Avatar and Extended Self in Online Gaming

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In this paper, we investigate Chinese consumers who create, maintain, and negotiate their identities through avatars in the online gaming community. We undertook non-participant observations and conducted depth-interviews with both experienced and amateur gamers. Initial findings have generated rich insights about how gamers create game avatars to extend a sense of self. The game avatar is in essence a visualization of desirable values that Chinese gamers seek to impersonate in real life. It is often used to transgress real world constraints. Here we report some of the emergent themes and discuss the impact of game avatar as extended self on society.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13322/volumes/v35/NA-35

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How material possessions influence identity construction has attracted continuous interests in consumer research (Belk 1988, 2001; Arnould and Thompson 2005). Previous studies have examined meanings of possessions from different cultures and how they contribute to and extend a sense of self (Mehta and Belk 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), not only in home settings but also in workplaces (Belk and Watson 1998; Tian and Belk 2005). However, most existing studies have focused on self extension through tangible material possessions (Belk 1991), or self presentation (Goffman 1959) through digital associations on personal web pages (Schau and Gilly 2003). Although it has been found that avatars influence consumption (Holzwarth, Janiszewski, and Nuemann 2006), how intangible game possessions (Belk 1991), or self presentation (Goffman 1959) through digital associations on personal web pages (Schau and Gilly 2003) contribute to and extend a sense of self in the Real World is unclear. We seek to contribute to this theoretical tenet of self extension through a netnographic inquiry (Kozinets 2002, forthcoming) of the online gaming community in China. Specifically, we examine how consumers manipulate avatars in the virtual world to extend a sense of self in the Real World. Online gaming community also constitutes a fantasy consumption space (Belk and Costa 1998) that allows long term involvement and vicarious self construction.

We explore strategies of self extension in this fantasy consumption space.

In addition to non-participant observations, we conducted depth-interviews with both experienced and amateur gamers in urban China. The interviews started with grand tour questions and were followed by probing questions for meanings of online games (McCracken 1988). The interviews lasted from twenty minutes to three hours. They were conducted in Chinese and then transcribed and analyzed. Our analysis proceeded through an itinerate process (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Spiggle 1994). Initial analysis has generated rich insights about identity construction and self extension within the online gaming communities in urban China. Chinese gamers construct a game avatar by projecting an ideal self and the well being of this game character is decided by the sum of its virtual possessions. For many gamers, the constructed avatar extends and enlarges a sense of self in the following ways. First, the avatar is used by gamers to extend the self beyond social taboos in real world, such as multiple marriages at the same time. Gamers seek idealized romance and experience love through the extended self of game avatar. The strong emotional involvement is experienced as “irresistible”, even with the presence of actual partners in real life. Gamers seek to maintain the marriage in the game and at times such virtual relationship even results in actual marriage in RW. Second, the game avatar extends a sense of self by expanding the gamers’ social network both within the game and in RW. Social capital (Bourdieu 1986) accumulated within the game empowers the gamer with a sense of control in real life. Third, the gamer and the game avatar are united by the flow of play and the gamer does not differentiate him or her self from the game avatar during the game. The avatar frames the gamers’ identity and negative reputation of the avatar often evokes a strong sense of shame, or what Goffman (1959) calls the stigma of social identity. Forth, gamers seek to experience a sense of achievement through the extended self of game avatar and strive to accomplish what they cannot do in RW. Lastly, gaming is taken as a process of socialization through which gamers can learn and practice various skills needed in real life. Game avatar extends a sense of self not only through creating but also through knowing (Belk 1988).

Accompanying the rise of consumerism there is often a sense of loss (Giddens 1991), for which consumption is celebrated as a form of compensation. Online games provide an ideal arena in which gamers can seek to experience an idealized and hyperreal past. It is in essence a play of the lost values in rapidly changing Chinese society. In addition to pursuing these values through consumption, gamers also seek to enact the desirable in play (Huizinga 1970). Different games emphasize different values and offer a wide range of psychological remedies for everyday problems faced by Chinese gamers. The variety of experiences sought after in online games goes beyond excitement, novelty, and relaxation. Gaming experiences are used to understand and guide actual lives in real world, and to help the gamer co-opt with frustrations in daily life. Gamers freely transgress between game and reality, and project experiences in the two different realms onto each other. We conclude our study with broad discussions of online game’s impact on society and social well being.

References