Gender differences in preadolescent children's online interactions: Symbolic modes of self-presentation and self-expression☆

Sandra L. Calvert*, Brian A. Mahler, Sean M. Zehnder[1],
Abby Jenkins, Mickey S. Lee

Children's Digital Media Center, Department of Psychology, Georgetown University, 306 White Gravenor, 37th and O Streets, NW, Washington, DC 20057, USA

Abstract

Preadolescent children who did not know one another interacted in a multiuser domain (MUD), an online site designed to facilitate identity exploration and peer interaction. Each child participated in two separate sessions, one with a same-sex and one with an opposite-sex peer. Children created characters that reflected real-life properties of themselves, such as gender and interests in popular culture. Boys in same-sex pairs interacted with one another through action, rapid changes, and playful exchanges. Girls in same-sex pairs interacted primarily through written dialogue. In mixed pairs, boys wrote more and engaged in less playful exchanges, and girls wrote fewer and increased their actions. The results suggest that boys and girls have their own unique play styles with same-sex peers, but will moderate those patterns during late childhood to communicate with peers of the opposite sex.
© 2003 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Media; Internet; Adolescent; Peer interaction

1. Introduction

The self includes representations of the physical and psychological characteristics of who we are, as well as an ideal self of who we want to become (Harter, 1998). Physical

characteristics of the self revolve around the body in which we live, a body that is constrained by attributes such as age, sex or gender, and physical appearance (Harre, 1983). Psychological characteristics of the self include the activities we do, the social skills we possess, and the roles that we play (Harter, 1998). How we present the self, characterized by its physical and psychological features, is the topic of a large literature on self-presentation (Harre, 1983; Harter, 1998). In most considerations of the self, it is necessary to consider the match between the actual, or underlying self, and the presented self, sometimes called the persona (Hall & Nordby, 1973).

Biological sex is one aspect that is often important in people's self-constructions (Ruble & Martin, 1998). In the sex-typing literature, distinctions are drawn between biological sex and gender, the latter being socially constructed (Huston, 1983). Gendered behaviors are a key marker of self-expression for many children and adults alike, providing one anchor of identity. Our gender often influences the way that we interact with others, and has been called an interpersonal aspect of identity (Baumeister, 1997). Gender-related behavior becomes especially salient as children approach adolescence where they move from a world dominated by same-sex interactions to one that increasingly includes opposite-sex peers.

Online multiuser domains (MUDs), where players can assume fantasy roles and engage in role playing activities, offer an easy context for exploring the self (Turkle, 1995, 1997). In anonymous online interactions, we are free to present ourselves in many ways, less constrained by the expectations of the real world (Calvert, 2002). Investigating such online explorations may offer a window on how children represent themselves to others by examining their symbolic modes of self-presentation and self-expression.

In this exploratory study, sex differences in the interactions of 11- and 12-year-old boys and girls were examined. We created an online MUD that was designed to foster social interaction and role-playing activities. In our data collection and analyses, we focused on three features that can serve as gender-related identifiers in online MUD interactions: (1) users' pretend names; (2) the kinds of pretend characters they create; and (3) the kinds of interpersonal roles and activities they undertake in relation to one another. We considered the interactions of unacquainted children in same- and opposite-sex pairs to maximize participants' flexibility in constructing a gendered character as well as in how easy it was for them to act in ways that were consistent or different from traditional gender roles.

1.1. Social interactions in MUDs

MUDs are online forums in which participants interact with one another (Turkle, 1995). These spaces were originally only a text medium but now allow interactions in an online, three-dimensional world. Players can play games and engage in somewhat constrained role play activities ranging from slaying dragons to pretending to be Barbie, or they can create environments and explore the MUD in more flexible, and open-ended ways (Turkle, 1995). Thousands of people, many of whom are adolescents, spend time online in these role playing activities (Turkle, 1995).

In MUDs, players create personas, or public masks—called avatars—in which they construct names, genders, and self-descriptions (Curtis, 1997). Some players use this medium