

Chapter 4.31

The Paradox of Computer–Mediated Communication and Identity: Peril, Promise and Second Life

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ABSTRACT

Past research on the effects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on identity has focused either on the inherent risks or opportunities it provides. The authors argue that the paradox within the nature of CMC has led to paradoxical predictions about the effects of CMC on identity. Rather than adopting a naïve perspective focusing on only one side of the paradox, the authors take a view of technological realism in which the paradox is embraced. Guided by these views, the authors analyze 59 students' papers reflecting on their identity choices in the creation and development of a Second Life avatar. Second Life is a three-dimensional (3D) multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) in which users create avatars (called "residents") to explore, interact with

other residents, learn, recreate, and shop with the local currency (i.e., Linden Dollars; <http://secondlife.com/whatis/>). Using the constant comparative method for thematic content, themes supporting a paradox of CMC effects on identity are identified from the student papers. The implications of a view of technological realism are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Past research on the effects of the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on identity tends to fall into one of two polarized camps: either the use of CMC will fracture the self in ways that threaten the very fabric of humanity, or CMC offers users a virtual utopia of self-disclosure, self-discovery, and self-actualization. However, to assume that

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the use of CMC will result in only positive or negative identity outcomes is to underestimate the complexity of the relationship between these constructs. A step into the world of one of CMC's newest technologies – Second Life – reveals that the future is neither as bleak nor as rosy as past research has predicted.

Second Life is a three-dimensional (3D) multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) in which users create avatars (called “residents”) to explore, interact with other residents, learn, recreate, and shop with the local currency (i.e., Linden Dollars; <http://secondlife.com/whatis/>). Second Life is described by its creator, Linden Labs, as “a free online virtual world imagined and created by its Residents. From the moment you enter Second Life, you’ll discover a fast-growing digital world filled with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunity (<http://secondlife.com/whatis/>). As of February 15, 2009, approximately 1,444,530 people logged into Second Life with approximately 60,000 logged in at any given time. An avatar is “an interactive, social representation of the user” (Meadows, 2008, p. 13). Residents initially choose between male and female 3D animated forms. However, once in Second Life, these “starter avatars” are modified by a series of identity choices limited only by a resident’s imagination. For this reason, the Second Life environment is a rich area for the exploration of both CMC and identity issues.

To facilitate a more critical understanding of CMC and identity, the chapter explores the paradoxes revealed by research on CMC and identity. First, we explore the paradoxical nature of CMC, guided by competing theoretical explanations. Second, we examine how changes in the conceptualization of the self (from premodern, to modern, to postmodern) have led to paradoxical predictions about identity in computer-mediated contexts. Finally, we posit that the naïve past conceptualizations of the effect of CMC use on identity must be replaced by a more realistic understanding of the complex relationship between these concepts. The

advantages of adopting a view of technological realism are revealed in the analysis of students’ attitudes toward Second Life (SL) avatars and identity in a hybrid Face to Face (FtF)/Second Life course. By understanding the paradoxes of CMC and identity through an exploration of the empirical research, we seek to establish a greater recognition of and appreciation for the complex relationship between CMC and identity.

THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF CMC CHARACTERISTICS

The many advantages and disadvantages characteristic of the CMC process create the unique paradoxical nature of the Internet (Joinson, 2005). The same CMC characteristics that comprise CMC’s advantages – the perception of anonymity, the ability to communicate efficiently across time and geographical distance, the chance to experiment with self-presentation and identity – also pose the greatest risks to CMC users.

One key feature that distinguishes CMC from FtF is anonymity, or the inability to confirm through visual cues the identity of the person(s) with whom users communicate via CMC (Gurak, 2001). The paradox lies in the fact that the perception of anonymity can free users to share their honest opinions without the fear of retribution (Joinson, 1999, 2001; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002), but can also allow users to deceive (Joinson & Dietz-Uhler, 2002), harass (Barak, 2005), or mistreat others without fearing reprisal. For online predators, the anonymity of CMC offers a new, expansive hunting ground (Denegri-Knott & Taylor, 2005), leading to aversive interpersonal behaviors such as cybercheating (Joinson, 2005; Whitty, 2005), cyberstalking (Joseph, 2003), cyberteasing (Madlock & Westerman, 2009), and cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Li, 2006; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith, et al., 2008).

A second key feature of CMC is speed, which refers to the changing expectations about and

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