The Ties That Bind: Being Black, Buying, and Hope (8:08)
Linden Dalecki, Pittsburg State University, USA

This short ethnographic film was commissioned by Burrell Advertising as part of the 2007 Proctor & Gamble Ethnic Marketing Conference. The aim of Burrell Advertising was to acquire a “thirty thousand feet view” of African American consumption patterns and attitudes. The film shows that the African-American market comprises participants from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds who express diverse views regarding African-American consumption and representations in marketing. The market, therefore, appears highly heterogeneous, comprising numerous distinct market segments. The film suggests that an emerging trend worthy of future research is the interest by highly-educated African Americans in “marketing that targets healthy eating and healthy living”—themes which these consumers observe are notably lacking in contemporary marketing.

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Experiencing the body in this symbolic realm brings us new inquires concerning the meanings attached to the avatars by their creators, how these avatars are constructed and reconstructed, and how and what consumers experience through these virtual bodies.

For the purpose of this videography, we interviewed three people (Skyler, Jesse, Fred) in physical everyday life settings, such as their offices or a computer lab at a university. These interviewees were logged in SL during the interviews, and were able to share their avatar (re)construction processes and bodily experiences with us visually. In addition, we interviewed five people (Raven, Esme, Spiff, Ginny, Cecil) online in their SL settings. First, we asked informants to talk about their initial involvement in SL and their feelings when they first found out about SL. Then, we asked them to describe what an avatar means to them and how having an avatar influences their SL experiences. Then we asked them to talk about the processes of avatar creation and recreation and what influences them in these processes. The informants talked about the number of avatars they created, the reasons behind creating several avatars, and how they created and modified their avatar(s). Lastly, we asked them to talk about the characteristics of the avatar(s) they created and whether there are any similarities or differences when they compare the characteristics of their avatar(s) and their first life selves. In sum, the questions mainly focused on the feelings and motives concerning their lives in SL, the processes of the (re)creation of virtual bodies/avatars, the motives behind these processes, and the experiences with these avatars in SL.

Concerning the concept of body in virtual worlds, our findings from the inquiry of involvement in SL, “avatar” meanings, avatar (re)construction and avatar experiences basically reveal that the body concept is perceived and experienced differently in many ways when compared to its perceptions and experience in first life. In virtual worlds, the body concept is more a reflection of contemporary consumers’ desire to experiment with different identities, experiences, and modes of life independent and free of nature and any one particular way of being and living. Preoccupation with the body is an essential part of virtual lives. The (re)construction of symbolic corporeal selves reflects the transforming urge of a modern consumer from perceiving his/her body as less of a tool for communication with and impression to others to an experience itself, an end that s/he playfully engages in for its own sake. The body itself becomes the experience in SL, rather than solely being a communication or impression management medium as it is perceived in first life.

The video concludes that the presence of the body in virtual worlds becomes symbolic in nature and enables people to playfully engage in (re)constructing several bodily selves. Freed from the physical constraints, the body is experienced in the symbolic realm of the virtual worlds. Consumers reconcile their urge for physicality with the non-physicality of cyberspace in symbolic forms. We call this process as symembodiment and our explorations in SL reveal that body is present in virtual worlds, yet not with its physical constraints but with its symbolic meanings.

References


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Consumer culture involves a quest for meaning in life primarily through consumption. With our logo-laden clothing and shopping bags, we roam the shopping mall in search of an identity and in search of meaning in life.

—Russell Belk, 2006

Can individuals use consumer culture to transcend the internalized or habituated orientations that emanate from their socialization in class, gender, ethnicity, and other dimensions of social structuring?

—Arnould & Thompson, 2007

The Ties That Bind: Being Black, Buying, and Hope (2007), is an 8-minute consumer ethnography shot on miniDV that was commissioned by Burrell Advertising as part of the 2007 Proctor & Gamble Ethnic Marketing Conference. Burrell’s main interest was to get a “30,000 foot view” of African American consumption patterns and attitudes. It is expected that a dialogue will be generated around the following theme: to what extent do the videography typologies proposed by Kozinets and Belk (2007) in the Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing result in different sorts of consumer information? For example, The Ties That Bind videography utilizes (1) videotaped interviews and (2) observational videography, as well as (6) impressionistic forms. Given that the short has participants from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds with a range of views regarding African American consumption and representations in marketing, it is also expected that discussion will be generated on the subject of various distinct consumer sub-segments within the African American community. In particular, given what appeared to be a common interest for highly-education African Americans in “marketing which targets healthy eating and healthy living”—something which this sub-segment felt was particularly lacking in contemporary marketing—a discussion of emerging trends and solutions could be invaluable.