The Effects of Spoke-Avatars’ Personalities on Source Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness in the 3D Virtual Environment

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Second Life is the fastest growing avatar-based 3D virtual environment and a promising communication channel for marketing and advertising. Avatars are virtual sources (or endorsers) that can be used as company representatives. A company or brand’s credibility can be created by any direct or indirect contact the consumer experiences with avatars. This study aims to empirically investigate the consequences of spokes-avatars’ personalities on source credibility. We conducted a two-group comparison experiment in a virtual store inside Second Life. The results showed that sincere avatars increased perceived source expertise and trustworthiness whereas exciting avatars increased perceived source attractiveness.

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While this study represents an initial step towards understanding consumer-created meaning, many questions remain. To what extent do created meanings draw from existing, shared cultural understandings (Thompson et al. 1994)? Also, what types of consumers are most likely to create product meanings? Meaning creation may be especially prevalent amongst influential consumers (Gladwell 1997), consumers high in need for uniqueness (Tian et al. 2001), and consumers with above average cultural capital (Holt 1998). By continuing to pursue our study we hope to initiate an informative and enriching line of research furthering our understanding of consumer-created product meaning.

References

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Background
Second Life is the fastest growing virtual environment and has received considerable attention from researchers and practitioners in the fields of marketing and consumer behavior. To date, about 6.5 million people have entered Second Life, and the impact of this technology is beginning to be felt by society (Bainbridge 2007).
E-commerce already thrives in this digital world—approximately $1,199,460 was spent in one 24 hour period (Second Life 2007). One of the most distinguishing key features of Second Life is that users can navigate, interact, and view the world through their own customized avatar. Avatars are increasingly used as company representatives and persuasion agents on commercial Web sites and virtual environments (Holzwarth, Janiszewski, and Neumann 2006).

Theoretical Framework
The notion of inanimate objects, such as commercial brands, becoming associated with human characteristics has been given a considerable amount of attention in consumer research. This symbolic meaning that commercial brands acquire is often called brand
personality (Aaker 1997). For example, a brand can be described by characteristics such as gender, age, social class, and lifestyle as well as classic human personality traits such as rugged (e.g., Harley Davidson), trendy (e.g., Apple), and sophisticated (e.g., Mercedes Benz).

This study aims to examine the relationship between symbolic consumption and consumer choice and to develop an understanding of what factors influence brand marketing and e-commerce in Second Life. This study empirically tests the role of brand personalities in persuasion and in the decision making process of the consumer. More importantly, the experiment was conducted in the avatar-based 3D virtual environment Second Life.

Although anthropomorphic qualities are most commonly associated with living creatures, consumers can also imbue non-human entities such as avatars with human personality traits. As sales representatives do in real life, avatars interact with consumers and make the online shopping experience more interpersonal (Holzwarth et al. 2006). Therefore, avatar-based 3D virtual environments are a promising marketing communications channel for brand management—not only online, but also in the real world—because marketers can effectively communicate personalities and images of their brands. Avatars are virtual sources or endorsers that can be used as company representatives. Thus, a company or brand’s credibility can be created by any direct or indirect brand contact that the consumer experiences with avatars in virtual environments.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the consequences of spokes-avatars’ personalities on source credibility. More specifically, it conceptually links two streams of research (brand personality and source credibility) and examines the impact of two of Aaker’s (1997) brand personality dimensions (Sincerity and Excitement) on three key constructs of source credibility: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. After reviewing prior research on brand personality and source credibility (e.g., Aaker 1997; Ohanian 1990), we predict that sincere spoke-avatars are more likely to be perceived as having source expertise (H1) and trustworthiness (H2) than exciting spoke-avatars, whereas exciting spoke-avatars are more likely to be perceived as having source attractiveness (H3) than sincere spoke-avatars. Towards the end, we conducted an experiment in the avatar-based 3D virtual environment Second Life.

Method

The present experiment is a two-group comparison design. Participants were 82 college students (43 females, 39 males) recruited from communication courses at a university in Massachusetts. We designed two different versions (featuring either an exciting or sincere spokes-avatar) of a 5-minute promotional script. We designed and manipulated the exciting avatar to appear young, trendy, unique, and contemporary. The avatar introduced itself by saying, “hi there! welcome to our store in second life!” and, then promoted the brand with an exciting tone consistent with the avatar’s personality. On the contrary, we designed the sincere avatar to look honest, friendly, and wholesome. The avatar introduced itself by saying, “Hello. Welcome to our store in Second Life,” and then promoted the brand with a sincere tone consistent with the avatar’s personality. Subjects were told that they would be in a clothing store where they would interact with a sales-avatar, who would then tell them about online shopping inside Second Life and introduce a new line of clothes that the company had recently released. They were then asked to listen to the spokes-avatar’s promotional dialogue and interact with it.

Results

To test the proposed hypotheses, a series of t-tests were conducted. Consistent with the predictions, the results indicated that subjects who interacted with sincere spoke-avatars showed higher scores for source expertise (α=.92, Mexpert=5.51) and trustworthiness (α=.93, Mtrust=4.94) than those who interacted with exciting spoke-avatars (Mexpert=4.79, t=3.02, p<.01; Mtrust=4.24, t=2.83, p<.01), thereby supporting H1 and H2. Further, as predicted, the results suggest that subjects who interacted with exciting spoke-avatars showed higher scores for source attractiveness (α=.78, Mattract=3.84) than those who interacted with sincere spoke-avatars (Mattract=3.32, t=−2.01, p<.05), thereby supporting H3.

Discussion

Despite the growing interest in the concept of brand personality, work in this area has been fairly limited and has made little progress in empirically supporting the importance of brand personality. Most of the research has focused on its structure and scales, but very limited research has empirically examined the consequences of brand personality. To fill the gap in the literature and expand application of brand personality to more diverse contexts (i.e., virtual environment and characters), this study investigated the predictive roles of spoke-avatars’ personalities on key dimensions of source credibility. Our findings suggest that spoke-avatars’ personalities can enhance source credibility in terms of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. The results showed that sincere avatars increased perceived source expertise and trustworthiness. Further, exciting avatars increased perceived source attractiveness.

From a managerial perspective, the findings of this study provide strategic insight into spoke-avatars and associated personality selection decisions. Avatars can serve as endorsers, sales agents, store assistants, and even as brands in virtual environments. Marketers can easily and effectively create, design, and manipulate spokes-avatars’ personalities to convey personalities and images of products and companies, thereby increasing the persuasiveness of brand communications.

References

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