Individual Motivations for Using Social Virtual Worlds: An Exploratory Investigation in Second Life

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Abstract

Advances in social virtual worlds, such as Second Life, create new opportunities for various applications in business, education, entertainment, and many other real-world domains. However, the benefits of social virtual worlds cannot be realized without sufficient user participation. There is thus far a paucity of research that has investigated people’s motivations for participating in social virtual worlds. Motivated by such concerns, this study aims at investigating the motivations for participating in social virtual worlds based on the uses and gratifications theory. An online survey with open-ended questions is conducted to identify the key motivations of user participation in Second Life. Content analysis is used to code and categorize the responses from 188 subjects. The results show that users’ motivations or needs for participating in Second Life can be categorized into three types, namely, utilitarian needs, hedonic needs, and social needs. This research has important implications for both researchers and practitioners.

1. Introduction

In recent years, virtual worlds have grown dramatically in both popularity and numbers, and have garnered significant attention from the public at large as well as from practitioners and researchers in various domains [26]. It has been reported that venture capital, technology and media firms have invested globally more than $1 billion dollars in 35 virtual world companies from October 2006 to October 2007. Gartner predicts that 80 percent of active Internet users will have a “Second Life” in the Virtual World by the end of 2011. There are a large number of publicly accessible online virtual worlds designed for a variety of functions, as well as a diverse set of target markets [26]. Some of these virtual worlds such as Second Life, There, and Active Worlds are built for general purposes (e.g., socializing, searching for fun, creating, and learning) and mainly targeted to adults, while others such as Disney’s Virtual Magic Kingdom and Sulake Labs’ Habbo Hotel are designed for specific purposes and ages [24]. According to the designed functions, virtual worlds can be classified into two basic types: 1) combat-focused games, and 2) social virtual worlds [13]. This study focuses on social virtual worlds, also called 3D virtual worlds [24].

Advances in social virtual worlds have created new opportunities for various applications in business, education, entertainment, and many other real-world domains. Social virtual worlds are becoming important tools for socializing, social networking, entertainment, collaboration, business development, as well as other activities [26]. First, social virtual worlds can be designed to function as realistic economic zones, and thus, they are much more than games [26]. Second, the benefits of social virtual worlds are found not only in the economic area, but also in social and other domains. For example, one of the most popular and well-known social virtual worlds, Second Life (http://www.secondlife.com) by Linden lab (http://lindenlab.com/), has provided a supportive environment for various practices in wide-ranging domains. Within Second Life, companies (e.g., IBM) have invested and started their virtual businesses, universities (e.g., Harvard and Stanford) have set up
virtual campuses, and governments (e.g. NOAA) have established their virtual presence3.

However, the benefits of social virtual worlds cannot be realized without sufficient user participation. Without sufficiently attracting a large number of users willing to expend a significant amount of time, social virtual worlds are most likely to fail. Also, it is crucially important for the operators of social virtual worlds (e.g., Linden lab) to understand the characteristics and motivations of their customers. Although the importance of motivating people to participate in social virtual worlds has been highlighted by both researchers (e.g., [26]) and practitioners, there is thus far a paucity of research that has focused on this issue. Motivated by such concerns, this study aims at investigating the motivations for participating in social virtual worlds. Specially, this study attempts to explore questions of why people use social virtual worlds and what they do in social virtual worlds from the perspective of the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory [6] used in a number of other settings e.g., [9, 10, 19, 22, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 34, 39]. The research questions generated in this study are: (1) For what do people use social virtual worlds, especially Second Life? (2) Do the uses and gratifications associated with social virtual worlds differ from motivations identified in previous research regarding other kinds of Internet applications? (3) How can understanding of user motivations help marketers develop 3D Internet marketing strategies?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a review of the existing research on social virtual worlds. Section 3 explains the theoretical background for investigating individual motivations and concerns of using social virtual worlds. Then the research design and data analysis are described in section 4 and 5, respectively. Section 6 summarizes the findings and discusses the implications for both research and practice. The last section concludes the study.

2. Social Virtual Worlds

2.1 Social Virtual Worlds and Second Life

Even if game-like elements are included, social virtual worlds are different from online games in that they primarily offer an opportunity for social interaction to support a variety of applications in various real-world domains, including (group) work, learning and education, and other business activities [13]. In this study, the social virtual world is defined as a three-dimensional (3D), Internet-based, immersive, massive multi-user virtual environment where a group of people gather together to engage in interactions for social, entertainment, educational, and commercial and business endeavors.

Second Life, launched by Linden lab in 2003, is the most popular and technologically advanced social virtual worlds [13]. It is a fast-growing digital world filled with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunities. On its website 4, Second Life has showcased its applications in a variety of domains by business corporations, educational institutions, and governments, etc. The applications of Second Life in different domains are listed in the following paragraphs.

2.1.2. Education in Second Life. Visionary corporations (e.g., Michelin, IBM, and Xerox) from around the globe, have all established and grown significant presences in Second Life. They are working in the social virtual world in a wide variety of ways, ranging from holding meetings and conducting training to building product prototypes or simulating business situations in a safe learning environment.

2.1.3. Other organizations in Second Life. In addition to many world-class companies and universities, currently in Second Life, there are also a number of other types of organizations including government institutions such as NOAA, the US Navy, and the US Army.

However, the values of an emerging Information Technology (IT) on productivity, as well as other aspects, can be realized only if it is accepted and used [36]. Social virtual worlds such as Second Life have attracted “a heterogeneous pool of participants who join activities with various expectations and for different reasons” [1]. However, the values of such social virtual worlds can only come true with sufficient user participations in these worlds. In other words, popularity is crucial to social virtual worlds that are most likely to fail without a large number of users who spend a significant amount of time in usage. Thus, it is crucially important for the social virtual world

3 http://secondlifegrid.net/casestudies

4 http://work.secondlife.com/successstories/
operators, such as Linden lab, to understand who their customers are, what they do in-world, and why they participate in these worlds.

Motivation is considered widely in prior research to be an essential factor that drives perceptions and behaviors [34]. In particular, based on motivation-oriented perspectives, IS researchers have demonstrated that motivations (intrinsic and extrinsic) are important determinants of individuals’ intention to use a technology (e.g., [8]). Hence, in order to promote user participation, social virtual world operators need to establish a better understanding of consumer concerns and motivations regarding Second Life usage.

2.2 Research on Social Virtual World Usage

In line with the dramatic increase of practice in social virtual worlds is the increase of academic research on virtual worlds from various perspectives. For example, The DATABASE for Advances in Information Systems journal published a special issue on virtual worlds in 2007, addressing topics related to virtual worlds that range from engineering to acceptance and diffusion, and from marketing and economics to laws and politics. As well, journals from various areas and domains, including Communications of the Associations for Information Systems (e.g. [26, 27, 32]), Science (e.g., [3]), and Harvard Business Review (e.g., [13]), have published papers on topics related to social virtual worlds from diverse angles. The wide range of topics and perspectives on virtual worlds in the academic research is, to a large extent, due to the wide range of applications of these virtual worlds in practice.

Since the success of social virtual worlds depends directly on sufficient user participation, there is a great deal of work and effort put into studying the acceptance and use of social virtual worlds such as Second Life. As first attempts in this area, prior studies have adopted the traditional technology acceptance model (TAM) or extended-TAM models to study the acceptance of social virtual worlds such as Second Life (e.g.,[11]). However, these studies have either used convenient samples or have shown that a TAM-based lens may not be sufficient for understanding the acceptance of virtual worlds due to the combined work and play motif of such massive multi-user virtual environments.

Although several other studies have carried out literature reviews and consequently propose more complicated theoretical models for understanding virtual world acceptance from a hedonic perspective (e.g., [15]) or predicting virtual world use-related behaviors such as buying virtual items in virtual worlds (e.g., [12]), these studies have yet to be validated empirically. Thus, it is urgent to establish and empirically validate a comprehensive and relevant theoretical model of social virtual world acceptance. In order to do that, it is essential to have a better understanding of which motivations play critical roles in determining the acceptance and use of such a new technology, especially given that these motivations can range across utilitarian, hedonic and social dimensions. This study addresses this gap in the research by exploring the motivations of social virtual world users.

3. The Uses and Gratifications Theory

U&G theory originated in mass communication research in the 1970s to identify audience motivations for the use of new medium innovations, such as radio and television [5, 30]. According to U&G, users’ decisions to use a medium are determined by the functions for which the medium serves its users. Previous researchers in mass communication research have applied U&G to understand audience motivations for using radio, newspaper and television [19, 25, 29]. Recently, U&G has been used in the studies of the uses of new media and technologies, ranging from computer bulletin boards [28], cable television [9], TV remote control devices [38], computer-aided instructional settings [24]; now it also includes the Internet [18, 34]. Thus, U&G research has been quite fruitful in understanding individual motivations and concerns for using various media [10, 22, 34].

Since the emergent and rapid development of the Internet, several studies have been conducted to understand users’ motivations and concerns of Internet use, seen from the perspective of U&G. According to these studies, individual motivations for use of the Internet can be classified into three general types, namely, utilitarian, hedonic and social motivations. Accordingly, this study examines individual motivations for using social virtual worlds from the perspective of these three dimensions of uses.

First, the utilitarian dimension of motivations is based on the assumption that users are practical problem-solvers [4]. Utilitarian motives refer to purposeful, rational and task-focused values (e.g., shopping, searching information, and learning), resulting from problem-solving, goal-directed activities [2]. Users experience utilitarian motives when their pre-determined purposive needs are fulfilled. Thus, utilitarian motives are characterized as instrumental or extrinsic motives [37]. They are increased by task achievement rather than by the usage experience itself [2]. Prior research has emphasized the importance of utilitarian motives as a determinant of Internet media uses [31, 34, 39] and computer applications [37]. In the
context of social virtual worlds, the utilitarian potential of the new 3D virtual world technology is expected to have a strong influence on the adoption decision. For example, users may use the social virtual world for starting businesses, learning languages and computer skills, shopping, and facilitating education.

Second, in addition to utilitarian motives, people’s decisions to use social virtual worlds are influenced by hedonic motives. In consumer behavior research, hedonic motives are viewed as an overall judgment of experiential benefits, such as entertainment, excitement, playfulness and escapism [2, 14]. Compared with utilitarian motives which are functional and task-related, hedonic motives are experiential and enjoyment-related [37]. In other words, hedonic motives represent intrinsic motives [37]. Users obtain hedonic motives when the act of a medium or technology usage is appreciated in its own right, regardless of whether pre-determined tasks are completed. For example, people often use the Internet for entertainment, for the joy of the surfing experience, rather than simply for rational, task-focused purposes. Hedonic motives have been found to be an important determinant of Internet adoption and other media adoptions [20, 21, 33]. In the special context of social virtual worlds, searching for fun, exploration and playing 3D games are some of the potential hedonic values for which users seek.

Third, it has been recognized that more and more people are using the Internet for social networking and interpersonal communication. Thus, in addition to utilitarian and hedonic motives, social motives are the third potential determinant of Internet adoption. Social motives (e.g., meeting similar others, chatting with close friends, interacting with strangers) refer to the assessment of the benefits resulting from fulfilling interactive and communicative purposes. Hence, social motives represent another extrinsic motive category. Prior research has emphasized the importance of socialization motivation as being an essential influence of Internet usage [22, 34]. In the context of social virtual worlds, meeting and chatting with other people is expected to be an important motivation for use of this new technology.

4. Data Collection

The purpose of this study is to understand individual motivations for use of social virtual worlds from the perspective of U&G theory. Our exploratory study was conducted to identify and categorize the key factors of individual motivations for use of social virtual worlds. Data were collected from “real” field users of Second Life, using an online survey with open-ended questions. We chose Second Life as our research site since it is the most well-known social virtual world in existence. As one of the earliest social virtual worlds in the market, Second Life has represented the typical development of social virtual worlds since it was first opened to the public in 2003 [7]; this was followed by a number of others such as HiPiHi (http://www.hipihi.com/) in China.

4.1 Online Survey

The survey comprised of two open-ended questions and several demographical questions. To refine the survey, a pre-test was conducted with 10 graduate students who were also Second Life users. Questions that were confusing were discussed and reworded for clarification. The refined survey was then posted on a widely-used online survey servicing website. Invitation messages containing a link to the survey in each were distributed to Second Life users through a number of avenues, including mailing lists, postings, blogs, as well as “in-world” announcements, personal contacts and word-of-mouth. Economic incentives were provided to encourage participation. Respondents who gave valuable answers were given L$100 in appreciation of the effort and input contributed. Moreover, an extra bonus of L$100 was given to a number of “top” respondents who contributed the “most” valuable answers. Reminders were sent two weeks after the initial invitation distribution.

4.2 Respondents

Within a six-week period, 516 people viewed our survey. Among them, 192 completed the survey, representing a response rate of 37.21%. Four responses were removed from the analysis because of insufficient necessary information, leaving a total of 188 responses for analysis.

Second Life does not provide data regarding the social-economic structure of the users [11]; thus, it is not easy to evaluate the representativeness of our sample. Previous studies have expected Second Life users to have characteristics similar to Internet users, and have thus compared the demographic profile of the respondents in their study with that of the Internet population in order to demonstrate the representativeness of the sample [11]. Here, we refer to the statistics of Second Life users as reported by third-parties to justify our sample selection, a practice that has been used by previous IT usage studies (e.g., [16]). The third-party statistics that we use in the current study is the Second Life User Statistics of December 2007 by Michael Frost\(^5\). The statistics track the data

\(^5\) http://secondter.wikispaces.com/Second+Life+User+Statistics
from the economic statistics by *Linden Lab* to generate the user statistics, and thus, is believed to be a reliable surrogate of the population of *Second Life* users.

First, the demographics of the current study indicate that 57.45% of all respondents are male, compared to 41.55% female, thus showing a high consistency with the gender ratio in Frost’s (59.32% male versus 40.68% female). Second, the age structure of our sample is as follows: 13-17 years of age (2.13%), 18-24 (26.60%), 25-34 (26.06%), 35-44 (24.47%), 45 plus (20.74%), and unknown (0%); this is also consistent, to a large extent, with that in Frost’s (1%, 24%, 36%, 23%, 15%, and 1%, respectively). Third, the respondents in the current study come from all over the world, including 37.50% from North America, 19.15% from Europe, 26.60% from Asia-Pacific, 6.12% from South America and 1.06% from Africa.; in comparison, the percentages in Frost’s are 41.94% from North America, 39.95% from Europe, 10.45% from Asia-Pacific, 4.35% from South America, and 0.20% from Africa; thus, our sample contains relatively fewer respondents from Europe (and North America) but a few more from Asia-Pacific, probably due to the fact that the authors of the current paper are all from universities located in Asia-Pacific. In general, the demographic profile of our sample shows a very high consistency with that in Frost’s statistics, representing a sufficient representativeness of our sample.

Further, given the wide range of possible topics, the avenues that we used to announce our survey for data collection were extended to the wide “geographic” distribution of the places we visited in *Second Life* as well as mailing lists, forums, and blogs. Thus, we have confidence that our sample represents, to a large extent, the population of *Second Life* users.

### 5. Data Analysis and Results

In order to explore the individual motivations of *Second Life* users, the two open-ended questions in our survey were: “What (purposes) do you use *Second Life* for?” and “Why do you use *Second Life*?” The second question focuses completely on individual users’ motivations for using *Second Life*, while the first sheds light on both motivations and reasons for usage. Given that the primary objective of this study is to explore individual user motivations for use of the social virtual world, we excluded from our content analysis those answers to the first question that referred to external reasons of usage (e.g., social norms), and focused only on those comments that related to “personal” motives. For example, if a respondent claimed that he used *Second Life* because of “spare time and [because] my friend told me about it,” we excluded “my friend told me about it” from our analysis and coded only “spare time” in a specific category.

#### 5.1 Coding Schema

The coding schema was initially developed based on categories of motivations identified in previous studies, including utilitarian needs, hedonic needs and social needs. We then did a “trial” content analysis of the response texts to demonstrate the relevancy of the initial coding schema, as well as to refine it. The resultant categories and codes are shown in Table 1 in conjunction with presentation of results.

#### 5.2 Content Analysis

After a refined version of the coding schema was developed, two analysts who were familiar with both U&G theory and the virtual world (*Second Life*) did content analysis independently. Their codes were compared, indicating very high consistency in terms of the resulting codes. Inconsistencies were then discussed and re-coded based on the discussions.

Noting that a respondent could indicate multiple motives within one response (even within one sentence), we identified each of these motives and coded them accordingly. For example, a response that said, “I am disabled and *Second Life* lets me do things and meet people I never could in real life.” Another example is that a number of subjects referred to “socializing” as one of their motivations of using *Second Life* mentioning that within *Second Life* they could socialize or meet with people from all over the world, something that they could not easily do in their real lives. In these cases, we coded both “socializing” and “second experience” for these responses.

In some cases, respondents tended to use umbrella words to describe their motivations. For example, a majority of respondents identified “socializing” as one motivation for using *Second Life*. By reading through the responses, we could easily tell that the umbrella word “socializing” actually referred to a variety of behaviors, including communicating or keeping in touch with families and friends, meeting new people from different cultures and making friends with them, chatting/talking/discussing with people, building communities by interacting with people with similar interests or opinions, and social networking for business, etc. Yet, in some cases, it was not easy to tell exactly what “socializing” represented. Hence, we did not distinguish these diverse behaviors from others, but classified them with an umbrella code (i.e., “socializing”).
5.3 Results

As suggested, “people come to [virtual] worlds for a variety of reasons” [13], and our results confirm this claim. Based on the qualitative data, the analysts coded the responses from the 188 participants into 563 items. These items were mapped neatly into the three categories of motivations (based on U&G theory), namely, utilitarian needs, hedonic needs, and social needs. Table 1 shows the results of the content analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
<th>Comment Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarian</td>
<td>205 (36.41%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>49 (8.70%)</td>
<td>I've also been taking classes learning how to create things with the building tools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>37 (6.57%)</td>
<td>I use it for shopping to make my self feel sexy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making money</td>
<td>28 (4.97%)</td>
<td>My primary purpose has shifted from 3d creation to making money. I am also using it for personal gain...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating</td>
<td>28 (4.97%)</td>
<td>I primarily use it because I enjoy creating content, especially scripts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>20 (3.55%)</td>
<td>I use SL as a tool for researching the relation between social presence and learning outcomes in virtual environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>13 (2.31%)</td>
<td>working with a class on appearance and gender; working with a class on ed tech; starting a university orientation workshop for new students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business &amp; Commerce</td>
<td>15 (2.66%)</td>
<td>I've got direct exposure to international buyers for my digital media services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>5 (0.89%)</td>
<td>To raise donation for our real life not-for-profit charity, contributing back to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting / Presenting</td>
<td>4 (0.71%)</td>
<td>case presentations, online meetings, Attending / presenting at educational conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simulation</td>
<td>2 (0.36%)</td>
<td>medical simulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimenting</td>
<td>10 (1.8%)</td>
<td>experiment interactive art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3 (0.54%)</td>
<td>Freebies; Memorizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedonic</td>
<td>201 (35.70%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring</td>
<td>64 (11.37%)</td>
<td>my goals were to understand SL well enough to make constructive use of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>38 (6.75%)</td>
<td>I use Second Life for entertainment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing</td>
<td>34 (6.04%)</td>
<td>enjoy the broadband internet games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicarious Experiences</td>
<td>27 (4.80%)</td>
<td>meet people and do things i don’t do in rl. you can have very meaningful and interesting conversations with people you would never meet in rl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversion</td>
<td>19 (3.37%)</td>
<td>gone is the boredom and loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escapism &amp; Fantasy</td>
<td>14 (2.49%)</td>
<td>to have an experience of multiple lives, alternate persona, changing of physical appearance, gendre change, seeing oneself as another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies</td>
<td>5 (0.89%)</td>
<td>art and music appreciation; Camping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>157 (27.89%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing</td>
<td>135 (23.98%)</td>
<td>I also like to talk (chat) with people from all over the world...And it's interesting how easy it can be to make friends with new people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing &amp; Clubs</td>
<td>9 (1.60%)</td>
<td>Also dancing and socializing with people from around the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>9 (1.60%)</td>
<td>I love to meet with girls in real life who I got to know in SL before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber Sex</td>
<td>4 (0.71%)</td>
<td>I have used SL for cyber sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Items</strong></td>
<td>563</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3.1. Utilitarian needs. Many individuals (36.41% of the comments) use Second Life for utilitarian needs, including learning and education, shopping, economic and business motives, etc. Among the utilitarian needs, learning accounts for nearly 25 percent of the comments, indicating that Second Life users treat such a multi-user virtual environment as a good platform for using learning activities (such as taking courses) to improve their language or programming skills. Accordingly, it is not surprising that educators use this environment for educating and teaching. People also participate in the real world for economic and commercial values, including shopping, making money, as well as doing business and commerce there. As for business and commerce applications, users join in the world to exhibit entrepreneurial behaviors, including starting up businesses and creating shops, as well as conducting in-world marketing, such as advertising and customer management.

In addition, creating is another important utilitarian motivation for using Second Life that is related to other utilitarian motives such as making money and learning. For example, people make virtual objects or design virtual clothes to sell (making money) or to practice and improve their scripting ability (learning). Given that Second Life has recently emerged as a new technology which has been widely used by people in a variety of fields, researchers from various areas conduct their research on diverse topics, including human behaviors, technological design, and education and teaching.
The results also indicate that a few people use the virtual world for meeting purposes (e.g., attending meetings and conferences online, or do presentations), simulating (e.g., medical simulation) and experimenting. For example, IBM has built a space in Second Life for their workers to hold meetings and simulate business situations, etc. Finally, a small number of respondents claim to use second life for altruism (e.g., helping others, doing charity, sharing information, and contributing to the community) and memorizing people or events, or for getting freebies.

5.3.2. Hedonic needs. While some comments demonstrate that people use Second Life for utilitarian needs, others indicate that their participation in Second Life was for the process itself, in other words, for hedonic needs. For instance, 35.70% of the comments note that users participate in Second Life for exploring virtual worlds, playing (gaming) and entertainment (having fun and relaxation), getting away from real life (experiencing “second” life, diversion, and escapism & fantasy), as well as developing hobbies. These comments reflect that use of Second Life is generally for “fun,” and many users note that they use Second Life for enjoyment of the experience itself rather than accomplishing some tasks. One user simply says: “I use Second Life for entertainment” or another uses it “[to] enjoy the broadband internet games.”

Other people use Second Life due to their interest in, curiosity about, and willingness to explore, this social virtual world. One user notes: “Initially, my goals were to understand SL [Second Life] well enough to make constructive use of it. That continues to be an ongoing objective and my explorations are often around that potential.”

Finally, people note that Second Life provides its users opportunities not only for experiencing new things or meeting people which they could not experience in their real lives (i.e., vicarious experiences with a “second life”), but also for overcoming boredom and passing spare time (i.e., diversion). For example, one person reports that “It seems quite a liberating way to meet and talk with people of the opposite sex - it’s safer and not embarrassing or confronting and you can have very meaningful and interesting conversations with people you would never meet in rl [real life].” Another user says that by using Second Life, “gone is the boredom and loneliness.” In addition, Second Life users can also try out alternative personae or new identities (i.e., escapism & fantasy) by (as one user points out) building characters or customizing their avatars, such as “to have an experience of multiple lives, alternate persona, changing of physical appearance, gender change, seeing oneself as another.”

5.3.3. Social needs. A majority of the comments that were received (27.89%) reflect a strong desire for social needs (i.e., the needs for socializing). These comments indicate that some residents participate in Second Life mainly for meeting and interacting with people from all around the world, as noted, “I [also] like to talk (chat) with people from all over the world … And it’s interesting how easy it can be to make friends with new people.” In addition, some note that they participate for communicating and maintaining relationships with existing social networks in the real world, such as families, friends, partners or colleagues. For example, “As a professional educator, connecting with colleagues in the network of virtual worlds has led to wonderful new learning[,] and connections that have proved to be most valuable.” Further, socializing can also happen in the form of collaboration, or for building communities with people who share common interests, values, visions, or ideas. As one user notes, “SL has the potential for them to connect with other like-minded [learners] people from an international community, in safe and secure, virtual environments.” Finally, Second Life is used by some users for dancing and clubs as well as looking for romance (both in the virtual world and real life) and cyber sex, e.g., “I love to meet with girls in real life who I got to know in SL before” and “I have used SL for cyber sex”. The above evidence indicates that Second Life users demand a multi-user virtual environment that fosters the building up of social relations in some way [1].

6. Discussions

Although existing literature (e.g., [26]) and practices relating to social virtual worlds have highlighted the importance of motivating people to participate in these social virtual worlds, people’s usage motivations of social virtual worlds have not yet been investigated and are not understood well. This exploratory study identifies user motivations for use of the most famous and well-known social virtual world (i.e., Second Life) and classifies these motivations into three general categories: utilitarian needs, hedonic needs, and social needs. The current study has implications for both practice and academics.

6.1 Implications for Practice

This study will benefit at least two parties of practitioners who are related to social virtual worlds: providers of social virtual world services and corporate
users of these services. First, providers of social virtual worlds (such as Linden Lab) can benefit from the identification and classification of customer usage motivations of social virtual worlds. As providers of nearly “brand new” platforms, many social virtual world operators do not have a lot of knowledge about their customers in terms of who they are and the expectations that they have. The determination of a set of primary motivations of customers is an important aspect for increasing service quality, which has primary benefits for customer attraction and retention—a critical aspect of social virtual world management at the current stage.

Understanding important uses and sought after gratifications from social virtual world usage can guide social virtual world operators in fine-tuning their offerings. For example, our results show that Second Life users have diverse expectations toward such a social virtual world and that their motivations for using this world can range across utilitarian, hedonic, and social dimensions. The operator of Second Life, i.e., Linden lab, can benefit from our results in at least three ways.

First, the utilitarian dimension of Second Life usage seems to involve a large teaching and learning component; this highlights the managerial importance of making education and learning easy in this environment. Linden lab could thus profit by enhancing the functions of their products to support e-education and group learning. Second, hedonic motivations of Second Life users highlight the managerial importance of providing these users with holistic optimal experiences [6] or flow experience [23]. That is, Second Life users who have such experiences in their usage are highly likely to go back for continued use. Therefore, Linden lab could benefit by improving the interface designs and reducing system requirements of its product to provide optimal experiences to their users. Third, the social dimension of Second Life user motivation supports the idea that Second Life is a social medium. Different from its close-relative, multi-user online games (MMOGs), Second Life has been used widely by its users for seriously managing social networks and relations in real life. Linden lab could thus benefit from learning from other social network services to provide its users with more supportive features.

Therefore, social virtual world operators, including Linden lab, could benefit from this study in terms of gaining a better understanding of the characteristics and motivations of their customers, making judgments of how well they serve their customers to meet their expectations, as well as improving their services for future use.

The other party of practitioners who could benefit from the current study relates to organizations that have adopted Second Life as a platform for performing their business and marketing. Marketers could benefit from such a study in at least two ways. First, since a pool of heterogeneous people are motivated to participate in the virtual environment by a variety of needs [1], and since customers’ virtual representations (i.e., avatars) in the world may offer some insights into the creators’ hidden features [13], marketers in Second Life could thus carry out surveys to investigate the relationships between the features of avatars and their creators’ motivations. It would be beneficial for marketers to understand their customers in order to segment, reach, and influence them directly. Second, social virtual worlds, such as Second Life, are an entirely new medium of marketing. Ongoing efforts to understand consumer usage of this dynamic new commercial venue could assist business decision makers in providing products and services that are more responsive to consumer needs and expectations. Businesses in Second Life could even build databases of profiles of these customers and establish long-term relationships with them.

6.2 Implications for Research

First, this study provides evidence of the relevance of U&G theory in the special context of social virtual worlds. U&G has been used and validated in the studies of the uses of a variety of new media and technologies, including the Internet, as mentioned earlier. Yet, it has not been previously used to understand motivations of social virtual world usage. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to do this. Our results demonstrate that U&G provides valuable insights into social virtual world user motivations.

Second, this study can serve as a basis for future studies related to social virtual world usage. The U&G dimensions of utilitarian, hedonic, and social needs of social virtual world usage, identified in the current study, may be useful for developing scales to measure user expectations regarding using social virtual worlds. The scales can then be useful for developing models of individual use of social virtual worlds. Applications of these scales in theoretical models would be useful for investigating theoretically specified relationships between social virtual world user needs and other important theoretically specified constructs related to the success of social virtual worlds.

More specifically, our results demonstrate that social virtual worlds, such as Second Life, are not entirely utilitarian (i.e., productivity-oriented) [15] in nature, but rather have substantial hedonic
motivating customers to utilize and continue using social virtual worlds. This issue is fundamental to the success of social virtual worlds.

7. Conclusions

Understanding the nature of motivations of social virtual world users is crucial to the success of social virtual worlds. Drawing on the uses and gratifications perspective, this study analyzes the content of qualitative responses from Second Life users on an open-ended question based online survey, and consequently classifies Second Life user motivations into three general categories: utilitarian needs, hedonic needs, and social needs. Social virtual world operators could benefit from this study in terms of managing and enhancing their products and services. Marketers in social virtual worlds could design market offerings that are more responsive to consumer needs to attract more potential customers, based on a better understanding of consumers’ needs and expectations for social virtual world usage. This could lead to greater degrees of consumer value and greater benefits from consumers’ social virtual world usage.

We conclude that the uses and gratifications theory is robust and useful in the development of theoretical dimensions representative of consumer motivations for social virtual world usage. This paper reports an exploratory study investigating consumer motivations for social virtual world usage. The three dimensions of consumer motivations for social virtual world usage identified here can serve as a basis for developing scales to measure consumer needs and gratifications for social virtual world usage and for modeling social virtual world usage.

8. References


