Examination of a cybersex fringe community

Mary Schmitt

Queens University of Charlotte

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The Web 2.0 has advanced technology to further new media in a networked society. These expansions have increased the popularity of sexual content online. One area that has developed quickly online is sex and sexually related groups because “the net has undoubtedly become the most pervasive medium of sex education on the planet” (Reed, 2018, p. 110). A division of the virtual world includes cybersex which includes “SkyperSex, sex chat rooms, cellphone sex (phone sex made easier and more mobile), sexting, teledildonics (sex toys mutually controlled via online connection), sex-centered digital games and sex in virtual worlds” (Reed, 2018 p. 111). Sex in virtual worlds allows users to identify their cyber sexualities; sexual alternatives can be explored safely and could be deemed the safest sex because there is no exchange of bodily fluids. In this examination of a cybersex fringe community, it will involve the free 3D virtual world of *Second Life,* where the concept promotes “Your world. Your Imagination” (Second Life, n.d., para. 1).

The global virtual world of *Second Life* started in 2003 and “of the 36 million *Second Life* accounts that had been created by 2013—the most recent data Linden Lab will provide—only an estimated 600,000 people still regularly use the platform” (Jamison, 2017, para. 54). In this examination, discovery showed that the online community of *Second Life* represents itself as the most extensive user-created 3D online life with the intent for users to connect with a global community within many communities of various interests. The connections are endless within *Second Life* as the service hosts events and forums such as parties, workshops, contests, and more. Also, you can explore thousands of 3D destinations where you can connect with other users to explore the virtual world. The most important part of *Second Life* is the access to the thousands of various unique virtual groups which include sex groups. Even though there has been a decrease in users, “*Second Life* has maintained a few strongholds... particularly over the BDSM and fetish communities, who enjoy [118 different adult-only areas](http://secondlife.com/destinations/adult)” (Billock, 2016, para. 4). Participants can know each other, be completely anonymous, and engage in real-time digital sources. Users can experience sexual encounters in addition to relationships, which all take place either virtually or in the participants’ imagination.

Those that belong to the cybersex culture of the virtual community of *Second Life* contribute to its identity by supporting and participating virally within the sexually themed groups, events, and destinations. Also, the user has the ultimate control to create and design their look, which contributes to the overall population of *Second Life*. The self-creation user generated content in the viral world includes “the exchange of text-based sexual chat is supplemented by graphic sexual imagery using avatars that simulate sex. Indeed, “*Second Life* has a thriving sexual culture and a wide diversity of sexual subcultures, with the two of the largest being Furries and Goreans” (Miller, 2011, p. 177). To further understand the role of *Second Life* participants, the social cognitive theory is applied. In this theory, it is “a complex, multifaceted theoretical framework that seeks to understand human thought processes and behavior” (Sirianni & Vishwanath, 2012, p. 5). The *Second Life* members shape their contributions by their human and virtual thought processes and behaviors by their choices within the viral community. These contributions come from “four main features that enable online intimacy and make it a novel form of relationship — imagination, interactivity, availability, and anonymity” (Miller, 2011, p. 179). The growing popularity of sexual content online correlates to how imagination plays an essential role in contributing to the identity of the group. Virtual worlds exist because of imagination. The imagination creates an escape as an Atlanta mother with severely autistic twins takes full advantage of this feature. In her *Second Life*, “Bridgette spends an hour and a half on the online platform *Second Life*, where lives in a sleek paradise of her owning devising” (Jamison, 2017, para. 4). Interactivity also shapes the identity of the group because cybersex is “a social interaction between at least two persons who are exchanging real-time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused or satisfied” (Miller, 2011, p. 176). The availability aspect of the fringe community gives identity to the group by providing sexual minorities a voice in cyberspace. As a user in *Second Life,* you can set your engagement between complete anonymity or true self, and the user controls the content and connection.

Those who do not belong to the *Second Life* and its cybersex fringe communities can either contribute criticism or support to the identity. The criticism of *Second Life* and its virtual world led Time magazine to label *Second Life* “one of the 5 Worst websites because of its user unfriendliness” (Hemp, 2007, para. 1). This criticism drove *Second Life* to enhance its virtual world presence, technology, safety regulations, and legal overviews of the company. Those that comprehend virtual worlds and experiences but do not belong to *Second Life* contribute to the identity by the notion of support, understanding, and developing business ventures. There is a market for virtual 3D worlds, and “companies will end up creating (and governing) their own 3D environments – for example, standalone virtual shopping malls, where users can meet with the avatars of real-world friends” (Hemp, 2007, para. 5).

In conclusion, the communication and culture of fringe communities connect to a network society. The examination of cyber sexuality within *Second Life* demonstrates that fringe communities exist within a broader online community or culture. There is an old saying that sex sells, and that supports that “there is no aspect of contemporary life that has been impacted more deeply by the Internet than sexuality” (Reed, 2018, p. 109).

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