

Chapter 22

Trendy Avatars and Their Hair: Studying a Symbolic Cultural Artifact with Multiple Qualitative Methods

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ABSTRACT

This case study uses multiple qualitative methods to examine cultural meanings of virtual goods in a virtual world or Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) with consumer marketing promotions. Through participant observation, avatar hair emerged as a key virtual good. Symbolic displays in social interaction showed different meanings and uses for types of hair available to users, including high-status rare hair, and versions aligned with marketing promotions and real-world brands. Study of online artifacts examined user-generated content, such as user forums and machinima. The long interview method subsequently was employed to gather insight from users. Findings demonstrate how different data from these online methods provide rich meanings for avatar hair related to symbolic interactionism and self-presentation. Methods explore co-production among users, platform, and marketing efforts. Cultural meanings, user self-displays, and corporate influences related to avatar hair are presented. Avatar hair emerged as a status artifact that often revealed levels of social skills or wealth in this virtual culture, at times connected with marketing promotions relevant outside of the virtual world. Methodological implications are explored for avatar-based participation, artifacts from social networking and other technologies, and ethical approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers of virtual culture often negotiate new technologies, changing human interactions, and real-world integrations. Increasingly, commercial influences exert impact via technology platforms or user preferences. These dynamics pose challenges to applying proven research methods with new phenomenon while maintaining a strong ethical approach.

This chapter will demonstrate how qualitative methods with multiple technologies provide cultural insights through user data that extends within and, importantly, outside of a virtual world or massively multiplayer online game (MMOG). Cultural meanings of virtual goods were explored in Virtual MTV (VMTV), which replicated the MTV network series of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*. This free-to-play virtual world also served as a marketing platform for MTV and other con-

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sumer brands inserted into user experiences and activities. The objectives for this chapter are to show how multiple qualitative methods leveraged technology to explore cultural meanings for hair as an important virtual good, and how the methods enhanced findings. In this case study, findings focus on the hair's cultural status, and at times, high monetary and social value. Given user interest in avatar hair, VMTV added different hairstyles in catalogs, contests, and marketing promotions – including versions from real-world brands like Garnier and MTV series.

Avatar hair is among other virtual goods that develop cultural meanings evident through symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Solomon, 1983) and self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). Exploration for this work started with these perspectives to examine virtual goods, at times related to real brands, from which avatar hair emerged as an important cultural artifact. Methods integrated the online and offline, virtual and real worlds, and user-generated content (UGC) in various technology platforms. Ethnographic methods included participant observation with a researcher as avatar to explore social and play activities, avatar displays, and related brand promotions. The participant-as-observer acted as a researcher (Babbie, 1992) in VMTV with light user interactions to understand culture with low social disruption (Ess & the AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002). Screenshots in VMTV sessions and related online research were captured and edited in Microsoft Word. Hand-written observational notes from sessions in VMTV and other platforms were typed into the word processing program following sessions, along with separate writings about researcher emotions (Bernard, 1988; Neuman, 2000). Observational data showed symbols indicating social use values – situational or due to cultural norms (Lindlof, 1995) – for hair as an important artifact. The long interview method (McCracken, 1988) was used further to gather user insights to build upon observations. Seven phone interviews, based on requests via VMTV

and social network sites (SNSs), were conducted and filed with audio software. Outside of VMTV, key data were gathered through text, photo, and video content (including hundreds of machinima videos on YouTube) on SNSs, discussion forums, MTV e-mail communication, and other online sources. As such, various technology platforms were used for data gathering and documenting.

Findings exhibit how different data points supported cultural meanings for avatar hair, with enhanced validity from various methods. Hair was required for avatar creation, and was part of impression formation. Avatar hair (rare versions were valued as high as \$1,400) and other virtual goods impacted social interaction, sparked user demand for new hair types from VMTV, and related to marketing promotions. Findings show how commercial and user influences unpredictably determined cultural value for hair versions. Conclusions discuss cultural meaning development within the symbolic interaction framework, enabled through the use of proven methods that integrated and enabled virtual application of techniques and technologies.

BACKGROUND

Virtual goods, including avatar hair, may serve as symbols with varied cultural meanings that may be understood in ways users interact with others. Displayed on avatars, virtual goods demonstrate a form of self-presentation. These aspects are explored in terms of the literature for development of cultural meanings, and virtual research methods that can be applied to socialization in MMOG culture.

Virtual Goods as Symbols

In virtual worlds or MMOGs, users engage in activities and social interaction. The virtual space provides default, choice-based, and achievement options (such as winning a contest) for users to

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