Symbolic and Experiential Consumption of Body in Virtual Worlds:
from (Dis)Embodiment to Symembodiment

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Abstract

This study examines the symbolic meanings of the body concept in a virtual world called Second Life (SL). Using audio-visual approach to netnography, 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 their avatars. In light of our findings, we draw attention to the conceptualization of body as experience, which brings the enhancement in the perception of body as a means of self-presentation to experiencing the body for the sake of the body. Furthermore, we introduce the concept of symembodiment as a means of articulating the presence of body in SL and reemphasizing the non-resolvable embodiment/disembodiment paradox of the body in the virtual world.

Keywords: avatar; body; Second Life; virtual worlds; netnography; audio-visual research.

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The concept of body has long been an interest for consumer researchers. The main focus of this interest evolved around the corporeal body (1) as a means of self-presentation and socialization (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995) and (2) as a project that modern consumers work on (Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner, 1991; Schouten, 1991). Furthermore, social scientists, mainly from sociology and philosophy, have started to question and discuss the presence of the body with the emergence of new communication technologies. Some argued that these technologies have enabled people to break out of the finitude of their embodiment and engage in disembodiment (Balsamo, 2000; Stone, 2000; Turkle, 1995; Ward, 2001). Others have contested the idea of the body becoming futile in virtual worlds, and have advocated the essential role of embodiment in any human experience (Argyle & Shields, 1996; Flichy, 2007; Froy, 2003; Hansen, 2006; Mingers, 2001).

In the beginning of these technologies, communication that took place in chat rooms, discussion boards, and the like was restricted to the written word, and later enhanced by voice. More recently, the growing semiotic potential of the virtual worlds allows for visual representation of one's physical self through images such as avatars and photos, which brought another perspective to the embodiment/disembodiment debate.

Our research explores the symbolic and experiential construction of body through avatars in a three-dimensional virtual world called Second Life (*SL*), where experiences are completely user-created. Our research questions include the following: (1) How do consumers attach meanings to the digital self images they create? (2) How are these images constructed and reconstructed? (3) How and what do consumers experience through their virtual bodies? Specifically, construction of symbolic corporeal selves through avatars has been interest to us.

We suggest that this phenomenon reflects the transforming urge of a modern consumer from perceiving his or 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. Our explorations in *SL* reveal that, having gained the ability to play with the semiotic potential of the virtual worlds, consumers engage in the creation and recreation of several avatars, each constituting another self. The presence of the body as well as the experiences and explorations through bodily creations (avatars) become symbolic, yet the illusory nature of the body's presence in virtual worlds still remains, leading to the futility of resolving the embodiment/disembodiment duality. Consumers can create several bodily selves in *SL*, yet these processes are full of refractions from both First Life (FL) and *SL*. The construction of these bodies and the experiences lived through them in this symbolic realm are nevertheless affected by consumers' FL selves and vice versa, further intensifying the body/mind dilemma in virtual worlds. Therefore, we introduce the concept of *symembodiment* as a means of articulating the

presence of the body in virtual worlds, and further highlighting the non-resolvable and futile nature of the embodiment/disembodiment debate.

We begin our study with a discussion of the theoretical approaches to the body concept in virtual worlds in order to provide the theoretical foundations that inform our netnographic research. We then describe the research processes used in our study. Taking into account the notions of fluidity, symbolic realm, and multiplicity (of images, selves, and experiences), we present our findings. We greatly benefit from an audio-visual approach to investigate the construction of body in virtual worlds, which enriches our understanding of the symbolic aspects of body and helps with developing alternative perspectives to the conceptualization of body in contemporary world. Lastly, we discuss the implications of our findings on the presence of the body and the meanings attached to the body, draw attention to the non-resolvable nature of the presence of the body in virtual worlds, and present alternative conceptualizations.

Symbolic (Re)Construction of the Body in Virtual Worlds

The body has been an integral part of the self-concept, and body image has come to play an important role in contemporary society as a means of constructing, symbolizing, and expressing one's selves (Fisher, 1986; Schouten, 1991). As Joy and Venkatesh (1994, p. 339) suggest, "Our consumer culture (e.g., Westernized, post-industrial) is dominated by a preoccupation with the body. This preoccupation extends from such areas as food, dieting, clothing, fashion, exercise, to all kinds of phenomenological experiences with the body."

Social scientists have conceptualized body as a project individuals work on and alter as a means of identity construction and reconstruction (Schouten, 1991; Shilling, 2003). Furthermore, body has largely been treated as a medium that helps people explore and experience the world (Meamber & Venkatesh, 1999). One's perception of his or her body is considered interdependent with social relationships and control factors that constrain this perception of one's body in conformity with cultural ideals and normative as well as moral accounts (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Construction of body and the associated body image therefore, serves as a form of socialization and a means of signifying one's self-worth, status in social relationships and lifestyles, and exertion of control over one's self (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). In sum, modern consumers treat their bodies as not an 'end' but as a 'means' of conveying meaning and a desirable image to others.

This urge to construct a body that helps individuals present their selves as a means of signifying a desired impression to others becomes a complicated phenomenon as we tap into the realm of the digital universe. As Meamber and Venkatesh (1999, p. 192) also put forth, "how do consumers reconcile their urge for physicality with the non-physicality of cyberspace?"

Recent advances in new media technologies enhanced the text-based communication on the internet with voice and later with visual aspects, such as avatars, photos, videos, and the like. Thus, consumers gained the potential to manipulate signs and to play with the symbols of the virtual worlds, both in the form of text and images. Some of these virtual worlds provide individuals with the ability to create their visual representations or personified icons, and therefore express one's selves in several bodily representations—ideal or possible, real or fantasy. Contemporary consumers live in a visual culture bundled with a multiplicity of signs and symbols. Therefore, the textual is replaced by the visual as the cultural order with the advent

of new media technologies and communications (Venkatesh, 1999). Actions become symbolic in nature and evoke meanings that open up symbolic participation in fantasy, narrative, and code (Alexander, 2003). The construction of who one is tends to become a shorter-time project than was previously possible. This construction of several bodily selves may reflect the transforming urge of a modern consumer from perceiving his or 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.

Consequently, body concept and bodily representations are also significant in virtual worlds. In the information or network society, the internet has brought a new logic to communication, where relationships and exchanges become increasingly based on fluidity—that is, individuals can perform temporal roles or express multiple selves based on a variety of experiences. New technologies offer the individual the potential to manipulate signs, play with the symbols of the virtual worlds, both in the form of text and images. The growing semiotic potential of the virtual worlds allows for visual representation of one's physical self through appropriation and manipulation of digital images (Nguyen & Alexander, 1996).

Digital images help consumers with reconciling their urge for physicality with the non-physicality of cyberspace in symbolic forms. As suggested by Reid-Steere (1996, p. 36), "The boundaries delineated by cultural constructions of the body are both subverted and given free rein in virtual environments. With the body freed from the physical, it completely enters the realm of the symbol." The construction of body based on fluidity in the virtual worlds leads to the perception of the virtual body as more 'fluid'. Furthermore, as Cavallaro (1998, p. 13) states, "A body that is fluid and fragmented may sound like fun. If the body is not one fixed 'thing' but many possible 'bits' of things, the opportunities for play and experiment become virtually endless." In other words, freed from the constraints of a physical body, people playfully engage in novel forms of self-presentation and turn symbols into personal expressions (Schau & Gilly 2003). Therefore, the body is considered a medium that helps people explore and experience the virtual world, as it has also been conceptualized as a medium that helps with exploring and experiencing the actual world (Meamber & Venkatesh, 1999).

Avatar: The Body in the Virtual World

Avatars are among the most popular digital images; or, in other words, symbolic forms used in the virtual world. Derived from the ancient Indian language Sanskrit, an Avatar is defined as an embodiment of a deity on earth. In the digital world it denotes "a representation of the user as an animated character" (Loos, 2003, p. 17); "general graphic representations that are personified by means of computer technology" (Holzwarth, Janiszewski & Neumann, 2006, p. 20); "graphic icons representing users through various forms" (Chung, 2005, p. 538); or "discursive or visual virtual selves" (Kolko, 1999).

Construction of avatars is user-generated, meaning that users have the control of creating and manipulating their avatars, constituting them with several attributes, gestures (using animated expressions such as smiling, winking, sticking a tongue out, etc.), and physical appearances (humanlike, non-human, half-human, cyborg, animal or fantasy creatures). Through these digital images, the presence of the body as well as the experiences and explorations become symbolic. That way, individuals construct their selves in varying personas through these avatars and experience alternative lifestyles in virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft*,

EverQuest, *SIMS* and *SL*. The use of avatars in creating "cyber-characters," participation in games or chat rooms on the internet with personas other than ones experienced in actuallife, adventures in several virtual worlds, are all providing people with possibilities of projecting selves constructed swiftly and temporally. Webb (2001) also suggests that the avatar culture created in virtual worlds connects people temporally and loosely, yet brings the eventual emancipation to relocate their selves in another place.

SL provides outlets through which present experiences can be constructed and shared, and different selves can be explored and experimented. Meaning and substance are sought in present moments through experiencing and experimenting. Actions, virtual or actual, become means for creation of these experiences in the present, rather than tasks to be decidedly organized for future gains. In virtual worlds, individuals have numerous symbolic bodies to choose from and they greatly influence the kind of body they inhabit (Castronova, 2004). The symbolic nature of the virtual presence in *SL* enables people to playfully engage in their bodily creations called avatars. This symbolic (re)construction of these avatars becomes a means of creating multiple selves. Consequently, construction and reconstruction of avatars becomes a playful experience and achieves the desire to live in different bodies with various attributes that are symbolic creations of their selves. Today's consumer no longer consumes objects, rather it is the symbol, the sign value that is consumed and produced in a perpetual cycle (Venkatesh, 1999). Virtual worlds, the worlds of free-floating symbols, where individuals are devoid of the constraints of their bodies, are embedded in the scheme of symbolic forms (Venkatesh, 1999). Hence, the continuous construction of body through avatars becomes a symbolic experience, in which the body is present, not with its constraints but with its symbolic significance.

Second Life (SL)

There are many outlets on the internet, in which present experiences can be constructed and shared, and different selves can be explored and experimented with. *SL*, described as "a 3-D virtual world entirely created by its residents[1], is one of these outlets where consumers can construct, reconstruct, and experience multiple bodily representations.

Mainly, *SL* is "… a world with birdsong, rippling water, shopping malls, property taxes, and realistic physics. And life inside is almost as varied as it is outside." (Roush, 2007, p. 39) that was opened to the public in 2003 by the American company Linden Lab, and it has been growing day by day in terms of the number of registered users, as well as the territory of this virtual world as expressed by Roush (2007, p. 39):

"Second Life, which started out four years ago as a 1-square-kilometer patch with 500 residents, has grown into almost 600 square kilometers of territory spread over three minicontinents, with 6.9 million registered users and 30,000 to 40,000 residents online at any moment."

SL community describes itself as[2] :

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[1] Second Life*: What Is Second Life? <<http://secondlife.com/whatis/>>, accessed 26 Oct. 2008.

[2] *Ibid*.

"a global community working together to build a new online space for creativity, collaboration, commerce, and entertainment. We strive to bridge cultures and welcome diversity. We believe in free expression, compassion and tolerance as the foundation for community in this new world."

Consumers are enabled to experience and experiment freely with their bodily creations due to the symbolic nature and the semiotic richness of virtual worlds. In *SL*, people gain the ability to play with the symbolic tools of this semiotic universe. The symbolic nature of the virtual presence in *SL* enables people to playfully engage in their bodily creations or, in other words, their *avatars*. Symbolic (re)construction of these avatars becomes a means of creating multiple selves and brings the playful experience and the achievement of the desire to live in different bodies with various attributes that are symbolic creations of their selves.

Methodology

Initially, advances in new media technologies enhanced the text-based communication on the internet with voice and later with visual aspects, such as avatars, photos, videos, and the like. This enhancement has many implications on human experiences to become more visual due to the dependence of everyday life experiences on such media as television, films, and the internet (Mirzoeff, 1999) that privilege the visual. Furthermore, new media technologies, like most marketing and social phenomena, became visual in nature in an environment where markets and economies have been increasingly relying on images (Schroeder, 2002).

As visual aspects gain more significance in virtual worlds, there is a need to develop different approaches to netnographic research methodologies to gain deeper understanding of these aspects and other aspects that relate to the visual. We propose that audio-visual research, which has been extensively utilized in ethnographic and participant observation research, can also be utilized in netnographic research as a way to make this research stream richer in exploration of the recent internet phenomena such as virtual worlds. This way, we could develop an emotional understanding (Denzin, 1989) or experiential knowledge (Belk 1989). In other words, the use of audio-visual signs other than words will possibly enable us to develop a deeper and more thorough understanding of persons, situations, events, and places of our interest.

We conducted netnographic research to capture the behaviors of people in Second Life community, as netnography is "an interpretive method devised specifically to investigate the consumer behavior of cultures and communities present on the internet" (Kozinets, 1998, p. 366). Additionally, an audio-visual approach in netnographic research enables us to communicate the understanding we have developed with greater effectiveness. This is mainly due to the construction of everyday reality in virtual worlds different than the outside world in terms of multiple audio, as well as visual imaginations. Revealing this imagination is easier through an audio-visual communication of our research. Furthermore, we think that the audience of the virtual world research pays greater attention to the visual, making it a necessity for the virtual world researchers to think, do research, and communicate findings visually and better meet the visual expectations (Belk, 2006) of these audiences.

Our research in virtual worlds provides an illustrative example of a netnographic research conducted with an audio-visual approach. First, we describe our data collection process. Then, we reveal our findings on the semiotic potentials of virtual worlds regarding the body concept.

Our project focuses on the meaning of the body concept in virtual worlds—more specifically, on the symbolic construction and experience of the body and the meanings consumers attribute to their bodily experiences. The body and the virtual world are both parts of contemporary visual culture. Thus, the visual nature of these concepts makes visual research more attractive for us to investigate these phenomena. We were interested in exploring the conceptual changes in the body concept due to momentous changes in contemporary culture, and particularly in the meanings of the body in virtual worlds. In addition, the unprecedented growth of a 3-D virtual world, *SL*, made us recognize the abundant possibilities it offers as a visual research outlet, which led us to start on a research project together. Our research protocol is composed of the following steps:

1. We became residents of *SL*. We created avatars that represent ourselves in *SL* by choosing from one of the default avatars and making modifications to them. One of us preferred to be as loyal as she could to her FL body features and created a female avatar. The other preferred to create two avatars, one being a gothic girl and the other, a bald and sexless creature reflecting her different ideal selves.

2. According to Kozinets (1998, p. 366), "netnography, like ethnography in cultural anthropology and cultural studies, strongly emphasizes full participation in the culture being studied, as *a recognized cultural member*." Therefore, we fully participated in *SL* culture and conducted participant observations. We conducted our observations both separately and most of the time together. We videotaped most of the observations we did together. On average, we spent three to four hours a day (mostly at night) in *SL* for ten months. We did our observations in different places, which were representations of popular places in FL, such as themed environments, amusement parks, popular cities, and ISTE-International Society for Technology and Education-island. Based on these observations, we developed deeper insights into the structure of *SL* and specified our focal area of interest for this study. Accordingly, we developed a framework for possible questions to ask our informants.

3. In locating our informants, we used personal networking, or in other words, the snowball sampling method. We asked the people we knew if they knew anyone who actively resides in *SL*.

4. After identifying a few potential informants, we asked referring persons to act as intermediaries in communicating with these informants. We did not have limitations in finding informants only in first life. As a matter of fact, our objective was to conduct interviews with people in both *SL* and in their first life physical settings to be able to gain deeper insights into the phenomena we were interested in. We thought that the comparison of offline data with online data might also be beneficial to our research as a means of articulating the strengths and weaknesses of our methodological approach. We conducted our online interviews in our respondents' houses and in some other public spaces in *SL*.

Our major data source for this study was composed of our experiences as residents in *SL*, and online and offline interviews (only the interviews were offline, but during these offline interviews, the informants were online on *SL*, which enabled us to reflect both on their on-screen and off-screen aspects of *SL* experiences) with the informants. All of the interviews were in-depth and semistructured. However, a few of the earlier interviews were led more by the informants rather than by us. Thus, we sometimes experienced shifts from semistructured to unstructured interviewing in the first few interviews. As our understanding of the phenomena developed, we took the lead in discussions. However, we let the informants express themselves as much as they wanted in the areas of inquiry. We followed an iterative approach where we

built our inquiry areas on all previous interviews for the next interview. Interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to almost two hours. Our informants' age ranged from 21 to 60. Four of our informants were female, and four of them were male.

For the purpose of this research, we interviewed three people (Skyler, Jesse, Fred) in physical everyday life settings, such as their offices or a computer lab at a university. As mentioned earlier, these interviewees were also logged onto *SL* during the interviews. This was similar to using projective techniques. 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) to 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*. We transcribed verbatim each of our respondent's videotaped responses. Each of us analyzed all the transcripts separately to identify the themes emerged. Then, we cross-checked our results to find the common recurring themes in both analyses.

Findings

We classify our findings as the role of avatars in involvement in *SL*, "avatar" meanings, avatar construction, and avatar experiences. Then, we articulate these findings and their theoretical implications in the "Discussion" section.

Involvement in Second Life

We found that abundant opportunities in symbolic bodily creations and multiple bodily experiences have been important motives in the initial involvement of our informants in *SL*. Consider, for example, Skyler's statement:

"You actually do go ahead and live in your Second Life. So I was pretty interested in it. Then I heard you could do different characters, you don't have to be just human, you can put whoever. I guess your mental image of yourself is onto the virtual world. And there is *(sic)* abilities to make yourself to look exactly like how you're doing in real life and then you can do different things such as make yourself a creature, or make yourself look twenty feet tall. All these different things like that. So I was very interested in it. When I heard about it, when I heard what you can do with it, it was very interesting" (Skyler, offline interview).

As this statement reveals, being able to create and experience any bodily self that is desired is an important motive for involvement in *SL*. Whereas first life is limited in the bodily creations, *SL* provides consumers the freedom to construct and reconstruct their desired bodily creations and experiences. This leads to higher involvement of consumers in *SL*. Raven expresses bodily freedom as a motive for her involvement in *SL*:

"We're born with set bodies. They look a certain way; they will always look a certain way and that's it. My mind doesn't have those constraints. Raven is a woman that my mind projects as me. I guess if you're given the opportunity to be anything, to think outside the box like that, why stick with what you are in real life, when you could be an animal you admire, a beautiful fish..." (Raven, online interview)

Moreover, not only creating and experiencing their own bodily constructions, but also experiencing the concept of body in general through different and multiple forms of other consumers' bodily creations they encounter is a motive that appeals to *SL* consumers. Skyler states:

"…that's kind of cool too when you run into people, you know, in different costumes, they have different avatars, different creatures I guess you can call them…" (Skyler, offline interview)

Avatar is not a motive only for involvement in *SL*, but also a motive for involvement in experiences without worries about appearance. Consider for example Spiff's expression:

"I found in Second Life with *(sic)*, and I guess this is because of having an avatar, is *(sic)* you get to know people really quickly and easily, cause you're not so worried about your appearance as you might be in real life". (Spiff, online interview)

Avatar Meanings

In virtual worlds, bodily preoccupations take place through avatars. Our research findings of the meanings consumers attribute to their avatars revealed that preoccupation with the body is also an essential part of virtual lives.

"Avatar" mainly means creation and recreation of multiple virtual world selves reflecting various imaginations and visions of *SL* consumers. For example, Skyler describes "avatar" as:

"…a creation that isn't really like a picture, it's like a cartoonish virtual image of yourself". (Skyler, offline interview)

In *SL*, "avatar" meanings expand beyond pure representation of first life self. Avatars do not only have meanings in terms of self representation, but also in terms of self construction. It means experiencing multiple selves. Ginny's statement reveals meanings of "avatar" in the sense of possibilities of projecting selves that are constructed swiftly and temporally:

Sometimes you just get tired of being who you are and you wanna be something else. You know, you wake up one day and then you go, "You know what? I think I wanna be a Neeko, or the next day you wanna be a mermaid, or sometimes I wanna be a fairy, It just depends on what you feel that day. I think it definitely extends the experience as you go through. You get to see different lifestyles; you get to be somebody else for a while". (Ginny, online interview)

Avatar Construction

Entering *SL* requires the creation of an avatar. In this creation process, a few default avatars are given to consumers as options to choose from. However, the avatar creation process usually does not end there, but starts at and continues from this point. This process usually becomes an ongoing creation and recreation process as the options to choose from to create avatars are abundant. This continuing process is reflected in Ginny's questioning of having only one avatar:

"I like to see how many different avatars I can actually make. There are so many things to choose from out there, so many different lifestyles you can lead. Why be restricted to one?" (Ginny, online interview)

The constitution of body as a communicative medium (Domzal & Kernan, 1993), and as a project though does not totally disappear in virtual worlds, as Esme proposes in her avatar creation process:

"When I first came into Second Life, I adopted an avatar that was very plain, and I was steadfast about I was not going to be very sexy and I was not going to spend any money, and I was not gonna wear little tiny shorts and skirts revealing clothes. But I saw that I actually stood out by being boring looking, and, so I spent a lot of time thinking about what, what kind of presentation do I want to have…" (Esme, online interview)

Yet, the focus becomes more of "body as experience" in *SL* through the enabling of consumers to playfully engage in symbolic avatar creation and experience different bodily selves. This playful engagement has been an important motive in occupation with the body more than any other motives. Specifically, our findings reveal the excitement with experiencing completely different body features compared to the ones one has in first life. How Spiff constructed his avatar is an example of the playful engagement in becoming someone else:

"Well, I guess I wanted to just make myself different than I was in real world, just maybe to experience something different. Well, white, 41 years old, still have some of my hair, being black and bald looks pretty good." (Spiff, online interview)

Other consumers' creations as well as consumers' own visions influence the creation process of avatars. mSkyler reflects the influence of others on his avatar creation process:

"I already knew that you could create your own avatar to whatever you wanted. But when I saw that they have the wolf there, I got all excited and I was like oh right on…I saw different creatures who were walking around, that's what led to me to wanting to be something else." (Skyler, offline interview)

The process of avatar construction and reconstruction is itself a core experience in *SL*. Cecil's expression about his avatar construction process is an example to this process being a focal experience:

"It's interesting enough that when I was building the avatar, I don't know why I was attracted to that. I didn't actually seek out to become a half human, half borg. I just saw it when

I was putting on clothes, trying on things, it just appealed to me to be half technology, half human." (Cecil, online interview)

Another point we encountered in the data on avatar construction is that consumers create several bodily selves in *SL*, yet these processes are full of refractions from both first life and *SL*. The construction of these bodies and the experiences lived through them in this symbolic realm are nevertheless affected by consumers' first life selves and vice versa, which further intensify the body/mind dilemma in virtual worlds. Jesse reveals this interplay between first life body and the avatar:

"When I was creating my first avatar, I know she's brown skin, she's not thin, I made sure she was of average height which I am; I made sure she was of average weight which I am. And, but, everything else is kind of different. So, but I tried to make a little bit of myself in her…And if I wanted to, I can try to make myself to look more like the character, cause I can straighten my hair, put make up on too, and just put my contacts, just like her, cause I have been wearing contacts too. So I can kind of make myself look like her, instead of her look like me." (Jesse, offline interview)

Avatar Experiences

Both the opportunities to create avatars and the opportunities to live body-related experiences are abundant in *SL* as Esme proposes:

"…there are silly things that you can do that are just fun, like you can go skiing, bike riding, or you can go to a club, and go dancing. And I think it's just sort of good, silly fun." (Esme, online interview)

In addition to individual bodily experiences, avatars engage in bodily interactions with other avatars through virtual touching. This aspect further enhances experiences. For example, Ginny states the abundance of both individual and interactive bodily experiences in *SL*:

"Here you could actually, you could virtually hug someone, or, or, give them a kiss, or any kind of touching, dancing, things like that. You can swim, I mean, fly, it just goes on forever." (Ginny, online interview)

Yet, we also found that *SL* is not free from some physical constraints and it has its own construction of physical distance that influences the experiences of *SL* residents. Esme states a situation where she talks about the influence of physical distance on *SL* residents' feelings:

"I was talking to a man at ISTE one day who was actually asking the question why people stand so far apart. If you look at how people stand in real life and you compare that, in proportion to how they stand in Second Life, people stand much further apart in Second Life, unless the avatars are being intimate with each other. The day he brought it up, we were in a circle of about eight people. And as soon as he said it, we all stepped forward, you know, several steps, and we all commented on how actually much better we felt that we were closer. But then, I've noticed that since then those same people will stand far apart." (Esme, online interview).

We found in *SL* that people have the ability to engage in bodily experiences that they would not be able to engage with their real life bodies because of their physical constraints or psychological constraints, such as phobias. We also found that even though these experiences take place in the virtual world, people may still feel some physical effects as a result. For example, Ginny talks about such effects:

"When I'm a human I go, there's parasailing, I love to leap off of things. I'm terrible about that. My husband tells me I have a symicidal avatar. Because I love to jump off the buildings, and just fly off wherever I wanna go. There is parachuting, where they get up in the air and just let go. That's pretty interesting because that free fall effect is, wow, you know, kind of gives you a blood rush there." (Ginny, online interview)

Having avatars that are created as mental images of people that represent them in *SL* is found to enhance the excitement with experiences. Skyler's excitement about flying with his wolf avatar reveals the value of bodily experiences in virtual worlds:

"That's another aspect that you actually have the ability to fly. So, you know, it's kind of crazy to see a flying white wolf going around everywhere. Other people fly too. It's just, it's really neat, because who doesn't wanna try to fly just with themselves. I guess Matrix style, or Superman style, or anything of that sort. That's pretty neat that you actually get to experience that because it's your second life, it's your virtual life." (Skyler, offline interview)

We find that since people in *SL* create their avatars that are reflecting their mental images of who they want to be, they build higher levels of empathy with their avatars, which strengthens the feeling aspects of their experiences. Fred's explanation of his flying experience reveals this empathy and how this empathy enhances what he feels through his avatar experiences in *SL*:

And I had a hard time like landing, but I finally figured it out. Before I used to, I used to fall. Cause you could fall.

Researcher: But nothing happens when you fall?

"Oh no, no, I mean you can just see the stress that he goes through…You know actually I'm terrified of heights, so every time I'm on and I'm flying, I have this sensation of as if, honestly, as if I'm doing it. It's strange cause I'm terrified of heights. But I like to do it. Isn't that weird? That's probably what I enjoy the most, flying." (Fred, offline interview)

Along with making gestures with their avatars, touching, flying, and performing various physical activities in *SL*, people can experience various audio and visual elements of the body that they cannot experience in real life due to physical or social constraints. In terms of visual avatar characteristics as experiences in *SL*, Skyler states that:

"Something I really can't do, I guess, in real life are tattoos and everything of that sort for future job instances. But I can do that on here, because you can place tattoos on yourself as well." (Skyler, offline interview)

Audio aspects of avatars in *SL* can also be special experiences in *SL* that lead to more immersion into *SL* experiences. What Cecil expresses with his two types of voices that he gets by using a voice filter reveals how experiences are enriched in *SL* through these characteristics:

[Using female voice] "But I think I can do more with the voice changer, make it a little bit more authentic and the characterization amusing. But I like the female voice when I want to get in touch with my, my female side. Sometimes I read poetry in Second Life. I like to read Sylvia Plath and I think it helps a little bit to have the female voice, rather than you know, my [using cyborg voice] "Hi, I'm Cecil Borg, you'll be assimilated" voice." (Cecil, online interview)

Discussion

From Body as Self-Presentation to Body as Experience

In the postmodern realm, the body is conceptualized as a means of communicating or conveying an impression and that the utmost deployment of the body is to signify meaning (Domzal & Kernan, 1993). Scholars have explored the goal of self-presentation in virtual places (Schau & Gilly, 2003) and articulated the ways of reaching this goal, in which social actors are involved in projecting a desired impression (Goffman, 1959). It has also been suggested that such impression requires corporeal or embodied display and consumers engage in displaying signs and symbols to communicate their desired impression and express their identities (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Hence, the body serves as a communicative intermediary to convey such impression. This visual representation of one's self in bodily creations called avatars has considerable impact on how one communicates with others and conveys meaning to others. As a matter of fact, the act of creating virtual selves is considered rhetorical since communicating through an avatar incorporates the realm of gestures and visual representation (Kolko, 1999)

As our informants also articulate, the constitution of the body as a communicative medium (Domzal & Kernan, 1993) does not disappear in virtual worlds. However, it becomes more of a body as experience in *SL* through the enabling of consumers to playfully engage in symbolic avatar creation and experience different bodily selves. This process of symbolic bodily construction distances itself from the idea of perceiving the body as merely a means of communicating one's selves. It becomes more of an immersive experience of constructing and reconstructing one's selves, therefore indicating the experiencing of the body for the sake of the body, and less of a purposeful signification of the body to convey a meaning or an impression to others. In other words, the role of the body is transformed from a means to communicate or signify impression to an end in that the body itself becomes the experience.

It has also been suggested that extreme reliance on an "economy of visual pleasure (text and avatars)" alleviates the concern for social bonding (Webb, 2001, p. 586). This may also indicate that consumers are more concerned with experiencing and experimenting with the construction and exploration of digital selves and less concerned with the intention of communicating one's desired selves to create impression. Immersion into constant exploration of *SL* (where consumers constantly teleport their avatars to explore different virtual places in *SL*) and the construction and reconstruction of bodily selves (where consumers keep changing the appearance and physical features of their avatars) becomes a focal concern in *SL*.

From "Disembodied" Self to "Symembodied" Self

Virtual worlds subvert the oneness or singleness of the identity. The construction of who one is and how one is constructed in the gaze of the others become user-generated processes that welcome multiplicity and change. The opportunities to live "parallel lives" (Turkle, 1997, p. 1100), create multiple representations of one's selves as well as explore new aspects of one's selves (Reid, 1998; Turkle, 1997) are staggering. Just like the endless choices of these virtual worlds, one's identity, as Turkle (1997, p. 1101) describes, "is the sum of one's distributed presence", which she calls "windowing" and suggests that "the self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings… The life practice of windows is a distributed self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time." Hence, the internet's potential to provide individuals with alternative lives and construction of several identities that transcend the limits of embodiment (Venkatesh, Meamber and Fırat, 1997) is eminent.

Yet, the technological and cultural changes mentioned earlier heat up the debate of the non-resolvable fate of the body in the virtual world. Scholars (Hansen, 2006; Madden, 1993; Takayoshi, 1994; Turkle, 1995) have contested the idea of the body becoming futile in the virtual world, and advocated the indispensable role of embodiment in any human experience, therefore rejecting the notion of the Cartesian body-mind separation. Embodiment or corporality ought to be present in identity processes (e.g. self-presentation) (Rook, 1985) and serve as a moderator in social interactions (Stryker, 1980) through the ways one experiences and deploys his/her body (Domzal & Kernan, 1993).

Others have emphasized the corporeal body serving no longer as a limitation. In the digital realm, Haraway (1997) argues that the indispensable presence of the body for presentation of a self becomes obscure as participants of digital media break out of their corporeality and constraints of their bodies, an opportunity that allows individuals for new designations of gender, sex, physical forms (cyborg, hybrids), and indefinite symbolic associations. Beetham (2006) explores the unprecedented significance of writing in online domains by stating that such writing goes beyond time and space borders and enables individuals to engage in disembodied communication by breaking out of the finitude of their embodiment. Kozinets (1998, 1999) also describes virtual spaces as discursive places in that a dynamic communication is convened among individuals. Beetham (2006) suggests that the cyber world, where people forming communities can embrace their virtual selves and leave behind their embodied selves, is the ultimate playground for the liquid, shifting postmodern self. The body becomes no longer a limitation to reflect their subjectivity, and the ability to overcome the limitations of the body allows for such subjectivity to be presented in disembodiment. Through disembodied subjectivity, individuals convene to communicate in digital public places.

Nevertheless, the semiotic potential of the digital realm allows for visual representation of one's physical self through avatars, images, photos and the like. Webb (2001, p. 562) defines virtual identity as "embodied, sensuously experienced and contingently rhythmic and mobile." Schau and Gilly (2003) suggest that in personal websites, individuals are driven by the desire to explore and display other selves. Virtual worlds enable individuals to present multiple selves and make these selves comprehensible in visual, textual, audio, animated semiotic richness (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Freed from the constraints of a physical body, people playfully engage in novel forms of self-presentation and turn symbols into personal expressions (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Computer-mediated environments grant access to semiotic tools, cultural artifacts, and various

forms of expression (Appaduari, 1996). In communicating their identities people manipulate signs (Wiley, 1994), at times to represent embodied presences and at other times experiencing a disembodied existence (Brewer, 1998). They can freely choose to conceal the undesirable aspects of their actual physical and psychological selves or to proudly express their desirable aspects in the digital realm, aspects that are sometimes hard to convey in the physical realm (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

With *SL*, presentation of the self is enhanced by immersion into *SL* experiences, which take the form of symbolic construction and reconstruction of bodily selves through the semiotic scheme of the virtual worlds. Consumers are enabled to playfully immerse into life experiences and experiment with these lived moments through their multiple avatars. In order to move away from the embodiment/disembodiment debate and reemphasize the fact that this paradox is not to be resolved, we need to understand the symbolic creation and experiences the body is involved in. We call this process *symembodiment,* in which consumers (re)construct and playfully engage in the symbolic creation and experiencing of their avatars.

For example, during our interviews, one of our respondents, Ginny, became a mermaid and all of a sudden, she grew a tail and experienced the transition into a leopard. Our half-human cyborg respondent Cecil changed his deep voice into a soft female voice while he was reading poems in *SL*. Jesse, who adopted an "elf" self in her daily *SL*, also experienced a monster self when she wanted to scare others to have fun. Ginny expressed that she loved to jump off the buildings and experienced "symicidal" (symbolic suicide) avatar selves, and Raven experienced symbolic death in combats in *SL* (Ulusoy & Vicdan, 2007). All of these observations reveal that the body is experienced for the sake of itself rather than solely being used as a medium of self-presentation or communication.

Engaging in Non-Resolvable Paradoxes in Virtual Worlds

The practices with new technologies signal that people want to have input and partake in controlling their lives and the meanings that both construct and emerge from the moments of experiences in their lives. Modern discourses and the advent of technologies give them the impulse and the confidence that such participation must be and can be achieved. They want to be independent and free of nature and any particular way of being and living, they desire to experiment with different identities, experiences, and modes of life. This explains the exploding popularity of virtual worlds.

The momentous changes in culture and the technological landscape both accentuate particular modern paradoxes and bring them to further attention. Often in trying to come to terms with and understand these paradoxes, however, the modernist intellectual momentum impels many to try and find resolutions for the paradoxes they become aware of. Yet, resolution is impossible. A necessary mindset change has to accompany the changes in culture and technology; that these paradoxes are not to be resolved but to be engaged with to playfully and critically seek balances that present possibilities of finding meaning and substance in lived moments (Kellner, 1989; Kroker, 1992). Postmodern sensibility calls for a playful, if critical, engagement with the potentials of experiencing different modes of being and finding meaning in the existence of the "other" (Caputo, 1997).

These paradoxes are also well articulated in other literatures, from psychology to sociology and philosophy. One paradox involves the construction of the self. The corporal body is considered a resource for self-construction and can be modified and played with as a means to construct different meanings of the self (Callero, 2003). A self tends to be impossible to construct without reflections from the "other(s)" (see Gergen, 1991; Lacan, 1977; Ricoeur, 1992). In effect, despite the single body that is inhabited, a self completely distinct and independent of the other(s), one constructed or designed completely by *one* tends to be illusory. Every one, each self, is full of refractions of others. What is left for each to do, therefore, is not claiming uniqueness, independence, separateness, or, on the other extreme, conformity, determinism, uniformity, but extraction—from the point of subjectivity that is allowed by the fact that each specific experience is happening at a particular time and in a particular context, from a particular perspective—of specific meanings that are and can be shared by others inhabiting the same moment and the same space.

From this point of recognition, the discourses well represented in Zwick and Dholakia (2004) regarding (dis)embodiedness of the experiences on the internet constitute signs of another non-resolvable paradox. The corporeal body is always there, even when absent, but also always absent, even when present. The internet technologies intensify the recognition of the mind-body dilemma. The mind and the body are forever intertwined in their distinction. Again, trying to find a solution in terms of whether they are distinct or inseparable distracts people from experiencing the meanings that can be derived from different moments when varying balances of the two elements occur, in different moments and in different contexts. The urge from modernist ideologies to resolve paradox rather than playfully and critically experience them thus blocks deeper immersion into life's moments and stunts extraction of meaning and substance in life. Modern marketing's response to dilemmas and paradoxes of life has a similar effect. Products are offered to resolve the tension creating, for a metaphor, a black-hole that sucks all the richness of information/meaning from the situation leaving it with a single answer, rather than expose a process where the players can experiment with and engage and explore the variety of different balances from each of which different meanings can be derived.

This impulse further contradicts the emerging aspirations that people increasingly exhibit; as observed from the trends in using the new internet technologies, they seek to experience a multiplicity of selves in a multiplicity of modes of living and being. The modern impulse of seeking *an* ideal life is waning, while the desire to experience multiple alternate lives that allow extraction of different meanings from life waxes. Given this trend, often voiced expectations and concerns that people will now simply want fast food, to only watch television and not read (Weeks 2007), only virtual lives, only non-corporeal experiences, and the like, will likely prove unwarranted. Rather than become stuck in one or another form of experiencing life or being, the postmodern impulse tends to seek to experience this *and* that, not this *or* that (Firat, 2005).

There is no resolution of life's paradoxes, there is no single grand future to be arrived at on which all will agree and all will commit to; there is no promise of a future for which sacrifice is justified. Instead, the only chance is to seek and find meaning and substance in the moments lived, through playful and critical engagement with conditions of humanity that are and will always be paradoxical. Ironically, promising future(s) may only be possible if and when rich meaning and substance is found in the present moments.

Consumers are engaged in continuous construction and reconstruction of present bodily experiences in *SL*. The cult of the hyperreal in this digital realm is flourished with the ability to play with such multimedia, present digital selves through this playful engagement with all kinds of sensory forms (audio, images, texts…) that are components of such media, and make sense to others in this multiplicity of experiences. In the world of hyperreality, a bodily symbol is presented for the sake of itself (Baudrillard, 1988). Postmodernist sensibility invites the (re)cognition that all social reality is constructed, and that the distinction between the real and the fantastic is more in the orientation one has towards one's surroundings than in the nature of those surroundings. Hence, through this blurring of distinctions between fantasy and real, thus the hyperreal, consumers become experiential subjects in the network society (Venkatesh, 1999).

Conclusion

Our findings from the inquiry of involvement in *SL*, "avatar" meanings, avatar 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 particular way of being and living. This is contradictory to the perception of body as a "project," where the construction of the body and the associated body image served as a form of socialization and a means of signifying one's self-worth, status in social relationships and lifestyles and exerting control over one's self (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). In short, the body itself becomes the experience in *SL*, rather than solely being a communication or impression management medium as it is perceived in the first life.

In addition, audio and visual research enabled us to have deeper insights about the semiotic potentials of virtual worlds. Sonic and visual imaginations and constructions that are different from the world outside are easier to grasp through using audio-visual research methodology. Our research approach also enabled us to realize the paradoxes more easily. This may be due to the fact that people talk about their *SL* experiences reflecting upon their first life experiences and they sometimes try to rationalize their *SL* experiences. Audio-visual research helps with capturing the paradoxes in people's *SL* behaviors, lifestyles, and constructions, as well as their accounts about them.

In conclusion, the presence of the body in virtual worlds becomes symbolic in nature and enables people to playfully engage in constructing and reconstructing several bodily selves. We see individuals to create and recreate several avatars. Some reflect their FL selves on their avatars and emphasize their actual selves. Others experience a totally different being (e.g. animals, mermaids, cyborgs) or create their ideal selves. This immersion into avatar creation and experiences reveals the transformation in the meaning of the body from a means to convey impression to others to experiencing the body for the sake of the body. In *SL*, the body itself becomes the experience. We see individuals engage in several bodily experiences in *SL*, experiences that they can or cannot immerse into in FL (e.g., flying, skydiving, skiing, dancing) and experiences that they symbolically (e.g., death, suicide) and literally immerse into (e.g., having the sense of blood rush while the avatar is falling down). They gain the ability to engage in bodily experiences that they couldn't engage with their FL bodies because of physical or psychological constraints. Nevertheless, consumers build higher levels of empathy with their avatars, which strengthen the sensory aspects of experiences. Thus, there is no point when *SL*

experiences are purely separated from those of FL and vice versa. FL selves are reflected on *SL* selves and vice versa during avatar (re)creation. *SL* consumers both reflect their FL selves on *SL* selves (e.g., keeping social distance in *SL* just like in FL; making avatars look like their FL selves and reflecting their *SL* selves on their FL selves, gaining skills through *SL* and reflecting that self-esteem gained in *SL* on FL experiences).

Therefore, as a means of moving away from the embodiment/disembodiment debate concerning the presence of the body in virtual worlds and reemphasizing the fact that this paradox is not to be resolved, we need to understand the symbolic creation and experiences the body is involved in. Freed from the physical constraints, the body is experienced in the symbolic realm of the virtual worlds. We call this process as *symembodiment* and our explorations in *SL* reveal that body is present in virtual worlds, without its physical constraints but with its symbolic meanings.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our first limitation stems from the constraints of netnographic method as a qualitative research methodology, since netnographic research lacks the degree of generalizability that positivist research offers. In addition, we mostly focused our participant observations on the popular sites in *SL*, the places where the majority of the residents preferred to visit. *SL* is a very broad virtual environment. Another limitation is due to the sampling protocol we followed. We used our personal networking to interview our respondents. Nevertheless, snowball sampling method bears the limitation that the sample chosen for the study may not be representative of the general population of *SL*.

Future research efforts should recognize the psychological aspects of FL and *SL* self reflections on each other, as well as the roles ascribed to different avatars by consumers. While we articulated the experiential aspects of avatar construction in *SL*, motivational and psychological factors that lead to such experiences would complete the bigger picture concerning the construction of bodily creations and how these bodily creations influence and are influenced by consumer selves.

From a theoretical perspective, our goal was to make two important statements: 1) To present the shift from the body as a medium of self-presentation to body as experience 2) To provide an alternative perspective to the embodiment/disembodiment debate concerning the presence of the body in virtual worlds. We introduced the concept *symembodiment* to articulate the presence of body in virtual worlds and emphasize that the body is present in virtual worlds with its symbolic significance, not with its constraints. Our explorations also revealed that consumer FL selves and *SL* selves are in constant negotiation in the process of avatar construction and experiences. Nonetheless, future research should direct its focus on the elaboration of these processes and how different cultural positions affect these processes.

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