Exploring the (Re)Construction of the Body in Virtual Worlds: Consumption of Body As Experience

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We explore the meanings in the ongoing (re)construction of the body through avatars in a virtual world called Second Life. Using nethnographic research method, we investigate the ways in which consumers are involved in SL, the meanings attached to their avatars, the process of (re)constructing their avatars, and the experiences lived through avatars. Findings help conceptualize the body as experience, which enhances the perception of the body as a means of self-presentation. We introduce the concept of symembodiment to articulate the presence of body in SL, and to provide an alternative perspective to the embodiment/disembodiment paradox in the literature by revealing further paradoxes concerning the presence of the body in virtual worlds.

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natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes) risks. However, with the existing research on risk, we are unable to address possible variance in assessing risks in cross-context. How do people perceive risks in different risk domains? How do they manage (tensions and) their perceptions across these domains? How consumers live/cope with various (and sometimes countervailing) risk discourses (e.g., economic, political, technological, environmental, social) and what kind of role consumption plays in those experiences? How various risk discourses are activated and negotiated in everyday life? How are consumers’ practices related to one discourse is mediated through other risk discourses? Do they balance their practices related with competing risk discourses? Or do they trade off one against another? Do the risk perceptions and resultant practices shift toward one risk domain to another? Consumer researchers need to answer these important questions and thus reveal embedded and complex quality of multiple risk discourses and their reflections on consumption practices.

To address this theoretical gap, a poststructuralist perspective would offer insights into how consumers experience multiple risk discourses and what role their consumption practices play. The methods used for data collection include multiple steps. First, a questionnaire was distributed to 50 graduate students as part of a graduate course. After giving some information to them about the project, questions asked were about the types of risk discourses they can identify, how they think they are related to consumption, and how they deal with them in their daily life, and how they think they effect their consumption in general. The purpose of this step was to gather a sense of potential areas to probe in the second step of the data collection process that is in-depth interviews. Preliminary analysis suggests several themes around these practices as prioritization (focusing one over the other depending on context), distraction (choosing to be distracted by other issues about their lives), ignorance, accommodation (trying to be careful), and some shift (in consumption practices).

This study hopes to add to the existing body of research around risk in consumer behavior field by studying risks as discourses in order to provide a deeper understanding about social, historical, cultural constructions of risk. Furthermore, it attempts to shift the focus from individual and isolated risk domains as they are tackled in previous research to a more broader perspective of multiple risk domains as experienced and lived by consumers on a daily basis. Sharing these ideas and preliminary findings at ACR would definitely provide much needed feedback and comments, and would also open up potential collaboration among other consumer risk researchers.

References

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The main focus of interest on the body concept in consumer research evolved around the corporeal body. Body has been investigated as a project that modern consumers work on (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991; Schouten 1991), and as a means of self-presentation and socialization (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Thus, modern consumers treated their bodies as not an ‘end’ but a ‘means’ of conveying a desirable image to others. Furthermore, with the emergence of new technologies, the presence of the body has been questioned. Some argued that these technologies have enabled people to break out of the finitude of their embodiment (Balsamo 2000; Turkle 1995). Others advocated the essential role of embodiment in any human experience (Argyle and Shields 1996; Froy 2003; Hansen 2006).

The growing semiotic potential of virtual worlds through multiplicity of symbols (Venkatesh 1999) allows for visual representation of one’s physical self through avatars, which are “graphic icons representing users through various forms” (Chung 2005, p. 538). In this study, we explore the meanings attached to the avatars, and how and what consumers experience through these virtual bodies, in a 3-D virtual world called Second Life (SL).

We conducted netnographic research, which helped us understand the symbolic aspects of body, and develop alternative perspectives to the presence of the body in virtual worlds. Our preliminary data consist of our experiences as SL residents, and online/offline interviews with eight informants, all of which were in-depth and semistructured.

Findings derived from the meanings attributed to avatars reveal that 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 (FL). Whereas FL is limited in the bodily creations; SL provides consumers the freedom to (re)construct their desired bodily creations and experiences.