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“Virtual Worlds Research: Consumer Behavior in Virtual Worlds”

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Editor’s Introduction

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In his 1992 science fiction novel *Snow Crash*, the author Neal Stephenson depicts a future where individuals inhabit two parallel realities; their everyday physical existence and their avatar existence in a 3D virtual world. In 1999 the first of three *Matrix* movies is released. It portrays a future where the world in which humans live and perceive to be real is in fact a simulated reality created by machines. These are just two examples of many works of fiction that portray a world in which human beings live either partially or fully in an alternative computer mediated world. In many of these storylines the characters move seamlessly back and forward between these two worlds. And it appears that now life is imitating art. In fact, as strange as it may seem, for some virtual residents, particular the younger ones, avatar-to-avatar activity is as real as face-to-face contact. These residents do not necessarily differentiate between their real and their virtual life. To them, they are one and the same and for some the virtual world may be even better than the real thing.

With so many people making the virtual leap - as of October 2008 the adult focused virtual world *Second Life* reported almost 15.5 million registered members and youth oriented *Habbo Hotel* boasted 111 million registered members - many marketers are eager to join them and stake their claim in this new landscape. Unfortunately for many, including American Apparel and Starwood Hotels their efforts have failed to live up to expectations and they have since withdrawn. Despite these and other failures there are many examples of success including campaigns by Cosmo Girl and Toyota Scion in *There.com* and Nike in *Second Life*. So what is it that determines success or failure? We can attribute the most prominent failures to a number of factors. For instance, some companies are quick to exit when they fail to achieve audience traffic similar to what they see in real-world media platforms. They forget that at this early point virtual worlds simply do not attract the volume of visitors we are accustomed to seeing on a broadcast media platform. Others simply replicate real world strategies (such as erecting

billboards) in-world, only to have residents flatly reject them. In essence they do not understand how individuals use these environments and how to harness the unique characteristics of the space to offer a compelling experience to their customers. So what, do we need to do differently in virtual worlds than we do in the real world in order to achieve success? To be able to answer this question we need to first explore what, if any, differences exist between real world and virtual world consumer behavior.

In this, the second issue of Journal of Virtual Worlds Research we aim to stimulate dialogue on the topic of in-world consumer behavior. In the first set of papers those active in virtual worlds share with us their response to the question "Consumer behavior in virtual worlds, is it really any different to the real world, or is it simply a case of 'old wine in a new bottle'?" From here we present a series of papers addressing different facets of virtual consumer behavior. From body image to virtual goods to brand value each of these papers offers unique and valuable insight which will benefit both academics and practitioners alike and inspire ongoing dialog and research in this area.

Keywords: consumer behavior; avatars; identity.