University of Sunderland

TITLE: DEVELOPING A METHODOLOGY TO RESEARCH THE AVATAR / USER RELATIONSHIP

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

RESEARCH QUESTION

Virtual worlds such as Second Life have created a new place to enact the social in which the user creates an avatar to explore, interact and consume. Consumer behavior researchers have largely overlooked avatars and the challenges they present to extant theories. There have been calls for research into the avatar-user relationship (Messinger et al, 2008) and indeed Belk (2013 p 44) suggests that what both our avatars and we do online influences the self and therefore "only studying extended self offline is missing a large part of the influences on our contemporary self concepts and our and others' activities in creating them". This leads us to the research question: How can the offline and online self be researched to understand the avatar-user relationship? This

paper addresses this contemporary research problem.

METHOD AND DATA

Studying the new phenomenon of the avatar/user relationship, necessitated adapting/developing a new research approach. As the focus is on the individual user subjective personal introspection was combined with a five year longitudinal multi-modal case study. We argue there is a valid justification for a single case in these very particular circumstances (after Gould, 1991).

The final data set comprised of items including 32 snapshots, four videos, four in-world interviews, two out of world interviews, two focus groups, twenty five pages of Second Life inventory, journal and conference papers produced by the author with various co-authors during the period, reflective logs of author and students as well secondary material, a total of approximately 3,100 pages

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Netrospection allows us to follow longitudinally the user and their avatar and reveal new insights into changes of behaviour both in and out of world. Experiments in the virtual world led to real life changes in the user which were not transitory as extant research suggests.

The avatar became an extended self of the user and this process can be followed longitudinally. This appears to link to the authors' role and social identities over the period, which moved from educator through an experimental phase to researcher. The dataset demonstrates that through for example the videos and snapshots being used in lectures and/or conference presentations the authors' avatar had come to be associated with her real life persona and role identity. There was also a progression in achieving cultural competence, social identity and integration into the virtual world community which appears to mirror an acculturation process. Similarly there is a learning

process to becoming a consumer within Second Life linking to consumer acculturation.

Our research has demonstrated the value of using netrospection as a methodological approach that is distinct from netnography and auto-ethnography.

KEY CONTRIBUTIONS

The development of a new research method we term 'Netrospection' which links Subjective Personal Introspection with a multi-modal five year longitudinal case study. This combines longitudinal analysis of both the online avatar and the offline self; using an extensive data set of online and offline materials with the SPI. Netrospection enables new perspectives upon the avatar-user relationship and may be developed into a Guided Netrospection process opening up new research opportunities with the potential to be applied within other online environments.

The process of an avatar becoming an extended self of the user is documented over the course of this research. Extant research suggests any changes in the user after being in a virtual world are transitory in the real world, our research findings challenge this.

Strong links to acculturation and consumer acculturation theory including the concept of cultural competence mean our work extends contemporary migratory consumptionscapes (Askegaard & Özçaglar-Toulouse (2011) into the cybermarketspace crossing conceptual boundaries.

References are available upon request.