

Societal Impact Highlights



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Research Group: Marketing

Case study: [The good and the evil behind social media](#)

Summary

Since their inception slightly over a decade ago, social media platforms and virtual environments sparked extensive debates, characterized by dominant terms like Facebook depression, cyber-bullying, and virtual addiction. Bernadett Koles and her co-author Peter Nagy explored the impact of online presence from a variety of perspectives, with particular attention to the experience of teenagers and young adults. While acknowledging the potential risks, their work presents a variety of positive outcomes with implications for widening the scope of relevant discourse.

Underpinning research

The purpose of the current line of research undertaken by Bernadett Koles and her co-author Peter Nagy during the past five years contributes to increasing our understanding of the impact of online collaborative environments on students, particularly adolescents and young adults, and greater society. Consistently with prior work, the authors confirm (1) that students who spend extensive amounts of time on Facebook (i.e. 3 or more hours per day) tend to fare worse in terms of school, social and peer relations, and overall emotional well-being than their less active counterparts. However, within more reasonable limits, this environment seems to hold positive outcomes for many of their users, and may even serve as a source of social and emotional support.

One particularly advantageous aspect of virtual environments comes from the relative ease of exploration and experimentation that reaches beyond availabilities in offline settings. This makes them particularly attractive to teenagers and young adults, who by default are in an exploratory mode given their stage of life. They often experience immense pressures from parents and teachers and are faced with hard decisions to make. Koles and Nagy emphasize (2) that virtual environments may provide these more vulnerable groups with a particular form of support, by exposing them to an environment that fosters experimentation with different roles and identities, without having to deal with the tension and the pressures that may otherwise characterize their offline existence. Although there is an overarching assumption that these online places are used predominantly for gaming and socializing purposes, and thus are not as valuable for students, in fact these environments offer various opportunities for learning, education, leadership, and commercialization. Moreover, participants can utilize and transfer their skills and competencies acquired in their virtual sphere to their offline environments as well (3), with many becoming successful writers, designers, or musicians.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that not everyone will enter into these environments with the same mindset, and there is obvious variation in terms of what different users intend to take with them from their experiences (4). Yet given the safety and security that most people feel in relation to an online space, and the fact that they can assume a 'blank slate' or a new start without prior roles or expectations, certain possible, hidden or ideal aspects of their identities can be revealed and further explored, which would not be possible in offline settings. This may have particularly interesting – and possibly even therapeutic – implications for adolescents and young adults (5), and thus should be explored further in research, educational settings and policy work.

Since their publications, the research of Koles and Nagy received attention from numerous other researchers and has been showcased in subsequent scholarly work. These outlets include doctoral dissertations, books, conference proceedings, and various peer-reviewed journal outlets. Several of these studies explore student and adolescent emotional and psychological well-being, as well as investigate different ways of using online platforms for educational purposes, including teacher training and assessment. Further research accentuates the importance of virtual worlds from the perspective of identity development, exploring the consequences of congruent versus incongruent offline and online selves.

Key researchers: During the composition of the present research, Bernadett Koles has been at BRU-IUL since 2014, prior to which she was at Central European University. Peter Nagy is currently at Arizona State University, with prior years spent at Corvinus University of Budapest.

References to the research

1. Koles, B. and Nagy, P. (2012). The Impact of Facebook Usage Patterns on School Attitudes: The Case of Young Hungarian Users. *Multicultural Education and Technology Journal*, Vol. 6(1): 4-17;
2. Koles, B. and Nagy, P. (2012). Who is portrayed in Second Life: Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde? The extent of congruence between real life and virtual identity. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, Vol. 5(1):3-19.
3. Nagy, P. and Koles, B., (2014). The Digital Transformation of Human Identity: Towards a Conceptual Model of Virtual Identity in Virtual Worlds. *Convergence - The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 276-292;
4. Koles, B. and Nagy, P. (2012). Virtual Consumers behind Avatars: The Relationship between Virtual Identity and Virtual Consumption in Second Life, *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 87-105;
5. Nagy, P. and Koles, B. (2014). My Avatar and Her Beloved Possession: Characteristics of Attachment to Virtual Objects, *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 31, No. 12, 1122-1135;
6. Koles, B. (2014). A new generation of digitally educated workers. In M. Kisilowski (Ed.), *Free Market in its Twenties*. CEU Press, Budapest, Hungary.

Details of the impact

Social media platforms (e.g. Facebook or Twitter) and virtual environments (e.g. Second Life or World of Warcraft) attract a large and international user base. At the end of 2015, Facebook reported 1.59 billion active users per month, with slightly over 1 billion users per day. Although having witnessed some recent decline in subscription rates, virtual worlds continue to enjoy their popularity and draw in millions of participants. These massive numbers highlight the importance of understanding online presence; which is a relevant issue from the perspective of various stakeholders, including academics, teachers, parents as well as students. Yet still today, the consequences of participating in online environments remain quite unclear. Undoubtedly, there are numerous documented risks, including addiction, bullying, depression, and various

psycho-emotional difficulties. Based on the growing demand for their support, ChildLine – a UK-based charity organization providing 24-hour counseling service for children and young adults – emphasized in a recent report that today's youth are facing issues and coping with problems that did not exist 30 or 40 years ago. Amongst the main factors, incorporating divided households, bullying, self-harm, and various anxieties, they report social media usage and online presence to be prominent in contributing to the current rates of teenage unhappiness. Based on similar findings and reports, the dominant view that emphasizes the risks and negative outcomes at the expense of potential advantages often prevails.

The sequence of research carried out by Bernadett Koles and her co-author Peter Nagy presented various areas where positive and beneficial aspects associated with online environments are possible and may be fostered. What is important to recognize is that these environments – social media and virtual world alike – are meaningful for many young users, and with some help and assistance from their institutional and community surroundings, they may be able to use these spaces to assist them in their ultimate quest for identity development and in smoothing their transition to adulthood. One particular area where scholars and educators may be influential is in curriculum development, with a growing number of successful attempts to incorporate online social environments into curriculum offerings, with details of the corresponding efforts and societal impact originating from the set of studies outlined in the following section.

Workshops and Curriculum Development efforts: Based on her research output and expertise, Bernadett Koles was asked to compose a book chapter (6) elaborating upon the potential impact of social media and virtual worlds on today's youth and their communities. This area is relevant given that the current digitally immersed high school and college students will provide the next generation of our labor force, making the congruence between their expectations, skills and abilities with our own desirable. The resulting book chapter postulates certain forthcoming trends, including the notion of multiple realities, presumption, and skill transferability. These ideas have been presented to and debated at length with members of the CEU community during a series of roundtable discussions. Particular attention was paid to curriculum implementations, and as a result several new or substantially modified courses were introduced throughout the university's offerings. For instance, social networking platforms were introduced throughout many courses, increasing the interactive nature of communication amongst students as well as faculty members, and encouraging blended learning. Similarly, seminars were proposed to elaborate upon the increasingly digital trends, risks and opportunities that characterize social media platforms, in order to provide students with a more holistic

understanding of these environments. Finally, courses incorporating these platforms were developed jointly with partner institutions to enable and enhance collaborative efforts and opportunities of a diverse set of international and physically remote student teams.

Similar discussions have been carried out in two additional outlets listed below; one of which was a round table discussion at the Annual Conference of the International Management Research Academy, Zagreb, Croatia, and the other a round table discussion on higher education in a networked society at 7th International Conference on Information System, Guimaraes, Portugal. Both of these venues united a large number of scholars, educators and practitioners from around the world, providing a fruitful environment to host lively debates about the positive and negative outcomes of social media usage and virtual world participation. Proposals were made for innovative classroom instructional methods, incorporating social media and virtual platforms. Participants discussed potential practical takeaways, proposed further research agenda, and developed concrete implementation plans for the purposes of curriculum development.

Sources to corroborate the impact

- Koles, B. (2013). Business Higher Education in a Networked Society: Challenges and Opportunities. Round table at the Annual Conference of the International Management Research Academy (IMRA, Zagreb). <http://www.imraweb.org/conferences/2013zagreb>
- Koles, B. and Nagy, P. (2012). Reinventing Roles and Work-Related Relationships in Virtual Worlds – A Conceptual Model. 7th International Conference on Information System: Adopting Emergent Knowledge and Technologies to Develop Innovative Information Systems (Guimaraes, Portugal). <http://aisel.aisnet.org/mcis/>