

Identity Mobility and Self-Presentation in Social Virtual Reality: A Dual Case Study Based on VRChat

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Abstract. Social virtual reality (VR) is often regarded as a space that enables flexible self-reinvention. However, daily interactions indicate that "identity mobility" is fundamentally constrained by structures. This article explores how identity mobility (defined as the ability to cross and maintain embodied identities across different scenarios, without excessive restorative labor) is restricted in VRChat. We used digital anthropology and participant observation methods to analyze two diagnostic breakdown cases. Case 1 focuses on a form of gender ambiguity, in which a cute anime girl image, a masculine voice, and a feminine interaction style triggered viewers' scrutiny and interrupted normal conversations, revealing legibility as a normative threshold for recognition. Case 2 witnessed interference in a community world dominated by Mandarin (the "Chinese bar"), where an intrusion led local participants to switch to English to set boundaries, thereby compressing expressive participation into functional speech and making linguistic legitimacy manifest as symbolic power. Overall, these cases demonstrate how comprehensibility and legitimacy shape who can be recognized and heard in social VR, and this process requires extremely low interaction costs.

Keywords: VRChat, Social Virtual Reality, Self-presentation, Linguistic Capital, Symbolic Violence

1. Introduction

Social virtual reality (VR) is increasingly becoming an important venue for daily interaction. In social VR, users become locatable and addressable bodies through avatars, voice, spatial audio, and gestures, rather than merely presenting themselves through profiles or posts. Experimental research shows that interactions in social VR can mimic face-to-face coordination (e.g., turn-taking cues and gaze-related temporal dynamics), placing identity and social order at the analytical core [1]. Meanwhile, "metaverse" research links embodiment and co-presence with self-image expression and sustained participation, highlighting the conditions for successful or failed self-presentation under mediated co-presence [1].

VRChat provides an instructive context for this exploration. It is not only constrained by platform-wide policies but also by the diverse local norms in different public and semi-public worlds. Importantly, governance and safety infrastructures can serve as classification systems, shaping who is seen as trustworthy or qualified to participate; for instance, VRChat's trust ranking

ecosystem may produce hierarchical and stereotypical effects, hindering cross-identity interactions and exacerbating exclusionary dynamics [2].

Popular descriptions often extol the "flexibility of identity," emphasizing the customization, anonymity, and potential for self-reinvention that avatars offer. However, emerging research demonstrates that this representational malleability does not eliminate inequality but reconfigures how power and marginalization operate in bodily performance and interaction norms [3]. Researchers argue that this fluidity is structurally conditional: it depends on whether the performance remains intelligible within a given interaction field and whether the performer can access the linguistic and symbolic resources necessary to maintain this intelligibility.

Against this backdrop, the study addresses this gap by examining identity fluidity — defined as the actual ability to traverse and maintain embodied identities across different contexts without incurring disproportionate repair labor. The study's comparative ethnographic approach centered on "failure as diagnosis": Role-playing interactions with gender-ambiguous or transgender-coded avatars, and cross-language interference in a Mandarin-dominated community world [4]. Through these cases, the study demonstrates how identity fluidity is unevenly distributed and actively maintained through ongoing interactional work.

2. Theoretical framework: an integrated toolkit for analysing identity mobility in social

2.1. Goffman and Butler: interaction, intelligibility, and the politics of recognition

Building on the paper's premise that identity in social VR is through interaction rather than mere representation, the study first mobilizes Goffman and Butler to conceptualize identity mobility as an interactive achievement that is constantly tested, stabilized, and sometimes unstable across real-time encounters. Goffman's description of self-presentation directs attention to how users manage impressions through co-displays (avatar appearance, sound, visual effects, timing), a sequential order of interaction that must be recognized and sustained by the interactant [5].

In social VR research, recent work has shown how platform-specific interaction practices (e.g., mirroring, spatial co-presence, role customization) can serve as a resource for communicative strategies and self-management, supporting the claim that "performance" is constituted by materiality and interaction, rather than being purely psychological [1]. Butler's theory of expressiveness extends this perspective by highlighting the normative conditions of identifiability: identities become socially real only when they are given intelligibility within a dominant explanatory framework [6].

2.2. Bourdieu: linguistic capital, legitimacy, and symbolic violence in voice interaction

For Case 2, the paper draws on Bourdieu's theoretical framework to explain why language asymmetry can reconfigure interaction authority in the Chinese VRChat world, even as Chinese speakers remain numerically dominant. Bourdieu's linguistic capital and the legitimacy of "authorized language" redefines language choice as a power mechanism rather than a neutral communication tool [7]. In multilingual encounters, those whose languages are institutionally and culturally considered more "unmarked" or globally legitimate can more readily control the tempo of conversation, narrative direction, and relevance standards, thereby shaping whose identity work is expansive and whose is constrained.

To capture the coercivity dimension of this process, the framework incorporates the concept of symbolic violence: subtle and often misrecognized meanings imposed to render domination seem

natural, necessary, or merely "the way interaction works" [7].

This paper combines these theories to analyze identity mobility as structurally dependent on interactional recognition and linguistic legitimacy. This integrated toolkit is particularly well suited for social VR, where identity is simultaneously embodied, negotiated moment-to-moment, and layered with normative and linguistic hierarchies [3].

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a digital ethnographic approach based on participant observation to examine identity mobility as it unfolds through situated, real-time interaction in VRChat. Digital ethnography is particularly well suited to social VR because it treats co-presence, self-presentation, and sense-making as relational achievements produced through ongoing coordination rather than as stable user attributes [8]. Empirical materials were generated through long-term immersive engagement in public and semi-public VRChat worlds, focusing on naturally occurring interactional moments in which identity performances became fragile, contested, or in need of interactional repair. Immediately after each session, detailed field notes and analytic memos were produced to document interactional sequences (such as openings, turn transitions, and stance shifts), embodied cues (including avatar appearance and spatial positioning), and the practical conditions under which a performance was sustained, compressed, or abandoned.

Case selection followed a purposive sampling strategy: the interactions entail identity mobility, salient disruptions, and rich interactional evidence. Therefore, these two cases are not isolated incidents but rather richly analytical segments that reveal how different interaction conditions in VRChat limit the maintenance of socially understandable selves: Gender-ambiguous avatars and linguistic asymmetry in a Mandarin-dominated world. This comparative research method is consistent with emerging academic research that combines VRChat observations with qualitative analysis to conduct field studies of interaction norms and inequalities [9]. To protect the privacy of the participants, all the usernames mentioned in this article and other features that might be identifiable have been anonymized or removed.

4. Case study 1: ambiguity in role representation and readable identity

4.1. Scenario description: the core tension in practice

This scene takes place in a public VRChat social world, where casual chatting and spontaneous self-introductions are the default modes of interaction. In this scene, a gender-ambiguous participant presents an extremely "cute" style anime girl image - petite in stature, with artistic facial features, and animated with lively wandering movements. However, his (assuming this player's biological sex is "he") voice has a clearly masculine tone and resonance. In contrast, his interaction style has distinctly feminine characteristics in terms of tone, politeness strategies, and body language (such as gentle laughter, friendly approaches, and gentle gestures). This multimodal incongruity quickly draws the attention of nearby participants, shifting the atmosphere from mundane conversation to an interactional moment demanding interpretive scrutiny.

Several participants who were involved responded with obvious curiosity and doubt. Some would pause before communicating with the virtual image, consider the way of addressing, and even completely abandon the use of pronouns. Others would shift the conversation from the current topic to the virtual image itself, directly asking questions such as "Who are you?" or "Are you male or female?" The player with the girl image attempts to maintain a relaxed atmosphere in the interaction

—continuing to talk in a friendly manner, using interesting responses, and maintaining a consistent embodied style, yet nearby participants increasingly view their avatar as a problem to be solved rather than a partner to interact with. As more questions arise, the group's engagement no longer revolves around common topics, but turns to clearly defining the "appropriate" category.

4.2. Performative breakdown and the demand for readability

From Goffman's perspective, the scene is clearly a failure of performance: self-presentation can only be sustained when others regard the presented identity as "sufficiently real" to fit the situation [5]. Here, this cooperation becomes conditional. Once the players notice the mismatch between the little girl image, the male voice, and the feminine interaction style, the communication shifts from casual chat to classification work. The participants hesitate in their address terms, avoid using pronouns, and ask directly ("What are you?" "Are you male or female?"), treating the virtual character's body as a problem to be solved rather than a conversational partner. In response, the avatar user (Player A) makes remedial repairs - maintaining a friendly tone, offering brief explanations, and attempting to redirect the conversation to ordinary topics - while the other players (Player B and the surrounding group) perpetuate ambiguity by seeking confirmation or turning the uncertainty into a collective joke. Thus, this breakdown stems not from a lack of personal confidence but from an interactional process in which the definition of the situation becomes unstable and open to renegotiation.

Social virtual reality further intensifies this dynamic by compressing multiple channels of self-presentation into a highly visible scene. Although virtual characters can change quickly, the voice timbre and interaction style are difficult to match the gender script inferred from the visual design. This dynamic echoes the broader finding that role-based environments can intensify gender expectations and stereotypes rather than eliminate them [4]. As a result, the performer is forced to invest disproportionate repair work while the audience retains the power to accept, reject, or prolong the process [4].

4.3. Structural constraints and the politics of intelligibility

From Butler's perspective, gender only has social reality when incorporated into the dominant explanatory framework [6]. This dynamic echoes the broader finding that role-based environments can reproduce gender expectations and stereotypes rather than eliminate them [4]. When bystanders interrupt an ongoing conversation and directly ask, "Are you male or female?", the tone of the conversation shifts. This question serves as a filtering mechanism: communication will stall until the performer can be classified into a recognizable category. Therefore, the scrutiny of the Player B group actually implements normative constraints, re-integrating an unclassifiable performance into the binary classification system. This structural constraint can be described as conditional intelligibility: the identity fluidity of Player A is possible only when the performance consistently conforms to shared schemes of social recognition, rather than the performer's own standards. Empirical work on role-based gender practice in social VR similarly shows that users navigate gender through situated role-play while facing social expectations that shape how performances are interpreted and sanctioned [4].

The analytically critical point: identity mobility falters via the politics of intelligibility. This case illustrates that avatar-based identity mobility in VRChat is fragile and relational. It is sustained by audience cooperation and shared interpretive procedures, which break down when readability becomes controversial. The resulting repair work -interpreting, correcting, adjusting voices, switching avatars, or exiting -illustrates the view of such people that actions are positional and

contingent: stability is not given, but continuously accomplished through concrete labor under normative constraints.

5. Case study 2: language asymmetry and restricted mobility of identity recognition

5.1. Scenario: language shift and interactional order disruption in "Chinese Bar"

This incident occurred in a public VRChat community world called "Chinese Bar". In this world, Mandarin is the default language, and most participants expect daily communication and joking greetings to be conducted in Chinese.

On the night of observation, several users who spoke Mandarin were chatting in small groups. At this time, several English-speaking users also joined the scene. An English-speaking user (Player A) frequently interrupted the ongoing Mandarin conversation, with attention-seeking behaviors: "Hey - can everyone temporarily speak English for a while?" and "What exactly is this room discussing?" "Hey? Is anyone here?" These interruptions disrupted the turn-taking order, forcing conversations to stall or break down. A second English-speaking user (Player B) further exacerbated this disruptive behavior by making offensive and sexist remarks targeting the women present: "That voice is so cute - are you a girl?" and "Come and talk to me, don't ignore me," and repeated similar statements after being refused. When refused, he ridiculed this refusal behavior as "too shy" or "uninteresting", which caused a clear discomfort reaction and further attracted the attention of others, making the disruption even more severe.

The turning point arrived as Mandarin-speaking participants shifted from ignoring the disruption to direct intervention: "Stop interrupting others", "This is a Chinese room - don't speak loudly and cover up the voices of others," and "If you continue to do this, we will report your behavior to the GameManager". As more participants joined these intervention measures, the Mandarin chatting significantly decreased, and English became a practical language for confrontation and management.

5.2. English as a tool for interruption, control, and order restoration

This scene demonstrates the dominance of English-based authority through three practical effects. Firstly, the English-speaking participants can continuously initiate actions: continuous interruptions and targeted remarks enable them to control the pace of the conversation. In contrast, others are forced into a passive response state. This aligns with Bourdieu's view that "legitimate" language functions as a resource for directing interaction rather than a neutral medium [7].

Second, Mandarin-speaking participants are drawn into the English linguistic framework to reassert control. When the interference intensifies, the most direct boundary-setting actions will be expressed in English (for example, "Stop interrupting") because it is regarded as a universally understandable code, even in Mandarin-dominated environments [7]. This is an example of symbolic violence: the hierarchical system manifests as "common sense" interactional necessity rather than explicit domination [7].

Third, Mandarin speakers' participation shifts from expansive narrative expression to functional speech. Prior to disruption, interaction included banter and storytelling; afterward, communication narrows to instrumental, control-oriented discourse, warnings, directives, concise justifications, while affiliative dialogue is set aside or abandoned. Once a user's expressive language switches from Chinese to English, their self-presented content changes. They simplify wording, reduce nuance, and prioritize functional speech acts over expressive identity work.

5.3. The legitimacy of English and symbolic violence in VRchat

In this situation, English's dominance is not merely because it is easy to understand, but also because of the symbolic legitimacy it is accorded. Even in a Mandarin-centered environment, players would consider English as the safest communication method when interacting with intruders and restoring order.

This is where Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence becomes analytically salient: symbolic violence denotes a mode of governance that operates not through overt coercion, but through the taken-for-granted acceptance of legitimate authority [7]. The essence of the indigenous players of "Chinese Bar" in VRchat remaining silent or collectively, tacitly defaulting to using English in this scenario is due to the emergence of symbolic violence. The root cause lies in the fact that English is a tool for cross-cultural conflicts and is endowed with a hierarchical level of discourse power. In this context, no participant explicitly asserts the superiority of English; yet their practices presuppose English as the only viable code for restoring order. This transformation is a "practical necessity", and this necessity is precisely the way symbolic violence operates - by making ordinary compliance seem natural to make the unequal legitimacy appear natural.

6. Comparative analysis: mechanisms constraining identity mobility

6.1. Common patterns

Although these two cases seem quite different, they both reveal the common logic of structural limitations on identity mobility. In Case 1, when avatar, voice, and interactional style are incongruent, self-presentation becomes unsustainable as a socially intelligible mode of expression. Case 2 shows that interactive authority is reorganized through the language hierarchy. English becomes the default medium for restoring order, while those who are not dominant language users are pushed to more concise and practical forms of expression. These mechanisms operate in different ways - one through visual and physical norms, and the other through the language hierarchy.

However, both cases indicate that identity mobility is not merely a matter of personal choice or technical ability. Instead, it depends on unequal opportunities to gain recognition, legitimacy, and communication resources in the interaction.

6.2. Deep structures of power: normative discipline and symbolic violence

The unequal distribution is underpinned by power operating through naturalization. The mechanism of intelligibility (Case 1) operates through normative discipline: Butler's framework shows certain embodiments are governed by unintelligible, requiring continuous repair work to achieve recognition [6]. Power functions by defining the boundaries of what counts as a socially real identity [10].

The mechanism of legitimacy (Case 2) operates through symbolic violence: Bourdieu's framework shows that language redistributes interactional authority and compels accommodation without overt coercion [7]. Power functions by redistributing interactional resources under the guise of necessity.

These cases show that identity mobility in social VR is constrained by two interrelated mechanisms: intelligibility (readability as a discipline) and legitimacy (as the language of symbolic violence). Both shape who can be recognized and heard without extra work, and therefore who can

sustain a mobile, richly performed self in everyday VRChat interaction [3, 6, 7]. Identity fluidity thus depends not on individual capacity but on structural position within hierarchies of intelligibility and legitimacy.

6.3. Practice implications

For VRChat, these findings imply that identity mobility depends not only on interactional governance but also on design feasibility. Design and policy interventions should reduce the cognitive repair burden for marginalized users, safeguard flexibility for self-identity within virtual communities, and provide multilingual and context-aware tools to ensure that boundary work and inclusive participation are not restricted to a single "legitimate" language.

7. Conclusion

This paper argues that identity movement in VRChat is not an intrinsic freedom given by virtual avatars, but a structurally conditional interactive achievement shaped by recognition and authority. Through two cases, it shows how "failure" can be diagnosed: Role-based gender ambiguity reveals how fluidity depends on normative intelligibility, where the need for readability serves as a form of discipline that can direct interaction toward review and repair. In the "Chinese Bar" incident, disruption can trigger a shift to English, redistributing interactional authority via linguistic legitimacy and enacting symbolic violence through seemingly pragmatic accommodation. Identity becomes less fluid because the conditions for being readable, audible, and perceived as social consequences are unevenly distributed. This paper identifies two mechanisms constraining identity mobility: intelligibility (readability as normative discipline) and legitimacy (language as symbolic violence).

The study is limited by its small sample size and focuses on a single platform and a set of communities. It does not claim statistical generality. Future research could extend this argument with longitudinal ethnographies that track how recognition mechanisms stabilize over time, systematic comparisons across multilingual "place" worlds, and cross-platform analyses of how different speech architectures and governance systems amplify or suppress these mechanisms.

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