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English 8

22 March 2018

Creating Space: Gender Identity in Digital Worlds

**Introduction**

This research will discuss how people portray gender identity in online spaces in a variety of ways, including: images, screen name, and avatar selection. We will look particularly at Facebook, World of Warcraft, and Instagram for how people portray gender identity in online spaces. This is important to study because it is possible that the online world creates a safe space for people to express what they perceive as their true gender identity. Or, perhaps, it allows people to temporarily break free of societal gender roles and constraints, as in Chopin’s *The Storm* and *A Pair of Silk Stockings*.

**Rationale**

 Many of us spend more time online than having face-to-face interactions. In addition, the concept of catfishing, the #MeToo movement, as well as high-profile celebrities undergoing gender reassignment surgery, has highlighted and underscored the important topic of gender identity in our society. Given the proliferation of online profiles and digital communication, we are interested to know how people portray gender identity in online spaces. Does gender, for example, translate to online spaces? The members of our team became interested in this topic when we began looking at our own profiles. Two of us are gamers who often play avatars as the opposite gender. This got us thinking about how many other people choose avatars of a different gender and why? Also, we wondered if our choice to portray our gender online other than how we portray our gender in real life impacts how other perceive us online. *In short, we are learning about gender identity in digital spaces because we want to find out if and how teens’ online gender identity differs from their real life gender identity in order to find out why they choose to represent gender in particular ways online.*

**Methods**

In order to go about finding satisfying answers to our question, we will begin by reviewing the source materials we read in class including *A&P* by John Updike, *The Storm* and *A Pair of Silk Stockings* by Kate Chopin, the article “Does Yourself Exist?” by Steve Taylor, the *Body Types Test* as well as various poems dealing with gender identity.

 Furthermore, we will look up additional sources using the library databases EBSCO Host and GALE focusing on how people portray identity online, particularly gender identity. Once we have gathered enough background information, we will conduct a short survey through Google, asking teens what digital platforms they use, what screennames they use, profiles pictures, and the gender of any avatars they use online. We will ask them if they disclose their gender identity online (such as in their Facebook profile) and why or why not. The survey will ask then to explain why they chose these representations. This brief survey should take them no more than 10 minutes to complete. We will then examine their responses for gender-related comments and sort their responses into categories. We do not yet know the categories, as these will necessarily emerge from the responses we collect.

**Predictions and Significance (what it all means)**

 We predict that we will discover varied responses, but we believe we will also discover that most people will likely portray the same gender identity they portray in real life in digital spaces. However, while in real life, people portray gender identity through clothing, hair, makeup, names, mannerisms and other external factors, we believe that in online spaces, this performance will shift to things like screen names, avatars, profile pictures, and other digital markers of identity. Rather than capitalize on the freedom of online spaces to reinvent gender identity, we predict the gender identity of most teens will closely imitate the gender identity they portray in their everyday lives. Another possible finding is that some teens might use online spaces to experiment with gender expression, choosing to either change or alter their gender identity online or conceal their gender identity either by choice or chance. Either way, this research will help us understand the role gender plays in our digital lives.