

EXPLORING DIGITAL IDENTITY AND USER ENGAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL
REALITY: PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS IN VRCHAT

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STATEMENT BY THE AUTHOR

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis.



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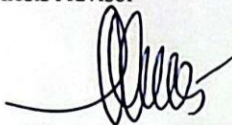


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ABSTRACT

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This research aims to uncover how do users create digital identities and manage their identities in Social VR environments? What psychological effects do users experience associated with their social interaction with other users in VR? And finally how does user engagement in social VR affect how users engage with and perceive their digital identities? This research investigates how variables like gender identity and body dysmorphia affect users psychologically in Social VR environments. Using qualitative methods similar to those employed by Guo Freeman, Divine Maloney, and other prominent researchers, this study examines digital self-identification and user engagement in virtual platforms. The study employs an empirical, in-depth qualitative analysis to uncover themes in user interaction where the study will then categorize them, and explore their broader implications. Users create and maintain their digital identities in VRChat mainly through the design of avatars which facilitates the exploration of identities around a number of features including identity exploration, gender affirmation, and creative expression. Identities are fluid in nature, context-based, and transient. Psychological effects range from increased confidence and emotional affiliation to stress and anxiety depending on the size of the group and the toxic community presence in VRChat. Deep user engagement brings a sense of stronger identification with avatars and their communities which subsequently shifts users views of self. Moreover, engagement appears to consolidate digital practices and social attachments which potentially contributes both positively and negatively to well-

being.

Keywords: digital identity, virtual reality, VRChat, gender affirmation, body dysmorphia



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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis work to my family and my friends in the virtual community, as well as my lecturers._



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I want to thank my parents and my sister, who have supported me through this tough journey. My friends Letty and Zachary for being there with me until the very end of our school years here at SGU. Without you guys, I wouldn't have become the man I am today. I also want to give my thanks to my community and friends in virtual reality; without their participation, my thesis findings would not have been made possible. I also want to give my deepest thanks to my best friend who passed away last October, you continued to believe in me and support my vision when everyone else thought otherwise. May you rest in peace, Rayleena.

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