Cyber-Synchronicity:
A Theoretical Model for Bridging the Virtual and the Material

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ABSTRACT

Communication affects us as human beings, whether via virtual worlds or the material one, and involves a variety of issues. Some are issues both worlds have in common, while others are unique, depending on the individuals involved, the communities inhabited, and the mediums utilized. Prior research has demonstrated that, for inhabitants who reside both in the virtual and the material, there is significant effect on the experience of both worlds stemming from both worlds. This study combines Gergen's Saturated Self theory, Hamman's Virtual Community theory, and Van Manen's four phenomenological existentials to posit both an additional four existentials unique to virtual communication and a theoretical model that can be used to chart the impact of each world upon the other. The Cyber-Synchronicity model will aid in a deeper understanding of the meaning and impact of synchronous and synonymous participation in a virtual community.

Keywords: Cyber-Synchronicity, Community Model Internet, Identity Model Internet, Internet, Virtual Identity

INTRODUCTION

According to a report from the Pew Research Center, 75% of all American adults have opted to be a part of a group or organization. Interestingly, 80% of Internet users participate in groups, while only 56% of non-Internet users do so (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011). Contrary to the stereotype, then, Internet users are more actively social than non-Internet users. The Internet has become a facet of life for millions of people around the globe, and yet it is still perceived by many to be separate from what most would consider "real life" in terms of concepts of self, group, and behavior.

Consideration of the interplay of the virtual and the material, and their impact on issues of self (identity), group (community), and behavior (culture) for Internet participants has been limited by the absence of data on non-virtual (material) elements associated with Internet users. For purposes of this discussion, the term "identity" refers to an individual's sense of self, the term "community" refers to an individual's sense of the others around him, and the term "culture" refers to an individual's sense of place within his social group(s). While some of the pertinent literature has examined issues of identity, community, or culture, the emphasis has been on either virtual or material manifestations, not their synchronous and possibly synonymous existence.

As the Internet finds its way into more and more homes across the globe, virtual

communities are becoming more prevalent, blending virtual and material environments. The Internet has also begun to re-define what community has traditionally meant, moving away from geographic locations to realms unstructured by spatial boundaries. In a virtual community, geography no longer dictates participation so long as internet access is available.

Howard Rheingold (1994) examined what now seems a rather primitive virtual community over a decade ago. Sherry Turkle (1995) studied virtual identity and its deployment by those who engage in online opportunities. More recently, Laurie Kendall (2002) added to the literature by focusing on how, in a social online community, the participants' virtual identities were negotiated within the virtual construct. Current studies of virtual community and culture, however, have not really explored the synchronous interconnection and influence of the virtual and material worlds upon each other, nor the possibility that such interconnection and influence could also be synonymous. Much previous virtual reality research, for example, focused primarily on occasional and extraordinary events, giving little insight into routine day-to-day events and interactions that participants commonly encounter. In order to better understand the interconnection between virtual and material worlds, analysis must examine a participant's experiences – specifically those that touch the virtual and material realms simultaneously.

Because analyzing only the virtual dimensions of a virtual community is insufficient to illustrate participants' motives and relationships, knowledge of participants' experiences in both material and virtual environments are required to reveal how modern virtual communities are constructed and participated in. To do so requires a new scholarly lens through which issues of identity, community, and culture can be viewed. This means of examination must allow for the possibility of overlap between virtual and material worlds, with specific attention to the shaping of the participant's lived experience or, at least, how he or she thinks that the confluence has shaped his or her experience.

Theoretical Grounding

No single existing theoretical model provides an accurate view of issues of identity, community, and culture in a virtual environment, and their potential relationship to these issues in a material environment. To provide a suitable means of analyzing these phenomena, elements from three different theoretical concepts will be combined to form the basis for a new way of understanding these issues: Identity theory, community theory, and phenomenological existentials. With this hybrid lens, a more accurate view of the phenomena may be achieved, and a more thorough understanding may be possible.

Identity

Attempting to define identity is like trying to name the color of wind: For every person asked, a different answer will be given. As James Fearon (1993) notes:

Our present idea of identity is a fairly recent social construct, and a rather complicated one at that. Even though everyone knows how to use the word properly in everyday discourse, it proves quite difficult to give a short and adequate summary statement that captures the range of its present meanings. (¶ 3)

Some approaches link the concepts of identity and self. Erikson (1950, 1968) expanded upon Freudian psychology by positing that a person's sense of self is based upon that individual's perceptions of psychic states in the past, present, and future. According to Erikson, a person constructs a sense of self by moving through a series of eight stages, each dependent on successful navigation of the previous one, in a process that takes the individual from infancy to middle-age and beyond.

Marcia (1980, 1987), who formulated a neo-Eriksonian framework called "The Identity Status," perceived identity for an individual as being achieved through a process of questioning identity, undergoing an identity crisis, and then committing to a post-crisis identity. Marcia

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