Indeed, any new creation starts with something that is intended for the betterment of humanity, yet its use becomes altered with time; television is a great example of that.

Yet, it must be noted that people have always been looking for ways to detach themselves from reality-at least for a short while- that's why reading or watching soap operas are addictive; it is a means to forget the present time, and become involved in an virtual-imagined space and time. This is why online chatting and online games became so popular and addictive to a certain extent; they provide a person an opportunity to escape the reality that he dwells in. However, what Second life possesses that distinguishes it from other online platforms is the construction of a new identity and the social interaction of this reconstructed identity. Notably, studies that have been conducted during the past few years express situated personal experience, in addition to examining the needs and problems, and thus undermining the typical distinction between the virtual and real life (Bakardjieva M. , 2003). Accordingly, Second life represents a new and distinguished "virtual reality" for those who are interested in experiencing a new type of virtuality that defies that status quo of virtual environments. Thus, the intent of Second life's design is to allow users to literally construct a complete alternative reality from their own (Terdiman, 2003).

According to Milligram and Colquhoun (1999), technology has mapped reality, and this reality is being mapped by the virtual. So the real question is: "despite of the fact that these virtual environments are created by man himself and thus adheres to all logical explanations, however, do these virtual worlds slowly but surely map out the reality?" Could we advocate for Baudrillard's claim about the co-mingling of the virtual and real and its tremendous effect on the reality? This is what the study investigates, the ramifications of such co-mingling on the users identity in reality.

Hence, based on the digital shift and the rapid growth of the technological advances, the digital world is connected to the real world. People go into the digital world to escape reality, break out of certain codes, defy the boundaries and perceive the world from a different perspective; that's when they engage with symbolic representations that are nonetheless linked to reality. Therefore, in addition to investigating second life through an in-depth analysis of its impact on society regarding business and education, the exploration of the effect on one's identity is crucial. Even though many studies have been conducted to research second life and the exploitation of the latter in many fields mostly in education, business, social engagement and advertising, however little research has been done to affiliate between SL and the users identity in real life. Thus, the advent of virtual worlds has affected reality in so many ways, and it is important especially for users to understand the genuine uses of these worlds, but also become aware of its drawbacks on their real lives.

Second life and identity:

Second life is offering its user the opportunity to alter his own identity into becoming the person he wants to become through designing his own avatar and creating a lifestyle of his choice. And these changes affect the user in the virtual environments as in the real life itself. As a matter of fact, Nick Yee (2007) in his doctoral dissertation talks about the proteus effect that states that digital media allows us to make up both dramatic and subtle changes to our self-representations that affect how we interact with others in virtual environments in addition to changing our behavior due to avatars. On the same note, Jeremy Bailenson (2009), head of the lab and an assistant professor of communication at Stanford, studies the way self-perception

affects behavior in a research being done at Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL). He suggests that our self-perception dictates our attitude and behavior towards the real world. Whether it's confidence or insecurities, they will be translated in our daily conduct. And this applies in the virtual world as well, in second life in particular. Bailenson (2009) claims that "the qualities you acquire online - whether it's confidence or insecurity - can spill over and change your conduct in the real world, often without your awareness". Bailenson (2009) has found that even 90 seconds spent chatting it up with avatars is enough to elicit behavioral changes offline - at least in the short term."

The avatars we choose, whether they represent cuter, shorter, taller or thinner versions of ourselves are a means to boost our self-confidence and attain whatever we couldn't afford to be in the real life for any reason. Obviously it can affect the user in real life positively or negatively. Confidence can be gained or ideologies such as violence or offensive sex can be promoted. "In a therapy setting, we could use these virtual environments to get people to become more confident," says Yee. "But they can also be used in advertising and as propaganda." Moreover, Boellstroff (2008) believes that people can discover many things through their avatars especially identity issues linked to gender whereby people can choose whatever gender they desire. Beollstroff (2008) conducted an ethnographical study of second life and explored all aspects of social life. He discovered that people have the tendency in virtual worlds to be themselves in some way, but he also found out that one's experience in SL regarding his identity exploration is different from that in the real world. As a result, Beollstroff (2008) came to the conclusion that avatars allows the person to explore some aspects of his self that he could not do otherwise in

real life. Turkle (1996) asserts with Beollstroff that virtual world offers the opportunity for parallel lives through which the user gets the opportunity to explore his self while playing. Further than this, Taylor (2006) who did an ethnographic study of the virtual world “The Dreamscape” proposed that users acquire the sense of “being real” by using a body in the form of avatar and immersing themselves in virtual worlds. Consequently, this backs up Jean Baudrillard’s simulation; whereby Bauldirllard (1985) believes that simulation is the generation by models of real without origin or reality: a hyper-real... It allows the co-mingling of physical reality with virtual reality. Simulation threatens the difference between “true” and “false”, between “real” and “imaginary” (Bauldrillard, 1985). Therefore, Second life conforms to the conventions of postmodernism by allowing the user to abandon the constraints of reality and enter hyper reality where anything is possible.

Second life and education:

Apart from its basic concept of socialization, Second life has become a platform for educational purposes and is developing more and more to become a real platform for real education. Savin-Baden (2008) argues that it is important to integrate real life and second life learning activities, and create spaces for interaction. Neely and Ragas (2010) note how teachers and academics have been growing interest over second life education. Second life has become an important tool for instructors from over 150 academic institutions and at least 15 countries (Neely & Ragas, 2010). Second life is being used to teach a variety of subjects including literature, politics, law, marketing, media, medicine and engineering.

It has been praised for conducting new types of teaching in virtual environments and in establishing new learning activities that attracts students who are not satisfied with the typical teaching methods in real life.

Yet, some critics argue that second life teaching is not effective as real life. Thus, Foster (2007) believes that virtual worlds serve a better as a place for play than learning. Anthes (2007) agrees with Foster and suggests that the technical problems might be considered a barrier to a true effective teaching, and these things must be taken into consideration before announcing that second life has become a “real” platform for education. Coffman and Klinger (2007) discuss how the new “digital native” generation of learners is “seeking meaningful experiences that engage them to think critically and create new understandings that they can transfer to their real-world” (p. 31). Moreover, they assert that a variety of learning styles can become appealed through the virtual world, but there should be a variety of learning activities that appeal to a diverse range of learning approaches (Coffman & Klinger, 2007). Thus, second life also serves as a practice field for students to try out skills and apply concepts in realistic settings (Antonacci & Modaress, 2008). For instance, medicine students can perform surgeries on avatars; engineering students can create buildings, roads, even towns all within a virtual setting.

Robert Kennedy once said that: ‘There are those that look at things the way they are, and ask why? I dream of things that never were, and ask why not’. If we could have the opportunity to imagine things, and then apply and act upon these imaginations, what would stop us? Second life offers us this opportunity, and at this moment in our history, education is the prominent key for all humans to transcend above everything, and second life can play a significant role in exploring new learning and teaching approaches that challenge our status quo of teaching.

During 2007-8, there was an initiative by individuals and groups in universities to increase funding for researches and institutional projects (Kirriemuir, 2008). Many of these initiatives recognized that second life offers the capacity to create the environment to suit the learning in ways not possible in real life and enable learners to imagine new approaches (Blascovich, 2002). Salmon (2009) considers that Second life is “experiential, collaborative and immersive in ways that no virtual learning environment (VLE) or remote synchronous classroom ever could be” (p. 529). She believes that it is important in the future for academics to experience SL in order to understand its potential and, especially, SL’s affordances that enable exploration and discovery (Salmon, 2009). Papp (2010) claims that real classes will be shifted to online classes in the upcoming decade. He illustrates this by giving an example about St. Leo in Dade City, Florida University. He argues that this university is increasing its islands every year and offer classes supporting its 10,000 student’s and 1,700 on-campus students (Papp, 2010).

Another important aspect in Second life’s education is the transcendence of geography; in other words, there are no limits to pursue the university or college that one desires, thus in virtual world, geography doesn’t matter (Papp, 2010). These innovations through which an avatar can wander and interact and create are very enticing to learners. Thus, visiting and immersing oneself in learning locations and cultures can involve doing so in those no longer in existences or accessible in real life. Furthermore, simulations are considered very expensive in educational provisions in real life, Second life gives learners the opportunity to see how places look and “feel” what it is like being part of it. Second life makes them cheap and highly accessible and they could become a key ‘killer application’ of the future (Salmon, 2009, p. 532).

Childress and Braswell (2006) argue how online students become engaged in second life as they become more involved with each other and with their instructor. They have observed how social interaction affects the student's involvement in learning and they concluded that the visual feedback element of second life enhances the interaction and knowledge exchange among students and their instructors (Childress & Braswell, 2006). Further than this, the cognitive presence in online learning community is visible within Second life as group activities promote critical thinking and problem solving skills, and this in return is another important attribute for second life education (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999).

On the other hand, Dillenbourg, Schneider, & Synteta (2002) consider that collaborative learning is not a recipe and that they contradict the over-expectations of the benefits of virtual worlds in education. Because it is not possible to guarantee a successful collaborative task without rich interaction, discussion of meanings and representations, and exchanging roles, they emphasize the importance of teaching presence by offering two distinctive ways of carrying out collaborative processes (Dillenbourg et al., 2002). First, there should be a trigger in productive interactions, which is why teachers must assign well-structured duties. And second, all students must participate, and teachers must be aware of that, this is why it is difficult to track this in virtual worlds (Dillenbourg et al., 2002).

Therefore, even though second life and other virtual communities have broke the boundaries of education, yet how dependble these platforms for eduaction are still under question, because there are many barriers for a true education like the one we receive in real life. Nontheless, this educational revolution is awe insiprinig for many advancements in the future of education for both online and offline.

Second life bussines and adveristing:

Like education in Second life, business and advertising are highly prominent in this virtual environment. Linden Dollars is the currency of SL can be exchanged for USD in Lindex currency exchange market on the Second life website, whereby 1 USD approximately equals to 266 Linden Dollars. According to Borland (2005): “Some inhabitants are already making more than \$100,000 a year in real-world money by selling digital wares constructed inside the world or running full-fledged role-playing games”. It should be noted that Borland discussed the business in second life in 2005, thus this number has mostly increased over the past decade.

In capitalist societies, property is an important part of a personhood. It is an extension of one’s self because people are judged by their clothes, cars, homes, among other things. By giving virtual avatars virtual property, particularly property that is created out of their own work, simulation, interactivity and meaning (through a sense of ownership and accomplishment) increase (Jones, 2006). In Second life as the real life, American consumerism exists everywhere but in a virtual form. While walking in the virtual streets of second life, one cannot but notice the stores, people using certain products, billboard adverteng for products and so on. Business and the flow of money are extremely valuable for the survival of SL and it is important to note that users find meaning and experience by conducting business in SL, and this has ramifications over the real life of its users when it comes to their identity and social interaction. Again, the most appealing aspect of second life is “freedom”- which does not exist in the real world, and this is why users of SL find themselves indulged in things they can not engage with in real life. Thus, according to Second life official website in 2007, residents spent 1.6 million dollars within 24 hours on virtual products such as cloths, cars, pets, and many other things.

This is an indication of how SL users satisfy their “real needs” of purchasing certain items in virtual worlds, in a sense that cannot be purchased in real life.

According to Mennecke et al. (2008), Second life makes e-commerce become personal; in a way that provides “live” presence of the buyer to buy the virtual products. This approach of virtual worlds on the Internet has “created an alternative medium and lucrative shopping channel in the context of multichannel retailing which broadens interactive marketing opportunities for all players involved (i.e. consumers, retailers, and suppliers)” (Kuntze, Crudele, Reynolds, & Matulich, 2013). Kim and Forsythe (2008) claim that the interaction between the consumers on virtual worlds and the product enhances the entertainment value of shopping experience. Thus, a study conducted on people’s consumerist activities in virtual worlds concluded that users favored retailers that promote for social customer aspects, entertainment and variety of goods (Kuntze et al., 2013). That is why retailers utilized the virtual worlds for advertising, marketing, testing and launching products (Kuntze et al., 2013). Hence, it has become important for companies who want to market their products in real life, market them also in second life. This gives them the opportunity to provide a market presence, cost efficiency of advertising in virtual platforms, and the customer feedback that they can attain. This is why some marketing companies are also using these platforms to popularize their name. Companies like “Second Marketing” reported that in one marketing campaign, they interacted with 1,600 people in 60 hours (Tedeschi, 2007). Wallace (2000) believes that the presence of virtual avatars in e-commerce can increase profits up to three times.

On the other hand, Lieb (2007) believes that residents in Second life do not really care about the brand-name advertisers want to sell; what they really care about is sex.

Thus, “virtual sex trade is roaring in Second Life -a particularly popular business just sold for \$50,000 real dollars” (Blodget, 2007). Further than this, genital organs are one of the most frequent purchased items within second life (Blodget, 2007). Of course, this raises ethical questions about second life, and the true reasons behind people’s engagement in virtual worlds. Freud believes that everything is related to sex, whether directly or indirectly. So the question is: could we argue that more than 50% of second life users seek this virtual world to satisfy their sexual fantasies and perform other activities to hide the real causes, or do other reasons such as conducting business and socializing surpass sexuality in SL?? Levy (2014) argues that Face book has replaced Second life. He claims that face book is probably better, cheaper and more reliable and accessible than second life (Levy, 2014). Indeed, if we want to draw comparisons between second life and face book for example (both of them are social media channels), one would argue that face book is way ahead of Second life regarding many aspects. Creating an avatar as a first step is time consuming and needs money (if the person decided to create an unusual avatar); face book is definitely easier for advertising and reaches the right audience for certain ads. But second life’s creativity and innovation is what attracts its users to continuo on with their virtual lives. Thus, Enright (2007) believes that one of the main reasons that companies join Second life is to increase brand equity. Keller (1993) asserts this idea by arguing that Second life improves brand image and awareness, which consequently improves brand knowledge and brand equity.

It is inevitable that second life has introduced a new channel for marketing and for conducting business, but that does not mean it is the best way for conducting both. At the end of the day, second life is a virtual world that is based on one’s imagination. It is true that we are now living in the virtual age, but we must distinguish between what is seen and touched in real life,

And what remains on the screen of a computer, tablet, or phone. Those screens will always draw the line between the virtual and the real no matter how the line blurs between the two.

Hence, the following step would be discussing the theoretical foundation of this research – uses and gratification- in order to understand why users of second life seek this virtual reality, and how this in return affects their identity and social behavior.

Theoretical framework

Scholars have long understood the important role that media plays in influencing people's attitudes, perceptions, and actions. Sometimes audience seek the media for definite cause, such as entertainment or acquiring certain information, other times the audience is passive and sub-consciously absorbs what the media delivers. However, researches have discovered that users of media are more active than passive. The notion of "active communicator" has taken a major status in communication discipline (Bryant & Street, 1988). Thus, not only media needs the people; people are also in need of media. This is why the deliberate choice of users by media content in order to satisfy the users' needs which is the basic concept of the uses and gratifications approach (Rubin, 1994). Katz and Blumler (1974) were the first to draw to roots for uses and gratifications theory by stating that: "ask not what media do to people, but ask what people do with media". Hence, how users use the media and what gratifications they receive in return is the core idea of uses and gratifications theory. Moreover, one has to draw distinctions between what users of media seek and what they actually receive.

Wenner (1982) argues that gratifications sought are not necessarily congruent with gratifications obtained from media vehicles. In other words, the results of certain users of media might be unpredictable even if they know what they are seeking. This is probably one of the dangerous aspects of media gratifications; you get what you don't expect. And it must be noted that users of Second Life use this platform to gratify a need; whatever the need maybe.

Accordingly, this paper investigates "second life" and its repercussions on its users. The study will examine how users of second life are socially and psychologically affected by the latter. Thus, a focus group will be conducted in order to investigate the effects in addition to using the theory of uses and gratifications as the theoretical background to understand why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy their specific needs. And based on the findings in the literature review, the uses and gratifications of second life are obvious and categorized. They differ from one person to another depending on the society they belong to, their psychographics, character and motives. To sum it up, some users use Second Life to socialize, escape reality, explore themselves; others might use it to pass time, advertise for a product, conduct businesses or seek education.

So the next step would consist of investigating what the focus group has to say about the first research question.

RQ1: what are the uses and gratifications of second life?

However, what starts out as a need to fulfill in Second life might be transformed into another addictive need. What distinguish SL among other cyberspace platforms are the endless activities that can be done. Again, you are living in another world- only it is virtual.

Socialization and passing time is perhaps one of the main reasons that people become involved in such platforms, yet- and with time- most of those users become addicted to chatting rooms. So, the real question is: how is users psychologically gratified upon using chartrooms? Does it enable them psychological empowerment or social one?

Indeed, psychological gratifications is probably the most alluring part of virtual environments, hence meeting up and socializing on these virtual environments is a lot easier compared to real life socializing- what people fear in real life situations does not exists in virtual worlds, this is why there is no feeling of stress accompanied when socializing on these platforms. However, these gratifications sought on second will surely have an impact on its users. Philip Rosedale (2006) –Founder of Second life- attacks criticisms pointed at the repercussions of SL on it users. He doesn't believe that any person would be affected just by sitting on the computer because it depends on what kind of person he is-whether in reality or on virtual environments (Siklos, 2006). Moreover, if a person is confronted with a complex human environment with people from all over the world ... one could actually be better off in front of the computer's screen than in reality. Rosedale (2006) adds that: "Second Life can teach people new skills and connect them with new cultures in a way that the real world-environments of many places cannot".

Furthermore, what virtual environments like second life present to its users is the ability to explore one's own identity regarding gender, ethnicity, social class and values. And when one truly seeks to discover what his real identity is, he might be amazed of the "other side of him" that he did not know before. A person might discover that he is homosexual and SL gave him the opportunity to portray the opposite gender of his/her.

Nonetheless, this is where the real consequences of SL take place. By living two lives, the real and the virtual, with two sexes, the user's identity will be affected in real life, and the co-mingling of the two worlds, will clash at a certain point.

Another purpose for users of SL to be engaged in this virtual environment is conducting business. Second life's marketplace can be a concrete field to study how users gratify themselves through virtual consumption. However, it should be noted that no research has been carried out to study how virtual identity affect consumption in Second life, yet correlations between online shopping and how it affects the person psyche could be validated to virtual environments and Second life.

According to Menon & Kahn (2002), the decision to shop online is made with emotion rather than reason. Thus, when avatars interact in SL to buy promote or buy a certain product, analysis of the product will take place regarding the circumstances surrounding them (the virtuality if the world). Yet, what incentives push the users to conduct business on virtual platforms, knowing that the product that he buys or promotes for might remain virtual? What pushes him to convert real money (converted from real USD) to engage in virtual shopping?

Based on this, it is important to ask the following theoretical question:

RQ2: Does the gratification sought from Second life affect the user's identity in real life?

Methodology

A qualitative analysis using focus group will be conducted for this study in order to understand how Second life affects its users.

Focus group questions:

- 1- What was the main purpose for you joining second life, and has this purpose changed with time?
- 2- Describe your relationship with your avatar? And does it represent your offline/real self?
- 3- Do you sometimes mix-up between real life activities and Second life activities?
- 4- Do you carry out alterations on your avatar from time to time? If so, what prompts you to do so? And does this alteration affect your relationship with other avatars?
- 5- What do you normally do in Second life? And how do you believe that gives you gratifications?
- 6- Have you conducted business or sought education on Second life?
- 7- Do you believe that Second life has impacted your real life in certain ways?

Interpretation of the results

The discussion of the focus group gives a true insight about the users of second life and the gratifications they obtain in return, in addition to how second life affects one's identity. Thus, most people join second Life in order to kill time, however, they become addicted to it because second life gives them additive reasons to become attached to this platform. Joining Second life starts with socializing but is transformed into creating friendship,

Maintaining and transforming these friendships into real life ones. However, as they acquire new “virtual friends” on SL, they become psychologically empowered in real life because unconsciously they feel that they are being recognized and loved. And of course, one of our basic needs in real life is the need to be loved and cared about and this is why SL becomes addictive. But the significant issue here is that, the feeling aroused in SL becomes adopted in real life, and so our real life emotions becomes based on what we get from the virtual life and this is Baudrillard’s argument about hyper-reality, and this is why it is dangerous because we are basing our emotions and feelings on something that is virtual or fake or that does not exist in real life. On the other hand, it should be noted that Second life does indeed give users the opportunity to discover new things and to participate in educational platforms and conferences which can be attributed to the positive sides of SL. Indeed, a participant created an island, the other was engaged in technological conferences, or was involved in fashion shows, or got the opportunity to satisfy his desire and teleport from one place to another... this is why we should not underestimate the power of SL and how it can really fulfill desires and create opportunities that reflects positively on its users. The problem arises when these uses becomes part of their daily routine and swamps their “real daily activities” through which the users become engaged for long hours in SL in order to fulfill their desires.

Further than this, the “happy feeling” generated in real life from second life is a dangerous issue because this might lead to character disorder and might develop into something worse. Also, an interesting detail in this focus group is that almost all participants are aware of the gratification they seek and they consciously reveal this idea.

This connotes that users of Second life actively seek out Second life to fulfill whatever they want to fulfill regardless of the other gratification they obtain along the road. Users recognize that avatars may be a separate entity from them and are able to make observations and behave from an outside perspective. Hence, there is a complex relation between the experiences of the user's self in second life and that in the real physical world.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze the implications of Second life on the identity of its users. This study has practical implications for teachers, researchers and users of Second life. The findings about the users' practices and gratifications of second life have shown that virtual worlds have a significant potential in affecting one's identity in real life. In addition, the literature review presented a rich understanding of how education and business are operated in Second life and how they could be used for the benefit of real life education and business. Moreover, the focus group conducted portrayed a minor reflection of the current situations of users in Second life, particularly, what users seek in SL, what activities they conduct, and what gratifications they get in return. Therefore, it might be beneficial in the academic discipline for teachers to know more about education in SL and the nature of activities and learning processes that exist there, because at some point in the near future, teachers might have to implement teaching in virtual worlds. According to the literature and the focus group conducted, Second life affects its users in real life and as a result, it affects society as a whole; thus one's own identity is what distinguishes him from the other and if this identity becomes impacted, it will affect those around him and as a result affect his role in the society.

Our expectation for the future is the development of more virtual worlds that resemble our reality in its simplest details. The boundaries between the virtual and the real are becoming more blurred with time, and this trend will not stop in the near future. We now spend most of the time involved and indulged on the internet in all its platforms conducting business meeting, studying researching, listening to music, watching movies, socializing and wasting time. So the major question is: “What life are we really living, the virtual or the real?”

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