Chapter 98
Viewing Cybercommunities through the Lens of Modernity:
The Case of Second Life

Victoria Wang
University of Portsmouth, UK

John V. Tucker
Swansea University, UK

Kevin Haines
Swansea University, UK

ABSTRACT

The growth of cybercommunities is a notable social phenomenon. Empirical studies of cybercommunities have described new forms of social behaviour that call for deeper conceptual analysis. Drawing on evidence from our research in the cybercommunity Second Life, the authors examine the sociology of cybercommunities through the lens of Giddens' abstract theories of modernity. In particular, the authors suggest that an individual's participation in cybercommunities may be gauged using a spectrum of individual responses to particular abstract conditions of modernity. These abstract conditions have interpretations ranging from seeking refuge from the vicissitudes of the real world to pursuing the playful heights of modernity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet is host to numerous and diverse cybercommunities. The structure of cybercommunities can be categorised into different types, by governance, social or commercial purpose, and technology. For example, cybercommunities can be sponsored by organisations or initiated by members (Porter, 2004) and based on technologies involving one dimensional text, three dimensional (3D) animation, audio and video. Within many advanced 3D cybercommunities (e.g., Second Life, There, Activeworlds), computer technologies have generated new forms of human communication, interaction and social structure; participants are able to play roles in new environments, situations and communities, realising all kinds of human activities and fantasies.

This article arises from a research project on the nature of deviance in cybercommunities. Of particular interest was the relationship between social life in cybercommunities and the modern world. Drawing on ideas mainly from Giddens' theories of modernity (1990 & 1991), the formation and various attributes of cybercommunities can be understood as extreme products of modernity. Second Life was created by advanced technologies to replicate and reflect the real world, and thus features many contemporary communities, cultures and activities. It was selected as the field of empirical enquiry because, being an authentic social community with a rich social life, Second Life could be understood as an exemplar of modernity, both sociologically and technologically. In this article, through the theoretical lens of Giddens' theories, we attempt to provide an understanding of individuals' motivations for engaging in cybercommunities. Giddens' theories of modernity are particularly suited to analyse individuals' participation in cybercommunities for six main reasons:

1. These theories are comprehensive and rich in sociological ideas and cover most aspects of social life;
2. These theories discuss the individual and community, which is needed for a more in depth study of participation in cybercommunities;
3. The role of technology in shaping modernity is emphasised in these theories, which makes them suited to explore the technological nature of cybercommunities;
4. Giddens' articulation of the conditions and characteristics of modernity have formed the basis of much subsequent theorising;
5. In contrast to the fluid nature of postmodern theories (e.g., Bauman 2001), Giddens' work focuses on the dynamism of modernity constituted by three characteristics,[1] which forms the abstract analytical constructs of our empirical enquiry; and

6. Based on his idea of globalisation, Giddens' theories are culturally independent – suitable for analysing cybercommunities.

Examining empirical data from research in Second Life through the lens of Giddens' work, we suggest that the birth and rise of cybercommunities are direct responses to certain characteristics and conditions of modernity. We explain the motivations and perceptions behind individuals' participation in cybercommunities through Giddens' dynamism of modernity (1990). We propose that an individual's participation in cybercommunities may be gauged using a spectrum of individual responses to the modern world – ranging from seeking a form of hiding place to *retreat* from the vicissitudes of the real world, to seeking a rich and diverse playground in which to *pursue* the heady heights of new possibilities for self-identity and expression. Indeed, retreat and pursuit are two extreme ends of the sociological spectrum. The analysis presented in this article suggests that, on a continuum of motivations, an individual's response falls between these two extremes and may be conceived as a combination of these two opposing forces, pushing and pulling the individual, simultaneously.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: ON CYBERCOMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUALS' PARTICIPATION

Academic research on cybercommunities has been wide-ranging and multi-disciplinary (Hercheui, 2010). Although a lot has been said about cybercommunities, there is still much to be researched, as these communities are evolving constantly and rapidly (Artz, 2009). Of course, many different terminologies have been used to describe these virtual social formations, such as Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs), Virtual Social Networks (VSNs), virtual worlds, online worlds, virtual communities and online communities.

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