

Chapter 27

Adonis or Atrocious: Spokesavatars and Source Effects in Immersive Digital Environments

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ABSTRACT

A virtual world is an online representation of real world people, products, and brands in a computer-mediated environment (CME). Within the next few years CMEs are likely to emerge as the dominant internet interface. In addition to corporate websites, companies will operate virtual stores where customers can browse and interact with assistants. However, due to the newness of the medium advertisers still struggle to figure out the best way to talk to consumers in these environments—or to decide if they should enter them at all. In this chapter, the authors look at the role of avatars (digital spokes characters) as sources of in-world marketing communications. The authors discuss conceptual issues such as how an avatar's appearance and the ability of the visitor to customize this appearance may influence consumer attitudes and behavior and how conversations with other avatars can serve as a potentially valuable starting point for buzz-building and word-of-mouth marketing campaigns. They conclude with some specific suggestions based upon "lessons learned" regarding issues advertisers need to consider when choosing a spokesavatar to communicate with residents of virtual worlds.

WELCOME TO THE METAVERSE

From *Second Life* to *World of Warcraft*, to MTV's *Virtual Pimp My Ride*, millions of consumers live a parallel life in a digital reality. A *virtual world* is an online representation of real world people, products, and brands in a computer-mediated envi-

ronment (CME). To many mainstream consumers and advertisers, this is largely an unknown or underground phenomenon—but it has real marketing consequences.

In mid-2007, Charles River Ventures proclaimed that the virtual goods market was worth approximately \$1.5 billion and growing rapidly. With more than 150 of these immersive 3D environments now live or currently in development,

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the number of consumers who come into contact with virtual goods as they navigate these worlds is projected to rise rapidly (“150+ Youth-Oriented” 2008). Indeed, according to one estimate by 2012, 53 percent of kids and 80 percent of active internet users will be members of at least one virtual world (“Kids” 2007, “Virtual Great Enters” 2008).

Clearly virtual environments will be pivotal in fueling new consumer trends over the next decade. McKinsey predicts that “Virtual worlds such as *Second Life* will become an indispensable business tool and vital to the strategy of any company intent on reaching out to the video-game generation” (Richards 2008). *Harvard Business Review* predicts that within the next five years virtual environments are likely to emerge as the dominant internet interface. In addition to corporate websites, companies will operate virtual stores where customers can browse and interact with assistants (Sarvary 2008). To date numerous companies including IBM, GE and Toyota have created CME’s for internal and external applications. Eventually, these CME forums may rival traditional, marketer-sponsored e-commerce sites in terms of their influence on consumer decision making and product adoption.

However, due to the newness of the medium advertisers still struggle to figure out the best way to talk to consumers in these environments—or to decide if they should enter them at all. Ironically, this challenge is compounded by the unparalleled latitude both advertisers and consumers possess in these environments to assume virtually (pun intended) any physical form they wish. How will our understanding of *source effects* apply to advertising contexts where a company spokesperson whose *avatar* (or digital representation) is a fiery dragon, a sultry siren, or both at once? How does that company relate to a consumer whose avatar resembles George Bush, a furry creature, or a superhero? Welcome to the wild and woolly world of advertising in virtual worlds.

The influential cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* by author Neal Stephenson envisioned a virtual

world as a successor to the Internet called the *Metaverse*, where everyday people take on glamorous identities in a 3D immersive digital world. The book’s main character delivers pizza in RL (real life), but in the Metaverse he is a warrior prince and champion sword fighter (Stephenson 1992). The hugely popular *Matrix* movie trilogy paints a similar (though more sinister) picture of a world that blurs the lines between physical and digital reality.

Today these fictional depictions are coming to life as we witness the tremendous growth of real-time, interactive virtual worlds that allow people to assume **virtual identities** in cyberspace. On these sites, people assume visual identities or avatars ranging from realistic versions of themselves to tricked-out versions with “exaggerated” physical characteristics, or from winged dragons to superheroes. Researchers are just starting to investigate how these online selves will influence consumer behavior and how the identities we choose in CMEs relate to our RL (or “meat world”) identities.

Why should advertisers care about a bunch of digital die-hards? Why shouldn’t they? After all, they often obsess over the precise appearance of a spokesperson—whether a celebrity, fashion model or “(wo)man-on-the street” because they understand the potency of source effects: Often who says it is just as important as what they say. Indeed a vast corpus of literature dating back at least 50 years attests to the importance of this communications variable (for a detailed review see Joseph 1982).

However, we see little evidence that anything approaching this level of care operates in virtual world environments—even though many advertisers are starting to recognize the potential promotional power of these emerging media formats. So far, anything goes—the virtual platform is so new and the permutations of appearance so vast—that most marketers are still at the early stage of debating just what they should say or do. Worrying about the proper vehicles to deliver this content

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