

Emotion in Virtual Social Interaction

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I describe a project to address the circumstances under which emotion processes in face-to-face virtual social interaction are equivalent to emotion processes in face-to-face, non-virtual social interaction among human agents. According to the framework that I propose, the equivalence depends on (1) social realism, and (2) social risk. Social realism involves the extent to which the social cues in the virtual environment correspond to those an actor experiences and expects under similar circumstances in a non-virtual environment. Cues may include (but are not limited to) the appearance of others and objects; verbal, non-verbal, and paraverbal behaviors; and other sensory inputs (e.g., sound, smell, touch). Social risk involves the potential for incurring social costs, such as losing one's identity or loss of status. This risk depends on an individual's investment in the social resource at stake (e.g., the identity, status) and the likelihood of the loss occurring. I hypothesize that the greater the social realism and social risk in the virtual social environment, the more that emotion processes in virtual social interaction will correspond to those that occur in non-virtual social interaction. Furthermore, I hypothesize that social realism has a positive effect on perceptions of social risk. I discuss the implications of this project for enhancing understanding and development of virtual social environments, as well as for advancing understanding of emotion processes. Insofar as virtual environments are increasingly being deployed for a broad range of purposes (e.g., entertainment, training and education) this project offers important applied and theoretical contributions.