

Understanding participation styles within teen Virtual Worlds: A comparison of UK & Finnish users.

Abstract

Purpose

Teens spend an increasing amount of time online particularly in teen-based virtual worlds such as Habbo Hotel™ & Stardoll™. Research to date has focused on identity and personal development highlighting issues such as bullying. This research aims to identify the participation styles of teen users and reflects the international nature of this market by undertaking a two-country comparison of users.

Methodology

A phenomenological approach is taken informed by Consumer Culture Theory. Wide ranging discovery interviews will yield rich data. UK and Finnish nationals in their home countries will carry out interviews.

Findings

The exploratory interviews will generate detailed narrative accounts of how teenagers engage with these virtual worlds and how they fit within their lived experience. The interviews are being undertaken during October/November 2013. Analysis and interpretation of the findings from these discovery interviews will be submitted in the full paper in February 2014.

Originality Value

Participation styles are identified in relation to both the socio-cultural context of the teenagers and the specific virtual world context. Comparing the UK and Finnish results will allow identification of participation styles and behaviours that may cross cultures and others that are cultural tied.

Purpose

Teens spend an increasing amount of time online particularly in teen-based virtual worlds such as Habbo Hotel™ & Stardoll™. Kzero Research (2011) estimate there are 652 Million accounts held by 10-15 year olds & 385 Million accounts for 15-25 year olds worldwide. Informed by Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) this study aims to understand the phenomenon of virtual worlds from the teenage consumer perspective situated within their life narratives. While previous research has identified the significance of ‘cultural age’ (Abiala & Hernwall, 2013) the social-cultural perspective has not been actively researched to date. Equally, many studies have had a single country focus other than self-completion type surveys. Therefore, a two-country study will yield new insights. The context specific nature of virtual worlds has not been considered for example Stardoll™ is a girl’s only environment while many others are mixed gender. This discovery research will yield rich data that will not only identify current participation styles but also other issues relating to consumer behaviour and ethics.

Background

Virtual worlds combine computer game and social networking technologies creating an interactive 3D environment. They create a sense of place compared to traditional websites or social media. To explore interact and communicate in these worlds users create avatars which are graphical representations of themselves. Like planets in the solar system, virtual worlds are discrete universes suspended in the World Wide Web. It is estimated that the global economy is worth \$6 Billion (Castronova, 2010) and comprises 300+ virtual worlds (Kzero, 2011). The owners have complete control over these worlds including the types and level of agency of the avatars. A Special Issue of the Journal of Marketing of Management focused on virtual worlds and suggests, “rapid growth in teen and children’s virtual worlds might perhaps lead to an emergent generation of avatar natives” (Saren et al 2013 p5).

Teen virtual worlds

Recent research by Kzero(2012) suggest in the final quarter of 2012 there were thirteen teen virtual worlds in the 13-15 age category including Minecraft (43Million users) a creative world reminiscent of 3D Lego and Stardoll (212m) a girl only fashion-creation world. While, in the 15-20 age category there are nine worlds including Maple Story (120M) and Habbo Hotel (230M) (IBID, 2012). Table 1 shows those worlds with 5M or more users, not shown are five relative new entrants to the market that have not reached 5M. The dominance of Habbo Hotel and Stardoll is illustrated with Maple Story having the largest user bases. There are two other clear groups the mid-range worlds with 20-50M users and the lower end with 10-less than 20M. Finland based Habbo Hotel is reported to have 51% of users in the 13-17age range with 30% in 18-24 age range with a peak of 8.7 Million concurrent users (Sulake, 2010). This range of ages is interesting as it suggest that there may differences between different countries/cultures regarding the use of these virtual worlds. Maple Story is an Asian folklore world with a large young consumer following with an average age of 18 years (Ducheneaut et al. 2009). Therefore, this is an international market.

Fig.1 Teen Virtual worlds in the 13-20 age range with 5M or more users final quarter 2012 (Kzero, 2012)

Name of Virtual World	Age Range	User Nos.
Habbo Hotel	15-20	230Million(M)
Stardoll	13-15	212M
Maple Story	15-20	120M
Gala	15-20	50M
Minecraft	13-15	40M
Roblox	13-15	30M
Go Supermodel	15-20	30M
Weeworld	15-20	30M
Planet Caerno	13-15	23M
FusionFall	13-15	15M
WooWorld	13-15	12M
Ozworld	13-15	12M
Fiesta	13-15	12M
Howse	13-15	11M
Smeet	15-20	10M
Meez	15-20	10M
Cosmopak	15-20	5M

Teen virtual worlds are also becoming increasingly complex offering not only social activities, but also games, competitions, creative opportunities that may include trading, virtual and/ or real world merchandise. Creating their avatar and changing its appearance was one of the key features young consumers enjoyed in virtual worlds reported by Tuukkanen, Iqbal & Kankaanranta (2010). While, Kafai, Fields & Cook (2007) describe, Whyville as an 'identity playground', where 'twens' created their avatars: - for aesthetic reasons, to match 'real' self, as an affiliation, as not available in real life, to fit trend or to be anonymous (p.35). Children using Zora construct virtual homes which they are encouraged to put cherished possessions in allowing identity and moral values to be explored (Bers, 2008). Stardoll has links to real world brands such as DKNY & Chanel and TV programmes such as Strictly Come Dancing and recently launched a range of real world merchandise in J C Penney (Kzero, 2012). Tuukkanen, Iqbal & Kankaanranta (2010) suggest that the structures of the virtual worlds affect the level of children's agency, hence the importance of studying specific virtual worlds. Therefore, the range of potential participation styles is becoming increasingly complex and understanding the context of specific virtual worlds essential. There is also evidence that children leave virtual worlds as they grow out of the particular age range of a world (Tuukkanen, Iqbal & Kankaanranta, 2010). Indeed Habbo Hotel term users that have outgrown the world as their alumni (Sulake, 2012).

Participations styles

Research into online communities for adults has identified a range of participation styles. Kozinets (1999) for example examined members' topical and social involvement in a community, and came up with four member types: (1) tourists, 2) minglers, 3) devotees, and 4) insiders. Tourists, as their name indicates, have a passing interest that they aim to fulfil by visiting the community and lack social ties. Minglers again are mostly interesting in social interactions. Devotees are involved in the community's core topic, not social ties. Insiders have both strong social ties, and a strong interest in the community topic. These members show different participation styles, with minglers and insiders showing stronger social interactions, and devotees and tourists more involved in information exchange. De Valck et al (2009) investigated, in addition to social and informational behavior, visit frequency and visit duration. Based on informational behaviour, De Valck et al. (2009) identified five member types in virtual communities: core members, conversationalists, information lists, hobbyists, functionalists and opportunists. These member types differ according to their visit frequency and duration, focus of activity, and degree of social involvement. Further preferred participation orientation can be predicted, for example, informationalists prefer Wiki's, conversationists prefer blogs and hobbyists prefer Facebook. These results relate to online discussion communities directed at adults, and therefore, are likely not to apply to children or teens using 3D communities. A recent Swedish study of 10-14yr olds use of social networking sites suggested cultural age and gender issues were relevant. Girls being more likely to discuss fashion blogs and games to a less extent, while boys discussed games and pornography (Abiala & Hernwall, 2010).

3D communities differ in several ways from 2D communities: they enable multi-media navigation including audio, video and TV, access to information collections, ability to get acquainted with new places for relaxation, fun, and new places, access to multi-player games, sales-related activities of virtual and real-life goods/services, developing social or clinical skills or socializing in general with the help of avatars, and attending in events and communities (Boulos et al. 2007, Ward & Saren, 2008). Early virtual world research focused on role play games such as World of Warcraft (WoW). Yee (2007) identified three overarching components in player motivations; achievement, social, and immersion, also reporting that women showed greater relational motivation. Worlds such as Second Life are social / user-generated worlds in contrast to the goal-orientated fantasy role-play worlds like WoW. Eisenbeiss, Blechschmidt, Backhaus & Freund (2011), identified four latent user segments of socializers, refugees, creativity seekers, and specialists in Second Life. While the first three categories were driven by individual motivations of social, escapism and creativity the specialists had mixed motivations. Therefore, creativity and mixed motivations appear to differentiate the social virtual worlds from the game play focused worlds. Interestingly, Eisenbeiss et al (2011) specifically mention Habbo Hotel suggesting the teenage focus would moderate these results.

There has been much less work on participation styles in teenage worlds. There was an early survey by Kzero for Habbo Hotel in 2008 however, the results are no longer available online and as there have been substantial changes within Habbo Hotel world this data would not reflect current preferences. A study of Swedish users aged 13-15 of virtual worlds identified broad activities that could be summarised

as socialising, gaming, exploring, creating and purchasing (Iqbal, Kankaanranta, & Neittaanmäki, 2011). A range of different worlds was researched but activities were summarised overall and were not related back to the individual virtual worlds (Iqbal et al 2011). Mäntymäki and Salo (2011) used Habbo Hotel to study purchase behaviours which were linked to self expression and status value thus the presence of others was 'pivotal' to the purchase. While, virtual items such as collectable items, clothes, pets and furniture and premium memberships also differentiated the user from others. They concluded that future studies should include more than one virtual world, several countries and there was a need to understand the social dynamics within virtual worlds to learn more about participation styles (IBID, 2011).

Consumer Culture theory

Recently Arnould & Thompson (2005) reviewed 20 years of CCT research and suggested that is not a theory as such, but a range of theoretical perspectives that seek to understand consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings as dynamic relationships. Research has focused around four key areas: consumer identity, market place cultures, socio-historic patterns of consumption and marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. The aim has been to put the consumer at the centre of research in line with the marketing concept. Therefore, given the importance of cultural age already identified, this seems to be the most appropriate approach to understand more about the socio-cultural influences and how they may link to teenagers' participation styles within virtual worlds.

From the extant literature, we have identified a need to understand participation styles in teen virtual worlds, as they become more and more complex cybermarketplaces. Key issues are the need to explore more than one country, understand the context of the virtual worlds being studied and link to the current lived experience of the teenagers.

Research design

Research Question

1. To what degree do teen virtual world users have a preferred participation orientation such as informationlists, conversationalists and hobbyists?

Research Objectives

1. To understand how virtual worlds fit into the life narratives of the users.
2. To identify participation styles within teen virtual worlds.
3. To compare results between UK and Finnish users to identify key similarities and differences.

Our target audience for this research are users between 18-24 years who have several years experience of using teen virtual worlds e.g. Habbo Hotel reports 30% of users are between 18-24 years. This also complies with UK ethical considerations. Our aim is to consider two virtual worlds with different contexts. The virtual worlds used will largely depend on the accessibility of UK and Finnish users. The authors will become participant observers within the virtual worlds selected for study prior to the interviews. There will be ten interviews in each country for two different virtual worlds giving a total of twenty. This exploratory research aims to understand this phenomenon from the consumers' perspective. We propose using a life narrative approach to allow the users to speak in an open semi-structured format allowing a conversation to develop and flow. The Discussion Guide has two main sections the first is about the background of the user and the second is their use of virtual worlds. These wide ranging discovery interviews will yield rich data. The interviews will be recorded with permission, transcribed and thematic analysis carried out using Nvivo software. After two initial interviews in each country, the discussion guide will be reviewed and adapted as appropriate. The two researchers will continue to liaise and check at intervals as the interviews are transcribed.

Findings

The exploratory interviews will generate rich and detailed narrative accounts allowing participation styles for teen virtual worlds to be identified. Further, these interviews may reveal wider consumer behaviour issues and help identify behaviours that may cross cultures and other that may be cultural tied. The interviews are currently in progress and the initial analysis and interpretation of the findings will be submitted in the full paper in February. There will be a full discussion including managerial implications, academic implications and ethical and/or policy implications.

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to acknowledge that a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grant Research Award has funded this work. We thank them for this very valuable support.

References

- Abiala, K & Hernwall, P (2013) Tweens negotiating identity online –Swedish girls' and boys' reflections on online experiences. *Journal of Youth Studies*, DOI:10.1080/13676261.2013.780124
- Arnould, E.J. & Thompson, C.G. (2005). Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, 4, 868-882
- Boulos, M. N. K., Hetherington L. & Wheeler, S. (2007), Second Life: an overview of the potential of 3-D virtual worlds in medical and health education, *Health Information & Libraries Journal* Volume 24, Issue 4, pp. 233–245.
- Castronova, E.W. (2010). *Studying beehives*. Paper presented at The Federal Consortium for Virtual Worlds, 3rd Annual Conference, SecondLife. Retrieved from <http://www.ndu.edu/icollege/fcvw/index.htm>
- Cyber Creatives Inc. (2011). MMORPG gamelist. Retrieved from <http://www.mmorpg.com/gamelist.cfm> Accessed 25th October, 2011
- De Valck, van Bruggen, G.H. and Wierenga, B. (2009), Virtual communities: A marketing perspective, *Decision Support Systems*, Vol. 47, pp. 185-203.
- Ducheneaut, N., Wen, M.H., Yee, N., & Wadley, G. (2009) Body and Mind: A Study of Avatar Personalization in Three Virtual Worlds. *In Proceedings of the 27th International Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, CHI 2009 ~ New Media Experiences Boston, MA, USA*
- Eisenbeiss, N. Blechschmidt, B. Backhaus, K. & Freund, P.A. (2012) “The (Real) World Is Not Enough:” Motivational Drivers and User Behavior in Virtual Worlds *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 26 4–20
- Iqbal, A., Kankaanranta, M. & Neittaanmäki, P. (2011) Participation of the young ones in virtual worlds: a look at experiences and motivations *World Journal on Educational Technology*. Vol 3, issue 1 (2011) 16-27
- Kozinets, R. (1999) E-tribalized marketing?: the strategic implications of virtual communities of consumption. *European Management Journal* 17, June, 252–264
- Kafai, Y.B., Fields, D.A., Cook, M.S. (2007) Your Second Selves: resources, Agency, and Constraints in Avatar Designs and Identity Play in a Tween Virtual World. *Situated Play, Proceedings of DIGRA 2007 Conference*
- Kannan, P. K. Ai-Mei Chang & Whinston Andrew B. (2000), Electronic Communities in E-Business: Their Role and Issues, *Information Systems Frontiers* 1:4, 415-426.
- Kzero Research (2011). Virtual worlds: Sizes by territory. Retrieved from <http://www.kzero.co.uk/blog/> Date accessed 17th October 2011
- Mäntymäki M. and Salo, J. (2011), Teenagers in social virtual worlds: Continuous use and purchasing behavior in Habbo Hotel, *Computers in Human Behavior* 27, pp. 2088–2097.
- McCracken, G. (1988) *The Long Interview*. Qualitative Research Methods (13) Sage Publications: California
- Saren, M. Harwood, T. Ward, J. & Venkatesh, A. (2013) Marketing beyond the frontier? Researching the new marketing landscape of virtual worlds. *The Journal of Marketing Management*, Oct, p 1-8
- Sulake (2012). <http://www.sulake.com/habbo/?navi=2>
- Tuukkanen, T., Iqbal, A., Kankaanranta, M. (2010). A Framework for Children’s Participatory Practices in Virtual Worlds. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, North America, Available at: <https://journals.tdl.org/jvwr/article/view/1889/1158>.
- Ward J.A & Saren M. Second Life: Contours of a Virtual Marketing Landscape. *In: European Academy of Marketing Conference* 2008, Brighton
- Yee, N (2007), Motivations for Play in Online Games. *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 9, 772-775.