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NEW CONSUMPTION IDENTITIES IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

The case of Second Life

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ABSTRACT

The dynamic development of new technologies influences consumers in many different ways reaching far beyond the shift in consumption patterns, challenging the way consumers live their lives. The role of new information technologies is continually growing in our daily lives changing the way we see the self and the world around us. Consequently, the advent of the computer culture incites a radical rethinking of who we are and the nature of being human, which clearly illustrates the postmodern age. As a result, over the past decades consumer research has moved away from simply viewing consumers as information processors to consumers as socially conceptualized beings. This Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) movement views consumers and consumer behaviour as articulations of meanings and materiality within the productive of complex cultural milieu.

This ethnographic thesis focuses on the three-dimensional virtual world of Second Life, which is a 'Real Life' simulation and where the residents represent themselves through 'avatars', creating a kind of virtual materiality. This raises interesting questions for consumer researchers, not just about how consumption is enacted, produced and articulated within this environment, but also in relation to theoretical and methodological issues. More specifically, this thesis critically examines the development of interpretive consumer research and the emergence of the Consumer Culture Theory framework in the context of the juxtaposition of reality and hyperreality and takes a position which goes beyond the 'body in the

net/physical body' binary. Therefore, this thesis places the 'avatar-as-consumer' at the centre of the research focus.

The current thesis develops a theoretical framework which examines the role of consumption in resolving key paradoxes. Moreover, it extends the netnography framework from mainly text based research to the visual characteristics of virtual worlds so that it can be useful for the study of complex online environments and as a result, how the role of the researcher goes beyond netnography to virtualography is discussed.

Keywords: Consumer Identity, Avatar-as-Consumer, Virtual Materiality, Clothing, Accessories, Bodily Adornments, Virtual Worlds, Second Life, Netnography

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Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my parents for instilling in me an interest in learning and an appetite for knowledge. Thanks also to my brother for his encouragement in completing this research.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Dino and Nina, the two most special persons in my life. They, not only gave me life, but also fill it with all the love and affection one can wish for. Thank you.

Στους γονείς μου!

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Chapter 1 : INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the problem

During the past decade the dynamic development of information technology has influenced consumers in many different ways reaching far beyond a simple shift in consumption patterns (Kedzior, 2007; Johnson, 2001; Shih, 1998; Turkle, 1995; Venkatesh, 1998). These changes are reflected not only by the emergence of new types of products and services (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) but also by completely new environments that consumers choose to frequent, to experience and to consume (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Kedzior, 2007). Struggling with the ongoing fragmentation of identities and markets, both academics and marketers attempt to understand how the proliferation of Internet-based phenomena such as virtual communities and Virtual Worlds (VWs), affects the way people live their lives and consume (Simmons, 2008; Venkatesh et al., 1998; Tambyah, 1996).

More than four decades ago, Marshall McLuhan expounded that ‘cool' and inclusive ‘electric media' would ‘retribalize' human society into clusters of affiliation (McLuhan, 1970). With the advent of ‘cyberspace’, networked computers and the proliferation of Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs), McLuhan's predictions seem to be coming true. Not only are people retribalizing, they are ‘e-tribalizing' (Kozinets, 1999). Networked

computers and the communications they enable are driving enormous social changes (Kim and Jin, 2006; Carley, 1995; Cerulo, 1997a).

Therefore, with the diffusion of computer and information technologies throughout businesses and homes, the field of marketing has transformed significantly (Venkatesh et al, 1995; Winer et al., 1997; De Valck, 2005). Worldwide, people have adopted the Internet as an information, communication, transaction, and distribution channel. Because the Internet connects people and disseminates information at an unprecedented speed and scope, it is clear that also its impact as an online social network and knowledge reservoir is profound (De Valck, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Jones, 1995).

The recent advances in CMC have led to instant communication that ceases to be restricted by traditional understandings of space and time (Jones, 1998; Baym, 2009), but it is also possible to identify the infringement of the virtual realm on to our physical space (Ward, 1999) . In fact, the physical and virtual realms are becoming increasingly difficult to separate (Jordan, 2009; Markos and Labrecque, 2009) due to less frequent face-to-face contact (Ward, 1999; Donath, 1999). Due to the growth of CMC, online VWs are rapidly becoming recognized as a technology of substantial future importance for marketers and advertisers (Hemp, 2006; Holzwarth et al., 2006; Jin and Bolebruch, 2009). There are more than one hundred VWs, and more are under development (Barnes, 2007) and in recent years they have become highly interactive, collaborative and commercial. VWs have been defined as 3-dimensional

(3D) computer-generated environments that appear similar to what might be called the ‘real’ world, in a common-sense notion of that term often developed to supply online entertainment and social networking for users (Barnes, 2007; Barnes and Mattsson, 2008). In this research VWs are defined as open-ended virtual interaction platforms or ‘experience worlds’; therefore, as goals are not prescribed VWs are not games in the traditional sense. For instance, game-oriented environments, such as Worlds of Warcraft, Sims Online and Everquest would be excluded from our definition. Current VWs are new channels for marketing content, products and services (Hemp, 2006; Nelson, 2007; Prokopec and Goel, 2010; Evans and Wurster, 1999), integrating ‘v-commerce’, or ‘virtual e-commerce’ (Barnes and Mattsson, 2008). VWs clearly demonstrate how the boundaries between the physical and the virtual are becoming more fluid as individuals are interacting with digitally constructed entities (Ward, 1999).

This ethnographic study focuses specifically on the culture of consumption of the VW of Second Life (SL), which is the best known immersive 3-D VW created by its residents (users) (Rosedale and Ondrejka, 2003; Second Life Official Website, 2007) (developed by Linden Research).

Over the past decades consumer research has moved away from simply viewing consumers as information processors to consumers as socially conceptualized beings (Wetsch, 2008). This stage of consumer marketing research was identified as the ‘new consumer behaviour’ (Belk, 1995). The Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) movement looks at the consumers

and consumer behaviour as articulations of meanings and materiality within the productive of complex cultural milieu (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Canniford, 2005). The Internet has enabled a new type of social conceptualization where users can connect across disparate locations (Jones, 1999) with representations that are created through their own imagination, perhaps through online communities such as SL.

Specific academic research into SL consumer behaviour is limited. However, there is a significant body of work that provides a theoretical framework from which to build our understanding of the VW (Geissler and Zinkhan, 1998; Schlosser, 2003; Siddiqui and Turley, 2006; Verhagen et al., 2009; McKee and Porter, 2009). While SL is much more interactive and three dimensional than any other environment previously designed, research has been completed on the social construction of virtual communities (Baym, 2000; Sveningsson, 2001) in a text based environment such as chat rooms and discussion groups. These elements are present in SL but the addition of a visual presentation creates unknown adaptations. The ways in which an individual's identity is modified when interacting through a technological intermediary (Markham, 1998; Sondheim, 1996), or while interacting in online groups (Eichkorn, 2001), has been researched in the text environment, but the ability to create a unique persona through a customer-designed avatar that can represent either a person's actual self or their ideal self takes these interactions to a new level and produces many unknown factors. VW are qualitatively different to text based online environments. The 'Real Life' (RL) simulation, navigation and presentation of the self through avatars,

this thesis argues, create a kind of 'virtual materiality'. This raises interesting questions for consumer researchers, both in relation to theoretical and methodological issues (questions relating to the methodological particularities that emerge require attention).

The research questions of this thesis are:

- How is consumption enacted, produced and articulated within the Virtual World of Second Life?
- How can consumption within Second Life relating to the emergence of virtual materiality be theorized?
- How is the researcher positioned within the field she studies?

Therefore, the main objective of this research is to theorise the consumption of clothing, accessories and bodily adornment within SL relating to the construction of the "avatar-as-consumer", through the introduction of the virtual materiality of the avatar body, as understood and negotiated by the participants.

In order to explore and understand these issues, this thesis will focus upon the virtual materiality of the avatar within SL with concomitant identity construction through consumption of clothing, accessories, decoration and 'look'.

Theorizations of materiality are fundamental to the cultural understanding of consumer behaviour, therefore much of consumer researchers' interest has focused on the study of subject-object relations in different contexts such as material possession attachment (Kleine and Baker, 2004),

extended-self (Belk, 1988), or object meanings (Richins, 1994). The significance of materiality for consumer research revolves around the view that objects take active part in a subject's identity construction, thus consumer selves can be transformed, created, expressed, or emancipated in relation to objects and contexts in consumer culture (Borgerson, 2005). To put it another way, the consumer 'self' emerges through consumption practices and the objects involved in them, since consumption is a process through which human beings materialize or objectify values and meanings, resolve conflicts and paradoxes (Miller, 1987).

However, so far, theorizations of materiality in consumer research have mainly assumed the physicality/tangibility of the object of consumption neglecting the emergent dematerialization of consumables accompanied by the development of technology (Slater, 1997). Given the advent of Internet technologies, this is a significant omission, as with the proliferation of new technologies a steady extension of consumption into new digital domains has been reported, as consumers are living more and more of their lives online and are increasingly exposed to a new regime of materiality (Kedzior, 2009). Moreover, many goods which were once tangible have now lost their physical referent and become accessible solely as representations (Kellner, 1989), i.e. books, music, photographs etc. With few exceptions (Siddiqui and Turley, 2006) consequences of such process for consumer research remain largely unexplored. Therefore, an inquiry into materiality must expand and take into account various dimensions of change brought about by technology (Sherry, 2000). Thus, this thesis will focus upon the virtual materiality of the

construction of the SL avatar with its associated consumption of clothing, accessories, decoration, bodily adornments and ‘look’ as an altered regime of materiality observable in a virtual world.

The VW of SL represents a lively consumption space that is home to all possible manifestations of consumerism such as consumer activism, resistance and consumer activity, since in SL the elements of reality merge with fantasy, resulting in a highly immersive environment with few tangible boundaries. Therefore, existence in SL can be envisaged as an exemplar of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1981), where members of the culture realize, construct and live the simulation (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). The distinguishing value of SL as a site of this inquiry derives from the fact that it epitomizes the idea of virtual materiality, since not only is the object of consumption digitized and intangible, but the consuming subject (the avatar) is also an intangible representation in the virtual world.

Methodologically netnography emerged in consumer research and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) as a way to study consumption in environments mediated through CMC. Netnography has focused on studies of forums and chat rooms and as such is very text based. Therefore, netnography needs extending in order to be useful to study the specific characteristics of VWs which are image, presentation and visual and more immersive. Therefore, a second contribution of this thesis is to present an extension of the netnography framework for understanding VWs.

Moreover, in consumer research there has been a traditional ethnographic and theoretical approach to online research, which has not only been somewhat celebratory but has also largely ignored the power dimension vis-à-vis the researcher/ respondent relationship. Therefore, this thesis also seeks to develop a more critical approach to both the research process and the empirical analysis with particular regard to the positionality of the researcher.

So, the key contributions of this thesis are:

1) The development of a theoretical framework showing how consumption is used to resolve key paradoxes focused on the participants' accounts of and enactment of the virtual materiality of the self within SL.

2) Extension of the netnography (Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2002b, 2006a) methodology with relation to VWs.

3) Critical appraisal of the specificity of the positionality of the researcher within VWs.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into nine chapters. A brief overview of each of these chapters is presented below.

Chapter 1 introduces the research problem and objectives. It also provides an overview of the whole thesis.

Chapter 2 examines the development of modern communications media over the years and how the intensification of the role of these new technologies alters the way we see the self and the world. Moreover, this chapter presents the key terminology around online virtual worlds and the people within them.

Chapters 3 and 4 are the theory chapters of this thesis. Chapter 3 locates and theorizes consumer research in online cultures with a consumption focus within the central role that consumption plays in the postmodern society. Chapter 4 focuses upon the possible theorisation of the study of the consumption of clothing, accessories and bodily adornment within virtual worlds through an examination of theories of consumer identity.

Chapter 5 examines how consumer researchers are faced with a range of important methodological questions, due to the emergence of new information technologies and the proliferation of online communities, bringing in the forefront the need to better understand these new 'translocal' sites. The method of netnography is chosen and developed for the conduct of the research and the justification for choosing the approach is presented, along with how the research will be carried out.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the analysis of the collected data. Chapter 6 concerns the culture of the VW of SL along with the construction of the SL identity. This chapter demonstrates how Second Lifers view and treat their digital representations, paying a lot of attention in the customization process, which is driven by their imagination. Chapter 7 deals with consumer identity and SL. This chapter reveals how they perform their

consumption acts, indicating how important this is for them in order to blend into the SL community and to be successful in their relationships and interactions with their fellow residents.

Chapter 8 presents a comprehensive and detailed discussion of the analysis of the findings and results of the current research study by providing the major contributions.

Chapter 9 draws the overall conclusions and discusses the implications of the research. Moreover, it lists a set of possible future activities from various research directions.

1.3 Publications from Thesis

During the development of the thesis, the research was peer reviewed and published in international research conferences and journals. The publications which are based on the research in this thesis are:

- Nikolaou, I. and Bettany, S. (2010), Performativity and belonging: Negotiating the ethnographer and her field in virtual worlds, in Proceedings of the European Association for Consumer Research Conference 2010 (EACR), Royal Holloway University of London, Surrey, UK, June 30th – July 3rd 2010.

- Nikolaou, I., Bettany, S. & Larsen, G. (2010), Brands and Consumption in Virtual Worlds, Journal of Virtual World Research, Vol. 2, No. 5.

Chapter 2 : SETTING THE SCENE FOR A STUDY OF SECOND LIFE: BACKGROUND HISTORY AND KEY CONCEPTS

2.1 Introduction

The emergence of computer technology and the development of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has been the subject of an overwhelming discourse for the last two decades (Cairncross, 1997; Kitchin, 1998; Miah, 2000; Shields, 1996; Aitchison, 1999; Stebbins, 1997; Kizza, 1996; Jones, 1995; Loader, 1997; Kelly, 1994). Various cyberspatial environments, ranging from asynchronous text-based forums and chat-rooms to complex synchronous VWs, it has been argued, have developed our understanding and theorising of society towards postmodernity and the idea of plural or fragmented self (Rojek, 1995; Taylor and Saarinen, 1994; Taylor, 1999; Turkle, 1995, 1996; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Baudrillard, 1983; Poster, 1995; Tambyah, 1996; Arnould and Price 2000; Nguyen and Alexander 1996). Within this context, it has been argued that cyberspace brings a state of mind to the individual that is beyond traditional leisure experiences and the assumption of a stable homogeneous self engaged in those experiences (Poster, 1990, 1995; Lipton, 1996; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). In addition, cyberspace has been presented as a means to escape from the values and constraints of one’s immediate local culture (Wellman, 1997; Irvine, 1998 Gurstein, 2000) into a ‘glocalized’ environment (Robertson, 1992, 1995; Wilk, 1995;

Wellman, 2001), and linked to the increased commodification of leisure time (Rojek, 1993). Cyberspace is presented as a mode of freedom with few boundaries, besides the need for the technological equipment and infrastructure (Baker and Ward, 2002; Virilio, 1991; Rosenau, 1992; Baker, 2000), a way to enable a co-production of new distributed cultures (Featherstone, 1999; Russo and Watkins, 2005; Peppard and Rylander, 2005; Hemetsberger, 2002; Lessig, 2002) and to encounter de-contextualized 'other' (Aitchison, 1999).

This chapter is going to present a background research, starting with a brief history of mediating communications technologies including information on how modern communications media developed over the years as well as the history of CMC. Then, the emergence of online communities is presented followed by a description of online cyberculture. Next, the examination of the issue of identity within these virtual communities and its importance for individuals and society in contemporary life is presented. Then, the chapter focuses on VWs, and more specifically on the VW of SL, along with a brief introduction regarding consumer behaviour within the VW. Finally, this chapter is going to introduce and outline the concept of virtual consumption.

2.2 A History of Mediating Communications Technologies

This section will briefly trace the development of modern communications media, focusing especially on Europe and the United States. Beginning

with the invention of Gutenberg printing press in the mid-15th century, this section will discuss the evolution of what would later come to be called 'the media' in terms of major technological developments, social and political shifts, controversy regarding institutional ownership and regulation, and the emergence of a 'public sphere' in relation to 'mass culture'.

2.2.1 The Development of Modern Communications Media and CMC in Historical Context

Since the advent of the Gutenberg printing press in the mid-15th century, the process by which individuals accumulate knowledge and communicate with one another has undergone a rapid evolution (Childress, 2008). With each new advance in communications technologies, the spatial and temporal dynamics that had traditionally limited the flow of information have been increasingly transcended (Jones, 1995). Over the course of these developments, institutional control over the production of public discourse and national identity, the public, in turn, has routinely contested and subverted their authority, adapting media forms to various agendas of liberation, personal empowerment, and revolution (Anderson, 1991).

It is hardly a coincidence that the emergence of mass reproduction of the printed word was coeval with the emergence of modern capitalism; the commodification of cultural forms makes profitable such technologies of mass distribution (Lash and Urry, 1987). The expansion of a prosperous bourgeoisie together with the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution resulted in 'mass' consumption of newspapers and magazines, prompting the rise of commercial advertising and corporate control of

mass media industries (Toffler, 1981). Over the course of the 19th century, the dramatic increase in wealth and leisure time enabled some people to spend more time developing their individual hobbies and interests. Vehicles of mediated information and entertainment, in particular the radio and the cinema, became increasingly commoditized, marketed to serve the eclectic tastes of the public (Habermas, 1962). The World Wide Web, in its current form, is the greatest cultural marketplace, incorporating each prior form of commoditized media in its monetized offerings (Briggs and Burke, 2005). Nevertheless, just as corporate control and commercial advertising have been disparaged and resisted through 'alternative' radio and avant-garde anti-commercial video in the 1970s and 1980s, so too has commercial exploitation of the Web been resisted through the popular practice of sharing and downloading free content, as well as the 'open source' movement[1] (Lerner and Tirole, 2001).

CMC, though originally developed for military use like the telegraph and radio, grew in an independent grassroots manner (Rheingold, 1993). In this way, the development of the Internet differs markedly from the military and corporation controlled communications technologies that had developed over the past two centuries. Studios dominated the film industry and corporate broadcasting networks dominated the radio and television. Nevertheless, while the reception and development of these prior technologies were heavily influenced by public desires for domestic technologies and national security following wartime crises, computer

[1] The "open source" movement refers to a set of practices for writing software and making freely available the original source code, allowing others to more effectively expand upon already created software.

technologies evolved in an era marked by widespread rejection of the governmental, military, and corporate institutions of power and control. In many ways, this emergent ‘public sphere’ would come to more closely resemble Habermas’ (1962) depictions of the 18th century “sphere of private people come together as a public”, as the development of multiple social and political reform movements “claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves”.

The evolving nature of ‘mass media’ has both shaped and been shaped by a series of shifts in the public and private spheres and the relations between them. Once primarily relegated to the church, the university and the coffeehouse, the mid-18th century marked a notable shift toward reading as a popular domestic leisure activity (Thompson, 1995). The seemingly contradictory effects of industrialization and urbanization, characterized by the privatization of the domestic sphere in an increasingly large-scale mobile society, were resolved through the widespread incorporation of broadcasting media in the home, which Raymond Williams (1992, 1974) describes as “mobile privatization” (p. 20). The introduction of the telephone, newspapers, radio and television broadcasting brought the realm into the private sphere, in turn at least potentially inculcating a sense of commonality amongst dispersed audiences. Lynn Spigel (2001), expanding Williams’ theory, discussed what she termed “privatized mobility”, as the “media home” became increasingly experienced as “a vehicular form, a mode of transport in and of itself that allowed people to take private life outdoors” (p. 392). With

new technologies such as the media-loaded car and the mobile phone, people could also be ‘at home’ while in public spaces.

The evolution of CMC, in turn, has itself evolved from a state of ‘mobilized privatization’, where CMC was seen as providing a domicile window to what might be called “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983) (such as fandom newsgroups and the VWs of MUDs), to ‘privatized mobility’, when the mass popularization of Internet use and the development of the World Wide Web resulted in the personal lives of individual Internet users becoming increasingly broadcast to the world in the form of personal homepages and virtual diaries, and extended the spatial and temporal dynamics of interpersonal communication with offline relations through e-mail and instant messaging. With the rise of ‘Web 2.0[2]’ technologies, CMC has entered a new stage of ‘networked individualism’, wherein disparate pre-established communities (family, classmates, colleagues, co-workers etc.) are situated within the context of one’s online identity, allowing one to maintain an extensive network of both strong and weak social ties (Boase et al, 2003).

This section examined how mediating communications technologies have evolved over the years, from the invention of Gutenberg printing press to ‘the media’ and ‘mass culture’. The next section is going to introduce the concept of CMC.

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[2] Web 2.0 refers to a group of technologies which have become deeply associated with the term: blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds etc., which facilitate a more socially connected Web where everyone is able to add to and edit the information space (Anderson, 2007)

2.3 Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

2.3.1 Defining CMC

CMC is the name given to a large set of functions in which computers are used to support human communication (Santoro, 1995). A working definition of CMC which, pragmatically and in light of the rapidly changing nature of communication technologies, does not specify forms, describes it as “the process by which people create, exchange, and perceive information using networked telecommunications systems that facilitate encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages” (December, 1996). This seems to encompass both the delivery mechanisms, derived from communication theory, and the importance of the interaction of people that the technologies and processes mediate (Naughton, 2000). It also provides for great flexibility in approaches to researching CMC, as “studies of CMC can view this process from a variety of interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives by focusing on some combination of people, technology, processes, or effects” (December, 1996). The social aspects of the communication, rather than the hardware or software, form the basis of the more recent definitions. Jonassen et al. (1995) focus on the facilitation of sophisticated interactions, both synchronous and asynchronous, by computer networks in their definition of CMC. There is an evident deviation from a technological focus in definitions, clearly illustrated when Jones notes: “CMC, of course, is not just a tool; it is at once technology, medium, and engine of social relations. It not only structures social

relations, it is the space within which the relations occur and the tool that individuals use to enter that space” (Jones, 1995: 16).

In recent years the global web of computer networks has expanded at an exponential rate, linking education institutions, businesses and individuals. It has become an integral part of society and a medium for unprecedented human interaction (Sallis and Kassabova, 2000). The lowered costs of and easier access to computer technologies has increased the number of users (Macklin, 2006). This in turn is accompanied by a rapid growth of scholarly study of CMC (December, 1996; Spitzberg, 2006; Barnes, 2003). Because CMC scholarship spans many fields, and because of its rapid and continuing development, there is a variety of CMC terminology; in general, the term CMC refers to both task-related and interpersonal communication conducted by people (Ferris, 1997). This includes communication both to and through a personal or a mainframe computer, and is generally understood to include asynchronous communication via email or through use of an electronic bulletin board; synchronous communication such as ‘chatting’ or through the use of group software; and information manipulation, retrieval and storage through computers and electronic databases (Barnes, 2003). Nevertheless, as Santoro (1995) points out “at its broadest, CMC can encompass virtually all computer users … such diverse applications as statistical analysis programs, remote-sensing systems, and financial modeling programs all fit within the concept of human communication” (p. 11).

CMC has also attracted critical interventions into the discourse, largely as a palliative to the rather celebratory nature of much of the early research. A popular claim is that cyberspace is a social utopia, where race, gender, class, and status labels become somehow invisible on the Internet (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978; Kiesler et al., 1984; Sproull and Kiesler,1991), and that due to the lack of these social cues and the lack of hierarchy in the structure of the Internet provide the potential for equality in cyberspace (Fredrick, 1999; Grabe and Grabe, 2001).

Some recent studies have shown how communication via networked computers differs from traditional means of communication in both model and style, creating a more democratic and inclusive medium. The model of CMC is a bottom-up structure that gives voice to people who would otherwise not be heard (Gurak, 1995). The style of CMC has been seen as a more expressive medium (Rice and Love, 1987; Sproull and Kielser, 1991). Moreover, some claim that CMC is more democratic due to the fact that a user cannot be identified by gender, race, age, economic class, etc. (Sproull and Kielser, 1991). It is these characteristics, along with messages from mainstream media, that have helped create the popular “utopia” image of the Internet (Fredrick, 1999; MacLaran et al., 1999).

So, if CMC is nonhierarchical, more expressive, more democratic, and more inclusive, might the Internet create a feminist space?, as Fredrick (1999) asks. She goes on saying that these characteristics seem consistent with feminist ideals. Very generally, feminism is about uncovering women's perspectives, but a summary of feminist theory is

difficult because feminism is broad, diverse, and changing (Fredrick, 1999). Tong (1989) cites liberal feminism as the first feminist theory and notes that its main focus was and still is to bring equality to women. Since society initially excluded women from “the academy, the forum, and the marketplace” (p. 2), the goal of liberal feminists is to get women included and to give women voice. On the surface, CMC appears to give women a voice as it gives voice to everyone in a bottom-up model (Fredrick, 1999).

However, in spite of the claims of some scholars that CMC is a democratic space, and in spite of the popular image of Internet as utopia, other research has shown that CMC has many of the same power issues found in other communities and other forms of communication. Many studies have shown that CMC is not democratic, particularly in the area of gender (Kiesler et al., 1984; Herring, 1993; Li, 2002a; 2002b; Yates, 1997). It is argued that CMC reflects the same gendered identities and practices, as opposed to the claims that CMC provides an environment “free of the power structures of face to face interactions” (Yates, 1997: 287). Moreover, it has been noted that women and other minorities generally have less access to computers, and therefore less access to CMC (Balka, 1993, Kramerae and Taylor, 1993).

Setting the issue of physical access aside, it has been argued that women tend to use language that is attenuated, apologetic, and personally oriented in computer conversations (Herring, 1993), as they do in face-to-face conversations (Gilligan, 1982) and that males tend to write longer and more frequent messages (Herring, 1993; Sussman and Tyson, 2000;

Wood and Stagner, 1994). If this is the case then this style of language it could be argued that women have less authority in an online setting.

Even more generally, technology has historically not been created with the interests of women in mind (Wajcman, 1991), and many social questions remain to be answered regarding women's relationship to technology (Matheson, 1992).

This section examined the concept of CMC and how CMC differ from traditional means of communication resulting in the perception that online communication is more democratic, nonhierarchical and more expressive, creating a social utopia, which appears not to be the case, as discussed.

2.4 Conceptualization of CMC Collectives

Given the broader context of CMC outlined above and the history and importance of the technological and societal implications it is necessary now to examine how collectives within CMC have been conceptualized.

2.4.1 Online and Virtual Communities

Community is a core construct in social thought. Its intellectual history is lengthy and abundant. Community was a prominent concern of the great social theorists, scientists, and philosophers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Dewey, 1927; Durkheim, [1893] 1933; Freud, 1928; Kant [1781] 1996; Marx [1867] 1946; Nietzsche, [1866] 1990; Park, 1938; Royce, 1969; Simmel [1903] 1964; Weber, [1922] 1978; Wirth, 1938), and has continued to be so among contemporary contributors (Bellah et al,

1985; Boorstin, 1973; Etzioni, 1993; Fischer, 1975; Lasch, 1991; Maffesoli, 1996; Merritt, 1966; Putnam, 1995, 2000; Wellman, 1979). Indeed, for a century and a half it has been a staple of political, religious, scholarly, and popular discourse (Hummon, 1990). This discourse is principally about community's condition and fate in the wake of modernity, market capitalism, and consumer culture.

The concept of community is historically found in critiques of modernity. Early sociologists saw advancing nineteenth-century modernity not just challenging community, but destroying it. The very idea of society was defined largely in opposition to community, and throughout much of their history these two terms were essentially antonyms. Ferdinand Tonnies's 1887 classic 'Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft' (roughly, 'Community and Society'), formally distinguished between the customary, familial, emotional rural community and the mechanical, contractual, individualistic, rational urban society. The essential notion underlying this discourse was that something more natural and therefore real (community) was being replaced by a more depersonalized, mass produced, and less grounded type of human experience (modern society) (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The received view was that anomie, dislocation, and disconnectedness were the result of modernity's fatal assault on the premodern community. Throughout the twentieth century and to this day, the legacy of community lost has informed, infused, and perhaps infected social thought. It is a grand narrative of the modern period, and one in which consumption plays a very significant role (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The emerging consumer culture was one in which branded goods replaced unmarked

commodities, where mass advertising replaced personal selling, and where the individual consumer replaced the communal citizen. The growing centrality of the individual consumer and his/her growing materialistic desires were (and are) said to be part and parcel of the loss of community. This belief pervades the critique of consumer culture to this day. Not incidentally, branded products were ubiquitous and primary symbols of this purported “seismic shift” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001: 413) in human consciousness and the resultant (alleged) loss of community (Leiss et al, 1990; Marchand, 1985).

2.4.2 The Emergence of Online Communities

In spite of the prevalence of the term community to describe the sharing of various sorts of online communications, there has been considerable academic debate regarding the term’s appropriateness. Early on in its development, during the period that has sometimes been called ‘Web 1.0[3]’, the online experience was often more like the reading of a book than the sharing of a conversation. Originally, it was assumed that the members of online groups almost never physically met (Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 1998; Wellman, 1997; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). In the original formations in which online communities manifested, participants invariably were assumed to carefully maintain their anonymity, at least on the surface, to be rather fleeting and often informational or functional in nature (Kozinets, 2010).

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[3] Web 1.0 refers to the first stage of the World Wide Web linking webpages with hyperlinks.

Yet the notion that online gatherings were somehow a form of community was present from the beginning and has persisted (Ridings and Gefen, 2004). It has been argued that community and culture can inhere in many of the familiar forums and 'places' of the Internet (Jones, 1997). An e-mail group posting through a listserv can carry culture, and be a community, as can a forum, a blog or microblog, a wiki, or a site devoted to photo or video enthusiasts, as can podcasts and vlogs (Video blogs) (Kozinets, 2010). It has been argued that social networking sites and VWs carry the complex markers of many cultures and both manifest and forge new connections and communities (Jones, 1995; Korenman and Wyatt, 1996). Newsgroups and bulletin boards, as well as chat-rooms, although 'old-style' communities may never go out of style completely. Not only has it become socially acceptable for people to reach out and connect through this panoply of computer-mediated connectivity, but these 'places' and related activities have become commonplace (Baym, 2000; Igbaria, 1999; Jones, 1995).

The useful term 'virtual community' was developed by Internet pioneer Howard Rheingold (1993), who defined virtual communities as 'social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on . . . public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (p. 5). As Rheingold (1993) notes, people in online communities:

> "*chat and argue, engage in intellectual intercourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional*

support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games and metagames, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. We do everything people do when people come together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind. Millions of us have already built communities where our identities commingle and interact electronically, independent of local time or location. The way a few of us live now be the way a larger population will live, decades hence" (p. 3).

However, almost a full decade earlier Starr Roxanne Hiltz (1984) coined the term 'online community', however, these communities were situated in the realm of work, rather than leisure (Hiltz and Tufroff, 1978).

Complicating the description and definition, Komito (1998) conceptualized virtual communities as similar to types of 'foraging society' groups of people (these were the days when people were seen to be foraging for information, see Komito, 1998: 104), as well as bearing similarities to communities who share norms of behaviour or certain defining practices, who actively enforce certain moral standards, who intentionally attempt to found a community, or who simply coexist in close proximity to one another. Komito (1998) concluded by emphasizing the variety and dynamism of the construct: "a community is not fixed in form or function, it is a mixed bag of possible options whose meanings and concreteness are always being negotiated by individuals, in the context of changing external constraints. This is true whether group members interact electronically, via

face-to-face communication, or both". While sharing computer-oriented cyberculture and consumption-oriented cultures of consumption, it has been noted that a number of these groupings demonstrate more than the mere transmission of information, but, as Carey (1989) romantically puts it "the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" (p. 18).

Moreover, in the term 'community' we can locate a suggestion of some sense of permanence or repeat contact. There is some sustained social interaction and, beyond this, a sense of familiarity between the members of a community. This leads to the recognition of individuals' identities and the subjective sense that 'I "belong" to this particular group'. We could likely not say that Emily was a member of an online community devoted to breeding goldfish if she only visited that particular forum once or twice, or even if she 'lurked' on it for a half dozen occasions or so over the course of a few months. However, consider a triathlon forum in which Emily occasionally posted comments, where she was familiar with some of the main contributors, and where her preferences and interests were known by others in that group. That group would likely have more of a communal feel to Emily and it would probably be much more appropriate to suggest that Emily is a member of that triathlon online community. Clearly, a continuum of participation exists in determining what can and cannot be considered 'community membership'. Its boundaries are somewhat indistinct, but must be understood in terms of self-identification as a member, repeat contact, reciprocal familiarity, shared knowledge of some

rituals and customs, some sense of obligation, and participation (Jones, 1995; Smith and Kollock, 1999; Kozinets, 2010).

2.4.3 Online Culture and Cyberculture

As Raymond Williams (1976) wrote in 'Keywords' "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines…" (p. 87).

As Williams' scholarship suggests, for there to be culture, something needs to be cultured, cultivated, or grown; the concept is intertwined with implications of civilization, socialization, and acculturation. Over time, culture tended to be viewed by anthropologists as more material and practical, concerned with continuity of behaviours and values, and by cultural studies scholars as pertaining more to languages and symbol systems, although these currently are somewhat forced distinctions.

Anthropologist Clyde Kluckholn (1949) suggested various meanings of the term culture, including: a people's total lifeways; a social legacy; a way of thinking, feeling, and believing; a stonehouse of learning; a set of orientations to problems or learned behaviours; mechanisms for the regulation of people's behaviours; techniques for adjusting to the external environment; behavioural maps; and others. John Bodley (1994) uses the term to refer to a society in its total way of life or to refer to human culture as a whole, providing a generally accepted definition of culture as socially-

patterned human thought and action. He also notes that there are diverse definitions of culture that can fit into categories that are topical, historical, behavioural, normative, functional, mental, structural or symbolic.

In ‘The Interpretation of Cultures’, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) suggested that culture is best understood from the viewpoint of semiotics, or the meanings of signs and symbols. “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973: 4-5).

Culture is a public matter, Geertz suggests, because ‘meaning is’ – the systems of meaning through which we live are by their very nature the collective property of a group. When we look at what members of another culture are doing or saying and we cannot understand them, what we are acknowledging is our own “lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are ‘signs’ and have significance” (Geertz, 1973: 12-13).

The term cyberculture gains its utility from the idea that there are somewhat unique “cultural constructions and reconstructions on which new technologies are based and which they in turn help to shape” (Escobar, 1994: 211). The complex social practices and formations that constitute online behaviours originate at least in part in the distinct traditions, constraints and trajectories of computer culture. As Laurel (1990) noted, all online communities exist as “villages of activity within the

larger cultures of computing" (p. 93). Throughout human society, computer technology and its related bank of practices and traditions are increasingly fusing with existing and new systems of meaning. This mingling can produce surprising and unique cultural formations; these new cultural fusions, specifically, would be cyberculture.

Anthropologist David Hakken (1999) puts it this way "the new computer-based ways of processing information seem to come with a new social formation; or, in traditional anthropological parlance, cyberspace is a distinct type of culture" (p. 2). Canadian media scholar Pierre Lévy's (2001) definition of cyberculture as "the set of technologies (material and intellectual), practices, attitudes, modes of thought, and values that developed along with the growth of cyberspace" (p. xvi) is similarly comprehensive.

Jakub Macek (2005) usefully typologizes the various concepts of cyberculture into four categories: utopian; informational; anthropological; and epistemological. These various definitions and demarcations of cyberculture, from technologically utopian variants, as well as dystopian and celebratory postmodern strains, are closely related to four core American ideologies of technology: the technologically utopian 'Techtopian'; the pragmatic 'Work Machine'; the celebratory 'Techpressive' and the dystopian 'Green Luddite' (Kozinets, 2008). Figure 2-1 represents an amalgamation of these two approaches as a means of categorising different understandings of cyberculture.

As depicted in Figure 2-1 the term cyberculture can be defined through a futuristic and technologically utopian perspective, which views technology as the supreme plenitude of social progress; as a symbolic code of the new information society, signifying economic growth; as a set of cultural practices and lifestyles related to the rise of the networked computing technology, where technology is viewed as fun and playful; and finally as a term to reflect on the (negative) social changes brought about by access to the new media, where technology is viewed as containing "a darker side that deskills craftspeople, debilitates traditional ways of life, and despoils the natural environment" (Kozinets, 2008: 869).

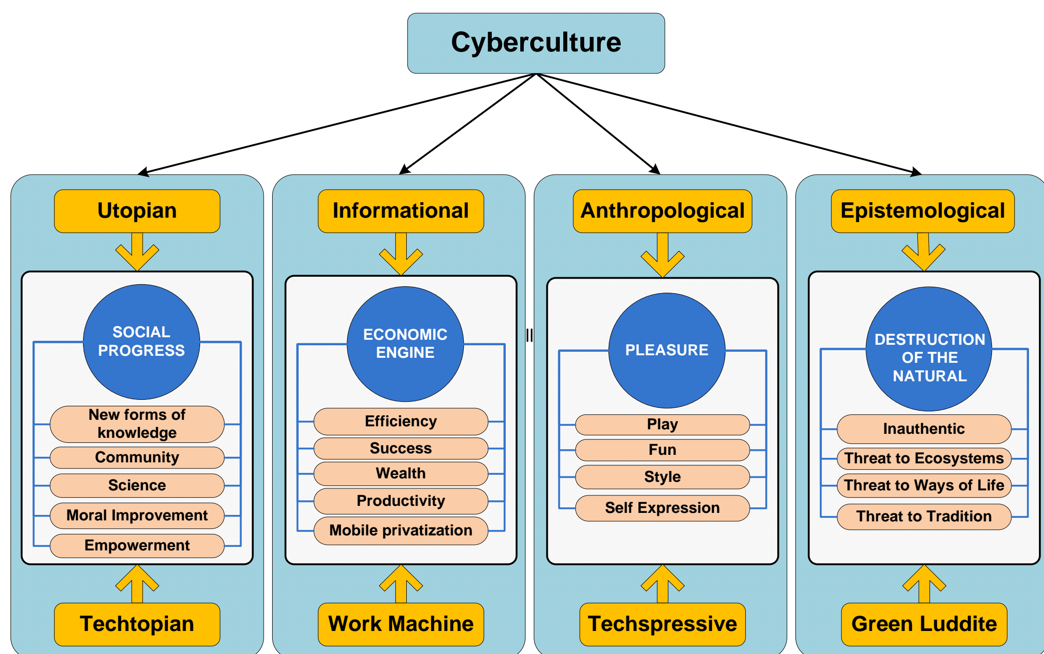

Figure 2-1: Cyberculture typologies (incorporation of Macek's and Kozinets's typologies of cyberculture)

As outlined above, the conceptualization of CMC collectives falls between a choice of (online) community or (cyber) culture.

However, culture exists, and always has, in a continuous state of flux whose transformations have been driven by our inventions, which we simultaneously shape and drive. If we accept that Homo sapiens is, by his nature, tool-maker and innovator, then perhaps it makes no more sense for us to talk about cyberculture as distinct from other forms of human culture as it does to talk about ‘alphabet culture’, ‘wheel culture’, or ‘electricity culture’ (Kozinets, 2009). This raises issues over whether cyberculture should be conceptualized as something different from everyday culture.

Due to the fact that culture is unquestionably based within and founded on communication (Carey, 1989), online communications act as media and possess a certain ontological status for their participants. These communications act as media of cultural transaction – the exchange not only of information, but of systems of meaning. Online communities form or manifest cultures, the “learned beliefs, values, and customs that serve to order, guide, and direct the behaviour of a particular society or group” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994: 485, f. 2). To avoid the essentializing as well as the hyperbolization that runs rampant in so much Internet-related discourse, it would be better to talk about particular online cultures in their specific manifestations. Therefore, it may well make sense, depending upon our research focus, to talk about VW culture, the culture of the blogosphere, mobile phone culture, or online Bollywood fan culture. The specificity of these latter terms is preferred over the generality of the term cyberculture, and would reserve the use of that term to references and discussions about distinctive shared characteristics of these online or

computer-mediated social formations. Therefore, the way this thesis will describe the specific CMC collectives is the culture of the VW of SL.

2.4.4 Identity in Online Communities

On the Internet, online communities have become common and millions of people are daily contributing online (Ellison et al., 2006). People meet at online communities instead of, and in addition to, traditional face-to-face interaction. Online communities are forms of CMC and they establish social groups or social networks online (Ferlander and Timms, 1999). Typically, these online communities have an idea, a common interest or a goal that they want to achieve (Westheimer and Kahne, 1993). How individuals interact with each other in the community, and why they contribute to these communities has been a subject for researchers since the mid-1990's (Turkle, 1995; Stone, 1991; Donath, 1999). One of the major topics that are discussed in this literature is identity (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2003; Cutler, 1996), but often with different definitions of identity and with different approaches. So, how is identity discussed in the online community literature?

The term identity is often discussed both in everyday language and in the research literature without further explanation. In information systems and internet applications the technological definition of identity is often very narrow (Riva and Galimberti, 1998). Identity is seen as being synonymous to identifying a user, e.g. having login name and a password.

2.4.4.1 Relations of Self and Online Identity

The literature regarding online communities discusses identity with different approaches. Five different approaches were identified in the literature: identity expression, identity nondisclosure, identity verification, identity deception and identity construction. Each of these approaches is briefly presented in this section.

2.4.4.1.1 Identity Expression

What is identity expression and how does it relate to online communities? First, it is important to look further into the question 'what is identity expression?'. Stryker and Burke (2000) discuss the expression of identities in their paper about identity theory. The research on identity theory has had two different directions: one "examining how social structures affect the structure of self and how structure of the self influences social behavior", while the other "concentrates on the internal dynamics of self-processes as these affect social behavior" (Stryker and Burke, 2000: 85). The meeting point of these two directions is, according to Stryker and Burke (2000), the behavior that expresses identities. The identity theory has its theoretical ground point in structural symbolic interactionism, therefore the expression of identities is in the identity theory often connected to interactions with others. In online communities 'the behaviour' that expresses identities can be the contribution of information or comments in the community.

But how can identity expression be related to online communities? Thorbjørnsen et al. (2007) define expressiveness as "the consumers'

perception of a given product's or service's ability to express both social and personal identity dimensions" (p. 765). Although Thorbjørnsen et al. (2007) examine the adoption of Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS), several similarities can be seen with online communities. They pin point that if behaviour results in an expression of identities, the service (in which our case is the online community) has to facilitate some elements of identity expressiveness.

Thorbjørnsen et al. (2007) apply the term identity expressiveness focusing on "the importance of behaviour as something that may be interpreted by others in the social construction of identity and by oneself in the repeated self-construction of identity" (p. 766). Furthermore, according to Wang and Fesenmaier (2003), individuals fulfil a number of psychological benefits joining online communities. They argue that online communities enable individuals to express their identities and therefore are able to fulfil some of their psychological benefits.

2.4.4.1.2 Identity Nondisclosure

In face-to-face discussions, one can easily appraise and judge their discussion partner by his/her looks. For instance, age, colour of skin, gender, height and weight etc. are elements that are most often revealed immediately in 'real life' contexts.

Self-disclosure is defined as "talking about oneself" and it greatly contributes to the construction of identity knowledge and impression building. Self-disclosure is the telling of private stories in public space

(Lee, 2006). In online communities, what people know about others is based on the disclosure of information that one wishes the others to know (Cutler, 1996). If one's age is not relevant to the persona one wishes to portray, then one need merely not reveal this information in order to prevent skewing others' perceptions one way or another (Wood and Smith, 2005).

Bowker and Tuffin (2002) have researched online community behaviour among disabled people. They found that disabled people like to contribute to online communities as "they can be treated on their merits as a person, rather than a disabled person" (p. 327). A choice to disclose repertoire has been identified and organized around three key resources: relevance, anonymity and normality.

Information that is once put on the internet might remain there forever, with no possibilities to take it away. Most people in online communities are conscious of this fact, and are thus careful about what they choose to disclose. Especially sensitive is to link your real name to your online activities, particularly when the Internet offers search engines that quickly find personal details (Solove, 2007).

2.4.4.1.3 Identity Verification

In contrast to the above, Stets and Cast (2007) discuss identity verification from an identity theory perspective. They suggest that self-verification is an important goal for individuals, and they examine how individuals control the flow of resources in order to achieve this specific goal. Stets and Cast

(2007) focus on the interaction between individuals in specific contexts. These contexts can be, among other, online communities.

Ma and Agarwal (2007) examined the role of different IT artefacts in online communities and how these artefacts enhance perceived identity verification. In addition, they examined how the perceived identity verification influences satisfaction which again influences contribution to the online community. They theorized that “a key driver to knowledge contribution in an online community is the accurate communication and verification of identity that can, in turn, yield extrinsic benefits such as recognition, and intrinsic benefits such as an amplified sense of self-worth” (Ma and Agarwal, 2007: 43).

In order to test their model, they examined four different IT artefacts; virtual co-presence, persistent labeling, self-presentation, and deep profiling. In their article they define identity verification as “the perceived confirmation from other community members of a focal person’s belief about his identity” (Ma and Agarwal, 2007: 46). They found that the artefacts have a positive influence on perceived identity verification, and that the perceived identity verification is strongly linked to satisfaction and knowledge contribution.

2.4.4.1.4 Identity Deception

In the end of Bauman’s (2004) essay on identity, he is asked a question about the use of the Internet as a communication medium. The question focuses on playing with identities and creating what are called ‘false

identities' in communication with others on the Internet. The creation of false identities on the Internet is often referred to as identity deceptions (Donath, 1999; Joinson and Dietz-Uhler, 2002). In this literature, the example of 'Joan' (Stone, 1991) is well known. Joan did not want to meet people face-to-face, but engaged in several relationships in the community. 'Joan' was a persona created by a male psychologist named Alex. When this was revealed to the community, several feelings were expressed (Stone, 1991; Turkle, 1995; O'Brien, 1999).

Joinson and Dietz-Uhler (2002) examined reactions to deception in virtual communities. They reviewed the literature of deception on the Internet and found several individuals playing with identities. Moreover, they did a case study in which they examined the reaction to an identity deception in the context of three related explanations: social identity, deviance and norm violations (Joinson and Dietz-Uhler, 2002). As Donath (1999) puts it "the deception is quite harmful to those deceived…however it is beneficial to the deceivers" (Donath, 1999: 3).

Additionally, in Demiris' (2006) review of health care professionals he discusses identity and deception. He writes about different identity cues that members of a community are able to use in order to identify an individual. These cues are divided into two categories; specific identity cues (IP address, domain name, browser type etc.), and more general cues (writing style, tone, and language). He discusses identity deception from four different angles; trolls, category deception, impersonation, and identity concealment. Demiris (2006) refers to a game about identity

deception when he uses the term ‘trolling’. The troll (which refers to the individual creating a fake identity) is playing with the others in the community, understands the identity cues, and can be costly for the community in several ways. They give bad advice, disrupt discussions, and damage the feeling of trust. There are many varieties of category deceptions. The troll is one, gender deception and status enhancement are other examples. Joinson and Dietz-Uhler (2002) examined three explanations for category deceptions; psychiatric illness, identity play, and true self. Impersonation or claiming to be a particular individual is relatively easy in online communities; for example, individual posts signed by another name (or the target name), without changing their login name, letting viewers believe they are somebody else.

2.4.4.1.5 Identity Construction

Moving on from the above categorisations that rest upon the assumption of a real/ virtual binary, the tradition of social constructivism, and the work of such researchers as WI Thomas, Peter Berger, Erving Goffman and Howard Becker, rejects any category of identity that sets forward essential or core features as the unique property of a community’s members (Cerulo, 1997b). This tradition is continued in the Internet-related research, where identity is seen in an anti-essentialist way. Identity construction means that identity is built through social processes and interactions.

Sherry Turkle (1995) explores online communities and their impact on personal identity construction. She follows members of a virtual community

as they interact in MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon). The testimony of MUD members, along with Turkle's insights, provides a unique picture detailing the construction and experiencing of different online personas. Furthermore, Turkle documents the ways in which individuals negotiate online identities relative to other facets of the self. By probing the balance between 'virtual' selves and 'real' selves, Turkle's work forces us to question any perspective that places virtual experience second to the concrete (Cerulo, 1997b). This perspective moves away from essentialist notions of a true, 'real' identity being expressed (or hidden) within the virtual context towards one that accepts the fluid, co-constructed and fragmented nature of identity in all contexts.

This section examined the emergence and characteristics of online and virtual communities and cyberculture in general, and explored the five different approaches to identity in cyberspace,

2.5 The Concept of Virtual Reality in VWs

In order to establish the background to this study it is necessary to outline a further important conceptual issue; that of virtual reality. Virtual reality underpins learned and lay understanding of VWs (Steuer, 1992; Heim, 1998).

VWs technologies underlie more and more of our critical human processes: how we entertain ourselves and socialize ourselves; how we teach and train; how we conduct ourselves in business, how we design and build our systems, how we deliver health care, how we negotiate and

mediate with each other, even how we vote and conduct governmental affairs (Bellman, 2005).

2.5.1 Dreams of Virtual Reality

Virtual reality is the technology, discourse and dream in which VWs rest. Technologically, virtual reality is defined as "a technology that convinces the participant that he or she is actually in another place by substituting the primary sensory input with data received and produced by a computer … The 'as-if' quality of virtuality becomes a pragmatic reality when the virtual world becomes a workspace and the user identifies with the virtual body and feels a sense of belonging to a virtual community" (Heim, 1998: 220-221).

Moreover, Hillis (1999) notes that "The positioning of [virtual reality] as a *new* technology, the *next* thing, expresses a transcendental yearning to deny both history and the necessary limits that attend and organize material realities and their accompanying forms" (p. 30).

In his book 'The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality' Heim (1993), describes seven different concepts that guide the field of study as well as the accompanying cultural construction of virtual reality: simulation (realism and three-dimensionality); interaction (ability to engage in the environment and with others in it); artificiality (even broader than Fink's (1999) definition of the virtual and similar to Baudrillard's concept of our world being completely saturated by simulacra and the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1981)); immersion (use of hardware to simulate sensory experience, like a virtual

reality headpiece or tactile glove); tele-presence (a feeling of presence in a remote (or virtual) place and/or control of a remote robot agent); full-body immersion (kinesthetic tracking of body movement by a computer); and networked communications (interactions with others via the Internet) (Heim, 1993). To achieve virtual reality status, a technology does not have to fulfill all seven concepts. Virtual technologies are characterized as 'strong' virtual reality or 'weak' virtual reality in relation to these seven concepts (Figure 2-2). For instance, a text-based chat room may be highly interactive but not immersive and thus would be considered weak. Nevertheless, if that chat space was a three-dimensional graphic environment that encompassed the vision of its users it would be considered a stronger type. This proliferation of definitions has made virtual reality an absolute catch-all phrase.

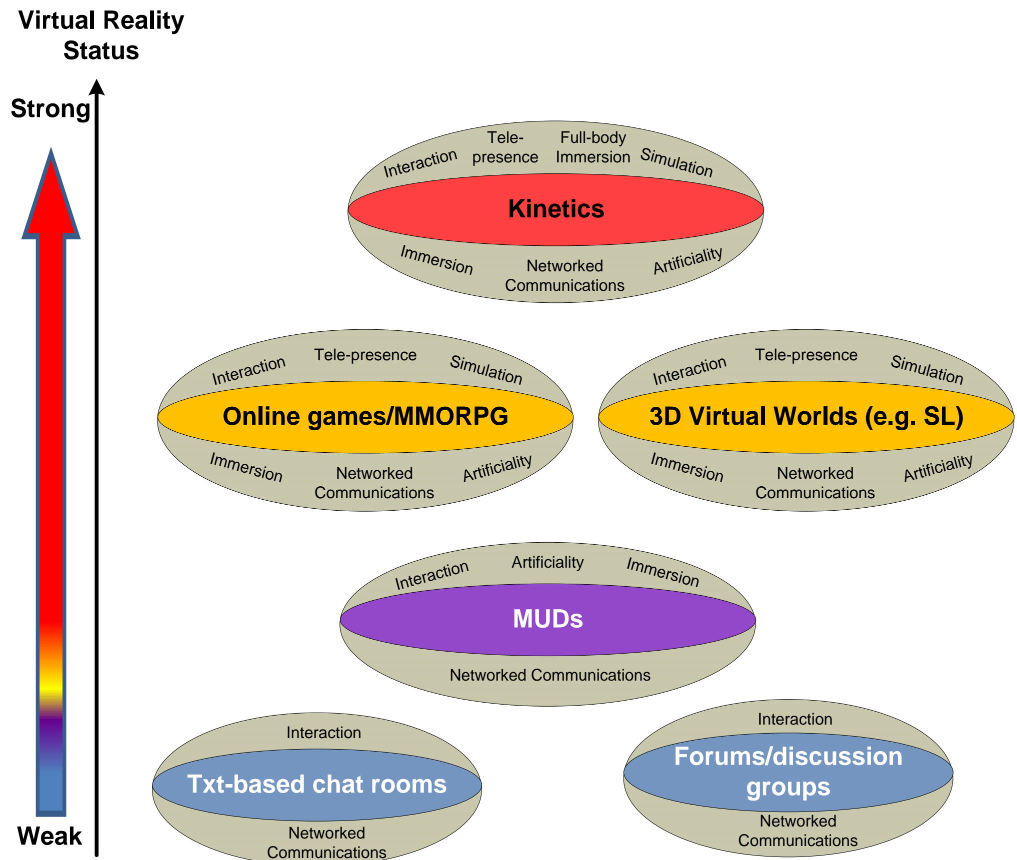

Figure 2-2: Virtual Reality Status

The founding dream of virtual reality was envisioned in a speech given by Ivan Sutherland, considered as one of the founding researchers in the field, in 1965. The 'Ultimate Display' would be 'connected to a digital computer … a looking glass into mathematical wonderland … The ultimate display would … be a room within which a computer can control the existence of matter … With appropriate programming such a display could literally be the Wonderland in which Alice walked" (Hillis, 1999: 8). Biocca and Levy (1995) describe the drive behind this dream as the search for the "essential copy" and the desire for "physical transcendence". "Seeking the *essential copy* is to search for a means to fool the senses – a display that provides a perfect illusory deception.

Seeking *physical transcendence* is nothing less than the desire to free the mind from the 'prison' of the body" (Biocca and Levy, 1999: 7). These goals follow the historic-cultural discourses of the primacy of vision and mind/body dualism that came before. The 'Ultimate Display' advocated to re-create a world as a better place and to re-create the body, digitized and customizable, as a perfect self.

Critics have reacted to this vision both with joy and anxiety. Hillis (1999) concludes his critical discussion of virtual reality as cultural discourse with the warning to never forget the promises of technological visions past, as well as the persistent place of the body.

> "*The promise and hype of [virtual reality] and [Internet technologies] more generally is part of an ideology of the future, produced in an amnesia and loss of history that forgets the broken promises of past technologies such as the 'universal educator' (TV) and 'too cheap to meter' (nuclear power). Metaphors of progress and evolution work to suggest that bodies and places are always incomplete, partial, and by necessity thereby flawed … if understanding can always only be partial, and if the mind is also flesh, then answers cannot lie solely within the transcendent light and reflected images inside [virtual reality] head-mounted display*" (Hillis, 1999: 211).

Hillis (1999) speculates that while virtual reality and virtual environments are "factual" and experienced sensually, they are, most importantly,

socially produced but try to “masquerade as brute facts” (Hillis, 1999: 52). To put it another way, virtual reality tries to act as an aspect of the world that does not need an institutional understanding but just “is” – like “snow on Mount Everest” (Hillis, 1999: 52). The virtual dream, then is dangerous due to the fact that it tries to replace brute reality with one constructed only of light and mirage.

On the other side of the spectrum, Zhai (1998), while attending to the risks of virtual reality, holds a more positive vision. “With the invention of [virtual reality] we are beginning to reach a stage of meta-physical maturity such that we can see through, without destructive disillusionment, the trick of the alleged materialistic thickness. We welcome it as an occasion for our participation in the Ultimate Re-Creation” (Zhai, 1998: 173).

Zhai argues that our very concept of space is based on vision, thus our understanding of the world, even what is “material”, depends upon the nature of our sensory framework (1998). To put it another way, it is the constraints of our physical senses that construct what space and matter mean to us. Virtual reality is thus innately good “in both experiential and transcendent senses” as it allows us to envisage the world and recreate it beyond the bounds of our current conceptions of the real (Zhai, 1998: 153). We are able to experience it as a new reality, since what we call reality now is constructed by the senses alone (Zhai, 1998).

Fink (1999), who writes evolutionary psychology theory, takes a different approach. In some sense, it really does not matter whether something is real or virtual since human beings are “programmed to assume that what

appears real *is* real. It is a powerful and automatic assumption. Consequently, simulations of people and environments easily deceive our Stone Age brains … We can't and don't overcome the assumption that what appears real *is* real, because we don't want to, don't need to, or don't gain anything by it" (Fink, 1999: 128-129). This means that for Fink, we constantly experience the virtual, so virtual reality is just another technology that enables interaction and engagement that we experience as real, even if it may not be tangible, since it elicits a response from our brain and our bodies. Virtual reality is not entirely good or bad, but one of many virtualities in our lives.

It seems productive to take the middle ground with Heim who argues that for "virtual realism", which he defines as "the pragmatic interpretation of virtual reality as a functional, non-representational phenomenon that gains ontological weight through its practical applications. Virtual realism steers a course between the idealists who believe computerized life represents a higher form of existence and the down-to-earth realists who fear that computer simulations threaten ecological and local values" (Heim, 1998: 220). Moreover, Heim notes that "Virtual entities are indeed real, functional, and even central to life in coming eras. Part of work and leisure life will transpire in virtual environments" (Heim, 1998: 44). He goes on to describe several characteristics of what it means to practice this view which include: criticism, avoiding exaggeration, seeing VWs as parallel to the actual, not a replacement of it, and a pragmatic sense that "realism in [virtual reality] results from pragmatic habituation, livability, and dwelling" (Heim, 1998: 46).

The current thesis is going to specifically focus on the VW of SL (see Figure 2-2), which is not what virtual reality purists would describe as an immersive VW, as it does not engage the user through virtual reality goggles or tactile interfaces. Nevertheless, it still resides squarely in the discourse of virtual reality because it provides a high level of interactivity and tele-presence within a parallel world that allows for the construction of place and self. Within SL, there is a tangible value and meaning for its users, particularly by enabling them to build and create. Following Heim, this work also introduces the notion of virtual materiality to attempt to conceptualize this virtuality/reality dualism. The next section is going to describe the VW of SL in more detail.

2.5.2 The Virtual World of Second Life

SL is a three dimensional VW, launched in 2003 by Linden Labs. SL was intentionally designed to be an environment constructed by its users. "From the shape of their avatars[4] to the design of their homes, from how they spend their time to what type of affinity groups they form; SL's design was focused on fostering creativity and self-expression in order to create a vibrant and dynamic world full of interesting content" (Ondrejka, 2004: 1). As such, it is unique among VWs that exist today but represents a trend that its creators and others anticipate may eventually transform the Internet as graphics and network capability grow (Kushner, 2004).

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[4] Avatar is derived from the Sanskrit *avatara* and is meant to suggest "the idea of a kind of transubstantiation, the incarnation of life in a different form" (Tofts, 2003, p. 56). Avatar is the common term for representations, either textual or visual, of people's presence in a digital environment. In SL avatars are three-dimensional and user constructed in almost every detail.

SL grew out of the vision of the 'Metaverse' described in Neal Stephenson's novel 'Snow Crash'. "Stephenson was the first to describe an online environment [The Metaverse] that was a real place to its users, one where they interacted using the real world as a metaphor and socialized, conducted business and were entertained" (Ondrejka, 2004: 81). The developers of SL see their user-constructed world as the first step towards fulfilling this vision. This vision is to create a space where anyone can create and build an avatar body and dreamlike places that fulfil their desires, a world that will function as 'real', transcending the bounds of flesh and circumstance of the actual, tangible world.

While SL captures the imagination of individuals who wish to create new lives free form societal and physical limitations of ethnicity, gender, geography, sexual orientation or status, it still manifests significant aspects of the society (American, capitalist, gendered) from which it sprung and thus is more reflective than transcendent. Nevertheless, since "it is now possible to work in a fantasy world to pay rent in 'reality'" in places such as SL, user-created VWs enable users to build virtual lives, with virtual bodies, virtual objects and virtual homes, that can have real, tangible value and meaning" (Lastowka and Hunter, 2004: 11). SL represents, as Hillis (1999) describes, an example of "[virtual reality] as postmodern technology" due to the fact that it blurs and fragments boundaries and senses of self and place and functions as a virtual microcosm for cultural, economic, and identity recombination (Hillis, 1999:164-5). In these new frontiers, avatars and the spaces they build will continue to challenge our concept of reality and humanity.

2.5.2.1 A Brief Description of Second Life

SL residents are able to interact with each other through motional avatars, providing an advanced level of a social network service combined with general aspects of a metaverse. Everybody's avatar runs (or flies) around together in a virtual environment, complete with oceans and trees and houses and animals. They can explore, meet other residents, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, create and trade items (virtual property) and services from one another. Avatars can take whatever form and appearance and manifest whatever personality that a user desires. Every avatar can point at people and things, drive virtual motorcycles, or run up to someone and hug them. Residents can own property, create objects and animations, form relationships with one another, and engage in virtually any type of transaction or interaction imaginable. They can communicate with one another by typing local public chat messages, typing private, global instant messages, and even by voice. They can also navigate the landscape by walking, flying, or instantly teleporting from one location to another, among other means. There's an easy-to-learn programming language one can use to tell the system to make something for them in a certain way. Making things costs virtual money, of course. So people make outfits and cars, and even houses, and they trade them back and forth, trying to save up their Linden Dollars ($L) to do more building when it strikes their fancy (Castronova, 2008).

SL is not a game since there really isn't any game to it at all. You just go *there* and talk to people, make friends, and build stuff that you might trade

around for $L, using the money to buy other things. For most of the millions of people who have begun to spend time within avatar-mediated communication systems, their encounter with this technology is not viewed as an encounter with a technology at all, but rather as a move into a new society, albeit one that operates under unusual circumstances. The circumstances change from world to world – in some, like SL, users build houses, in others they hunt dragons – but the common theme is sociality. These are new places for human communities, but they have grown to the point where they have begun to merge with communities – and markets -- outside cyberspace (Castronova, 2008).

Since opening to the public in 2003, it has grown explosively and today is inhabited by millions of Residents from around the globe. Since its launch in June of 2003, SL has skyrocketed to consist of slightly over 11 million residents in numerous countries (Economic Statistics, 2007). In March 2007, 61 percent of active SL residents were from Europe (16 percent from Germany), compared to 19 percent from North America, and 13 percent from the Asia Pacific. Additionally, 61 percent of residents were male while 39 percent were female (ComScore, 2007).

2.5.2.2 The Economics of the Second Life Community

The SL economy is a vital part of the experience. The SL Marketplace is a designated location within the online community where residents are able to purchase and/or sell virtual products. According to SL's Web site, ''SL has a fully integrated economy, architected to reward risk, innovation and craftsmanship" (The Marketplace, 2009). Products sold at the SL

Marketplace are designed and built by the residents themselves, and they are purchased with SL's own currency, the Linden Dollars (L$), which can be obtained through an online exchange (the LindeX Currency Exchange) with real world currency. The value of a Linden Dollar is L$267.48 per US$1.00 in average-value varies from L$264.00 to L$275.00 (Hof, 2007; Wong, 2006). So the value of one L$1.00 is US$0.00374. Incredibly, some residents are so successful in the SL Marketplace that they are able to make and sustain a 'real world' living (Arney, 2007). Recently, corporations such as Apple, Nike, and Nissan have become active participants in the SL Marketplace (Siklos, 2006). Residents can use Linden Dollars to purchase property, goods, or services from one another, to make purchases through automated vendors in a variety of stores, and for many other types of transactions. The prices of property, goods, and services are similarly driven principally by market conditions.

In September 2006, the VW had a GDP of US$64 million, based on residents being able to sell pretty much anything they create within the metaverse, as long as they can find a buyer. While the SL currency is known as the L$, these can be exchanged for real-life US dollars with SL creator Linden Lab (Second Life Official Website, 2007).

2.5.2.3 Virtual Consumption in Second Life

With the dynamic development of information technology and the proliferation of interactive media with the Internet and CMC technologies, the ways in which people consume started to change. Consequently, consumers were introduced to new ways of consuming physical goods

and services and their digitized equivalents such as e-books, e-journals, mp3 music, etc (Kedzior, 2007).

Virtual game communities are considered one of the most promising online game models – incorporating traditional computer games into the context of collaborative virtual environments. Thousands of participants may not only interact with each other, but they may also buy and sell virtual items in a virtual community. Such goods are bought and sold using real money (Atkins and Caukill, 2008). The emergence and increasing popularity of three-dimensional animated VWs such as SL has set new stages for consumption. Being highly immersive, these environments represent lively consumption spaces not only for consumption activities but also for other manifestations of consumerism such as consumer activism, resistance and consumer creativity (Kedzior, 2007).

According to Firat and Venkatesh (1995), consumer-controlled avatars engage in many consumption activities such as shopping, trading, socializing at a club, etc. In that sense virtual consumption demonstrates an aspect of 'hyperreality', where members of the culture realize, construct and live the simulation.

Similar to the physical world, consumption in a virtual environment is often connected to spending hypothetically virtual money. As we have mentioned earlier, SL has its own form of economy and virtual money might be exchanged into "real" money and vice versa. As a result, the line between real and virtual has become blurred. Due to the new character of VWs little remains known about the nature of such consumption (Kedzior,

2007). Therefore, the section that follows examines how virtual consumption can be theorized and conceptualized.

2.6 Theorizing Virtual Consumption

In the past few years, VWs have demonstrated the potential to be a novel online transaction environment compared to the Web-based context, since millions of people may not only interact with each other but also buy and sell virtual items in a VW. This market, which did not exist ten years ago, today it is estimated to be worth billions of U.S. Dollars (Lehtiniemi and Lehdonvirta, 2007).

Typical “virtual goods” are graphical items that are used to enhance one’s virtual presence, given as gifts to other users or used as equipment in games and activities (Hamari and Lehdonvirta, 2010). While to an outsider the goods may seem trivial and worthless, in the social reality of the VWs they can serve very similar functions as material commodities do in other contexts (Lehdonvirta, 2005). Consequently, spending real money on virtual goods can be an attractive proposition to a user (Lehdonvirta et al., 2009).

The first time virtual goods were traded for real money in any significant volume was in the early Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) of the late 1990s (Lehdonvirta, 2005). Players put characters, items and currencies earned through game play on sale at Internet auction sites like eBay, and other players bid for them. When an auction was completed, the buyer and the seller met up in the game world and the

object was transferred to the buyer's game account. Payment was carried out using ordinary means such as check or money order.

Since then, it has been estimated that spending on virtual goods has grown to over 2 billion US$ per year globally, even though the estimates are still rough (Hamari and Lehdonvirta, 2010). This reflects the fact that MMORPGs have become a popular genre of games, the leading title being World of Warcraft with approximately 10 million subscribers (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008). While player to player sales of virtual goods continue to thrive, game publishers are also increasingly selling virtual items and currencies to their players (Lin and Sun, 2007). This is particularly true in the Asian market. In September 2005, 32% of titles surveyed by Nojima (2007) in Japan used virtual item sales as their main revenue model. In October 2006, the share had grown to 60%.

Despite the growing prominence of virtual asset sales as a revenue model, relatively little research has been dedicated to understanding why and under what circumstances people buy virtual goods. Recently, there has been attempts to study the topic within the framework of Information Systems research (Guo and Barnes, 2007; Choi et al., 2007). This approach centres on psychometric modelling of user motivation and intentions. The studies conducted so far suffer from theoretical shallowness, relying on highly abstract psychometric variables such as 'perceived enjoyment' (Guo and Barnes, 2007: 72) and 'perceived fun' (Choi et al., 2007: 1) to explain purchase behaviour. Consequently, their practical and theoretical contributions are questionable. Furthermore, one

study finds that for ‘intrinsically motivated buyers’, who are the buyers aiming ‘to enjoy the process of the transaction’ (Choi et al., 2007: 2), ‘perceiving fun is more significant than perceiving less transactional cost’ (Choi et al., 2007: 9). For ‘extrinsically motivated buyers’, who are the buyers aiming ‘to acquire items with less effort’ (Choi et al., 2007: 2), the main finding is that ‘less transaction cost in trading is more important than fun’ (Choi et al., 2007: 9). Therefore, the findings are a direct consequence of the definitions.

Other earlier works on virtual goods purchases are similarly light on theoretical content, but contain useful case descriptions. In competitive MMORPGs such as Ultima Online, the virtual goods traded on player to player markets are typically powerful characters, items and currencies that help buyers to advance and prevail over other players (Lehdonvirta, 2005).

While explanations based on advancement and competitive advantage can be plausible in competitive gaming settings, they are difficult to apply in VWs that are socially-oriented, such as Cyworld, Habbo, and SL, where no explicit game play goals are involved (Lehdonvirta, 2009). Relatively little research has been published on purchase motivations in such online environments. A study conducted by Lehdonvirta (2005) proposes that virtual consumption in Habbo is related to collecting, decorating, expressing self-identity, role-playing and game-like activities. Gamers and role-players in Habbo use virtual items as props in order to construct suitable settings for their various activities, as well as for creating social distinctions between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. Different choices of items

also paint different images of self-identity, while decorating involves the use of virtual items for self-expression and aesthetic purposes. Martin's (2008) study provides a similar analysis of the roles that virtual goods play in SL. Generally, it can be said that Lehdonvirta (2005) and Martin (2008) identify the same kinds of social and hedonistic functions for virtual items that sociologists have long associated with material goods (Table 2-1). On a closer look, social and hedonistic motivations can also be identified in competitive MMORPGs. Oh and Ryu (2007) provide examples of gameplay-enhancing items versus 'decorative items' in Korean online games where players buy items from the game operator.

Table 2-1: Virtual item purchase attributes

Functional Attributes	Performance (e.g. speed) Functionality (e.g. teleporting)
Hedonic Attributes	Visual appearance and sounds (aesthetic pleasure) Background fiction (what role does the item have in the story) Provenance (e.g. did a famous user own this item in the past?) Customizability (the ability to personalize the item)
Social Attributes	Cultural references (references to the outside culture, e.g. Christmas decorations, national flags, etc.) Branding (virtual goods branded by 'real-world' companies) Rarity (so that the virtual asset is more valuable)

2.7 Conclusion

The Internet has been presented by various writers over the past two decades as a magical, violent, stunning, ideal or disastrous development that is the perfect illustration of the postmodern age. The role of new

technologies is continually growing in our everyday lives changing the way we see the self and the world. The advent of computer culture incites a radical rethinking of who we are and the nature of being human.

Texts addressing the computer revolution have discussed various aspects of its implication for society, from the globalizing effects of communications technology (Cairncross, 1997), to the social and ethical problems arising as a result of computer technology (Kizza, 1996). Moreover, numerous texts have sought to articulate the social, cultural, and political implications of computers and CMC (Jones, 1995; Shields, 1996; Loader, 1997; Kitchin, 1998). With an estimated 1 billion people connected to the Internet (Macklin, 2006), the salience of CMC is well recognized as being beyond needing justification for academic study. Within its confines, the Internet has become an environment of unbridled consumption, voyeurism and fantasy. On-line shopping, chat rooms and cyber-cafes all serve, supposedly, to liberate the consumer from the constraints of physical limitations (Hoffman, and Novak, 1997; Childers et al., 2001; Miah, 2000). The effort of having to stand in a queue, or the endless minutes spent on the phone trying to book a holiday are no longer an issue with this ‘1-click’ culture. Indeed, the very language of these systems is such that it implies essentially recreational qualities, with such terms as ‘browsers’ and ‘surfers’ describing how one – necessarily – participates online (Miah, 2000).

Central to these readings is how computers affect and will continue to affect what it means to be a human being and how one constructs identity.

Moving beyond what is made most explicit in Turkle (1995), and is further considered by Castells (1997), where it is argued by both that the kinds of interactions that take place within cyberspace are of a quite unique kind, the idea of cyberspace and cyberculture has become so ubiquitous that studies of the specificity of particular social, community or cultural milieu within CMC is more strongly indicated.

Chapter 3 : Locating Studies of Virtual Worlds in Consumer Research

3.1 Introduction

Having examined the background, history and key terminology around online VWs and seen the theorizing of these worlds and the people within them in the broader context it is necessary now to find a location for this within consumer research. This chapter locates the study of VWs with a consumption focus within the central role that consumption plays in the postmodern society. It will look at cogent approaches in consumer research, focusing on the developments in consumer research that the researcher thinks are most promising to build the contribution upon. First, how the idea of consumption has changed from needs to desires is going to be investigated. Then, how this movement in understanding consumption from the buying behaviour of rational economic individual actors towards a conceptualization and location within consumer research firstly as “postmodernism” and secondly as “consumer culture theory” will be undertaken. The current chapter and the next chapter are linked and the next chapter is going to deal more specifically with theories of identity that might help the researcher to theorize the consumer within VWs.

3.2 What is Consumption?

Campbell (1995) defines consumption as “the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service” (p. 100).

Useful as this definition is, Campbell himself recognizes that it is far from entirely satisfactory since at its heart lies an economic conception of the role of consumption. What is of more interest here, as Lee (1993) points out, is the way in which, during the 1980s the object of consumption, the commodity, came to take on some form of magical quality, to such an extent that consumption took on a dual role as both an economic and a cultural touchstone. McCracken (1990) is one author who has gone some way towards coming to terms with the complexities inherent in an understanding of the social significance of consumption. He describes consumption as a thoroughly cultural phenomenon and argues in turn that "in Western developed societies culture is profoundly connected to and dependent upon consumption. Without consumer goods, modern, developed societies would lose key instruments for the reproduction, representation, and manipulation of their culture . . . The meaning of consumer goods and the meaning creation accomplished by consumer processes are important parts of the scaffolding of our present realities. Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and collective definition in this culture would be impossible." (p. xi).

McCracken (1990) argues that any study of consumption should take into consideration the ways in which consumer goods and services are created, bought and used. The importance of this definition is that it extends the traditional view of consumption as an act of purchase in order to tackle the sorts of influences and experiences that are undertaken by both product and the consumer before and after such a purchase. Hence, if we are to accept the argument that consumption is more than a mere

economic phenomenon, then its cultural dimensions cannot be addressed in isolation. In fact, what is most interesting about consumption is that, "as a set of social, cultural and economic practices, together with the associated ideology of consumerism, [it] has served to legitimate capitalism in the eyes of millions of ordinary people" (Bocock, 1993: 2).

Having reviewed what consumption is, there is a need to explore how consumer society emerged, as discussed in the following section.

3.3 How did Consumer Society come about?

According to Jameson (1983), it is the evolution of capitalism that has dictated contemporary philosophy, cultural practices, art, and literature. He associates the period between the late nineteenth century (when Veblen's 'Leisure Class' was written and debated) and the mid-twentieth century (about World War II) in Western Europe, England, and the United States with monopoly capitalism and modernistic cultural practices. The philosophy of modernism gave emphasis to rationality and creating order out of chaos (Klages, 2006; Giddens, 1998). The assumption is that creating more rationality is contributing to the creation of more order, and that the more ordered a society is, the better it will function (the more rationally it will function). Due to the fact that modernity is about the pursuit of ever-increasing levels of order, modern societies are constantly on guard against anything and everything labelled as "disorder" which might disrupt order. Therefore, modern societies rely on continually establishing a binary opposition between 'order' and 'disorder' so that they can assert

the superiority of ‘order’. However, in order to do this, they have to have things that represent ‘disorder’ – hence, modern societies continually have to create/construct ‘disorder’. Possibly due to this, lavish expenditure was branded wasteful as the practice symbolized exception (Mason, 1982) or ‘disorder’. Nevertheless, rapid changes in the Western World broke the status-quo of long-established social-political-economic structures, and new ideas in the fields of sociology, philosophy, and business started to gain ground. The post-war era was marked by the rapid spread of capital across boundaries, resulting in the establishment of a clear hegemony of capitalistic ideologies over socialism and fast developments in and penetration of digital technology and communication science. In this stage of capitalism, especially from a period starting from the late ‘70s, emphasis was gradually being placed on marketing, selling, and consuming commodities, not on producing them and this period has been related with postmodernism (Baudrillard, 1975, 1981; Ewen, 1988; Mourrain, 1989).

The recognition of consumption, as it is perceived in postmodernity, and actions taken by institutions of Western society (which are also becoming increasingly common even in the newly industrializing countries) -- namely, marketing -- are relatively very important (Firat, 1991). These actions are to be based on the fact that postmodern consumption processes, cultures, and consumers are qualitatively different from those of the past. The argument made is that “the simpler “rational” consumer of the past was replaced by a more complex consumer” (Firat et al., 1995: 44). The domination of consumption over production occurred due to the production’s loss of privileged status in culture and consequently

individuals started defining their self-images for themselves as well as to others through consumption practices (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995; Jamal and Goode, 2001; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Belk and Pollay, 1985; Wattanasuwan, 2005; Landon, 1974 Featherstone, 1991a); marketing as a primary institution has reinforced this trend. “It is also in this (re)presentation of self-image(s) through one’s consumption that the consumer begins to conceive “the self” as a marketable entity, to be customized and produced, to be positioned and promoted, as a product” (Firat et al., 1995: 42). The importance of self and social images have given rise to the phenomenon where products serve as symbols, are evaluated, purchased, and consumed based on their symbolic content (Zaltman and Wallendorf, 1979; Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1994; Dittmar, 1992; Douglas, 1982; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; McCracken, 1988; Solomon, 1983). Consumption symbols signify social constructions of reality; they are the media of interpersonal communication and the symbolic meaning of goods is used as an outward expression of consumer self-concept and connection to the society (Elliott and Wattansuwan, 1998). Consumption has now become a means of self-realization and identification (Firat, 1991; Kleine et al, 1995; Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982), since consumers no longer merely consume products; they consume the symbolic meaning of those products, the image (Cova, 1996).

When consumption moves to the symbolic realm, distinctive display can be made even with less expensive material possessions, but by something which still communicates the symbol of distinctiveness. By adopting

abstract interpretations and ascribing complex cultural meaning to products, those with 'higher' taste but less money would aim to compete with those with money but no matching taste. This happens due to the fact that there is a "correlation between educational capital and the propensity or at least the aspiration to appreciate a work "independently of its content" (Bourdieu, 1984: 53). 'Economic capital' does not easily and necessarily translate into 'cultural capital'. Hence, the cultural 'elite' can make even a mundane or an easily affordable product to express and exhibit their exclusive taste, by sophisticated, in-depth appreciation and appropriate communication of these 'taste-symbols' which, by design, remain distinct from 'status-symbols'. Specific instances of this typical taste-based consumption can be seen in such practices where marginalized art-forms, artifacts or working class outfits like jeans (Trigg, 2001) are adopted as signs of exclusivity.

Consequently, it is no surprise that, by studying the trends of ostentatious consumption, both Mason (1981) and Galbraith (1984) could observe that consumers have become more educated and they no longer consider outrageous flamboyance and extravagant spending as the leading symbols of status; conspicuous consumption can be done more through educated or 'tasteful' expenditures than through flagrant exhibitions of wealth. Observations that conscious, overt, and direct display of wealth (position) has ceased (Galbraith, 1984; Trigg, 2001) and status is conveyed in more subtle ways (Mason, 1981). Furthermore, Holt (1998) recognizes that "Objects no longer serve as accurate representations of consumer practices; rather, they allow a wide variety of consumption

styles" (p. 5). In short, the change in the dynamics of conspicuousness can clearly be discerned; the previous emphasis on acquisition and exhibition of physical items shifts to experiences and symbolic image in the postmodern phase (Pine et al., 1999).

Having examined how consumer society came about, the thesis moves on to the investigation of how the idea of consumption has changed from needs to desires, followed by how needs, wants and desires are conceptualized in VWs.

3.4 Rethinking consumption

Consumption in VWs cannot be understood in the context of rational, economic models (Castronova, 2005; Lehdonvirta, 2008). These VWs/cultures are highly experiential and they cannot be understood through binary thinking since these worlds and the subject are co-produced and co-constitutive; the subject is highly experientially involved, emoting and fragmented so there is a need to look at where we can locate this study within consumer research.

3.4.1 Reconceptualising needs as desires

Traditional thinking in consumer research is dominated by the rational choice model, which suggests that individual behaviour is a process of conscious decision-making, based on assessing costs and benefits and then choosing the option with the highest expected net benefit or lowest expected net cost. It is a utilitarian model based on the concept of people

acting rationally, and acting individually (Harbaugh et al., 2001; Uzana, 1960; Becker, 1962, 1976; Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2009; Hollis and Nell, 1975; Radnitzky and Bernholz, 1987; Hogarth and Reder, 1987; Swedberg, 1990; Green and Shapiro, 1996). The rational choice model has so deeply dominated the understanding of consumption and policy-making that it feels almost intuitive to us, even though real-life consumption behaviour is far more complicated with social norms, cultural traditions, habits, and many other factors shaping our everyday consumption behaviour (Power and Mont, 2010).

Thinking about familiar consumption behaviours helps us recognize that consumption is complex, not always rational and that material possessions can be symbolic as well as functional. Therefore, in order to understand consumption, we need to move beyond the dominant (economic) understanding of consumer behaviour and think about where our preferences, needs, and desires come from (Power and Mont, 2010).

3.4.1.1 The Nature of Modern Consumerism

According to Campbell (1987), there are two crucial defining features of modern consumerism, distinguishing it most from earlier, more traditional forms. The one is the central place occupied by emotion and desire, in combination to some degree with imagination. Campbell (1987) has developed this argument in his work ‘The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism’ when he emphasizes that it is the processes of wanting and desiring that lie at the very heart of the phenomenon of modern consumerism. This is not to say that issues of need are absent, or

in fact that other features, such as distinctive institutional and organizational structures, are not important. It is simply to affirm that the central dynamo that drives such a society is that of consumer demand, and that this is in turn dependent upon the ability of consumers to repeatedly experience the desire for goods and services. In this regard, it is our affluent states, most particularly our ability to 'want', to 'desire' and 'to long for', and more specifically our ability to constantly experience such emotions, that actually underpins the economics of modern developed societies (Campbell, 2002).

The second, and closely related, crucial characteristic of modern consumerism, is its focus on individualism. Evidently, however, not all consumption is individualistic in nature, since there continues to be a significant element of collective consumption even in the most modern and capitalist of societies, that is goods and services, which are consumed by the community (for instance defence, or law and order). Or alternatively, goods and services that are owned by the community and then allocated to individuals rather than purchased on the open market (for instance local government housing). Yet, it is quite clear that a distinctive hallmark of modern consumption is the extent to which goods and services are purchased by individuals for their own use. Again this is in marked contrast to the earlier pattern, in which these were either purchased by, or on behalf of social groups, most specifically the extended kin or 'household' or the village or local community, or alternatively allocated to individuals by governing bodies. Even more characteristic of modern consumerism is the associated ideology of individualism. This is the value

attached to this mode of consumption with the emphasis placed on the right of individuals to decide for themselves which goods and services they consume (Kumar, 1988), what can be called ‘neo-liberalism’ (Larner, 2000). Kumar (1988) observed that one of the key features of modernity is individualization by which he means that “the structures of modern society take as their unit the individual rather than, as with agrarian or peasant society, the group or community” (p. 10).

Now these two features actually strongly support each other, and combined they define the nature of modern consumerism. The crucial key that constitutes the link between the two is the simple fact that modern consumerism is by its very nature predominately concerned with the fulfilment of wants rather than the meeting of needs. The significance of this development is that while needs can be, and indeed generally are, objectively established, wants can only be identified subjectively. This means that others can always tell you what it is that you need. In fact, you may not be qualified to assess those needs for yourself and therefore have to seek the assistance of experts in order to identify them, as in the case of one’s medical ‘needs’. But no one other than you is in the position to decide what it is that you want. When it comes to wanting, only the ‘wanter’ can claim to be an ‘expert’ (Campbell, 1998). To sum up, modern consumerism is more to do with feeling and with emotion (in the form of desire), than it is with reason and calculation, while it is fiercely individualistic, rather than communal, in nature. And it is these two features that provide the most obvious connection with the larger culture

as well as providing the basis for the claim that modern consumerism rests on metaphysical assumptions.

3.4.2 Needs, Wants and Desires in Virtual Worlds

Basic needs appear to be an obvious driver of consumption, but even the way in which physiological and social needs are met is determined by a variety of factors. Needs theorists, such as Max-Neef (1992) and Maslow (1954), concluded that actual human needs are "finite, few and universal" (Jackson, 2005: 170), and have distinguished between material needs, such as subsistence and protection, and social or psychological needs, such as self-esteem and belongingness. Maslow's well-known 'Hierarchy of Needs' implies that self-actualization needs will only be pursued once physiological needs have been met. However it is easy to find counterexamples, such as people who choose to starve to death rather than to lose self-esteem, or those who risk security for political reasons (Michaelis and Lorek, 2004; Douglas et al., 1998).

Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' diminishes and hides the passion that individuals experience in connection with certain consumption activities and it countenances the predominance of rational decision-making models within consumer research – only challenged within the last decade or so by alternative conceptualizations of the consumer's relationship with products and services, such as those of the extended self (Belk, 1988), the sacred and profane (Belk et al., 1989), postmodernism (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), symbolic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook,

1981), hedonic consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), consumer mythology (Levy, 1981), the cultural perspective (Sherry, 1986), and existential phenomenology (Thompson et al., 1989). By investigating consumer desires, consumer research may take yet another step in the direction of connecting feelings and personal experiences of the most passionate kind with the realm of consumption.

Desire is the motivating force behind much of contemporary consumption (Belk et al., 2003). A sharp distinction between consumer desire versus needs and/or wants is apparent in the way that people refer to these concepts in their everyday language. Desire does not develop from physical need as Elliott (1997) maintains, but is a categorically and qualitatively different phenomenon. Desires are specific wishes inflamed by imagination, fantasy, and a longing for transcendent pleasure (Belk et al., 1996, 1997). Although they are perceived to originate externally in the compelling object, the real locus of desire is the imagination of what would be like if only we could have the desired object. This means that consumer desire is a passion born between consumption fantasies and social situational contexts. Consumer imaginations of and cravings for consumer goods not yet possessed can mesmerize and seem to promise magical meaning in life. Desire is very much a social and personal construction. But just as much as people construct desire, desire constructs them. They are what they desire. Sartre (1956) observed that feeling an absence of being, individuals come to desire states of having and doing that they believe will construct and manifest their being.

In relation to consumption in VWs, these comprise of a complex phenomenon due to the fact that they offer many kinds of marketing experiences hitherto unseen in a single channel (Chambers, 2005; Kleeberger, 2002; Vedrashko, 2006). They are not only designed to entertain users (customers) but also to engage them in an experience. The use of multiple senses in this experience can make it much more effective (Kroeber-Riel and Weinberg, 1999: 123), and this is even more the case in emotional, new or unstructured stimulating environments (p. 418-419) of the kind seen in VWs like SL. VWs, like SL, enable their users to spend virtual fortunes on virtual goods and even create and sell virtual artefacts of their own. Online consumers may also browse endlessly through virtual marketplaces and create and display virtual goods. These virtual commodities are desired and enjoyed as if they were real (tangible) in the common sense notion of the word, but are not actually bought, or owned in a traditional material sense.

Virtual consumption can be said to be the latest stage in an ongoing transformation of consumption from a focus on utility through to emotional value, sign value and finally playful experience (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2005).

3.4.2.1 The Emergence of Imaginary Consumption

The trend towards virtualized consumption in the Web is told by Baudrillard (1998) as stages of simulation. Initially an image stood for the real as a direct representation, but following the industrialization of production, this relationship diminished. Consequently, any distinction

between representation and reality has disappeared leaving only the simulacrum, a world of signs with no basis of reality. This irruption of the sign is also highlighted by McCracken's (1988) history of consumption. In the 19th century the consumption of signs started to become a permanent feature of everyday culture: "more and more social meanings were being loaded into goods through new and more sophisticated devices for meaning transfer" (McCracken, 1988: 22). The availability of consumer goods and the potential for social mobility based on consumer appropriation of sign values, led to a democratization of consumer practices. The result was a reduced relevance of utilitarian value in favour of more aesthetic dimensions. This trend was further intensified through the 'Fordist Deal'. Between the turn of the 20th century and the 1960s, the alienating monotony of factory work was accepted in turn for a dream of a more satisfying life provided by the abundance of goods found in the marketplace (Ewen, 1976; Bauman, 1988; Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Yet, this symbiosis of efficient production and desire laden consumption was undermined by saturated markets throughout the 1970s which called for a different relationship between consumer desire and consumption. Post-fordist production regimes needed to become synchronized around more transient, intangible, information-based commodities (Slater, 1997; Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Firat and Schultz, 1997). Featherstone (1991a) summarizes the problem that modern economies have in using up what is ever more cheaply produced, suggesting that "to control growth and manage the surplus the only solution is to destroy or squander the excess in the form of games, religion, art, wars, death" (p. 21-22). Lee (1993)

views this gradual metamorphosis of consumption as a transition from material to experiential commodities. The productive apparatus increasingly creates experiences to be enjoyed, but used up during the act of consumption, resulting in never ending series of new consumption events. In the same vein, Firat and Dholakhia (1998) see contemporary consumption as a carnival of hyperreal moments, where the sign becomes what is to be consumed. Postmodern consumers endlessly engage in highly pleasurable, simulated experiences such as tourism, shopping malls, and the media (Urry, 1995; Gottdiener, 2000; Firat and Dholakhia, 1998), resulting in what Pine and Gilmore (1999) have called 'experiential economies'.

This aestheticisation of everyday life has given way to an endless rekindling of dream worlds, desire and pleasure for consumers (Featherstone, 1991a). Meaning embedded in objects transforms even mundane goods into resources for imaginary vistas that signify desirable values (Appadurai, 1986). Their capacity to conjure dream worlds is revealed most obviously in McCracken's (1988) thesis of displaced meaning, Campbell's (2004) romantic, hedonist consumer and postmodern appraisals of the evocative power of the image (Firat and Schultz, 1997; Cova, 1996; Firat and Dholakia, 1998). In these stories of consumer behaviour purchase is preceded by speculation of how life can be improved upon by consumption. Belk et al. (2003) postulate that consumer desire for commodities is based on a self-promise of an "altered state of being, involving an altered state of social relationships". McCracken's (1988) displacement theory advances a similar position:

“individuals anticipate the possession of the good and, with this good, the possession of certain ideal circumstances” (p. 110). Likewise, Campbell’s (1987) consumers are dream-artists who “employ their creative, imaginative powers to construct mental images, which they consume for the intrinsic pleasure they provide” (p. 77). Consumption therefore takes place largely in the mind as an aesthetic, imaginary (virtual) experience that relies on material goods and embodied experiences only as a resource to stimulate and actualize an imagination made restless by marketing. All of this is to conceptualize contemporary consumption as a game, only loosely regulated and framed by the rules of a diverse and ever-changing marketplace. Consumption may involve many games: the thrill of leisure pursuits as *ilinx*; the gamble of an impulse purchase as *alea*; fashion items as *mimicry* (identity play); and veblenesque conspicuous, competitive consumption as *agon*, to borrow Caillois’s (1958) play forms. But it is daydreams, a play of the mind, controlled and manipulated by individuals (Sutton-Smith, 1997) that best captures the desire individuals have to endlessly consume. Consumers’ imaginings start with what the market has to offer. They then act *as if,* enjoying an improvised game of make believe. Like play theorists such as Schechner (1988), contemporary consumer researchers reject conceptualizations of the consumer as a rational economic being and place imagination and daydreams at the heart of human action. However, Campbell (1987) highlights that the desire consumers have to make real that which is dreamed about puts a brake on the imagination by focusing consumers’ daydreams towards that which is available in the marketplace.

This section explored how consumption is driven more by desires and dreams rather than needs resulting in the importance given to the aestheticisation of everyday life, an important element in the postmodern society. The latter is going to be examined in the section that follows.

3.5 Postmodern Consumer Culture

3.5.1 Postmodernism

Postmodernism has become an important semiotic marker in consumer research for work that attempts to move beyond the emphasis on the rational economic consumer outlined above to the extent that a postmodernist paradigm exists within consumer research (Brown, 1999). However, the concept of postmodernism itself is an amorphous and controversial issue over which there is little cohesion or consensus regarding definitions, origins and applications. As Brown (1993b) notes "few terms have been so widely used, and abused, in recent years as 'postmodern', 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity'" (p. 19).

Many researchers are drawn to postmodernism due to its interdisciplinary nature which allows for the crossing of theoretical boundaries (Brown, 1993b) and a potentially richer and less narrow-minded view of the consumer (Miles, 1999). Such is its prevalence indeed that Featherstone (1991a), encapsulating both the fashion for an ambiguity of 'postmodernism', concluded that as the term has no meaning readers should endeavour to use it as often as possible. According to Denzin

(1993), it is a “slippery term with no clear referents” (p. 507). However, the prefix ‘post’ signifies something that comes after something else; in this case modernism. Its ubiquitous characteristics of irony, ephemerality, fragmentation, and paradox clearly contrast with modernity.

Postmodernism has emerged as a critique of modernism as well as a philosophical and cultural movement. The main focuses of postmodernism are ideas related to culture, aesthetics, symbolic meanings, literary expressions, language and narratives (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) note that it is perhaps more appropriate to use the term ‘postmodernisms’ (plural) than postmodernism (singular) in order to signify that it refers to a collection of several themes with different origins or starting points (Borgman, 1992; Rosenau, 1992). In this respect, thus, any definition of postmodernism calls for a dialectical and plural vision (Featherstone, 1991a). Postmodernism embodies a situation in which different styles, different ways of thinking and different ways of living are accepted and taken at face value, what van Raaij (1993) refers to as ‘pluralism’ and Brown (1995) as ‘plurivalence’. Postmodernism rejects the modernist notions of the existence of a social reality independent of a socially constructed one and that scientific enquiry provides the sole means of truly knowing and therefore representing this social reality (Firat and Schultz, 1997: 188).

The political position of postmodernism is that different myths must be allowed since they are products of the different ‘realities’ of individuals or communities, and that each myth system must show respect and tolerance

to the presence of others (Lyotard, 1992). Postmodernism speculates that the culmination of modernity renders this multi-mythic position both advisable and inevitable. The possibilities and potential alternatives that modern technologies have created on the one hand, and the cynicism and frustrations resulting from the crumbling modern growth on the other hand, result in the fragmentation of experience and the growth and efflorescence of multiple, often highly incompatible, lifestyles, ideologies, and myth systems (Firat et al., 1995).

3.5.2 Postmodern Conditions

Contributions to the literature in postmodernism come from a large variety of disciplines (i.e. art, architecture, literature, literary criticism, philosophy, etc.), and thus, the vocabularies and perspectives are also varied. Even though it might be difficult to fit all the discussions in one concise framework, certain postmodern conditions do seem to receive the greatest attention. As presented in Table 3-1, these conditions tend to be hyperreality, fragmentation, reversals of production and consumption, decentrering of the subject, paradoxical juxtapositions (of opposites) and a general consequence of these conditions - loss of commitment (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993). Much of the discussion on these conditions, regardless of disciplinary origin, pertains to marketing and the consumer (Brown, 1993b).

Table 3-1: Brief description of postmodern conditions

Postmodern Conditions	Description
Hyperreality	Constitution of social reality through hype or simulation that is powerfully signified and represented
Fragmentation	Omnipresent of disjointed and disconnected moments and experiences in life and sense of self – and the growing acceptance of the dynamism which leads to fragmentation in markets
Reversals of production and consumption	Cultural acknowledgement that value is created not in production (as posited by modern thought) but in consumption – and the subsequent growth of attention and importance given to consumption
Decentering of the subject	Removal of the human being from the central importance he or she held in modern culture – and the increasing acceptance of the potentials of his/her objectification
Paradoxical juxtapositions (of opposites)	Cultural propensity to juxtapose anything with anything else, including oppositional, contradictory and essentially unrelated elements
Loss of commitment	Growing cultural unwillingness to commit to any single idea, project or grand design

Source: Firat and Shultz (1997), p. 186

3.5.2.1 Hyperreality

The disillusionments with the modernist project have given rise to many diverse movements, especially in the most modern societies of the world, which seem to have eroded the commitment to modernity (Firat and Schultz, 1997). As a result, there seems to be an increasing tendency and willingness on the part of the members of society to look for the 'simulated reality' or 'hyperreality' in which "the real becomes not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is already reproduced: the "hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1976/1988, pp. 145–146), rather than an extant reality,

imposing and immutable (Baudrillard, 1983; Eco, 1986; Postman, 1985). This postmodern crisis of representation constitutes a "blurring of the distinction between real and nonreal" (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995: 252) whereby reality is not merely given but constructed through "replication" (Venkatesh, 1992: 202) and/or "simulation" [5] (Baudrillard, 1981/ 1988: 170).

Hyperreality is the condition suggesting that, as humans, we construct our own realities and that these realities are a product of our imaginations, ingenuities, fantasies, and pragmatic needs. The continental thinker closely associated with the term hyperreality is Baudrillard (1981). He posits that the world now is constructed through simulacra and simulations, a hyperreality or a world of self-referential signs. He discusses four evolutionary phases of reality and experience: the first is engaging in direct experiences with reality, the second is working with experiences and representations of reality, the third is consuming images of reality and the fourth (hyperreality or the age of simularca) is taking images themselves as reality. It is the latter that is of relevance to the discussion of consumption and postmodernity. Many contemporary examples of hyperreal are grounded in consumption experiences, for instance, in the simulations experienced by the customers of the now largest industry, tourism, in theme parks such as Disney World and Universal Studios, or in Las Vegas (Baudrillard, 1987; Sorkin, 1992). Baudrillard (1987) claims that

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[5]This is Baudrillard's (1981/1988, p. 170) "simulacrum," which he describes as follows: "Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum. These would be the successive phases of the image: 1. It is the reflection of a basic reality. 2. It masks and perverts a basic reality. 3. It masks the *absence* of reality. 4. It bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (italics in original).

Disneyland is the best example for understanding how our reality works in the postmodern world - a place which is at the same time a real, physical space, but also clearly a fictional, representational world. Furthermore, there seems to be an extraordinary interest exhibited in all media for the coming advent of virtual reality and/or integrative and immersive communication technologies that allow simulated presence and sharing of virtual spaces by people actually far away from each other (Bylinsky, 1991).

According to Baudrillard, consumption consists of the exchange of signs. Signs and images supersede materiality and use-value. This is not to argue that the products that we consume have no functional utility; rather, functionality itself is treated as a sign. Thus, Baudrillard and other postmodernists would argue that we live in a simulated environment where realties constantly are constructed and consumed. The contemporary consumer culture is replete with hyperreal objects, symbols, and spaces. For instance, we can see exaggerated forms of hyperreality in theme parks, in shopping centres, and in various commercial locations frequented by consumers all over the world. These further illustrate that we live in a visual culture where consumer images are packaged into signs, or, more accurately, into an endless chain of signifiers. With the emergence of new technologies of information and communication, the visual is replacing the textual as the cultural order.

3.5.2.2 Fragmentation

Rather than suppress fragmentation or try to find unifying themes to resolve it, postmodernism calls for an unabashed practice of it. Recognition of the above discussed interest among the consumers of, especially, contemporary market economies in experiencing the different simulated existences, and an interpretation of human history in terms of socially constructed realities, lends validity to making such a call (Firat and Schultz, 1997). This is a call for a tolerance towards different ways of being, lifestyles and realities. The postmodern sensibility even encourages the experiencing of many different ways of being, not conforming or committing only to a single one. Such an attitude obviously allows for an expansion of fragmentation, of fragmented moments of experience and existence in a lifetime. Since contemporary consumers find commitment to a single project or metanarrative across modernity to have brought little promise but much misery, they have an affinity to not commit or conform to any unified, consistent, centred field, idea, system, or narrative (Jay, 1986; Lyotard; 1992; Wilson, 1989), or “regime of truth” (Foucalt, 1980). Fragmentation seems to be omnipresent in the everyday lives of modern consumers.

Having said all the above, it is important to mention that fragmentation, more specifically, concerns individual identity construction. When we say that consumers are fragmented, we mean not only they are fragmented into groups (i.e. segmented) but also that the individual ‘self’ is also fragmented (Venkatesh, 1999). Hence, the self is envisaged more as a

product of derivative assemblage than as a unified construction. In redefining the self, the consumer becomes continuously emergent, reformed, and redirected through relationships to products and people.

3.5.2.3 Reversals of Production and Consumption

The conventional view of an economy is in terms of production and distribution of goods and services measurable in standard units and priced according to acceptable economic laws of supply and demand and managerial imperatives. Postmodernism recognizes the importance of culture in addition to the economy, and of consumption in addition to production, in analyzing the global economic and cultural landscape (Harvey 1990). Postmodernism also is labeled as late modernism to suggest that what we see is nothing but the extension of modernist tendencies. That is, when the economy reaches a particular point of production and distribution, and the society reaches a certain level of affluence, consumption becomes the driving force of economic movement (Venkatesh, 1999). Therefore, the reversals in production and consumption arise from production losing its privileged status in culture and consumption taking on greater significance becoming the means by which individuals define their existence and themselves in relation to others.

The first feature of postmodern economy is that the imageries of consumption drive production, whereas under modernism, production was given a privileged status. In other words, we have the first basic ingredient of the sign economy, which is that consumption is held at a higher level of

social signification than production. A second feature of the sign economy is that products reduce to commodities because, on most substantive features, similar products perform alike; they can be differentiated based only on their imageries or sign values. That is, consumption dominates production on two fronts: by elevating itself as the main driver of the economic system and by converting the economic system into a sign system (Venkatesh, 1999).

3.5.2.4 Decentering of the Subject

The ultimate consequence of this is the decentrering of the subject, whose authentic self is said to be irrevocably splintered and displaced by a "made-up self" (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995: 252; McCarthy, 1987; Venkatesh, 1992: 199). The revered 'subject' of the modernist narratives is decentered and (con)fused with the object. As Firat and Venkatesh (1995) point out, the postmodern consumer "embraces the confusion between the subject and the object" and is liberated from having or seeking a centered, integrated self (p. 254). It is also decentered in the sense that this subject is no longer one but multiple and changeable according to the situation she/he encounters (Gergen, 1991; Kroker, 1992; Solomon, 1992).

3.5.2.5 Paradoxical Juxtapositions

Hyperreality, fragmentation and the decentered subject create openings for juxtapositions of opposites. The ability and willingness to (re)present different (self)images in fragmented moments liberates the consumer from conformity to a single image, to seeking continuity and consistency among roles played throughout life, and the postmodern generation seems ready

for such liberation. “Anything can be juxtaposed to anything else. Everything takes place in the present, ‘here,’ that is, nowhere in particular” (Gitlin, 1989: 350). What in modernist sensibility would be considered disjointed, paradoxical and inconsistent, hence schizophrenic and pathological, is not so considered in postmodern sensibility. Postmodern culture liberates the experiencing of that which is different, even paradoxically opposed. Consequently, such juxtapositions in style, imagery, discourse, communicative action, etc., abound with examples increasingly found in art, architecture, literature, and the media (Gitlin, 1987; Foster, 1985; Jencks, 1987; Kaplan, 1987).

3.5.2.6 Loss of Commitment

Disillusionment with the inability to the modern project to deliver its promises and the growing willingness to experience differences mentioned above both reinforce the tendency in late modernity and in postmodern culture for a loss of commitment to either grand or singular projects. Rather, the postmodern consumer takes on multiple, sometimes even contradictory projects, to which she/he is marginally and momentarily committed, not taking any one seriously. This loss of commitment is observed in all walks of life: in personal relationships, professional tasks, consumption activities, etc. Marketing managers experience this when the consumer loyalties to brands and corporations that they took for granted are jeopardized (Firat et al., 1995).

Having examined the nature of the postmodern consumer culture it is important to now focus on the emergence of Consumer Culture Theory

(CCT), which needs to be investigated. CCT has emerged in consumer research within the postmodern paradigm as a way to link all of these ideas (the postmodern conditions) to the study of consumer culture with the interpretivist turn in consumer research and the cultural turn in the broader social sciences.

3.6 Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

CCT emerged in consumer research by illuminating the cultural dimensions of consumption, addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

Over the last 25-30 years there have been significant developments within the subject of consumer research, mainly due to the influences of the social sciences. These changes entail three main areas. Firstly, the scope of the subject of consumer research has widened to include the study of topics that have not been previously considered within the realms of consumption theory (Maxwell, 1996; Mick, 1996). Secondly, research within the academic discipline of consumer behaviour has increasingly used qualitative research methods as a tool of inquiry (Denzin, 2001; Belk, et al., 1988; Thompson et al., 1989; Goulding, 1999). Thirdly, the changes within consumer research studies have led to the development of what can be considered as a loosely connected family of research practices and activities investigating consumption; these have become known as Consumer Culture Theory or CCT (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Some

academics view this apparent importance of consumption as being a specific aspect of postmodern society (Miller and Rose, 1997), or that postmodernism is a better construct to understand consumer theory (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). These perceived links have increased in importance to such an extent that consumption is now considered as vital to the postmodern view of identity (Belk, 1988; Cova, 1997; Maxwell, 1996; Woodruffe-Burton, 1998). This hypothesis was commented on by Miller and Rose (1997) in their work on consumption, when they stated that "many diagnoses of our 'postmodern' condition hinge on debates about consumption: has consumption replaced production as the key to the intelligibility of the present?". Extending this hypothesis they set the rhetorical question surrounding such a view: "have consumption sub-cultures replaced class, region, generation and gender as sources of interest and identification?" (Miller and Rose, 1997: 1).

CCT has therefore been located within the postmodern paradigm of consumer research. A definition of consumer culture theory (CCT) is: 'an interdisciplinary field that comprises of macro, interpretive, and critical approaches to and perspectives on consumer behavior' (Arnould & Thompson, 2007, p.xiii). Arnould and Thompson (2005) offer a synthesizing approach towards "the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption" by developing four interrelated thematic domains of interest and develop the viable "disciplinary brand" of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). They assess how CCT has contributed to consumer research by providing novel theorizations concerning these four thematic domains of research interest. This indicates that CCT is not

a unified, grand theory but it moves toward the study of cultural complexity since it refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings, as opposed to merely a psychological or economic view of consumer activities.

CCT views consumption as constantly formed by ongoing interactions within a dynamic socio-cultural context, and is “fundamentally concerned with the cultural meanings, sociohistoric influences, and social dynamics that shape consumer experiences and identities in the myriad messy contexts of everyday life” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 875). Examples of research within the CCT group are articles published in *The Journal of Consumer Research*, as depicted in Table 3-2.

Table 3-2: Examples of research within CCT

Context	Author(s)	Points of Theoretical Contribution
Five women and their favourite brands	Fournier, 1998	A social relationship model of consumer-brand relationships
Consumer lifestyle choices in a small town/rural setting	Holt, 1997	The role of consumption practices in sustaining symbolic boundaries between social groups, as formed by complex intersections of sociological collectivities
Western stock shows and rodeos	Penaloza, 2001	Consumers’ active process in the co-production of marketplace meanings and the role of commodified cultural

		myths in mediating marketplace relationships
Men's and women's experiences of fashion and body image	Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Murray, 2002	Consumers active use marketplace ideologies via resistance interpretations that play off ideological contradictions and paradoxes, and the ideological mapping of their identity projects via brand meanings and fashion styles
Thanksgiving dinners; ordinary family dinners	Heisley and Levy, 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991	Cultural rituals; construction, maintenance and negotiation of family relationships through consumption

The CCT approach has an interest in the operation and influence of 'consumer culture', as denoted by "a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 869).

CCT does not view individual consumers as making rational choices in the context of 'free' markets. Instead, it has drawn on the work of Bourdieu (1984), Foucault (1974) and others to examine the ideological context in which consumption takes place. That is, individual consuming subjects are viewed as operating within a cultural, economic and political frame that shapes and limits how we can think, feel and act in the contemporary

marketplace (e.g. Holt, 1997; Askegaard and Kjeldgaard, 2005; Fournier, 1998). As such, CCT tends to be associated with in-depth qualitative analyses of consumers' perspectives, as they "actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 871).

Having examined the development of CCT, there is a need to examine the relationship between culture and consumption as well as the concept of symbolic consumption and the importance that it holds for the construction of consumers' identity/-ies.

3.6.1 Culture and Consumption

Consumption choices cannot be understood without considering the cultural context in which they are made: culture is the 'prism' through which people view products and try to make sense of their own and other people's consumer behaviour.

According to McCracken (1986), culture, first, is the 'lens' through which the individual views phenomena; as such it determines how the phenomena will be apprehended and assimilated. Second, culture is the 'blueprint' of human activity, determining the coordinates of social action and productive activity, and specifying the behaviours and objects that issue from both. As a lens, culture determines how the world is seen. As a

blueprint, it determines how the world will be fashioned by human effort. In brief, culture constitutes the world by supplying it with meaning.

Consumption is shaped, driven, and controlled at every point by entirely cultural enterprise. The consumer goods on which consumers dedicate time, attention, and income are charged with cultural meaning. Consumers use the meaning of consumer goods in order to express cultural categories and values, develop ideals, create and sustain lifestyles, construct concepts of the self, and create (and survive) social changes; as Slater (1997) points out “consumption is a *meaningful* activity” (p. 131), further noting that “*all* consumption is cultural” (p. 132), a statement that signifies several things. First, all consumption is cultural due to the fact that “it always involves *meaning*” (Slater, 1997: 132): in order to ‘have a need’ and act on it people must be able to interpret sensations, experiences and situations and they must be able to make sense of (as well as transform) various objects, actions, resources in relation to these needs. At the very last, in order for an object to be ‘food’ it must undergo a cultural sifting of the ‘edible’ from the ‘inedible’, as well as cultural practices of transformation.

Secondly, consumption is always cultural due to the fact that the meanings involved are necessarily shared meanings. Individual preferences are themselves formed within cultures. This does not mean that all members of a culture are unanimous and uniform in their consumption (this is impossible, especially as all cultures involve differentials formulate people’s wealth and status). The point is that when people meaningfully

formulate their needs in relation to available resources, they draw on languages, values, rituals, habits and so on that are social in nature, even when they individually contest, reject or interpret them. This is clearly expressed in Arnould and Thompson's Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (2005), when they note that "rather than viewing culture as a fairly homogeneous system of collectively shared meanings, ways of life, and unifying values shared by a member of society (e.g. Americans share this kind of culture; Japanese share that kind of culture), CCT explores the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader sociohistoric frame of globalization and market capitalism" (p. 868-869).

Thirdly, all forms of consumption are culturally specific. They are articulated within, or in relation to, specific meaningful ways of life; for instance, no one eats 'food'; they eat a sandwich, sushi, pizza (and all these are not just 'eaten' but eaten for 'lunch', a 'snack', a 'school meal'). This happens also with needs: 'the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth', as Marx rather ethnocentrically puts it (1973: 92).

Finally, it is through culturally specific forms of consumption that people produce and reproduce cultures, social relations and indeed society. To be a member of a culture or 'way of life', as opposed to just 'staying alive', involves knowing the local codes of needs and things. By knowing and using the codes of consumption of my own culture for instance, I

reproduce and demonstrate my membership of a particular social order. Furthermore, I *act out* that membership. My identity as a member of a culture is enacted through the meaningful structure of my social actions – the fact that I do things in this way rather than that. Not only my identity, but the social relations themselves are reproduced through culturally specific consumption (and by changing or rejecting the consumption codes of my culture I negotiate both identity and aspects of the culture). For instance, it is evident that between a household that sits down to a 'family meal' every evening and one whose members 'graze' (individually raid the kitchen at random times during the day for food consumed in their own rooms while consuming their own TV or computer game), altogether different families and family relations are being reproduced.

Having examined how CCT has emerged in consumer research within the postmodern paradigm, and how consumption cannot be studied without the cultural context within which it is enacted, it is imperative to move on to the examination of the shift from the material to the symbolic, which is vital for the understanding of the construction of the self.

3.6.2 From Material to Symbol: Consumption of Clothes, Accessories, Decoration and Other Bodily Adornment within CCT

CCT has been mainly expressed as an understanding of the symbolic, of consumer meanings and discursive and linguistic constructions of

consumer activities. Therefore, it is vital to examine the shift from the material to the symbolic. Such a discussion is presented below.

Once a product's ability to satisfy mere physical need is transcended, then we enter the realm of the symbolic and it is symbolic meaning that is used in the search for the meaning of existence (Fromm, 1976). Fundamental to the postmodern theory is the proposition that consumers no longer consume products for their material utilities but consume symbolic meaning of those products as portrayed in their images: products in fact become commodity signs (Baudrillard, 1981). "The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions" (Debord, 1977) and the "addict buys images not things" (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994). The term 'symbol' itself can relate to the product that carries meaning or to the meaning it carries, and the interpretation of meaning is a complex product of what is contained in the representation and what the individual brings to the representation (LeVine, 1984). Symbolism can be analyzed semiotically by examination of the system of signs and what they signify; however, it has been realized that this leads to an infinite regress as one sign leads to another without there ever being anything 'real' outside the system (Elliott, 1999). All meaning is socially constructed and there is no essential external reference point, so ultimately 'there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, 1977).

Shopping is changing its nature (Campbell, 2004). The focus is moving from the purchase of provisions to satisfy an individual's physical needs towards the use of consumer goods as a distinctive way of acquiring and

expressing a sense of self-identity (Dittmar and Beatty, 1998), regulating emotions (Elliott, 1994a), or gaining social status (McCracken, 1990).

According to Elliott (1997), in the acquisition of products, self-expression is achieved in a twofold manner: “The functions of the symbolic meanings of products operate in two directions, outward in constructing the social world: social-symbolism, and inward towards constructing our self-identity: self-symbolism'' (Elliott, 1997: 2). When considering social-symbolism, Warde (1994) states that “…people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices they possess and display. They manipulate or manage appearances and thereby create and sustain a ‘self-identity’” (p. 878), further adding that “…consumption offers security to individuals by confirming their self-image” (Warde, 1994: 882). When discussing self-symbolism, Hirschman (1992) argues with the earlier ideas of Belk that (as cited in Hirschman, 1992) “…consumers extend their identities and sense of self by incorporating larger numbers and types of products within a sense of personal possession or control” (p. 175). Therefore, Thorstein Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption becomes an internalized marker of self-worth and a condition for external social acceptance and status. Veblen, whose work focused on the bourgeois leisure class, argued that the purchase and display of expensive commodities is an important means of establishing or demonstrating status in society (Veblen, 2003) (Veblen, [1899] 1953). While some consumption involves subsistence or physical comfort, most consumption, according to Veblen, is driven by the desire to make “invidious distinctions” (Veblen, [1899], 2003: 234). Property, in

short, serves as a basis of popular esteem, class differentiation, and self-respect (Veblen, [1899], 2003: 234).

Obviously, beyond the material utility and exchange value of products, consumption as process is about the enjoyment of products and the images they carry as commodity-signs, a creative engagement with the symbolic contents of a fantasy world. “What is important is not the material possessions themselves or the demonstration of wealth by their display, but the accumulation of ‘symbolic capital’ through the informational use of goods to demonstrate knowledge of the appropriate taste code” (Elliott, 1997: 2). This symbolic cultural capital is only partly expressed through the goods purchased, the remainder lies with the process of consumption. The consumer is in a continuous fluid state of being and becoming within “…the eternal triangle of shifting roles between the consumer, the consumed and consumption” (Kell et al., 1997: 4). In the postmodern era symbols and meanings continually shift (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) leading to unstable identities which can be disposed of and reconstructed at will (Kellner, 1992). In this sense, postmodern identities become fractured, highly fluid, however, in some regard, meanings, symbols and identities are still restrained by dominant capitalist and masculine values. Therefore, postmodernist identity construction through consumption allows for new possibilities, styles, models and forms but not the death of identity or free-floating symbolism (Kellner, 1992). Here the postmodern emphasis of ‘free’ choice may have to be problematized (Slater, 1997) “because social setting sets the framework for every choice” (Haanpaa, 2007: 484). In this respect, identity is seen, in line with Jackson (1999), as being

multiple yet contested and subject to regulatory frameworks of cultural norms and expectations, thereby recognizing the “embeddeness of identity in shifting constellations of relations and symbolic, institutional and material practices” (Valentine, 1999: 495). As a result, “people are guided to act in certain ways and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural [discourses]” (Somers, 1994: 614).

Therefore, endeavouring to create the self in contemporary society is inseparable from consumption (Elliott, 1997; Gabriel and Land, 1995; Gergen, 1991; White and Hellerich, 1998). As George Herbert Mead suggests, if people want to change their identity, they need to change their consumption habits in order to indicate to others that they have adopted a new identity, only then can they assume the new identity (Campbell, 1995: 112). Indeed, contemporary society is first and foremost a consumer culture – where people’s social life operates in the sphere of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Slater, 1997). That is, people’s “social arrangements in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets” (Slater, 1997: 8). Hence, consumption is central to the meaningful practice of people’s everyday life. In essence, it is appreciated that consumers use symbolic meanings to construct, maintain and express multiple identities (Woodruffe-Burton and Elliott, 2004), resulting in much consumption being compensatory in nature, as well as to locate

themselves in society (Elliott, 1994b, 1997; Kleine et al., 1995). What people consume can say a great deal of who they are: the car one drives, the neighborhood one lives in, the clothes one wears, and the leisure activities one pursues all serve as markers of one's identity (Jackson, 2005). There are a number of inferences about people which are affected by the goods and services that they presumably have selected (Belk et al., 1982). The most heavily researched of these cues is clothing. It has been found to affect reactions to people in a number of ways, including judgments of status (Douty, 1963; Lasswell and Parshall, 1961; Rosencranz, 1962), personality (Hamid, 1968; Gibbins and Schneider, 1980), demographic and lifestyle characteristics (Douty, 1962), attractiveness (Hamid 1972; Holman 1980), and attitudes toward social issues (Buckley and Roach 1974; Triandis, Loh and Levin 1966; Thomas 1973). In addition, observations have shown that subjects behave differently toward others depending upon the clothing, and other bodily adornment the others are wearing (Bickman 1971; Darley and Cooper 1972; Lefkowitz, Blake, and Mouton 1955; Suedfeld, Bochner, and Matas 1971; Wise 1974).

Therefore, in terms of shopping for these specific items more than any other, it could be argued, consumption becomes a means by which individuals choose and express identity; as Featherstone (1991a) points out "the modern individual within consumer culture is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes…which are to be read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste" (p. 86). Anthropologists such as Mary Douglas have long observed that goods tell stories and function

as a critical mode of communication within a culture (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978). In addition, as Bourdieu (1984) notes "consumption is…a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code" (p. 2). In anonymous urban environments, consumption behaviour provides a quick, readily observable, and increasingly important way to communicate (Paterson, 2006; Frank, 1985). Tim Jackson (2005) has summarized: "we consume in order to identify with a social group, to position ourselves within that group, to distinguish ourselves with respect to other social groups, to communicate allegiance to certain ideals, and to differentiate ourselves from certain other ideals" (p. 31).

In order to feel 'alive' in this saturated world (Gergen, 1991), people long for a sense of meaningfulness in their pursuit of 'being' (i.e. the self-creation project); and it seems that they can symbolically acquire it from their everyday consumption. All voluntary consumption appears to carry, either consciously or unconsciously, symbolic meanings. This means that if people have a choice, they will consume things that hold particular symbolic meanings (Wattanasuwan, 2005). These meanings may be idiosyncratic or commonly shared with others. For instance, using recycled envelopes may symbolize 'I care for the environment', going to classical concerts may represent ' I am cultured', supporting gay rights may signify 'I am open-minded', or even buying unbranded detergent may mean 'I am a clever consumer' (Wattanasuwan, 2005). Much literature proposes that people are what they have, since their material possessions are viewed as major parts of their extended selves (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992; James,

1892; Sartre, 1998). Material objects represent a system of meanings, through which individuals express themselves and communicate with others (Dittmar, 1992; Douglas and Isherwood, 1978; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; McCracken, 1988). Since all consumption holds some kind of expressive meaning, people endeavour to incorporate into self-creation project those meanings they aspire to, while struggling to resist those they find undesirable. Clearly, sometimes people avoid particular consumption in order to create, maintain and advance the self (Gould et al., 1997; Hogg and Michell, 1996). However, from a critical point of view, striving to create the self through consumption may also enslave people in the illusive world of consumption (Wattanasuwan, 2005).

3.6.2.1 The Construction of the Self through Symbolic Consumption

According to Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1978), identity is constituted through our relationship to the symbolic worlds in the consumer sphere. Consumer goods and identity are closely connected, and consumer goods are part of our self-representation (Goffman, 1959). Shopping can be interpreted as a quest for cultural objects that can be used in the process of constructing and presenting the self. Consumer goods can be seen as vehicles for who you are or would like to be, or as means to become part of the crowd by blending in (Simmel, 1971), since they are consumed not only for their functional benefits, but also as symbolic signifiers of taste, lifestyle and identity (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1991a; McCracken, 1990). The choices are countless, the nuances delicate and the risks of failure many (Lynne, 2000). Shopping

could be interpreted as looking for something new, learning about fashion and searching for something that will improve your appearance.

A substantial body of literature proposes that people forcefully appropriate symbolic meanings for their self-creation project stemming from consumer products (Dittmar, 1992; Douglas and Isherwood, 1978; Elliot, 1994b; McCracken, 1988). Gabriel and Lang (1995) state that "whether one is looking for happiness, identity, beauty, love, masculinity, youth, marital bliss or anything else, there is a commodity somewhere which guarantees to provide it" (p. 17). In addition, McCracken (1988) explains that products hold an important quality transcending their utilitarian traits or commercial value, that is, they have the ability to carry and communicate cultural meanings. Symbolically, people exploit these meanings in order to create cultural notions of the self, to acquire and sustain lifestyles, to demonstrate social connection and to promote or accommodate changes in both the self and society (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996; McCracken, 1988). To put it simply, people consume these cultural meanings in order to 'live' in this culturally constituted world.

Indeed, consumption is a major source of symbolic meanings with which people implement and sustain their project of the self. In their everyday life, individuals employ consumption symbolism in order to create and communicate their self-concepts, in addition to identifying their associations with others (Dittmar, 1992; Elliott, 1997; Wallendorf and Arnold, 1988). Nevertheless, consumption symbolism is not a constant or intrinsic element; rather it is "socially constructed and there is no essential

external reference point" (Elliott, 1997: 286). McCracken (1988) notes that consumption symbolism is always in transit given that it is "constantly flowing to and from its several locations in the social world, aided by the collective and individual efforts of designers, producers, advertisers and consumers" (p. 71). Especially in contemporary world, the more society is saturated with signs and images, which marketers create in their marketing campaigns in order to entice consumers, the more those signs and images are disconnected from what they refer to (i.e. products), and the more malleable and diverse consumption symbolism becomes (Brown, 1995; Baudrillard, 1998; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Consumption symbolism eventually becomes negotiable and is subject to never-ending interpretations (Baudrillard, 1998; Elliott, 1997). Therefore, people keenly look for symbolic resources in order to help them negotiate, interpret, and appropriate meaningfulness in their mundane consumption. Due to the fact that product symbolism is not absolute, static and unique, people can playfully mix-and-match consumption choices in order to aestheticize their self-creation project. This means that they re-appropriate and re-contextualize consumption meanings in order to create lifestyles that allow them to experience comfort, excitement, emotional nourishment and ultimately pleasure (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). In fact, contemporary society is where consumption unfolds in the realm of enticement – where products become objects of desire and fantasy (Baudrillard, 1998; Bauman, 1992; Bourdieu, 1984; Elliott, 1997). The body project emerges large here (Wattanasuwan, 2005). Located in the heart of the construction of the self, the body becomes a consumption site on which people work in

order to pursue salvation (Baudrillard, 1998). People consume numerous products and services in order to construct their body images in a way that match their self-concepts. Nevertheless, beyond its image, the body is eventually a symbolic site for socialization (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995).

Fundamental to the construction of the self in contemporary society is the making of consumption choices that can facilitate the self in socialization, in particular to position itself in diverse social contexts. Gergen (1991) argues that “it is not the world of fashion that drives the customer into a costly parade of continuous renewal, but the postmodern customer who seeks means of ‘being’ in an ever-shifting multiplicity of social contexts” (p. 155). In essence, people make consumption choices in order to accommodate their changeable lifestyle (Wattanasuwan, 2005). As Dittmar (1992) points out “by buying goods, we magically acquire a different persona” (p. 2). For instance, a lawyer can easily be another person if he/she wishes to, by wearing a leather outfit instead of his/her formal suit and riding a Harley-Davidson instead of driving his/her Mercedes. In fact, consumption is a symbolic ground where individuals choose an assortment of the self, allowing them to exercise freedom through the consumption choices that they make (Bauman, 1988). As individuals try to forge a practice of freedom through techniques of the self (Foucault, 1988), they pursue a never-ending making of consumption choices (Giddens, 1991). People engage in the pursuit of consumption symbolism constantly in order to make sense of their lives and advance their construction of the self.

The next section is going to present how material possessions are associated with the act of consumption. Moreover, the attachment that people form to material possessions is going to be presented along with how this attachment evolves to be part of the extended self.

3.6.2.2 Material Possessions and the Self

In trying to understand modern consumption decisions, Dittmar (1992) describes a 'symbolic communicational' link through which the symbolic meanings of material possessions communicate aspects of their owner's identity to themselves and to others. Ger and Belk (1996) similarly note that consumption is a "communicative act crucial to the constitution of self" (p. 295). Moreover, O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002) state that "consumers seek 'positional' goods to demonstrate group membership, to identify themselves and mark their position" (p. 531). Therefore, the symbolic meanings of possessions can be essential in expressing not only one's own identity and membership of social groups, but also in perceiving the identity of others (Belk, 1988; Christopher and Schlenker, 2004; Dittmar, 1992; Solomon, 1983). Lury (1996) states that material possessions are "a means of making visible and stable the basic categories by which we classify people in society" (p. 13). Material possessions can therefore symbolize and communicate not only the personal qualities of an individual but also his or her group membership, social status and social position (Dittmar, 1992; O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Material objects, in this regard, embody a system of meanings, which, upon consumption, can be used by individuals as an outward

expression of their identity, and as a means of signifying group membership and identification (McCracken, 1988; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Douglas (1997) further argues that consumers define themselves in contrast to others; they identify themselves in terms of what they are not. As a result, individuals use consumption to give themselves a sense of belonging as well as an affinity with others who make similar statements to, and about, themselves. In this respect, as Moynagh and Worsley (2002) state "shopping is a struggle to define not what one is, but what one is not" (p. 294).

3.6.2.2.1 To Have is To Be

Sartre (1998) maintains that 'being' and 'having' are intimately intertwined. Ontologically, without 'having', 'being' cannot be realized. He asserts that "the bond of possession is an internal bond of being" (p. 588). Basically, Sartre states that we come to know who we are through what we possess. We acquire, create, sustain and present a sense of existential self by observing our possessions. The ability 'to see' is crucial here. Sartre (1998) even expands this point to the extent that "to see it is already to possess it. In itself it is already apprehended by sight as a symbol of being" (p. 581). Thus, by seeing a beautiful beach, we are able to obtain a sense of possessing that sight beach, and then accordingly incorporating it into our sense of 'being'. This conception illuminates how we obtain a feeling of being 'alive' just through 'window shopping'. The notion of 'to have it so be' is also affirmed by Belk (1988) and Dittmar (1992). Exploring the formula, "I am = what I have and what I consume" (Fromm, 1976: 36),

Dittmar (1992) elaborates: “material possessions have socially constituted meanings…this symbolic dimension of material objects plays an important role for the owner’s identity. …This suggests that material social reality is an integral, pervasive aspect of everyday social life, of constructing ourselves and others” (p. 204-206).

Belk (1988) further examines the intimate relationship between ‘having’ and ‘being’ by approaching possessions as the extended self. This perspective is also acknowledged by James (1892): “a man’s Me is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account” (p. 177). Conceivably, we incorporate whatever we perceive as ‘ours’ into our selves. Sartre (1998) explicates that things or people become a part of our extended self as long as we hold a sense what we have created, controlled or known them. Indeed, to be able to create, control or know anything, we need to invest ‘psychic energy’ such as effort, time and attention in it; and this energy has not grown or emerged from anywhere else but the self (Csikszentmihalyi and Richnerg-Halton, 1981). As a result, the self symbolically extends into possessions. As extension of the self, our possessions not only enable us to realize who we are but also to accommodate our self-transitions and to achieve or to dispose our sense of continuity from the past (Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1988). They symbolize “personal archive or museum that allows us to reflect on our histories and how we have changed” (Belk, 1988: 159). Moreover, they also help us to envisage our possible selves. Certainly, our

material possessions hold a capacity to keep our life narratives going. They sustain consumption symbolism that we embrace in our self-creation project. This includes symbolic meanings that we have acquired from consumption experience of intangible products. For example, photographs and souvenirs from the place we visited hold meanings of our travelling experience to that place. Douglas and Isherwood (1978) remark that without material object, meanings are inclined to drift or eventually disappear.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that a particular object holds a particular intrinsic meaning. An object may carry a varied range of meanings since the creation of meaning is not deterministic and unidirectional, and each individual may ascribe different and inconsistent cultural meanings to an object depending on the extent to which they share the collective imagination (Ritson et al., 1996). Csikszentmihalyi and Richnerg-Halton, (1981) further elaborate that since objects are "signs, objectified forms of psychic energy", they become "meaningful only as part of a communicative sign process and are active ingredients of that process" (p. 173). That is, the symbolic meanings of possessions emerge in the dialectical transaction processes between possessors and objects. Perceptibly, symbolism attached to an object signifies am owner's image, and vice versa. "Once Rolex watches, real or fake, are seen worn on the wrist of any taxi driver, the meaning carried by them becomes plastic" (Gabriel and Lang, 1995: 62). Although there are relative symbolic meanings embedding in all material objects, each object alone may not be able to tell a meaningful life story, rather it communicates together with

other objects in order to express an integral narrative of the self (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978; McCracken, 1988; Solomon and Assael, 1987). A Sony stereo playing a classical compact disc tells a different story about its owner from a Sony stereo playing a pop album. Presumably, by acquiring a new object into or discarding an old one from our possessions, we are able to ascertain, continue or alter the narratives of our selves (Kleine et al., 1995). By the same token, adding or abandoning one object may lead to adding and/or abandoning more objects in an attempt to complete a new episode of the narrative self. This includes an alteration of the body. Acquiring a new haircut may lead to altering our wardrobe and vice versa.

3.6.2.2.2 Not To Have is To Be

In addition to ‘what we endeavor to have’, ‘what we try not to have’ is also significant for our sense of self (Hogg and Michell, 1996; Gould et al., 1997). Creating a particular lifestyle for the self may involve disassociation from some other lifestyles. Thus, our self-creation project may engage in consumption resistance – that is abandonment, avoidance, or aversion of particular consumption (Hogg and Michell, 1996). In order to achieve a new identity, we often need to forsake the old ones. In doing so, we commonly abandon some possessions that are associated with the old self. For example, an actor discards his cowboy boots to wash away his regional image; a woman throws away a necklace given by her old boyfriend to break off her extended self to him (or his extended self to

her); a teenage girl rejects her ‘once favorite’ Barbie backpack to symbolize her grown-up self (Wattanasuwan, 2005).

Avoidance and aversion involve relative resistance to particular consumption choices. This includes several forms of negations: asceticism, altruism, boycott or deferred gratification (Gould et al., 1997). A committed Muslim refuses to consume alcohol to maintain his/her religious self; a man avoids using his favorite after-shave in favor of his wife’s favorite brand; a Greenpeace member refuses to buy genetically modified food to maintain his/her environmentally friendly stance; and a doctoral student abstains from going to a cinema during his/her write-up in order to finish his/her degree (Wattanasuwan, 2005). Consumption resistance also entails opposing consumption choices that symbolize associations with particular social groups. This can be related to the concept of the refusal of taste (Bourdieu, 1984) or the idea of ‘guilt by association’. Evidently, a businessman declines a particular brand of cigarette which is widely consumed by workers, or a woman refuses to wear a pair of Doc Marten’s boots which represent a lesbian’s dress code (Wattanasuwan, 2005). In fact, all these forms of consumption resistance can be regarded as crucial parts of our symbolic project of the self. Again, it is essential to keep in mind that, like the role of consumption in the self-creation processes, consumption resistance may also be temporal and contextual.

3.6.2.2.3 To Have is To Be Enslaved

While consumption provides us symbolic meanings to create the self and identity, at the same time it may enchain us to the illusive sense of self and the endless realm of consumption. Consequently, from a critical point of view, to have is to be enslaved (Wattanasuwan, 2005).

"If I am what I have and if what I have is lost, who then am I?" (Fromm, 1976: 76). To Fromm (1976), attempt to acquire a sense of 'being' through 'having' unavoidably comes with the threat to losing it since 'having' may not be permanent. Instead, he proposes we should realize the self by sharing, giving and sacrificing. Evidently, 'to have' ironically leads us to be enslaved – we become a slave of our own possessions (Fromm, 1976). Once a man has acquired a sports car, he may spend a lot of time cleaning and grooming it. Apparently, we become imprisoned (i.e. commodified) in the world of goods (Giddens, 1991). Faurschou (1987) comments: "[Postmodernity is]…no longer an age in which bodies produce commodities, but where commodities produce bodies: bodies for aerobics, bodies for sport cars, bodies for vacations, bodies for Pepsi, for Coke, and of course, bodies for fashion – total bodies – a total look. The colonization of the body as its own production/consumption machine in late capitalism is a fundamental theme of contemporary socialization" (p. 82).

In fact, the belief that we can exercise our freedom through consumption choices seems to be an illusion. Indeed, "we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose" (Giddens, 1991: 81). Moreover, Elliott (1994a) argues that

immediate pleasure derived from consumption experience may enslave us in the realm of addictive consumption. Gergen (1991) also expresses his hesitation about consumption freedom when he notes: “Yet this same freedom ironically leads to a form of enslavement. Each new desire places its demands and reduces one’s liberties. …Liberation becomes a swirling vertigo of demands. Daily life has become a sea of drowning demands, and there is no shore in sight. …Yet as Buddhists have long been aware, to desire is simultaneously to become a slave of the desire” (p. 74-75). Through consumption people choose and express their identity/-ies; every consumption act tells a story about the individual and the various belongings (and dis-belongings) being negotiated by that individual.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has located the study of the consumer culture of online worlds within consumer research and the wider social sciences. It has investigated the developments in consumer research, highlighting how consumption has changed from needs to desires. Moreover, it examined how understanding consumption has been conceptualized and positioned within consumer research firstly as ‘postmodernism’ and secondly, within that paradigm as ‘consumer culture theory’, with the latter having contributed to consumer research by illuminating the cultural dimensions of consumption, addressing the socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption. Furthermore, it has been exemplified that consumption is central to the creation and maintenance of the consumer’s personal and social world and has now become a means of

self realization and identification, due to the fact that consumers no longer merely consume products; they consume the symbolic meaning imbued in these products, which is the image, having led to the emergence of imaginary consumption, where the irruption of the sign dominates. Individuals engage in the pursuit of symbolic consumption, particularly of clothes and other bodily adornments continually in order to make sense of their lives vis-à-vis their significant 'others' and advance their construction of the self, employing their creative imaginative powers in order to create mental images, which they consume for the intrinsic pleasure they offer. Therefore, contemporary consumption can be conceptualized as a game, only loosely regulated and framed by the rules of a diverse and ever-changing marketplace. However, from a critical point of view, striving to create the self through consumption practices also enslaves people in the illusive world of consumption. This highlights that consumption has an essentially paradoxical nature and to understand consumption in specific cultural sites requires an analysis of the careful negotiation of these paradoxes through consumption. It can be argued that VWs like SL provide a fertile arena for examining and theorising consumer culture in terms of the negotiation of these paradoxes as already discussed. There are few financial or physical boundaries in SL and it can therefore be conceptualized as a space of hyperconsumption. Examining and theorising the consumption choices relating to the extended self and other imposed boundaries and binaries structuring consumption itself.

The current chapter and the next chapter are linked and in the next chapter the researcher is going to deal more specifically with theories of

identity that might help her to theorize the “avatar-as-consumer” as well as the virtual materiality of the avatar within SL.

Chapter 4 : THEORISING CONSUMER IDENTITY AND THE "AVATAR-AS-CONSUMER"

4.1 Introduction

Chapter two outlined the background, history and key terms related to the study of VWs, and chapter three located a study of the consumer culture of online worlds within consumer research and the wider social sciences. Following on from this, this chapter will focus upon the possible theorisation of the study of the consumption of clothing, accessories and bodily adornment within VWs through an examination of theories of consumer identity and how the virtual materiality of the "avatar-as-consumer" might be theorised. Through these three chapters the scene will be set for the interpretive research and the analysis that follows. In this chapter, ontological commitments to the theorisation of the consumption of clothing, accessories and bodily adornment within SL relating to the construction of consumer identity will be made in order to provide a basis for the theoretical contribution of the thesis. In order to do this, as the central issue for this research is to examine and theorise consumer identity construction within the online VW, identity theories are examined broadly, and then with specific regard to the theorisation the "avatar-as-consumer" within online contexts.

In recent years questions of 'identity' have reached a notable centrality within the human and social sciences (Hall, 1997a). It is an ambiguous and slippery term. It has been used - and perhaps overused – in many

different contexts and for many different purposes (Buckingham, 2008). Although 'identity' employs different connotations depending upon the context within which it is deployed, one thing at least appears relatively clear; 'identity' has reached its contemporary centrality both theoretically and substantively because that, to which it is held to refer is considered in some sense as being more contingent, fragile and incomplete and therefore more adjustable to reconstitution than was previously thought possible (du Gay et al, 2000).

The fundamental paradox of identity is inherent in the term itself. Originated from the Latin root idem, which means "the same", the term however entails both similarity and difference (Buckingham, 2008). On the one hand, identity is the "me" that is "the same" that is, a descriptor unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent over time (Cerulo, 1997b). On the other hand, identity also entails a relationship with a wider collective or social group of some kind, we are "the same" with others, for instance, when we talk about national identity, class, cultural/ethnic identity, or gender identity (Appiah and Gates, 1995).

For some time consumption has been seen as important to the concept of identity (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Beck and Beck-Gernshiem, 2002; Kellner, 1992; Valentine, 1999; Wattanasuwan and Elliott, 1999; Starr, 2004; Wilska, 2002; Brusdal and Lavik, 2008). Since consumption choices can signal particular identities to the broader social world, people's tastes – the products they choose to buy, attitudes they profess, and preferences they hold – can act as signals of identity, communicating

useful information to others (Bourdieu, 1984; Wernerfelt, 1990). People do not buy products only for their functional attributes, but also for what they represent (Levy, 1959). Therefore, consumers use products to construct and express desired identities (Belk, 1988; Escalas and Bettman, 2003, 2005; Kleine et al., 1993) and people infer aspects about others based on their purchasing decisions (Calder and Burnkrant, 1977; Belk et al., 1982; Holman, 1981b). Tastes and preferences can act as markers of social groups (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978) and signal a user's other preferences (Solomon, 1988; Solomon and Assael, 1987).

However, various authors have suggested that the flow and circulation of products in contemporary societies now make it more complicated to interpret the communication of meanings, identities and status through consumption due to the breakdown of definitive categories of class, gender, ethnicity and age (Craik, 1994; Edwards, 2000; Eicher, 1995; Featherstone, 1991a; Giddens, 1991; Maffesoli, 1996) and the multiplicities and complexities of identity construction. The theoretical vista with regard to identity has therefore changed, developed and increased in complexity. This chapter will seek to give a map to this vista, locating and outlining the specific research and theory on online identity construction within its broader context.

4.2 Identity in the Age of the Internet

As has already been discussed, more than any other medium, CMC challenges the conventional relationship between physical context and

social situation. When people sign on to the Internet they are no longer in 'their physical locus' but they are relocated in a 'generalized elsewhere' of remote places and 'non-local' people (Jewkes and Sharp, 2003). Cyberspace is thought to be both a public and private space, leading individuals toward a new community: "global, local, and everything in between" (Jones, 1995: 13). Moreover, cyberspace is a repository for collective cultural memory: it is "sacred and profane, it is workplace and leisure space, it is battleground and a nirvana, it is real and it is virtual, it is ontological and phenomenological" (Fernback, 1997: 37). In order to begin the theorization of "avatar-as-consumer" an understanding firstly of the progress of user identity within online contexts is required.

The Internet is a unique tool that offers its users the opportunity to present, invent and reinvent themselves. Discourses about identity appeared to be a key part of the contemporary realm of Internet research. Identity is considered not inherent or fixed by biological or psychological predispositions; rather, it is "multidimensional and amorphous; we can be whoever, whatever, wherever we wish to be" (Jewkes and Sharp, 2003: 2). As Turkle (1995) notes, cyberspace enables the formation of an identity that is "so fluid and multiple that it strains the very limits of the notion" (p. 12). Often, a dichotomy is set up between the physical world and the virtual world: "the physical world is a place where the identity and position of the people you communicate with are well known, fixed and highly visual. In cyberspace, everyone is in the dark. We can only exchange words with each other – no glances or shrugs or ironic smiles.

Even the nuances of voice and intonation are stripped away. On the top of the technology-imposed constraints, we, who populate cyberspace deliberately, experiment with fracturing traditional notions of identity" (McLaughlin et al, 1995: 93).

As described by Turkle (1995), the anonymity provided on the Internet, and consequently in virtual life, offers individuals ample room for exploration and experimentation with different versions of self, most notably with the constructions and the reconstructions of self that are intrinsic to postmodern life. Furthermore, the Internet provides a fertile medium for the growth of multiple realities and multiple identities (Turkle, 1995; Jones, 1995). Given the ample room for self-presentation, invention and experimentation that cyberspace opens up for, it is claimed that cyberself (or online self) includes attributes that embody "difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation" as opposed to the offline self (Turkle, 1995: 185). Nevertheless, the vast amount of research conducted on online identity reveals diverse viewpoints on the notion of the virtual self; some supporting, other conflicting. Some scientists believe that web users, specifically with regard to MUDers, indulge their fantasies without fearing the consequences that would follow in the offline world due to the fact that the variety of acceptable expression and behaviour in MUDs far surpasses that in the mundane world (Wertheim, 1999). On the other hand, Wertheim argues that online environments do not offer choices of selfhood absent in the offline world. In common with the ontological commitments of their work, other scholars claim that online self

is likely to be regarded as an extension of the offline self due to the fact that "for most people, internet use enhances, extends, and supplements what they do offline" (Rainie 2004: xiii, as cited in Robinson, 2007: 102). On the contrary, multiple self-ing online is in no way different from "the chameleon-like behavior" that people may exhibit in the real world (Robinson, 2007: 100).

This section examined how the Internet is a unique tool, which offers its users the opportunity to experiment with and explore different identities, by inventing and reinventing themselves, providing a fertile medium for the growth of multiple realities and multiple identities. The section that follows discusses how online identity scholarship has been developed into three key phases.

4.2.1 History of Online Identity Scholarship

Conceptualizing online identity has been a central part of cyberculture scholarship throughout the history of the field. In fact, writers, researchers and scholars have been fascinated by how self-expression may change as it moves from a face-to-face interaction to an interaction through a telephone line or a fiber-optic cable. For instance, both Marshall McLuhan (1964) and Neil Postman (1985) wrote about the shift from a literate culture to one mediated by television, and how the presentation of information changed as the medium through which the information was transmitted changed. Similarly, these concerns are applicable to the Internet and CMC, as issues of identity and self-representation have been

brought to the forefront of cyberculture studies due to the increased interactivity and creative potential of the web.

Silver (2000: 19-30) divides the promising field of cyberculture studies into three key phases of development: popular cyberculture, cyberculture studies, and critical cyberculture studies (Table 4-1).

Table 4-1: Three key phases to the development of cyberculture studies

Popular Cyberspace	Cyberculture Studies	Critical Cyberculture Studies
• 1980s • journalistic origins • descriptive • Internet-as-frontier • 'limited dualism': 'either dystopian rants or utopian raves'	• mid 1990s • more academic and less journalistic • considerable amount of work on identity • Sherry Turkle, Howard Rheingold, and Allucquere Rosanne Stone, Julian Dibbell • focus on virtual communities and online identities • empowerment, creativity and community • user-friendly Internet service providers	• second half of 1990s • broader view of what constitutes cyberculture • cyberspace seen a chaotic entity and difficult to map

The first phase, popular cyberculture, is marked by its journalistic origins and is characterized by its descriptive nature, and by its construction of the Internet-as-frontier. Even though the works that compose this phase continue to be historically pertinent, for the most part they endure what Silver calls a "limited dualism" and can be expressed as either "dystopian

rants or utopian raves" (Jones, 1997; Kinney, 1996; Kling, 1996; Rosenzweig, 1999). From one side, cultural critics blamed the Net for deteriorating literacy, political and economic alienation, and social fragmentation. For instance, Birkerts (1994), among others, warned that the Internet, hypertext and a host of electronic technologies would generate declining literacy and a less than grounded sense of reality. On the other hand, a vocal group of writers, investors and politicians loosely referred to as the technofuturists declared cyberspace a new frontier of civilization, a digital domain that could and would bring down big business, foster democratic participation, and end economic and social inequities.

It is not until the second phase, cyberculture studies, where a considerable amount of work on identity can be found, illustrated by writers like Sherry Turkle, Howard Rheingold, and Allucquere Rosanne Stone. By the mid 1990s, cyberculture studies was well underway, mainly focused on virtual communities and online identities. Moreover, as a result of the enthusiasm found in the work of Rheingold (1993) and Turkle (1995), cyberculture was often articulated as a site of empowerment, an online space reserved for construction, creativity and community, with the growing popularity of user-friendly Internet service providers such as AOL and CompuServe and the widespread adoption of Netscape facilitating it (Silver, 2000).

As revealed in the last few paragraphs, the difference between the first and the second phases is far from absolute. The third stage that follows is critical cyberculture studies, mainly developed in the second half of 1990s. By the late 1990s, due to the dozens of monographs, edited volumes and

anthologies devoted to the growing field of cyberculture, scholars take a broader view of what constitutes cyberculture (Silver, 2000). In this stage, the field is no longer limited to merely virtual communities and online identities. As with all emerging fields of study, the landscape and contours of critical cyberculture studies are, at best, chaotic and difficult to map, which means that instead of approaching cyberspace as an entity to describe, contemporary cyberculture scholars view it as an entity to "contextualize and … offer more complex, more problematized findings" (Silver, 2000).

Having explored the three key phases to the development of cyberculture studies, we need to move on to the identity construction process that individuals go through and the challenges that they meet when they enter an online community, which is described in the next section.

4.2.2 Digital Identity in Cyberspace: Being Online

As Benedikt (1991) states, cyberspace is considered to be "a new universe, a parallel universe created and sustained by the world's computers and communication lines. A world in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments, and alter-human agency takes on form: sights, sounds, presences never seen on the surface of the earth blossoming in a vast electronic night" (p.1). But who are we in this online cultural milieu? Are we the same person as we are in person or someone a bit different? Or someone totally different? In this respect, an interesting characteristic of cyberspace is that it offers a lot

of opportunities to individuals to present themselves in a variety of ways; individuals can alter their style just slightly or even indulge in wild experiments with their identity by changing their age, physical appearance, their personality, their lifestyle and even their gender (Suler, 2002).

Virtual environments open the door to new identity experiences. Entering a VW, where the real traits (both physical and personal) are not straightforwardly evident to others is, from a psychological point of view, a way of communicating, which entails new ways of being, of conveying and negotiating identities at stake. This gives individuals the opportunity to experience different self or selves and therefore to construct and communicate new identities.

Cultural psychology (Cole, 1998) emphasizes the significance of studying communities as the activity systems where meanings are co-constructed, as the 'place' where meanings are built and negotiated among members. From this perspective, the participants' positioning can be seen not only as an individual move, but also as a phenomenon that is both context shaped and context renewing (Schegloff, 1992). This entails that each participant decides what to portray about him/her self in that specific context, but also that the context itself plays a dynamic role in directing and modeling the possible choices.

The first thing that people do when entering an online community is to adopt personae and play with identities and multiple roles, as the possibilities of meeting others are infinite along the Information Highway. The username people choose, the details they indicate about themselves

and the details that they omit, the information presented on their personal web page, the persona or avatar by which they represent themselves in an online community - all are significant aspects of how people manage their identity in cyberspace (Suler, 2002), which offer interesting facets in achieving a better understanding about the notion of cyberself. In this context, Agger (2004) firmly states that “The virtual self composes himself in daily e-mail, Web surfing, chatting, cell phoning, faxing. It is a postmodern self less stable and centered than the self of previous modernities…Yet, at the same time, the Internet opens up a new world of self-creation, storytelling, global communities, interactive instantaneity…The Internet also requires a new sociology, a virtual one, that uses electronic media and composes itself differently, more publicly” (p. 146).

In cyberspace though, the performance of identity is distant from a direct interaction with these cues, and therefore, is thoroughly dependent upon the texts we create in the VWs (Joinson, 2003). Accordingly, “these texts are multiple layers through which we mediate the self” and the words we speak, the avatars we adopt to represent us and the numerous linguistic variations on language we employ to create a full digital presence (Tomas: 2007: 5). Language is said to play a vital role in online performance, and as Robinson (2007) notes “online performance takes place through the language used in messages and postings that are rich sources of expressions ‘given’ off” (p. 106). The choice that the Internet users have about what to reveal and what to hide about themselves and how to do it, gives them the opportunity to craft an identity that exists quite apart from

the usual pressures of the real world identity and impressions management. This even provides them with the chance to express parts of the self that they have found necessary to repress or efface in the offline world (Suler, 2002).

Donath (1999) insists "one can have, some claim, as many electronic personae as one has time and energy to create" (Donath, 1999: 29). In spite of that though, the Internet seems to be akin to the 'strangers on the train' phenomenon, where people seem willing to disclose details about their lives to strangers, since cyberspace enables individuals to express oneself and behave in ways not available in one's usual social sphere, firstly, due to the fact that one is free of the expectations and constraints placed on individuals by those who know them, and secondly, because the costs, risks and consequences of social sanction for what they say or do are greatly reduced (Bargh et al, 2002). However, the fact that there is greater control over self-presentation in online settings does not necessarily lead to misrepresentation online. Due to the "passing stranger" effect (Rubin, 1975) and the visual anonymity present in CMC (Joinson, 2001), under certain conditions the online medium may enable participants to express themselves more freely than in face-to-face contexts. While the norms of online interaction may be different from their counterparts, given the limitations of CMC, the self-ing process remains the same. Online self is claimed to emerge through social interaction in which the self masters the ability to be both the subject and object of interaction (Robinson, 2007). In Goffmanian terms, homepages, blogs, forums, as well as online diaries allow the 'I' to present the self to the cyberother, which presumes

the expectation of the virtual ‘generalized other’. The cyber ‘I’ constructs such pages with expressions given by choosing text, photos, and digital formatting with the other’s reaction in mind. Once the ‘I’ perceives the cyberother’s reaction, this reflexive constitution produces the ‘cyberme’ (Robinson, 2007). In the online world, there are no physical interactional cues as in face-to-face interaction. Therefore, online users employ text to send and receive signals that mimic the structure of expressions ‘given’ and ‘given off’ in the offline world. The success of the performances that users conduct online depends on the literacy in terms of site or community language that the cyberperformer must acquire. In various online spaces, the so-called emoticons offer a plethora of symbols that reduce the interactional signals to a single visual cue embedded in the text. Moreover, in terms of ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’, online instant messaging, for instance, allows multiple conversations with multiple parties to occur at the same time. This thereby, enables the creation of multiple back-stages that are invisible to other participants, a practice less feasible in face-to-face social interaction.

Having examined the notion of identity in cyberspace, the next section moves on to the issue of deception versus plurality of selves, where a discussion about what is perceived as deceit and what as multiplicity of selves is presented along with an examination of the notion of authenticity and how it can be applied to the postmodern, non-essential, flexible notion of the self.

4.2.3 Identity in Virtual Communities

The concept of identity plays a key role in virtual communities. In face to face interactions, identity is structured around visual clues, as both parties have physical presence. In this sense, the potential for identity play is limited. However, in online communication, which is the main activity of the disembodied virtual environment, identity is ambiguous, since many of the basic cues about personality and social role that we are accustomed to in the physical world are absent (Donath, 1999).

In the physical world there is an innate unity of the self due to the fact that the body offers a convincing and convenient definition of identity. The common-sense norm is: one body, one identity. Even though the self may be multifaceted and changeable over time and situation, the body offers a stabilizing anchor, as Sartre (1996) notes in 'Being and Nothingness' "I am my body to the extent I am" (p.326). However, the VW is different. The inhabitants of VWs are diffuse, freed from the body's unifying anchor. One has the opportunity to construct as many digital self-representations as they want. But who is this 'one'? It is the embodied self, the body that is synonymous with identity, the body at the keyboard (Donath, 1999). This means that the two worlds (the virtual and the physical) are not really disconnected. Although one person can construct multiple digital selves that are linked only by their common creator, that link, while invisible in the VW, is of great importance. Some of the multiple identities can be a true reflection of the self, others may be misleading and probably an exaggeration of the self, while some take on a different form. Donath

(1999) asks the questions "what is the relationship among the multiple digital selves that share a single creator? Do virtual self-representations inherit qualities, and responsibilities of their creators?" (p. 29-30). These kinds of questions bring a new approach to ancient inquiries into the relationship between the self and the body. Virtual communities are rapidly growing and their participants come across these questions as basic issues in their mundane existence, since in order for the reliability and trustworthiness of information about a confidant to be assessed, identity is necessary.

Moving on from the prior discussions in Chapter 2 and directly relating to theories of identity, the next section will discuss some issues arising regarding identity deception in cyberspace.

4.2.3.1 Identity Deception

Deception is part of life and the Internet is just a new, powerful tool for its practice. Deception is the act of hiding the real and showing the false; the deliberate change of identity to promote a desired outcome or to reach an end, a personal objective (Matusitz, 2005). The definition of deception puts emphasis on a second party that is involved, where the web user is deliberately trying to create deception in order to promote a desired outcome. Thus, the definition does not include self-deception, the act of deluding oneself by creating illusory ideas, or one's intention to use mental models to interpret things in an individual way (Matusitz, 2005), which can be applied in the VW. Many forms of identity deception in cyberspace are "acts of omission, rather than commission" (Donath, 1999: 52); they

involve a sort of concealment. Therefore, identity in cyberspace presents itself as a material symbol; symbols are conventional signs that have the ability to be phony and to deceive us.

Internet has changed the way people communicate and interact, and has added an element of mistrust by enabling false and misleading identities to flourish. The processes of presenting one's self and viewing others can now take place in a virtual world where participants' profile and digital self-representation is all they have to present themselves for people to interpret. Light untruths and blatant lies, mainly on the looks of the avatar, has become, if not granted, necessary in a virtual environment in order to constitute an online persona that is approachable (Fiore, 2008).

Deception of identity can impact the relationship from the beginning, obliging the performer to continue acting out the false identity. There may be many reasons for identity deception from an attempted or intended fraud to a lack of self confidence and social issues, as identity is directly related to the individual, making it difficult to create a completely disconnected online persona (Aguiton and Cardon, 2007). A deceptive identity may be the product of the creator presenting 'ideal selves' (Blair et al, 2009) the way they wish to be viewed and interpreted by others. In VWs communication and interaction happens in real time, which allows for a blurring of the boundaries when it comes to what is considered real and what is virtual and consequently, the question 'what can be counted as 'real' in a virtual space' remains (Turkle, 1994: 160). People can be absorbed by the reality of the identities they have constructed in a virtual

environment. This can be illustrated by the statement ‘this is more real than my real life’, said by a character who turns out to be a man playing a woman who is pretending to be a man (Turkle, 1994: 158).

Everything that presents itself as a material symbol (in this instance identity in cyberspace) is necessarily subject to the suspicion that it is phony and that we are dealing with a deception. On the Internet, no one knows that the web user is a nymphomaniac, a neo-nazi, or a killer (Matusitz, 2005). This comes as not a surprise, as we have to do with a world which encourages the creation of identity and the intrusion of another’s imagined reality. But, is the creation of different selves in virtual environments a deception or just plurality of selves? This issue is going to be discussed in the next section.

4.2.3.2 Deception or Plurality of Selves?

Masks and non-disclosures of identity are part of the nature of cyberspace. Nevertheless, deception on the Internet is not always acknowledged per se, by the receiver or the sender of the message. For instance, Turkle (1997a) argues that human beings are not deceptive online if only because they do not really become someone else, but what they actually do is split their identities into real life and online parts. An individual’s identity, she contends, “is the sum of his or her distributed presence” (p.1101). The self no longer simply plays different roles in different settings. Rather, the self exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time (Turkle, 1997).

Having multiple identities in cyberspace is not a deception but an extension of the range of the selves that are available. Turkle (1995) argues that the Internet makes tangible the postmodern condition of multiple, fragmented identities by claiming that on the Internet individuals self-fashion and self-create, and thus are able to “build a self by cycling through many selves” (p.178). From this critical point of view, there is an extension rather than a different order of existence due to the fact that identity is “something complex and decentred” (Turkle, 1995: 20), as well as dispersed and multiplied in constant instability (Poster, 1990). This is the reason why we should refer to ‘alterity’ instead of difference. The belief that individuals are unitary is itself an illusion (Turkle, 1997b). Turkle further extends her argument against deceptive identities in online communities by describing the reality of virtual life: “the idea that you are constituted by and through language is not an abstract idea if you’re confronted with the necessity of creating a character in a MUD. You just do it. Your words are your deeds, your words are your body. And you feel these word-deeds quite viscerally” (p. 307).

Apart from this view however, where multiple identities in cyberspace is not perceived as a deception but as an extension of the range of the selves that are available, there is another view which focuses on intentional deception of members of the online community. In this case, there are members that deliberately mislead other members by giving false information about offline truths, for instance, lying about their age, their gender, whereabouts etc. Each virtual community has its own expectations regarding honesty and identity performance. In the VW of SL

for instance, deception involves misleading other members regarding one's offline identity, at least the basic information about their life, i.e. age, gender, marital status, etc. Second Lifers expect their fellow residents to be honest about their identity, because as Kendall (2002) notes "people expect consistency of identity in others and may need such consistency in order to build trust" (p. 113). However, some are spaces intended for role-playing games whereas others are more geared towards social interaction without the explicit adoption of roles (Kendall, 2002: 122). For instance, in a role-playing group, the avatar user which has no connection to offline life is not considered a deception. To put it another way, the creation of an online identity is not by itself an act of deception. The context in which that identity is created determines whether the user is deceiving others or not.

Deleuze (1995) claims that the virtual has its own world and its own reality; it has a full reality by itself. As a spaceless, timeless and bodiless presence, cyberspace "is not so much parallel to the real world as an increasingly significant dimension within it" (McRae, 1997: 73). Magic and fantasy become real. Actually, "the very definition of the real has become: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction" (Baudrillard, 1983: 146). Nowadays, virtual reality has become 'real life' and the activities that the participants take part in are taken just as seriously as real life activities. As McRae (1997) notes, virtual reality "has become so immediate that what constitutes 'the real' is called into question" (p. 74).

The above paragraphs make clear that the boundaries between the virtual and the real are blurred and that cyberspace is a myth with its own reality

and its own space. At this point it can be claimed that no virtual participants exist 'in real' since virtual subjects are only attributes named by the individuals behind them. This means that the virtual participant becomes a symbol, a virtual subject of a VW that is nevertheless always linked to a body. Therefore, deceptive identities can be performed. Contrary to Turkle's claims, the paragraphs above assume that in cyberspace individuals do not have multiple selves, but only one self, one identity that is mutilated and broken into conventional signs. In fact, as individuals interact and communicate on the Internet, they have to decompose themselves as a collection of signs in order to send a message. This collection of signs may either convey aspects of one's personality or be a complete fabrication.

The question, this work suggests, between authenticity/non authenticity, real and false selves rests upon the insurmountable issue of the body in the net vs. the physical body. Research on CMC already demonstrates that users themselves constantly revisit this question in their discussions of and understandings of their own activities in cyberspace and therefore a stance must be taken which tries to go beyond the body in the net/physical body binary. Taking the "avatar-as-consumer" as the central figure in this research does not dodge the question but seeks to understand the oscillations between how identity construction is understood by participants vis-à-vis this binary through consumption of visual constructions of the avatar, like clothes, accessories, bodily adornments, etc.

Having investigated the concept of identity in online communities in general, the next section is going to specifically focus on the construction of identity/-ies in the virtual world of Second Life.

4.3 Identity in the Virtual World of Second Life

In online communities, where individuals can easily interact with each other, each member makes scenes unfold and dreams come to life. Therefore, participating in a virtual community, like Second Life, is both similar to and different from reading a book or watching television. As long as reading a book is concerned, there is text, but on virtual communities it unfolds in real time and the participant becomes an author of the story. Regarding television, participants are engaged with what the screen shows, but VWs are interactive and participants can take control of the action (Turkle, 1995). Similar to acting, the explicit task in online communities is to construct a viable mask or persona; a digital self-representation. Whether, or how close this can be to the participants' "real" self, their "authenticity" to "the real" non online person, is not an issue, neither is it a concern over whether they are being deceptive or not these are questions of essentialism and dependent upon the real/virtual binary. How the articulations of identity within the VW are wrought is important.

Even though in communication it is vital to be aware of the identity of those with whom we communicate, in order to understand and evaluate an interaction, web users, like actors on stage (Goffman, 1969), are often

performers, intentionally changing their identity. This means that a virtual community can become a context for discovering who one is or who they would wish to be. In this way, “virtual environments are laboratories for the construction of identity” (Turkle, 1995: 184).

In fact, one of the features that the Internet possesses is that it has been linked with freedom of self-invention, such as intentional gender swapping. Moreover, the media provides a range of stars and icons from whom web users can easily borrow bits and pieces of public persona when communicating in cyberspace. Web users create a real/imaginary self, a bricolage of ethnicity, religion, language, civil status, historical affiliation, or lifestyle. Re-imaging/imagining ourselves, what Turkle (1995) calls “reconstruction of self” through technology, seems like an empowering concept. The fact that web users are able to reinvent their selves in cyberspace proposes that identity is a quality of the human psyche, which determines how people reveal themselves to others (Matusitz, 2005). Web users can construct, embody, and reveal any one of a range of possible social identities, depending on the situation.

4.3.1 The Crisis of the Modern Self

Scholars such as Charles Taylor (1989) and Anthony Giddens (1991) treated the modern self as a reflexive entity. The notion of the self as a distinct individual became possible due to the fact that reflexivity stimulated a sense of autonomy for the re-imagination of roles. According to Giddens (1991), reflexivity is a concept of enormous significance for

seizing the construction of personal and social life. Reflexivity can be defined as a self-defining process that depends upon monitoring of, and reflection upon, psychological and social information about possible trajectories of life. Such information about the self and the world is not simply incidental to contemporary cultural life; it is in fact constitutive of what individuals do and how they do it (Elliott, 2001).

For Taylor (1989), self-exploration was considered fundamental for reflecting on the meaning of the self. By exploring one's self, each person was apparently able to draw out hidden features that made him/her unique. Self-exploration was considered to offer an expressive way to display the latent dimensions of individual existence. It could change a person's self-definitions and relationships with others. Reflexivity offered the condition for the modern self to explore its own being and pursue what it thought befitted its desires and aspirations (Lee, 2002). Freedom was the aptitude to perform self-analysis in order to actualize personal visions of new beginnings, new hopes and new identities. The reflexive nature of self-inquiry and self-examination entailed the modern explosion of knowledge in all fields of human endeavour. Knowledge was treated as inseparable from the dynamics of self-exploration, which means that each new discovery reflexively led to other viewpoints that expanded the horizon of empirical understanding (Lee, 2002).

However, the sense of confidence ascertained by self-exploration failed to become established as the source of certainty for self-understanding. Reflexivity created an impermanence of knowledge thus weakening the

stability of self-identity. Even though each act of self-exploration improved self-awareness, it also triggered forces of change in the self. Giddens (1991) mentioned this point in brief when he said “The chronic entry of knowledge into the circumstances of action [the self] analyses or describes creates a set of uncertainties to add to the circular and fallible character of post-traditional claims to knowledge” (p.28). Due to the fact that the reflexivity of the modern self is by nature elliptical, it is inevitable that the uncertainty generated by new knowledge puts an enormous pressure on the self to continually reassess its own construction. This raises the question of authenticity ‘can we be true to our own selves when reflexive knowledge is persistently transforming our sense of being?’, which has become very important to the meaning of the modern self.

The crisis of the modern self indicates that there is doubt about ontology. The opportunity that the self has to change dramatically over time in an age of excess increases the scepticism of self-identity as an unbreakable whole. If reflexivity leads to a constant re-examination of the self, then self-identity is vulnerable to fragmentation and limitless innovation. Kenneth Gergen (1991) highlighted that “technologies of social saturation are central to the contemporary erasure of the self” (p.49). In a situation where individuals are constantly exposed to new information, new knowledge and new experiences only partial identities are possible. The latter implies the interpretation of roles which may not be necessarily related. The combination of identities and roles that are not essentially integrated reflects an emerging social context saturated with novelty and

suffused by information (Gergen, 1991). This is a context that has been described as postmodern (Lyotard, 1984; Foster, 1985).

The postmodern self is freed from the fixed relationship between nominal identity and social roles. As Løvlie notes, the postmodernist “does not go for identity but for the manifold and equivocal” (1992: 119). Freedom is found not in the quest for authenticity but in the interplay of multiple roles that signify the openness of all meanings. The self is no longer defined as a consistent accumulation of attitudes and perceptions strung together by the power of reason; neither is behaviour necessarily considered an outcome of clear intentions. The postmodern self rejects the policing action of social institutions and pre-existing social scripts. The identity of the postmodern self does not have a centre (Lee, 2002). Sarup (1996) described such an identity as “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash …[and] not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each observer in each period” (p.25-26).

A fragmented self seems to have emerged from the crisis of the modern self. Are we made up of bits and pieces of this and that? Is identity nothing more than an illusion of socialization or a fiction of ontology? (Lee, 2002). It is hard to imagine a self without an integrated identity, a “subject in process” that is “constructed in and through language” (Sarup, 1996: 47). However, this is what self and identity mean in postmodernism, a movement that belittles closure and completion. Due to linguistic relativity, the self cannot sustain a solid identity but has to defer to the arbitrariness

of all conversational interactions. Therefore, the self appears fragmented as a consequence of the fluidity of speech (Lee, 2002).

Yet, reflexivity does allow some level of rational control over the construction of the self. The latter is not completely at the mercy of the arbitrariness of speech. Individuals can still exercise choice in self-presentation, even though choice is defined by a 'multiphrenic condition' (Gergen, 1991: 49) that empowers all types of innovation. When reflexivity intermeshes with innovation, it is more suitable to address changes in the self as a fractalization of identity (Lee, 2002). The idea of fractalization comes from Jean Baudrillard (1993: 5-6), who treats postmodern culture as the 'radiation of values' or the 'pure contiguity of values'. Hence, fractalization of identity reflects patterns of value rearrangements that exhibit the mixing of all reference points. For instance, the introduction of global culture has created a unique situation in which tradition becomes a foundation for experimentation. Individuals are able to combine elements of tradition and modernity in order to create unique patterns of identity that do not necessarily add up to a conventional role package. Cohen and Kennedy (2000: 346) gave an example of one young British man who was fascinated by traditional Chinese martial arts and Jackie Chan movies and who transformed himself into a Cantonese pop singer. His new identity is not perceived as a conflict of values but a fractalization of different cultural elements. This example concerns the details of fractal identity in the physical world. Since the individual is consciously aware of syncretizing values and their effects, voluntariness of such identity in the physical world is taken for granted. This can also be

applied in virtual environments where individuals are conscious of their actions and choices. In VWs the syncretising of values has in a way direct association with the waking self, since both the real person and the virtual persona have conscious control over inventing/reinventing his/her identity and there might be influences over one another. The difference is that in the virtual environment individuals do not have to consider the possible consequences of their actions and choices regarding the refashioning of their identity, since there is freedom of choices and the norms and morals in these environments are totally different from those in the physical world.

Having explored how identity is constructed online, there is a need to investigate how the construction of online identity is related and linked to the enactment of consumption, since the central issue of this research is to examine and theorise consumer identity construction within the online VW.

4.4 Linking Online Identity Construction to Consumption

The Internet and other online multiple or Multi-User Domains (MUDs), such as online games, discussion groups and VWs (Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995), are regarded, according to Fischer et al. (1996), as a “set of services to be consumed”. Some writers have characterized such consumption as a particularly telling example of the postmodern, meaning that it is more fluid, symbol-oriented, and consumer-controlled than previous conceptions of it allowed (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Turkle,

1995). For instance, people may assume various identities on the Internet as an act of consumption. Consumers in online environments are free to choose – with very little sense of enduring commitment - from a wide range of cultural narratives and identities so that they can become the person they want to be at the moment of self-construction, as well as invent and reinvent the self and be someone else or something else anytime they feel like it. Consumption can be a self-defining and self-expressive behaviour. People often choose products and brands that are self-relevant and communicate a given identity (Schau and Gilly, 2003). Therefore, the act of consumption in online environments serves to produce a desired self through the images and styles that are conveyed through one's possessions (Belk 1988). While modern self-identity had been defined by the pursuits of labor and tradition, the postmodern one is an ongoing consumption project continuously in flux and in flight from the past and the status quo (McCracken, 1987). In this way consumers make their identities tangible, or self-present, by associating themselves with material objects and places. Although consumer researchers have included symbols and signs in the set of objects and materiality they study (Mick, 1986) these symbols often refer to physical objects or places. With the advent of new technology, Computer-mediated Environments (CMEs) have emerged, allowing VWs in which consumers can present themselves using digital rather than physical referents.

Through CMEs, consumers have increased access to semiotic tools, cultural artifacts, and modes of expression (Appadurai, 1996). Druckery (1996: 12) proclaims that CMEs “collapse the border between material and

immaterial, the real and the possible," rendering these distinctions irrelevant. Similarly, Rifkin (2000) asserts that, as these distinctions erode, imagination has greater value than physical capital.

A great deal of thought in both the social sciences and humanities has been devoted to what has been characterized as the age of postmodernity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one main theme is that postmodernity, which places emphasis on hyperreal spectacle and signification rather than 'real experience' is liberatory for the consumer and frees him/her to construct his/her own symbolic world (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). They also indicate that their liberatory perspective stands in opposition to Baudrillard's (1981) pessimistic view which asserts that consumers lose their sense of identity and purpose in such postmodern hyperreality. Instead, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) find that "postmodernism creates arenas of consumption that are fluid and nontotalizing, which means that consumers are free to engage in multiple experiences without making commitments to any…The consumer finds his/her liberatory potential in subverting the market rather than being seduced by it" (p. 251).

Computer mediation may be seen as a form of hyperreality, an aspect of postmodernity in which media-mediated 'reality' seems more real, vivid and intense than 'real life' and in which simulation and the assumption of new/different identities and identitifications may be rampant (Baudrillard, 1983; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). As Firat and Venkatesh (1995) note "…postmodern technologies are viewed as communication tools that

permit movement in cyberspaces, virtual realities, and computer-mediated environments” (p. 253).

Poster (1995) refers to these developments as creating new forms of identities and new symbols of communication and consumption. In his earlier work (Poster, 1990) he identified them collectively as "the mode of information," as opposed to the "mode of production" (the paradigm of modernity). The postmodern nature of the new technologies becomes apparent as one sees in them the intensification of the hyperreal, the unraveling of power hierarchies (e.g., via the internet), the reempowerment of the consumer, and the fragmentation of cultural and social spaces (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

The postmodern consumer is an optimistic theoretical construction, due to the fact that it implies that each of us can select identities at will from the catalog of cultural images-identities that can be "worn" and then discarded, free from any sense of anxiety or uncertainty (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995).

In contradistinction to the use of online services, Thompson and Hirschman (1995) studied the body which in everyday life is numbingly hard to escape. Consumers fear that a person's ‘essential’ nature (i.e., spirit, mind, selfhood) remains trapped in a material body fully subject to the forces of nature. However, unlike everyday life where the body is visible (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994), online environments are already disembodied and the individual’s physical body, as well as other characteristics, may be held secret and anonymous. Therefore there

appears to be ample room for trying on new multiple identities than there is in the physical world. What is characterized as postmodern seems to be more plausible and tacitly, if not explicitly, understood in such virtual environments than in others. Indeed, the Internet in general, and SL in particular, are phenomena of the hyperreal environment that itself is a foundation of postmodern theory and discourse (Baudrillard, 1983; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

The possibility for creating and recreating online identity/-ies reflects a liminoid state in which an individual may assume varying identities that contrast sharply with his/her 'real life self' (Tambyah, 1996). These include changing aspects of the self online (multiple selves), and creating illusions (e.g. gender bending; having different personalities online and offline; being 'thin, rich and beautiful online' when one may not otherwise be). These online consumer identities may remain just that and thus are viewed as being in the realm of fantasy. But the great temptation for many people is to more conventionally and relationally tangibilize and express their own identities, as well as to confirm and verify others' identities by moving through stages beyond fantasy to meeting each other, if not always in person, then through phone calls and video or photograph exchange.

Consumers also often engage in a parallel quest for authenticity and often reject made-up selves that contrasting postmodern thought emphasizes (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). As Vattimo (1992) notes, we live in a world that is a continuous making of the present, especially through electronic

media. What is experienced momentarily becomes the real, and the construction of this condition and its intensification constitute the hyperreal. When this simulated reality captures the imagination of a community, its members begin to behave in ways that authenticate the simulation so that it becomes the social reality of the community (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). For instance, consider a consumer that chooses a virtual identity that is totally inconsistent with his/her identity in the physical world. This would require a lot of psychological effort in order to keep up this artificial identity, and especially in the case where the difference between the virtual identity and the identity in the physical world is large, such as in the case of gender-swapping. In this kind of situation, two options are feasible. An individual may try to converge both identities towards the physical world one, which entails that the virtual identity becomes more and more authentic or honest. Nevertheless, more likely, and as indicated by Turkle (1995), is another alternative: to just toss the avatar and create a new one. When one avatar outlives its psychological usefulness, it is simply discarded (Junglas et al, 2007). So, the question that arises here is how authentic/inauthentic are online identities? However, there is no clear answer for this question as the question itself is wrong; if identity is performed separately from fixed bodily attributes, then who one is or who one can be is not constrained by traits of their physical body but rather relies on their imagination of using tools of representation. Hence, the body itself is freed, through avatars or imagination and fantasy, from its conventional shapes, genders, colours, boundaries. This entails that cyberspace has come to be understood as a sensible deconstruction

of essentialism. In online environments, social identity becomes ever more performative to the degree that ‘real’ bodies are not capable of acting as anchor, essence, guarantor, container of a ‘true’ or ‘real’ self (Slater, 1998). As a result, as the idea of essential self has been reconfigured to something more flexible and mutable.

Given all of the above, within SL there exists a state of hyperreal consumption (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) with few boundaries besides those set by the skill, imagination and intelligence of the user. This provides a useful context to research the boundaries and categories that emerge from within such a seemingly “free” space. In order to do so this thesis will focus upon what has been argued as the most self/other defining set of consumption practices, those relating to the adornment of the body, the “avatar”, such as fashion, clothing, accessories and other bodily adornments including “look” through the construction of the avatar itself.

The notion of body has long been an interest for consumer researchers. Their main interest however, evolved around the corporeal body as a tool for self-presentation and socialization (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995) and as a project that modern consumers work on (Featherstone et al, 1991; Schouten, 1991). In almost all cultures, the aesthetic notions of the body are central to one’s identity (Joy and Sherry, 2003) and some researchers have found a linkage between consumer choices and identity-based motivation (Oyserman, 2009; Shavitt et al., 2009).

In the physical world, people interact, communicate and act through their corporeal bodies and they are judged by them and engage in the world through them. Avatars function in the same way in VWs. The only difference is that in a VW like SL one can change his/her appearance with a click of a button, like changing clothes. Unlike the physical world, Second Lifers are not stuck with the body that they are given, but can remake or create their body in any way they wish, by accessorizing it, changing clothes or decorating it with various bodily adornments, like tattoos, make-up, body-piercing, jewellery, hair ornaments, etc in order to portray a desired identity. This is very important given that fashion (clothes, body ornaments etc.) is described as a second skin (Rudd and Lennon, 2001; Shim et al., 1991). Fashion can be viewed as the mediator between the body and the outside world. We can be anyone we want to be, as Featherstone (1991a) notes, with the choice of our clothes, accessories etc. And yet the body itself, even when it is naked, is nuanced by symbolic meaning. The whole identity project, the performance of self (Goffman, 1959), is already at work with the body itself. Baudrillard's (1998) discussion of the body could easily be mistaken as a discussion of fashion. The body is 'objectivized' (p. 131), represented as fetish, as a 'forum of signs' (p. 133). When his discussion turns to fitness, the body, like fashion, can be designed, trimmed and 'watched over, reduced and mortified for "aesthetic" ends' (p. 142).

Recent advancement in new media technologies has augmented the text-based communication on the Internet with voice and later with visual aspects, such as avatars, photos, videos, and the like. Therefore,

consumers had the opportunity to manipulate signs and to play with the symbols of the VWs, in the form of text as well as in the form of images.

Contemporary consumers live in a visual culture that is full of signs and symbols. As a result, as Venkatesh (1999) notes, the visual is replacing the textual as the cultural order with the emergence of new media technologies and communications. All actions are symbolic to some degree and consequently they provoke meanings that allow symbolic participation in fantasy, narrative, and code (Alexander, 2004). The visual culture that we live in, has made the construction of who one is, a shorter-time project than was previously possible. The ability that individuals have to construct numerous bodily selves has driven modern consumers to start perceiving their body not as a means of communicating and interacting with others but as an experience itself.

As a result, body concepts and corporal representations are also important in VWs. In the contemporary information society, the Internet has introduced a new way for people to communicate, since relationships and exchanges gradually become more fluid due to the fact that individuals can perform temporal roles or convey multiple selves based on a variety of experiences. As Nguyen and Alexander (1996) point out, visual representation of one's physical self is achieved through the manipulation of digital images, due to the emergent semiotic potential of VWs, like SL. Consequently, digital images facilitate consumers' desire for physicality with the non-physicality of cyberspace in symbolic forms. Reid (1996) suggests that "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" (p.328). This results in the construction of the body in these VWs being more fluid and as Cavallaro (1998) points out "a body that is fluid and fragmented may sound like fun. If the body is not a fixed 'thing' but many possible 'bits' of things, the opportunities for play and experiment become virtually endless" (p.13). To put it another way, when individuals are freed from the limitations of the physical body, they playfully engage in new forms of self-presentation and symbols are turned into personal expressions (Schau and Gilly, 2003). In VWs these new forms of self-presentation come with the use and crafting of the avatar body. Through these avatar bodies, virtual materiality emerges, as they form consumers' experience of embodied presence in VWs, driven by the imagination of the consumer, what Bosnak (2007) terms 'embodied imagination' and Bachelard (1983) 'material imagination'.

The concept of virtual materiality is akin to Haraway's (1985) concept of the 'cyborg'. The 'cyborg' concept relates to the fusion of the machine and the human. Haraway argues for the 'cyborg' as a postmodern, strategic metaphor that can be used as a political and theoretical tool. Her metaphor of the 'cyborg' as one of restructuring the way in which we view the 'other', the fusion of different elements into a new way to envision the world (Haraway, 1991), is particularly suited to the Internet. The cyborg subject is firmly constructed in order to avoid not only oppositional dualisms that mark certain groups/subjects as Others, but the essentializing consequences of identity politics. According to Haraway

(1985) 'cyborg' is "a consequence of the breakdown in clean distinctions between organism and machine" (p.151). It is being employed here as a figure with which to explore the negotiations of the structuring binaries fundamental to common sense notions of the self by users. So rather than imposing these structuring binaries to users' behaviours, virtual materiality instead examines how users negotiate these through intensely personal and self constructed consumption practices of clothes, accessories, decoration, bodily adornments and 'look'.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the possible theorisation of the study of consumption of clothing, accessories and bodily adornment within VWs through an examination of theories of consumer identity and tried to theorize the virtual materiality of the "avatar-as-consumer".

As has already been discussed, with the recent advancement of new media technologies consumers had the opportunity to manipulate signs and to play with the symbols of the VWs entailing a visual culture that is full of signs and symbols, where the visual is replacing the textual, introducing new ways for people to communicate and new forms of self-presentation, freed from the limitations of the physical body. In SL residents present themselves through an avatar body, as has already been mentioned, providing them a sense of embodied presence entailing the emergence of virtual materiality.

Therefore, this thesis puts the “avatar-as-consumer” figure in the centre of its attention, taking a position that goes beyond the body in the net/ the physical body binary through the participants’ understanding and negotiation of this binary relating to the consumption of clothes, accessories, bodily adornments and ‘look’ resulting in the construction of their identity in SL.

Chapter 5 : METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction

Due to the advent of new technologies, the emergence of the computer culture, and the fact that technologically mediated communication is being incorporated into ever more aspects of daily life (Clegg, 2004; Mann and Stewart, 2000; Vayreda et al., 2002; Whitty, 2002, 2003, 2004), consumer researchers are constantly concerned about the global interconnectedness of today's world and the social relations that it involves. In fact, the ever-increasing pace and evermore ubiquitous nature of social media increasingly embeds participants in various online social networking services (Tikkanen et al., 2009) and moves contemporary consumers' lives towards online worlds and global information networks. Thus, it is important to provide a better understanding of these new 'translocal' sites, which are not bounded by geographical, spatial or temporal proximity and their communion is innately connected with the possibilities provided by online computer-networking (Rokka, 2010), sustaining their sociality through shared 'cultural practices' (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006; Rokka and Moisander, 2009)

Indeed, due to the proliferation of web technologies and online environments, such as online/virtual communities, online social networks, chat rooms, discussions forums, virtual multi-user game worlds and blogs (Kozinets, 2002b; 2006a; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Zwick and Dholakia, 2008), the production of consumer culture has undergone a dramatic

transformation. Being highly interactive and participatory these online environments give rise to a specific logic of consumer culture in which chameleon-like, globally spread and emotionally connected consumer collectives play a central role (Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Cova and Cova, 2002; Cova et al., 2007; Rokka and Moisander, 2009; Moisander et al., 2010).

Due to the centrality that these online environments occupy in our daily lives, online research methodologies have gained a growing interest among consumer researchers trying to seize complex and fast-paced online cultural production (Rokka, 2010). As a result, researchers are faced with a variety of important methodological questions, with their focus being on new forms of postmodern and sub-cultural consumer collectives and cultures (Rokka, 2010). As far as the current approaches in the stream of cultural consumer research are concerned (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Moisander and Valtonen, 2006), it is necessary that we, consumer researchers, better understand the contemporary marketplace cultures from various perspectives, especially those mapping the communal forms of affinity, such as consumption-oriented sub-cultures (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kates, 2002), youth cultures (Hodkinson and Deicke, 2005), fan collectives (Kozinets, 2001), brand enthusiasts (Schau, et al., 2009; Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder, 2008), virtual/online communities (De Valck, 2005; De Valck et al., 2009) and new neo-tribal realities (Cooper, et al., 2005; Cova and Cova, 2002; Cova et al., 2007; Maffesoli, 1988/1996). Along with these current tendencies, a growing number of researchers have adopted post-modern

neo-tribal approaches to study online tribes (Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Cova and Pace, 2006; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Cova et al., 2007) and applied sub-cultural frameworks of interpretation (Kozinets, 1997, 2001) in their theorizing.

Recent empirical studies have stressed the significance of topics like online consumer empowerment (Rokka and Moisander, 2009), co-creation and creativity (Bonsu and Darmody, 2008; Schau et al., 2009), and collective innovation and consumer collaboration (Kozinets et al., 2008). Fundamental to these accounts is the notion that collective forms of consumption are rapidly spreading into online CMEs requiring new Internet-adapted approaches and methodologies for their study (Rokka, 2010).

Moreover, even though cultural consumer research (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) has otherwise been keen on theorizing various aspects of globalizing marketplace cultures, media flows and brandscapes (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Firat, 1997; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Canniford, 2005; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006), Internet-based online environments and consumer communities have received relatively little attention as particular sites or locales of global cultural production. At this point it is worth clarifying that this does not mean that the globalizing 'mediaspace' (Appadurai, 1990, 1996) has not been understood as a key vehicle in the contemporary cultural production. After all, consumer culture is often conceptualized in this stream as a "densely woven network of global connections and extensions through

which local cultures are increasingly interpenetrated by forces of transnational capital and the global mediascape" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 869).

All the aforementioned call for more attention to the transnational dynamics of online cultural production and new modes of research. Therefore, this chapter examines how, due to the emergence of new information technologies and the proliferation of online communities, consumer researchers are faced with a range of important methodological questions, bringing in the forefront the need to better understand these new translocal sites. As a result of that, netnography (Kozinets, 1998) has emerged as the most appropriate and beneficial methodology for consumer researchers to utilize, since it seems to provide them with new opportunities and new avenues for research on the ever globalizing and tribalizing consumer culture (Tikkanen et al., 2009; Rokka and Moisander, 2009; Rokka, 2010; Kozinets, 2001; Moisander et al., 2010)

5.1.1 Research Methodology Adopted: Ethnography/ Netnography

Ethnography is the study and systematic recording of human cultures (Hine, 2000). The sustained presence of the ethnographer in the field setting, combined with intensive engagement with the everyday life of the participants supports an exploratory approach in a way for instance textual analysis does not (Hine, 2000). As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) point out "the ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily

lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned" (p. 2).

According to Hine (2000), ethnography provides a profound description of a phenomenon and helps to understand how people interpret the world without relying on a priori hypotheses. Nevertheless, computer technology has now challenged the need of ethnographers to physically travel for face-to-face interactions (Hine 2000).

At this point, it is worth mentioning that ethnographic methods have been constantly modified in order to suit particular fields of scholarship, research questions, research sites, research preferences, and cultural groups (MacLaran and Catterall, 2002). During the past two decades marketing researchers have reported their experiences of online research adding to the current substantial body of methodological work on online surveys, opinion polls and focus groups (Grossnickle and Raskin, 2000). Due to the emergence of cultures and communities through online communications, and consequently the growth of online marketing research the emphasis seems to be on recreating old methods rather than thinking about how the Internet might lead to the creation of new methods (Shea and LeBourveau, 2000), suggesting that ethnographers must alter their research techniques in order to accommodate these social changes (Garcia et al., 2009). Therefore, there is a need for consumer researchers to better understand these online communities and their consumer

networks so that new avenues for research on the ever globalizing and tribalizing consumer culture to be able to open up.

Indeed, in the field of cultural consumer research (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Moisander and Valtonen, 2006), netnographic inquiry, originally proposed by Robert V. Kozinets (1997, 1998, 2002b, 2006a), has been extremely successful in advancing our understanding and knowledge about the online cultures. Therefore, the researcher's approach to the exploratory study of the VW of SL is grounded on netnography.

Netnography emerged from anthropological understanding of culture and adapts ethnographic methods in order to study cyber cultures such as personal websites, online/virtual communities, discussions forums, chat rooms and blogs (Kozinets, 2006a).

Using netnography has several advantages due to its focus on investigating consumer and marketing behaviours in their natural settings and contexts instead of using experimental scenarios (Hine, 2000). Netnography is a research method rooted in cyberculture literature (Manovich, 2003; Robin and Webster, 1999), which defined cyberculture as a culture that has emerged from the use of computer networks for communication, entertainment, or business. It is a "qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through CMCs" (Kozinets, 2002b: 65). The aim of the researcher in this approach is to gain an "insider's perspective" – faithful to the perspectives of the participants – in the online field site she is studying and then to produce a 'thick

description', a written account of this 'other' culture (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006), which is the VW of SL.

Nevertheless, instead of directly observing people, netnography is conducted in online or virtual communities; it is an application of ethnographic methods to study online cultures. Following common ethnographic principles, netnography is both a process and product of online research (Kozinets, 2002b, 2006a). In this way, our concepts of place and space that are constitutive of the way in which we operate in the 'real world' are grafted onto the Internet and its use, as 'the concept of the field site is brought into question' (Hine, 2000: 64). A further issue is that ethnography entails participant observation, but in cyberspace what is the ethnographer observing and in what is he/she participating? (Bryman, 2004). In addition, as far as online interviews are concerned, the issue arising is the lack of individual identifiers and body language, so 'who exactly am I speaking to?' (Kozinets, 2010).

As already argued, this research project does not aim at finding out about the 'real' people behind the avatars. Hence, the ultimate unit of analysis is not the person but the behaviour or the act, focusing on culturally and socially instituted 'ways of doing and saying'. The inquiry focuses on consumption practices (observable in the VW) and meanings (constructed by consumers) attached to them. Due to the trasnational nature of these translocal online communities social phenomena need to be studied and analyzed through the field of practices, and not, for instance, by analyzing individuals or groups of individuals as 'units' of analysis. Actions are

embedded in practices and therefore constitute individuals and social groups (Schatzki, 2001). As a result, the central idea in this practice-oriented approach is that it treats practices as the site of the social and thus a specific context where, and apart of which, market-place cultures are produced and formed.

The core interest of this research is constituted by the social reality as constructed and lived in SL. While an informant's offline identity might be forged, his or her construction of meaning does not exist in separation from the person who constructed them. It always reflects one of the possible realities in which they function.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) note that in traditional ethnography "it is a distinctive feature of social research that the 'objects' it studies are in fact 'subjects', and themselves produce accounts of their world" (p. 105). At this point it is worth mentioning that netnography entails taking seriously the accounts of the world produced by technological subjects. The alternation which is required is between a world on which humans and machines are unproblematically distinct and recognizable, and one in which the two categories blur in a plethora of indeterminate texts (Hine, 2000). As it becomes harder to distinguish what is a human effect and what is a machine text, and the limits of truth and deception are stretched, the ethnographer too must play a part in these social developments, and the social study itself is transformed. Possibly this transformation occurs in a direction already heralded by analysts of postmodern culture – our assumptions of our ability to tell a kind of truth about the world are brought

into question (Hine, 2000). All constructions of 'reality' and 'authenticity', practicality and even 'adequacy' and 'holism' are, however, in ethnography and elsewhere, socially constructed, contextually determined, and contingent upon standards that we deem or do not deem to accept (Kozinets, 2010).

In terms of expending time making choices about fieldnotes, arranging personal introductions, travelling to and from sites, transcribing interview and handwritten fieldnote data, and so on, netnography is far less time consuming and resource intensive. This makes methods of netnography less time consuming and elaborate than traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2006b). The goal of netnography is to identify and understand consumers' needs and the influences on their decisions on the Internet (Kozinets, 2002b). It allows the researcher to study the conversation on the Internet in a real social context (Puri, 2007). Netnography differs from traditional ethnography in that the conversation is computer mediated, public, written, and often anonymous (Kozinets, 2002b). The strength of netnography is its particularistic ties to specific online consumer groups and the revelatory depth of their online communications. Due to the fact that it is both naturalistic and unobtrusive - a unique combination not found in any other marketing research method – netnography allows continuing access to informants in a particular online social situation. This access may offer important opportunities for consumer-researcher and consumer-marketer relationships (Kozinets, 2006b).

5.1.2 Research Methods Adopted

In a practice-oriented approach creative, multi-modal and multi-sited methods can be applied. As Kozinets (2006a) notes, netnography is, in essence, a multi-method. It is up to the researcher to decide what methodological means would be most appropriate and beneficial, depending on the aim and the objectives of the research study. The following section concerns the data collection method adopted in the current thesis.

5.1.2.1 Data Collection Method Adopted: Triangulation of Ethnographic Evidence

Throughout the current research investigation, the researcher examined the data from a holistic perspective. That is, the extended presence in the field allowed the netnographer to obtain many kinds of data that together could create a complete picture of Second Lifers' lived experiences which affect the construction of consumers' identity (Fetterman, 1989; Mariampolski, 2006). This approach of utilizing different sources of evidence in order to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources by double and triple checking is known as triangulation (Yin, 1994; Mariampolski, 2006). Cohen and Manion (1986) define triangulation as an "attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint" and Altrichter et al. (2008) contend that triangulation "gives a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation". Triangulation is an imperative procedure to ensure ethnographic validity as it tests one source

of evidence against another and tears away alternative explanation to substantiate the theoretical insights (Fetterman, 1989). Denzin (1978) identified four basic types of triangulation: 1) data triangulation, which uses a variety of data sources, such as times, situations, and individuals; 2) investigator triangulation, where more than one researcher is used; 3) theory triangulation, where a situation is examined from the standpoint of competing theories; and 4) methodological triangulation, where many methods are used to study the same problem. The current study uses methodological triangulation, since it uses three methods of ethnographic research: prolonged participant observation, personal diary and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Throughout the next sub-sections, the three methods of ethnographic research utilized are discussed in detail.

5.1.2.1.1 Prolonged Participant Observation

The basis of this study is participant observation, described by Denzin (1978) as "a field strategy that simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection" (p. 183). To put it another way, participant observation is a technique of collecting data by immersing oneself in the everyday lives of those under investigation (Denzin, 1979; Lofland, 1995). This method was deemed appropriate for the present study due to the fact that by penetrating their social circle and subjecting herself to the life circumstances of the SL residents, the researcher became in tune with their position and could sense what it was that the observed were responding to, what Schwara (1999) calls 'discursive and

communicative research', meaning the active involvement of the researcher in the environment being researched. Furthermore, such deep familiarity through participation in the culture enabled more open and meaningful discussions with the participants, provided access to cultural events that a non-participant would not have been provided access to, and allowed a deeper level of analysis to be conducted across all types of data gathered.

At this point it is important to mention that instead of the term 'participant observer' that characterizes the nature of the netnographic researcher's role in the setting, it seems more appropriate to make use of the term 'participant-experiencer' (Walstrom, 2004a, 2004b). The participant experiencer "entails the role of active contributor to the group being studied. This role specifically refers to a researcher who has personal experience with the central problem being discussed by group participants" (Walstrom, 2004a: 175). The use of the term "experiencer" instead of observer is helpful due to the fact that in the VW under investigation there is no opportunity to directly observe the other members of the group; the researcher can, however, experience what it is like to participate in the group by reading and posting messages to the group.

Table 5-1: Key issues in participant observation

Stages in the research	Key issues to consider
Access and entering the research setting	Covert or overt research?, entering public/private settings – implications?, conceal or reveal my intentions?, identify and 'brush-up' on interpersonal skills.
Conduct during the research	Be positive, adopt a non-threatening approach,

	be polite, respectful, interested and empathize with those being researched.
Recording data	Note-taking techniques: time-consuming with self-discipline, use more than one source of data.
Leaving the research setting	Practical or theoretical reasons for finishing, ease out gently and keep actors informed after the research if possible.

Source: (Finn et al., 2000: 72)

In order to situate myself as the researcher, a participant-experiencer, in this project, I first summarize my SL story. In the next few paragraphs I am going to present an auto-netnographic vignette of my arrival narrative within the VW of SL and how I progressed as a researcher and participant within it. Please note that SL was my first interaction with any virtual environment and online community in general.

5.4.3.1.1.1 My SL Story

The participant observation began with me creating a SL account, which encompasses the construction of an avatar, a digital figure that would represent me in the VW from now on. What follows is my SL story.

"Imagine that you are dropped in the middle of a new world with no guidebook, no capability to speak the language or find your way around, no friends and bad hair. You do not know where to go and what to do. This exactly portrays my first introduction to SL. In the VW of SL I am known as Grace Blitz (see Figure 5-1), born on the 28th April 2008. Grace was my digital representation in SL for both professional and personal endeavours.

Figure 5-1: The researcher's digital representation in SL

I came to this VW not knowing at all what I was going to see, what I was going to experience. I wanted to explore what it means to spend substantial portions of one's everyday life in the VW of SL and examine consumers' identity construction within this world. In order to do that I had to become one of them, so that I myself could witness the activities and experiences that people involved in the VW had. At first, I saw it simply as a means to accomplish my research interest. After a while though, I began to experience SL more as a place where my ethnography is taking place. The more I used SL, the more I felt that I was adopting it as a way of being, since I was trying to understand others who already perform their identities and live their SL. I wanted to know why people spend so much time in this VW, what their activities were and whether there was an influence on the way they viewed and constructed the 'real' and the 'virtual'.

If someone asked me about my first impressions of SL, I would firstly say that it is obviously confusing. The whole idea of creating your digital self

the way you want is really challenging and interesting, but one definitely needs help when they arrive in the VW. I remember the first day I came to SL, I landed to a place called 'Orientation Island', which was apparently for the newbies, and I remember that I had 'frozen'. I was thinking, "ok I am in SL, what am I doing now?". There were people (avatars) all around me that looked like nothing I had ever seen before. I had trouble identifying what I saw in my surroundings. I did not know where to go or where to start from. I can describe what I was feeling like a 'culture shock'. I was feeling nervous and frightened of the people-avatars around me. I was terrified that someone would pounce on me, well not on me but my avatar (by then the identification process was already happening) or animate my avatar without my consent. I felt quite unsafe and vulnerable amongst these avatars, which was like people with costumes. I did not know what to expect from them, just like I would not have known if I had landed in a new world. But at the same time I was kind of intrigued when looking to the other avatars around me just because I knew that behind these digital representations there were individuals from different places in the world probably in the same situation with me – trying to figure out what to do next.

The interesting point is that I was exploring SL space as I would have done in a real physical geographical space. I believe that the same behaviour pattern applies to both spaces. The thing that impressed me personally the most is avatars' appearance, which indicates that people do really care about their digital representation's looks. Most of the avatars that you come across in SL are very young in age, very fit, proportionate,

and with very nice and elegant facial features. So I had to become a good-looking avatar in order to blend. I came to realize that if people didn't think you knew what you were doing, your avi looked badly put together, then you had no chance of getting them to talk to you. When I felt that I was quite comfortable with the functions of SL, I started to be more successful at chatting to people (other avis) about their experiences in SL. In my profile I had clearly stated that I am in SL in order to conduct my research. So anyone can check this out. The difficult thing that I was facing is that some of the avis were not willing to chat with me, just because I am a researcher. These avatars see researchers as one group of people who are not very welcomed in SL. They tend to say that they are in SL just to 'escape' from RL (Real Life) and some are very rude. On the other hand, some others are really talkative and helpful. Another problem that I have faced, and still facing, is that sometimes in one moment to another the avi(s) that you chat with can simply click on the teleport button and disappear - just like that".

With all the time I had spent in SL since April 2008, I would describe myself as having an intermediate level of expertise by the time I began collecting my data. I had developed a good sense of the SL cultural and social mores – how to interact with others and the environment and find my way around. Meanwhile I had made some wonderful friends, with whom I was spending a significant amount of time. My intent was to immerse myself in the environment in order to become familiar with it. I did this by way of first hand experiences I found naturally attractive, such as exploring new places and going out alone or hanging out with friends,

either at their homes, their gardens, their clubs etc. (e.g. dancing, listening to music, swimming, playing games, drinking coffee). As such I was able to develop a strong rapport with the individuals under investigation. This rapport induced relaxation, honest behaviour, deeper and more accurate descriptions, and increased the likelihood of introductions to other members of the community (Agafonoff, 2006; Mariampolski, 2006). Reminiscent of Whyte's (1943) seminal ethnography, much of the richest data were obtained through the process of 'hanging out'. I found that it facilitated my acceptance within the group and allowed me to observe the everyday behaviour of the Second Lifers. Moreover, I explored sub-cultures with sexually explicit adult activity sims, fantasy and role-playing, and spiritual/mystical themes.

Throughout the participant observation, the primary data collection method was saving every discussion log (both public and private), taking snapshots and field notes. When in SL, one can save in an allocated place in their PC all the discussions that take place at the location that the avatar is currently in. This happens to the local chat only, as long as the person in logged on. As far as the private chat is concerned, an individual, wherever he/she is located in SL, can have as many private chats as he/she fancies at the same time with several individuals, being anywhere in the world of SL. Moreover, private chats can reach you, even when you are not logged in SL, given that you have ticked 'receive offline IMs via email' in the SL preferences. Taking snapshots is another method for collecting data, as they capture different moments from life in the VW. These visual data were useful in developing interpretations of events, establishing human-object

interactions, and complementing the researcher's discussion log archival documentation. In particular, they provide further evidence of how serious Second Lifers are about their virtual life and the ways they customize their avatars depending on the occasions. Moreover, field notes are also important for further documentation. Most of the times, there were hand-written field notes immediately recorded in a spiral notebook and imported into the Word document at a later date. Each of the field notes was dated and provided a description of the event and the location, along with an account of individuals involved, their actions, behaviours and possible motivations for behaviour.

Becoming a member of a particular culture, like SL, means entering at the bottom of the status hierarchy and undergoing a process of socialization. Therefore, the nature of the ethnographic process was evolving which allowed me to experience and interact with different elements of the culture as an insider. As I became more familiar with the VW of SL, I began to interact and participate with many members of the community. As experienced by Schouten and McAlexander (1995) and Belk and Costa (1998), this socialization process brought about a transformation in the researcher, from an outsider to the group to an accepted member, which involved a deepening commitment to the values and attitudes of the culture, including adopting the cultural jargon, norms and rituals. This provided me with the ability to conduct a deeper level of analysis when examining the data gathered. The process of transformation occurred gradually throughout the research process. Acculturation was achieved through the attainment of knowledge about the culture of SL and its

residents. This knowledge was gradually acquired mainly through the observation of Second Lifers' interactions, attitudes, discussions, and in general the ways in which they spend their time in-world.

During all this time I was very much involved with my graduate work, so SL became my social outlet, opting to pursue activities and friendships in this VW rather than the physical world around me. Spending five or more hours at a time in-world was not uncommon on weekends; the time flew by. Everything I learnt in SL, I learnt by asking friends or random people that happened to be around me at the time of my inquiry, by paying detailed attention to my surroundings, including how others were behaving, by reading instructions, whenever applicable, and in general by figuring things out as I went along. At one point, I had a payable job as a guest in a Greek sim, being responsible for greeting people who were 'landing' on the sim, and being of assistance to them.

What I have to say at this point is that my orientation to SL mirrored my experiences living abroad and experiencing foreign cultures as an insider/outsider who had been welcomed in by the locales. This orientation informed my role as a researcher as well, which I discuss in paragraphs below. Finally, even though many SL residents own land and build, I did neither. I attended once a workshop on building objects in SL, but I saw that building is a very time-consuming endeavour and I was unwilling to make time for that at the point.

5.1.2.1.2 Personal Diary

Throughout the ethnographic process I kept a personal diary written from an emic perspective, as a log of my activities and reflections. That is, the diary portrayed how I was engaged in relation with, rather than objectifying, the people studied. This process was a useful record of my cognitive and emotional experience, and allowed me to conduct personal introspection (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Shankar, 2000; Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). As James (1890) notes, introspection involves "looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover" (p. 185). By understanding the transformation of the self-concept more completely and by developing an understanding of how insiders view the world, it was expected that the data analysis and interpretations would be richer (Shankar, 2000).

The diary began with a statement of what the researcher knew about VWs at the beginning of the ethnographic process. Less structured in format than the researcher's field notes, the diary became a place to document her knowledge of the culture, her understanding of the ethos, her interest in residents' everyday activities, in addition to their shopping motivations and behaviours, her relationship with other fellow residents of the culture, and a place to document her transformation.

During the initial months of the netnographic process, during the periods of accelerated learning, the personal diary was updated regularly daily, weekly or more often. Nevertheless, during the later periods of the netnographic process, the researcher's personal diary was not updated so

frequently as she had come to understand the culture through lived experience. In total I had more than 200 A4 pages of fieldnotes, representing over 2,000 hours of immersion in SL.

The next subsection concerns the researcher's reflections as both a member and a researcher of the SL community.

5.4.3.1.2.1 My role as both member and researcher

As a researcher I began by asking whether the person who is living these experiences is my real persona or my digital persona. Inevitably though, my two identities are merged since my digital representation, my avatar, my digital 'self' has become part of my real self, as if I would somehow caused a dream to become 'alive'. But what about my subjects? They are avatars, stripped of their 'real life' identities, or are they? Do I have to see my subjects as real persons or as just avatars, who are living in a VW in their spare time? And how do I know whether they are presenting to me their digital self or their real persona? As should be apparent from earlier chapters after being in SL as a researcher for several months and struggling with these questions, in the end I realized that I would not find the answers because these were the wrong questions!

A human being experiences these worlds through an avatar, which is the representation of the self in a given physical medium. Most worlds (including SL) allow an agent to choose what kind of avatar she or he will live in, allowing a person with any kind of earth body to dwell in a completely different body in the VW (Castronova, 2003). In such worlds

you can present yourself as a ‘character’, you can be anonymous, you can play a role or roles as close or as far away from your ‘real self’ as you choose. There is an unparalleled opportunity to play with one’s identity and to ‘try out’ new ones (Turkle, 1994).

It is worth noting that SL is not a game since it lacks rules, character maintenance requirements and explicit goals. A game is just a game with rules, and you act according to those rules. What happens “outside the game” has little relevance. This can be called the “Magic Circle” of games, where gamers intentionally step into the “Magic Circle” and leave their Real Life problems behind (escape from them if you will), in search for some fun and entertainment — under the rules of the game world. Watching TV or reading a very good novel has the same kind of “Magic Circle”.

The VW of SL makes everything so much complicated because it’s not a game, it does not have any rules except for the ones you define for yourself. In this virtual environment escapism is possible, and the individuals involved in it just accept that environment as a valid one for their escapism.

SL allows self-escapism, which is almost the same with what an artist experiences when creating their own piece of art (or performing on a stage), and where the only “reality” is the one they construct. Therefore, it is different from, say, watching a football game and forgetting all about your true self; it’s more like being so engaged in designing the rules of

how football should be played that you forget everything else (Llewelyn, 2009).

So, what happens to our mind when we're logged in to SL? Thanks to our avatarisation, sooner or later, you will have to face your own notion of "self". You will start thinking "how do other people really look like? How do I look like to them?". When that happens, you start to develop bonds with your avatar — like, for example, go on a shopping spree to personalize it. Some avatars will be seen by their creators as pure art — they're just a manifestation of their talent and creativity. But, unexpectedly, you will notice that the vast majority will go from the stage of "this is my avatar" to "this is me". Some people though find that absurd. But even these people will dress their avatar in smart clothes when attending a business meeting in-world. When you ask them about it, they simply say that this is the way they would have dressed in 'real life' for a business meeting, mainly pointing to social norms and conducts, respect to others etc. Some others may say that they dress in business clothes in order to separate themselves from the other loonies out there, who are escapists, and dream that they are dragons or elves, or robots. They claim that they are rational human beings and they do not need that kind of escapism and that they are here to do serious business. Well, I agree with that but why should serious business be associated with representing your avatar with a business suit instead of being a robot for instance? That happens only when you put the word self into the association. And that is what happens, even if you deny it: you identify yourself with your avatar and you become one and the same.

Although I recognise that with the above I am moving from methodology to analysis, the point I want to make is that I will be doing and writing my research both as Ioanna and Grace.

For me, Grace is an extension of myself. I believe there is nothing unreal about my experiences in SL and in some instances I would go so far to say that my reality is enhanced and accelerated. This can be called embodied and immersed experience. My avatar is partly psychological projection and partly creative expression of myself. When I fall off of a balcony or cannot manage stairs, I feel clumsy, or even when I bump onto another avatar. Arriving to a place without my hair or without my clothes (which can happen) is horrific. I also feel wonderful dancing. And flying! Following someone through the sky is magnificent. In an emotionally real way, what happens to our avatars happens to us. The relationships we build through this medium are as real as any.

The interaction with other people is a reality. It is "real" just because behind the keyboard there are real people guiding, controlling and motivating the avatars. They are not simply surrogates for real people. Our minds, souls, spirits (whatever you choose to call the non physical parts of us), the things that really make us what we are, these all enter that space.

All the aforementioned mean that we, who are studying virtual spaces, adopt two dual roles. The first is to understand the researcher in the same ontological manner as ascribed by the researcher to the participants. Therefore, the researcher needs to reflect upon and document her own oscillations within and between the structuring binaries (such as these

mentioned earlier – the body in the net vs. the physical body) vis-à-vis her interpretations of the participants' consumption behaviour. The second relates to a more general netnographic dual role.

5.1.2.1.3 In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Ethnographic immersion is often augmented by ethnographic interviews; these are in-depth interviews conducted in the specific context under investigation. So, in addition to the hours of fieldnotes already mentioned, between September 2009 and March 2010, the researcher spent six months, approximately 25-30 hours per week, in-world conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews. Fifty-two (52) individuals who were active residents in the VW of SL were interviewed. Selection of participants for interviews was informed by the surrounding ethnographic research. As such, judgement sampling (Hair et al., 2003) was used, augmented by snowballing sampling (Bryman, 2004) to ensure as diverse a range of participants as possible. The interviews ranged in length from 90 minutes to up to four hours. Interviews were held at times convenient to both participant and recruiter and depending on the participant location (anything between 9am and midnight GMT/BST), with arrangements made in SLT (SL Time) and/or the time local to the participant, in order to avoid miscommunication. Due to the great length of the interview, they were arranged to fit the participants' timetables therefore the researcher met with each of the participants two to three times in order to complete the interview. All interviews were conducted exclusively in the VW of SL in written. The researcher used text-based chats and instant messages for

most interviews and logged and archived [6] 131 total sessions with participants on her password-protected computer. Due to the fact that the researcher did not own her own place in SL, she gave her participants the initiative to choose the place that the interview would be carried out, so that they felt comfortable and thus willing to be introspective and report underlying motivations behind their perceptions (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). Therefore, they were conducted either at the participants' home, shop, place of work or in the case of the participants that do not own land in SL, they chose their favourite place for the interview to be conducted.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen as this technique is well suited to discovery tasks (Wells, 1993). Furthermore, McCracken (1988) promotes the use of in-depth interview as the method of choice when cultural categories are themes of the investigation. The advantages are further highlighted by Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) who suggest that the thick description relies upon understanding informants' points of view (emic) to portray broader cultural meanings (etic point of view). Semi-structured interview provides greater scope for discussion and learning about the problem, opinions and views of the respondents. While there are some fairly specific questions (closed questions) in the interview schedule, each of which may be probed or prompted, there are lot more questions which are completely open-ended. The semi-structured interview method is formal, hence is a better way of catching the point of view of the people,

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[6] In the Preference setting of the Second Life® software on my computer I can check off that chat and instant messages are logged and archived to a designated folder on my hard drive.

and getting inside information. One can revise questions, if needed, during the process of data collection.

At its most basic, an interview is a conversation, a set of questions and answers between two people who agree that one will assume the role of the questioner, and the other the role of the answerer. The only difference between an online interview and a face-to-face interview is that the online interview occurs through the mediation of some technological apparatus (Kozinets, 2010). That, however, is a big difference.

In the physical world, the topic of interviewing is so intertwined with the conduct of ethnography that the two are virtually inseparable. So it is with netnography and online interviewing. The online interview has become a staple of online ethnographic research, present as part of the method from the very beginnings of work in the field (Baym, 1995, 1999; Correll, 1995; Kozinets, 1997b, 1998; Markham, 1998).

As with research in general, the recommended type of interview is going to be determined by the type of data that are required. For the type of nuanced cultural understandings of online social groups that are usually sought in a netnography, depth interviewing is usually the method of choice, which is the case of the current study. The depth netnographic interviews used in the current research allowed the netnographer to broaden her understanding of what she has been observing online.

There is one area requiring the development of netnography as a methodology. Netnography has mainly focused on studies of forums,

blogs, chat rooms and discussion boards and as such is very text based (Rokka, 2010). As a result, in such text-based research the presentation of the researcher self is also textually based. However, in VWs the presentation of the researcher self is visual.

In a VW like SL where self-presentation is visual it is imperative that the researcher herself has to take care of her avatar body, so that she passes that to others. The researcher needs to be part of the specific community and not an outsider in order to be able to establish contact with her subjects. This can be achieved by visual cues like clothing, accessories, bodily adornments etc. which represent knowledge about the culture that the researcher enters.

From my own experience throughout the conduct of this research, I realized that the avatar body and anything associated with it, plays a pivotal role in the way SL residents view and perceive the researcher. However, even when the researcher has improved her skills in the construction of her avatar body it is not granted that there will be immediate and open acceptance by the participants, but the chances to reach them and start a converstation are higher. Otherwise, if the researcher self presents herself in an avatar body that looks ‘bad’ or not in accordance to the SL ‘dressing code’ of the specific subcultures in SL that she aims to study then there are very high chances that the researcher is going to be rejected by the community.

This raises important issues to do with negotiating the persona of the researcher and also ethical issues; for example, is it ethically sound for the researcher to present as a 'goth' avatar in order to gain trust and acceptance (and thus data) or is this deception as broadly discussed in the literature reviews? These issues are expanded upon in the analysis later in this thesis.

In addition to the importance of the visual representation of the researcher-self, another thing that I noticed is that the participants were more willing to start a conversation with me because they could see that I was not a new-born avatar that entered the world just to do my research and exit. The fact that when I started conducting in-depth interviews I had been in SL for almost one and a half years seemed to be very important for them as they could trust me more and not feel that I am just invading their space.

The process that I followed during the conduct of the in-depth interviews was as follows: After the participant had read the Information Consent Notecard provided to them and accepted to be part of the research I tried to 'warm up' the atmosphere. Firstly, I was explaining who I am, what my research was about and my general credentials, leaving them space to ask any questions they wanted to about me and/or my research. Next, I started the interview by asking general questions about their SL so far, like how long they have been in SL, what their main activities are in SL etc. When I felt that the participant was feeling quite comfortable with our

conversation and with me, the first thing I asked was “how did you become the avatar you are today?”.

5.2 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Netnography involves an inductive approach to the analysis of qualitative data. Inductive data analysis is a way to manipulate the whole body of recorded information that the researcher has collected over the course of his/her netnography (Kozinets, 2010).

The researcher read the transcripts several times to find key words, ideas, and patterns and to identify emerging themes and categories as well as to consider possible meanings and how these fitted with the developing themes. Segments of interview text were coded enabling an analysis of interview segments on a particular theme, the documentation of relationships between themes and the identification of themes important to participants. The researcher was abstracting elements from the data, then compared and contrasted them for their similarities and differences.

The researcher kept asking herself about the deeper meaning of her participants’ narratives. She was asking herself not what the data is saying but why the participant has said it. The researcher was not aiming for description, but for explanation. She was asking herself ‘what is the participant attempting to convey in this response? What is he/she conveying beyond the words that he/she is using?’ In constructivist terms what is the participant ‘doing ‘with the language used.

The researcher used manual qualitative data analysis. However, she used her personal computer, which is password protected, for data storage, but she did not use any of the sophisticated software packages for data analysis available. Instead she used Microsoft's powerful word-processing, spreadsheet, and database programs. She chose this kind of manual coding, due to the large amount of data collected, which if printed out would occupy a lot of space.

The researcher saved her files in word-processing files, and used the word processing program to automate parts of the data analysis process. She coded inside the computer files using bold text, highlighting and different colours. The researcher used the adequate search and find capabilities of word-processing software to conduct text searches that aid her in the coding and classification. Different levels of coding and abstraction were organized by the researcher using the database capabilities offered by Microsoft Access.

Towards the end of the study no new themes emerged, which suggested that major themes had been identified.

5.3 Ethical Considerations

With its mix of participation and observation, its often uncomfortable closeness, and its traditions of distanced description and cultural revelation, ethnographic inquiry possesses some of the thorniest terrain for navigating research ethics. When the technological complexities and

unique contingencies of online interactions are added, these already-difficult issues become even more formidable (Kozinets, 2010).

As Thomas (1996) notes, it is perhaps unsurprisingly, given differing deontological, teleological and postmodern perspectives on research ethics, that a clear consensus on appropriate online procedures has not emerged. These ethical debates trigger two interrelated concerns: (1) is the CMC medium a private or a public medium, and, (2) what constitutes "informed consent" in cyberspace? The resolution of these issues is currently blurred. Sharf (1999) lists the principal ethical concerns that have become apparent in online cultural research as privacy, confidentiality, appropriation of others' personal stories, and informed consent.

Netnographers who adopt a traditional approach to research ethics might need to pursue research strategies of high visibility. Strategies of high visibility deliberately maximize the obvious presence of the researcher's participation as researcher (Kozinets, 2000).

In the current study, the researcher has fully disclosed her presence and intentions toward the community under study. Every member of the particular community can see the researcher's identity and her purpose by reading her profile, which is available to any member. Before starting asking questions the researcher declares her identity and her role within this community (in case the members have not checked out her profile) along with the provision of the 'Information and Consent Notecard' (see Appendix A) in order the researcher to obtain informed consent. This gives

them the opportunity to be aware of the research study giving them the freedom to decide whether they want to be a part of it or not. The netnographer also respects the dignity and privacy of members of the virtual community and their beliefs by providing informants with multiple opportunities for reviewing the foundations of the research and drafts of the research text, providing feedback, and asking questions. Moreover, an ethos of anonymity is part of the cultural heritage of virtuality (Taylor, 1999). In order the researcher to protect her participants' privacy and anonymity, she did not use their whole SL names but just their initials.

Many Second Lifers have lives unto themselves, for instance they are bloggers, clothing designers, artists, DJs, shop and/or club owners etc. who are known solely as their avatars. They are neither anonymous nor disguised because their SL identities are legitimated by the existence of the SL community, even by people who are not active in SL. To put it another way, society at large is becoming increasingly aware of VWs as locations of life as evidenced by the popular news and entertainment media's attention to and depiction of 'places' like SL. Most of the current study's participants were forthcoming about their 'real lives' to one degree or another. While the data collected centred on avatars and their experiences and practices, the researcher collected 'real life' demographic data such as age, gender, education, profession, and country of residence from the people willing to give them out.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined and presented the methodology I have deemed most useful to achieve the research objectives. That is to theorise the consumption of clothing, accessories and bodily adornment within SL relating to the construction of the "avatar-as-consumer", through the introduction of the virtual materiality of the avatar body, as understood and negotiated by the participants.

I have presented the methodology of netnography as a suitable approach to this study and I have outlined the necessary research processes undertaken within that framework.

Chapter 6 : Data Analysis Part 1: The Culture of SL and the Construction of the SL Identity

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is going to present the first part of the analysis of the collected data. This part deals with developing an understanding of the specific consumer culture of SL and the construction of the SL identity, the "avatar-as-consumer". Two main themes emerged: 'playfulness and imagination' and 'escaping from Real Life'. Both themes have been subcategorized into five subcategories. Under the theme 'playfulness and imagination' the five subcategories are: 'playing with the doll', 'fantasy, experimentation and identity play', 'beauty and body image vs. fantasy', 'stigmatized identity', and 'relationship with the avatar'. The second theme has also been subcategorized into five categories. These are: 'escapism in the fantasy of the dream world', 'transition between worlds', 'sky is the limit', 'fulfilling a fantasy or wish – nostalgia and reincarnation', and 'exploration/discovery'.

This part is very important to the current thesis as it presents the process by which individuals enter the VW of SL and the way they view the VW that they inhabit. Moreover, this part exemplifies how SL residents use this VW in order to construct, reconstruct, invent and reinvent multiple identities of any kind and experiment in the "safety nets" of the VW

(Turkle, 1995) through development of their (often multiple) avatars. This particular claim, one that has been largely instrumental in shaping public perceptions of CMC as anonymous, democratic, and barrier-free, is neatly encapsulated in the July 5, 1993 *New Yorker* (p. 61) cartoon by Peter Steiner. The caption reads "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog", as depicted in Figure 6-1.

Figure 6-1: Peter Steiner's cartoon
Source: Google Images, 2011

As has already been mentioned in previous chapters, VWs offer an interactive space where multiple users from vastly different locations and contexts may simultaneously engage in a simulated adventure fantasy. The creation of a social space within the machine provides a fantasy world where individuals may invent imaginary personas and enact alternative lives (Toffoletti, 2007).

When arriving in the VW of SL, residents are ‘dropped’ in a place which is specifically for the newcomers (newbies). All newbies are in their default avatar shape (there is a limited list of default avatar shape categories from which you choose during the signing-in process; see Figure 6-2).

Figure 6-2: Default looks to choose from during the signing-in process

Almost all avatars at that area look alike, due to that reason. However, virtual environments allow their users to radically alter their self-representation and SL is no exception. Therefore, once they have found their way around, mainly through communication with other users and self-observations, and become more familiar with what is going on in the SL culture, the acculturation process begins. According to O’Guinn, Imperia and MacAdams (1987), acculturation is “the process by which those new to a society adopt the attitudes, values and behaviours of the dominant host culture”. This process concerns the changes that an individual undergoes when in direct contact with a new culture (Graves, 1967). In the case of the SL culture, this process begins with the users wanting to modify their avatar’s appearance so that the creation of their digital representation, their digital self, meets the SL standards. Different individuals may take this acculturation process at different paces, mainly

depending on the time spent in the VW, with, obviously, individuals spending more immersion time, being quicker in adopting the new culture's characteristics.

As outlined in my own arrival narrative, the acculturation process continues with the act of shopping for shapes, skins, hair, clothing, shoes, accessories, etc. in order to construct their avatar by the various SL norms available. There is a huge range of products in the shops that exist in abundance in SL. In addition to shopping for garments, accessories and other avatar props, residents can look at the market and buy houses, mansions, clubs, luxury cars, yachts, airplanes etc, so that they live the lifestyle they desire. The act of changing and customizing digital representations is time consuming and elaborate. This activity plays a central role in becoming a unique individual in this VW, since it is that specific digital body, the avatar, that represents them in SL serving both a personal function (individualization) and a social function since this avatar facilitates the interaction with other avatars in-world. Furthermore, they have the opportunity to create their digital selves as their ideal, whatever form that might take and they can quickly and easily change their appearance and style anytime they feel the need to. It is easy to notice that the VW user situation is an idealized fantasy of the postmodern human, in which a user can freely shape his/her own "self" (Filiciak, 2003).

The rest of the chapter presents in detail the two themes that emerged regarding SL consumer culture and the construction of the residents' identity, through the avatar as well as their subcategories.

6.2 Theme 1 – Playfulness and Imagination

The first theme that emerged out of the collected data concerns the playfulness and imagination that the VW of SL provides to its residents. This theme has been subcategorized into five categories; these are: 'playing with the doll', 'fantasy, experimentation and identity play', 'beauty and body image vs fantasy', 'stigmatized identity' and 'relationship with the avatar'.

6.2.1 Playing with the Doll

A very interesting observation that has been noted throughout the research process is that there seems to be a tension between SL and the physical world regarding how people view the act of changing appearance and style (of their avatar and their physical body). They enjoy the fact that in SL the customizing process is totally different than it is in the physical world, since in SL they have the ability to easily construct and reconstruct their idealized digital representation, whatever form that takes. This leads Second Lifers to be able to experiment more in SL than in the physical world '*just because *all clothes fit*' (GL)*. Indeed, in SL they can change any time any aspect of their avatar's appearance, be it clothes, skin, shape, hair colour, style, length etc, which cannot be done *'without a lot of hard work and money in real life' (HH)*. As another resident notes *'it's a lot harder to change a look in RL than in SL but the sheer enjoyment of trying on different clothes and hairstyles - a lot less in RL than in SL…wow I'm a bit surprised that I enjoy it so much in SL - it doesn't seem like the kind of thing I would be interested in […] It's so easy in SL - all it takes is a click,*

and there is so much available […] it's easy on a psychological level in SL as well - I don't think people expect as much consistency in how an individual looks... in RL, if I went and had a makeover, people would have to get used to the new look all over again' (NW).

The above quote clearly illustrates the big difference that exists between customizing one's physical appearance and one's digital representation appearance as well as how enjoyable it is in the VW, even for people that are not so much into shopping and changes in general. A major factor for that is the easiness of doing it in SL and the abundance of products available, in addition to the fact that in the VW people do not expect much consistency in the individuals' looks, which shows diversity and freedom, elements that appear to be central in the culture of SL, as compared to the physical world context.

Residents tend to relate the customization process with playfulness and fun, which made some Second Lifers view their avatar as a kind of a Barbie Doll, with which they can play and change outfits and consequently SL is like a big doll's house: *'…I treat K like my little Barbie doll […] it's so much fun to get to dress up your Barbie' (KH)*; *'[SL is] more like a big doll's house' (PP)*; *'I never had a real doll with this many outfits. :-)' (LM)*. Here the avatar is treated as an object that they own and whose appearance they can transform as often as they fancy *'I change my avatars [clothes] several times a day hehe…' (KH)*. This is very important given the history, usability and attributes given to the Barbie Doll over the years. Launched onto the market by Mattel in 1959, Barbie was originally designed as a

fashion doll for adults to buy. It was only later that she became popular as a toy for little girls (Peers, 2004). It is from her beginnings as a fashion plate that Barbie came to stand for glamour, beauty and style (Billyboy, 1987; Lord, 1994). This is clearly demonstrated in the following quote *'…play young and gorgeous again… a way of finding things that always fit… you're looking at Barbie…I LOVE playing Barbie' (AK)*.

6.2.2 Fantasy, Experimentation and Identity Play

SL offers the possibility for identity play and experimentation as part of the world's fantasy and imagination. As AL points out '*the fantasy element is always present for most people in my opinion […] i have lots of fantasy stuff too, just simply because its fun' (AL)*.

SL involves rituals of transformation (Goffman, 1963). The vast amount of choices that the residents have regarding appearance and styles, which they can employ, not only offers them a liberating opportunity for temporary identity transformation, but the fantasy role that the residents can take on, provides a further incentive for transformative play (Hickey et al., 1988). As AK notes '*SL also gives room for fantasy (I have this great pirate suit, oh, and a bullfighter suit.....' (AK)*.

Second Lifers can decorate and personalize their avatar with an array of accessories at any time, which makes customization a cumulative and never ending process: *'I always seem to come back to the same places, since those designers are ones who meet my taste for fun, interesting things, but also the conservative nature of my work wardrobe. So I will*

spice up something dull with a jacket that is not conservative, or a pair of almost fetish boots' (DA). Participation in SL is a form of identity work aimed at creating a more significant, exciting, and confident self. These elements reinforce the liberating opportunity to play a wildly different character whose behaviour bears faint resemblance to quotidian life (Belk and Costa, 1998). This transformation and identity play is apparently a very important part of the participants' experience in SL, which has become an obsession in the post industrial societies (Filiciak, 2003). As Giddens (1991) notes, the instability of identity in the post-traditional world demands that we be inevitably involved in a 'reflexive project of the self': this project is reflexive because it involves constant self-monitoring, self-scrutiny, planning and ordering of all elements of our lives, appearances and performances in order to organize them into a coherent narrative called the 'self'. Consumerism is central to this self-obsession (Slater, 1997). This is partly because we not only have to choose a self, but as Foucault's (1988) line of argument also indicates, have to constitute ourselves as a self who chooses, a consumer. This is absolutely the case in SL, where one in order to change his/her appearance and the overall lifestyle that they want to pursuit, has to go shopping, to consume. As GL points out *'… to convey that identity to others, we need other, physical means to do so. Shopping (especially for clothes and accessories, since they represent something which is in other people's permanent visual field when you talk to them) is definitely part of it. More so than, say, buying a TV, which only SOME people will see (when you interact with others, MOST of the time you won't be able to show the TV you bought — they*

will just see your clothes and accessories, your hairstyle, your makeup...)'. (GL).

The daydreams and fantasies that consumers entertain may thus be actualized in various ways through performance in spaces like SL (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2005) and through the act of shopping that the residents go through, in order to tailor the way they look according to their own desires and preferences, which seems to be a very enjoyable activity for them; they find pleasure in shopping for different items and then experimenting with them as the following quotes illustrate: *'I can mix different outfits from different designers to make my pirate costume for example. it is funny* :) *with eye –patch and pipe' (VF)*; *'I change to experiment. Experiment with myself and with other ppl's reactions. Being something out of Startrek people ask what are you???'. (PI); 'I have often dressed as the "Reluctant Quester" a character I created for my blog and for the quest' (MS)*.

In addition to the idea presented that the avatar is similar to a doll, an external object owned by the resident, participants also report and display that they use their imaginations to create a physical appearance with which to represent themselves in cyberspace. Residents report that they take pleasure in customizing the appearance of their avatars since it is very important to them that their digital self-representation has a unique style, which is their own style. Having the opportunity to customize their looks is very pleasant and they devote quite a lot of time and effort (and money, most of them – including myself!) to make sure that their avatar

has a style that suits them. In the next few paragraphs I present a reflective autoethnographic passage describing my own processes.

“When I first signed in SL I was lost. The first thing that I was concerned with was to start getting as familiar as I could with the way the VW I inhabited was working. What can I do in this online environment? How can I navigate through it? How do I communicate with other avatars? Can I change the way I look and if yes how? All these were questions that were crossing my mind from the very first moment I came to this new world. The process of figuring out how this new culture works and finding answers to the aforementioned questions took me quite a lot of time I admit. After a while through, when I was finally able to navigate around my major concern was my appearance, the way my digital representation looked. So the next step for me was to start consuming so that I could gradually customize my looks and become an attractive avatar. The only way to do that was to go out in the SL market (which is huge) and buy new clothes, skin and shape, for starters. I was so excited that I could create any look that I wanted to! I thought ‘right, ok, I will go out in the freebie shops (since at first I thought that it was silly to spend real money for virtual goods) and look for new clothes and shapes’ and I did it. I went to some shops that have ‘freebies’ and got some new clothes (quite provocative I can say!), hair (I chose pink hair!), eyes (I chose blue eyes although in my first life my eyes are brown), and finally a new shape, which I after customized; I became very tall, thin with a very feminine body definition, and relatively large breasts. After some time in my new look through, I was not enough satisfied with the way I looked and the quality of my hair and clothes. It did

not feel right. I was not feeling that what I am looking at on the screen was me, did not feel like me at all. Something was wrong, but what? I reckon that the problem was the fact that I could not identify with Grace. I did not feel that she and I were one piece. At first, what I did was to reduce the size of her breasts. The other thing that bothered me was the type of clothing that she was wearing. That is not me(!), I do not wear these kind of clothes, and to be honest it did not feel good after a while, because now Grace was projecting a different image than I wanted her to. So in order to be able to customize my avatar so that I could identify with her I decided that I needed to spend money to buy better clothes, some accessories, etc. However, before putting in real money I looked at ways I could earn money in-world; I could either 'camp' or find a job. I thought that 'camping' was a good idea to earn some Lindens.

There are some particular sims where you can 'camp', which means that in order to get Lindens your avatar needs to be seated on a bench or positioned in a specific place for quite a long time without moving. But it is not lucrative at all; the pay was 2 Linden Dollars for 20 or 30 minutes. After some time doing that I realized that it is not working and I felt the need to put real money in it. And I did. I have spent 30 pounds in total (in SL terms you are quite 'rich' with this amount of money). It felt so nice to be able to buy anything that I liked and customize my avatar until the point where I felt that 'yes, that's it', this feels like me now!'. The amazing thing is that you can always alter your appearance either slightly or radically, presenting yourself in many different ways.

However, the changes that I only made to Grace were hair, clothing and accessories. I enjoy very much playing and experimenting with different looks in terms of hair, clothing, and accessories, mainly tattoos and earrings and I have always been in a human shape. Once I bought a panda shape and put it on but the very next moment I changed back to the human form, as it felt really weird being a panda. Figure 6-3 depicts some of the changes I went through since the signing in process. As can be seen in the figure, despite the limitless possibilities to become anything in SL the only changes that I made where hair, clothing and accessories, and I was always in a 'human' avatar body, which was the only form that I was feeling comfortable with. What I was looking at the screen it really felt like 'me'. For me the most enjoyable thing was to experiment with different styles, which I wish I could do in my first life but unfortunately I cannot for many different reasons.

At this point I would like to share with you a very specific moment during my life in SL. Once, while I was trying on some hair demos with my friend, who came with me in order to advise me on the hair that suits me the most, something terrible happened. These hair demos had probably a kind of 'bug' and when I tried them on I lost my shape and I literally became another avatar shape – I became very short with totally different shape. By that time I had been feeling a very strong identification with Grace that when I realized it I panicked and felt that I have lost a big part of myself. I was so sad about it, I almost cried. I was trying to put my old shape on but it would not let me. I still remember how frustrating and stressing this experience was, and to be honest I could not believe that I was reacting

this way. I do not know if you have ever felt this way about your digital representation, but my feelings at that moment were so strong that I was surprised with myself. I am lucky that my friend was with me to calm me down. After a while I put myself together and thought that if I logged off SL and logged in again I could probably put on my old shape without facing any problem. And I felt so happy when I saw again ‘me’ on screen, I cannot really describe it”.

Figure 6-3: The progress of the self-presentation of the researcher

Moving on from this object/subject division in understanding the "avatar-as-consumer", in SL residents have the freedom to employ multiple identities, since they can experiment with their avatar and play with different looks. Residents can explore their powers of imagination and fantasy, as there is a certain creative element to 'being' in cyberspace. This notion of creativity is evident on the World Wide Web, where people can create a space to represent themselves such as a VW like SL. The SL resident decides how much of their physical self to resemble through their avatar or even to invent a self that bears no relation to their 'real' selves. Thus, as Baudrillard (2007: 55) puts it, "this body, our body, often appears simply superfluous... ...everything is concentrated in the brain".

Part of the fantasy and play is the ability to create multiple identities, either by experimenting with a variety of different looks and styles or by creating more than one digital representation called 'alts', which shows that virtual environments are the domain of liquid identity (Filiciak, 2003). The former (employing different looks and styles) gives residents the opportunity to work on their single avatar and create various images, just as AL states '*What I really like is having lots of different styles. I have my black A and my japanese A my punk A and my chic A my blonde A and my brunette A tattooed not tattooed pierced, not pierced goth neko and I have a very dumpy housewify one lol she brandishes a rolling pin is short and fat she is no more like me than the Barbie by the way (I hasten to add) LOL but what I wanted to do was to create a "look"'. (AL)*. This clearly is associated with the postmodern lifestyle, which is featured by a lack of cohesion; it is fragmented (Bauman, 2000). These ideas are difficult to define simply,

but they are characterized by such terms as “decentred”, “fluid”, “nonlinear”, and “opaque” (Turkle, 1995: 17). In the context of this postmodern identity, this issue fits into the idea of the identity being fluid or fractured and potentiality of constant state of change, with the mixture of various styles projecting different identities. The sourcing of these various looks gives the individual an eclectic mix of looks allowing for a sense of play (Firat, et al, 1995; Firat and Shultz, 1997; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) within SL consumption. Through the pick and mix of styles, the identity can be moulded through the symbols and messages projected (Firat and Shultz, 1997). Furthermore, through the interaction of individual and group identities (Elliott, 1997; Featherstone, 1991; Firat and Shultz, 1997), it creates the idea of identity being fluid (Firat, et al, 1995; Firat, and Shultz, 1997; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), as NW points out *‘In SL, I can be blond and fair in sweater and slacks one day, and purple and bald in leather the next, and a giant bird the day after that’ (NW)*.

As far as the creation of one or more ‘alts’ is concerned, the reason often given underpinning this is that Second Lifers want to enact alternative lifestyles through their different ‘alts’. This can be depicted in what KM commented on her many digital selves *‘I had 12 [alts] about a month ago. I know some ppl have many more, but it was too much. Each one was ending up with her own life, her own friends...I have eight now. I had one alt who lived in the desert and one in a city. Two were for Gor*[7] *- two*

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[7] Gor or Gorean is one of the most successful role-play themes in SL. In this theme, player-characters act out a barbaric world of sexual slavery that is based on the novels of John Norman. Gorean sim communities are closed or semi-closed social groups that act as real communities “living” in a particular shared online place.

places in Gor […] I don't use them anymore. […] well, it's like, when you step into one, you take on that life. One is very functional, the builder but I always tried to get skin, shape, hair, clothes, in stores I'd never been in before and I'd go places that I don't go as some other self' (KM). KM claims that each one of her 'alts' was *'ending up with her own life'*, which means that KM was living in the VW of SL many different lives. As Turkle (1997) notes "In the MUDs [online game 'worlds' for role-playing], the projections of self are engaged in a resolutely postmodern context . . . the self is not only decentred but multiplied without limit. There is an unparalleled opportunity to play with one's identity and to 'try out' new ones" (1997: 145).

At this point it is worth mentioning that people present themselves differently in particular situations, not because they are hiding aspects of themselves, but because some behaviours are more appropriate in one context than another. For instance, DA, who has come in SL for both personal and educational work-related reasons, has two digital representations; one for fun and the other one for work purposes. As she notes *'[…] In order to participate in a real academic conference in here, VWBPE 09, i had to give my RL name and my original avatar...wanted to keep her privacy....so I created this avatar for work purposes, and to be able to associate my RL name with it […]It's funny, though, that at the same time as this "me" was born, my original avatar also was beginning to do serious arts-related work and got a boyfriend' (DA)*.

Gorean role-play groups in Second Life construct their own social rules and play. In doing so, they create and maintain a vibrant community life.

Due to the fact that a variety of contexts affect individuals differently, one's social identity appears to regularly change in relation to the social situation. As such, an individual may appear to have many different and conflicting social identities. HH, who is another educator and comes in SL for both fun and work notes that *'I have met some wonderful people that have become very close friends who are not educators - that is my fun part of sl and non-working so I created another avatar for that 'other' life. It helps a couple of my close sl friends know when I'm here for fun...or when I'm here for work and me too...lol'. (HH)*. This realization appears to be philosophically contradictory to the humanist notions of a complete, manageable "Cartesian" self (Descartes, 1641). The 'self' is conceptualized as more fragmented and incomplete, composed of multiple 'selves' or identities in relation to the different social worlds we inhabit, something with a history, 'produced', in process. The 'subject' is differently placed or positioned by different discourses and practices" (Hall, 1996: 226).

As outlined above, people negotiate multiple facets, they unconsciously associate different facets of their identity with particular contexts. For example, one may maintain a work-based facet that only appears when one enters the workspace. Such archetypes aid users in properly negotiating their presentation, knowing which facet to show given a situation. Therefore, identity of a person or a group of people always depends on others (or other groups of people). Through the variety and multiplicity of our interactions with each other, different aspects of our identities come to play, so that identity never reaches any fixed or stable

manifestation. There are always possibilities for addition of new connections, thus, there is always a 'deferral' to other potential identities (Derrida, 1976). This is clearly demonstrated in the following quote *'Sometimes…when you are well known in some SL circles...you need to be able to be online and not findable...So...if i want to do research for a business …Consulting...i may wear another identity. That no one knows. Or if i read about something in Zindra that i want to know about. To keep up with the culture... but i don't want assholes IMing*[8] *me for months because they saw me shopping in Zindra, or even just looking around...i can protect my privacy. also, all my avis are female. at some point i may take a course or participate in workshop that requires me to have another alt... the university of Washington certificate program, for example, makes their students be alternate gender and ethnicity than their own in RL..for learning purpose. Anyway...' (DA)*.

As noted previously, social fragmentation can be liberating because it allows for individuality, where people have the ability to portray a wide variety of the different aspects of themselves in different, yet appropriate situations (Simmel, 1971: xliii). DA for instance has two avatar accounts, which she both uses regularly and as she notes *'…during the day, which is when most of my work related activities as this avatar take place, this one. At nights and weekends which is when most of my other friends are on, and when her arts-related work is done the other one […] i have two*

[8] IMing refers to Instant Messaging

houses. Two different wardrobes, i collect SL art, and i swap back and forth between them…' (DA).

6.2.3 Beauty and Body Image vs. Fantasy

6.2.3.1 Self-Enhancement and Self-Verification

The research accounts indicate that there appears to be two camps of SL residents; first, are the ones who think that avatars should be as fantastical as possible (*self-enhancement*) and not to conform to physical world limitations *'Why come here and limit yourself? I already have a job/loft/clothes/human body, I wanted to do and have things I wasn't able to in RL' (II)*. Self-enhancement is a fundamental human tendency to "propel the ego upwards" (Koffka, 1935). Self-enhancement theory is based on the notion that individuals are motivated to promote a positive self-concept and solicit positive feedback from other people, referred to as simple self-enhancement, and that those who hold negative self-views tend to distort personal information in a positive direction, referred to as compensatory self-enhancement (Hull, 1943; Kaplan, 1975). This happens in SL as the residents can expose any image they desire and present themselves to fellow residents the way they want to be portrayed, given that SL is a world of imagination and fantasy without any constrains: *'Interestingly, of all my forms, only one looks like the real me, and I find I don't like using that one much in SL. I made that one mostly to see how accurate I could make it. And what that avatar is on-screen, I feel... pretty uncomfortable, really. If I just want to be myself, I'll log off and hang out*

with friends in Real Life. To be "just myself" in a world where I could be anything I can imagine is, to me, as boring as always getting Vanilla ice cream at a store that has hundreds of ice cream flavors available' (CM).

The second camp is the ones who want their avatars to be as real life-like as possible or at least some certain features of their first life (*self-verification*), as the following quote illustrates *'It [my avatar] does have most of my RL features, idealized of course. I do have blond hair and glasses in RL, and the hairstyle I found is almost identical to my RL hairstyle. I am a lot shorter than most male avs because I wanted realistic proportions' (WG)*. Contrary to the previous view, self-verification theory argues that people are motivated to maintain a consistent self-concept, preserve the truth about themselves, and seek objective feedback from others (Swann, 1987). People are motivated to self-verify, since exposing one's self-concept in a stable, self-congruent manner helps avoid psychological and interpersonal anarchy, reinforces a person's confidence in predicting and controlling the world, and facilitates social interactions (Swann et al., 1989).

However, as WG's statement '*It [my avatar] does have most of my RL features, idealized of course'* indicates, sometimes the same people seem to be subject to both self-enhancement and self-verification. Therefore, some researchers propose to abandon an "either-or" approach in favour of a more reconciliatory view (Brown et al., 1988; Swann et al., 1989), suggesting that people are motivated at the same time by self-

enhancement and self-verification and that they will seek to satisfy both motives when possible.

6.2.3.2 Monitoring and Controlling Appearance

Individuals who have been in SL for quite a long period (that being a couple of months) report that they feel pressured to manage their appearance so it meets the SL standards. Residents often stated that since there is a chance for every SL resident to look 'perfect' then why not do so? It seems that consumers in SL have the desire to assert self-control over their avatar bodies. As pointed out by Foucault (1980), a person's sense of being a volitional subject who can exercise self-control assumes a high degree of self-awareness. Equally, this self-awareness occurs through socialization in cultural beliefs, standards, and normative values that define the aspects of one's life that should be controlled. Therefore, the self-aware subject is at the same time subject to a multitude of socio-cultural influences. These influences include subtle social pressures to conform to a particular "look" (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). As CW notes *'if you've been here for several months and you look like you got here a week ago, I tend to be dismissive of you […] this isn't RL so you have complete control over your appearance and you should at least make some effort to be attractive […] I'll be polite and civil, but there wouldn't be any chance of anything further than casual acquaintance […] you don't have to be some knockout looking AV but look like you know what you are doing in here' (CW)*. CW's statement '*there wouldn't be any chance of anything further than casual acquaintance'* echoes historical

analysis indicating that bodily appearance has often been interpreted as symbolizing the moral character of the self (Fallon, 1990), keeping her away from an avatar that does not look attractive.

The last part of the quote '*you don't have to be some knockout looking AV but look like you know what you are doing in here'* clearly demonstrates the need for residents to have the knowledge to act according to the norms of the SL community. First, this underlies a consumption ideology, in which the use of products, such as skin, shape, hair, clothes, accessories etc is portrayed as a decision to take control of one's life and reconstruct their appearance so that it is in accordance to the SL norms (Bordo, 1993; Scott, 1993): *'In rl, we're subject to things beyond our control; genetic inheritance physical disabilities age financial situation. Here, we are whatever we choose to be' (LK)*. Throughout the history of Western culture, the state of one's body has been interpreted as a material sign of the moral character "within" (Foucault, 1978). In contemporary consumer culture, consumers' perceived responsibilities include careful monitoring and controlling of the physical appearance of their bodies.

The last two quotes elucidate the way Second Lifers think about how established avatars' appearance should be. There appears to be two taken-for-granted cultural discourses underlying this thought; the first is the ideal of controlling the body and its related sense of moral obligation to do so, as is also conveyed in KM's statement *'I think looking good makes things better. It's like a social duty. It's nice to be with people who care about how they look. It's kind of like a living museum or art gallery in RL*

and SL. did you ever look at someone and just say, "Wow!". It's a nice feeling and it's good to give that to others in both SL and RL' (KM). Second, it is the cultural idealization of feminine beauty that entails an even stricter set of demands on women to maintain a more youthful and beautiful appearance (Bordo, 1993). The quotes that follow point toward the fact that in SL one can look young and beautiful, like a model: *'You can look any way you like here perfect like a runway model stunningly beautiful sexy in almost any way […] but what i wanted from the beginning was to look sexy but approachable attractive' (KM)*; 'Here *everyone can look young and beautiful if they chose. Until they find out how to do so they are kinda despised. They are like social outcast' (KJ)*. KM talks about looking any way you want, 'perfect like a runaway model' highlighting the consumer pursuit of beauty ideals (Bloch and Richins, 1992), which underlies the consumer society that we live in; a consumer culture that is marked by the competing images of idealized slimness and idealized body images.

Similarly, KJ's quote tackles the same issue about choosing to be young and beautiful, adding that until new residents get the knowledge required in order to adopt to the SL culture they are like outsiders, people who do not really seem to blend with the rest of the residents, since they have not yet met the appearance standards of the culture they entered.

Many consumer actions are motivated by culturally sanctioned knowledge claims concerning how consumption can be used to control the appearance of the body (Glassner, 1990). The processes by which the

culture at large establishes conceptions of the normatively acceptable body and, conversely, renders problematic bodily traits that deviate from the normative standards (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994). The response to the fact that there are some residents who deviate from the normative standards is shown in the following comment: *'…and oh boy some people just look AWFUL… terrible clothes, terrible avatars with exaggerated boobs... but I guess I'm a snob…' (AK)*. But what is perceived as normative standards? Apparently it is the "norms" portrayed on mass media, which play a major role in establishing these normative standards. While the "norm" often evokes the notion of an average, the normative body constructed by mass media images is far from any sense of the average body. Rather, media images have normalized cultural ideals of physical beauty and, conversely, problematize any deviations from these ideals (Bordo, 1993).

Moreover, the cultural stigma attached to those who substantially deviate above implicit body appearance norms often includes the attribution that these individuals have not exerted sufficient effort and self-care to avoid such a situation (Fallon, 1990), as demonstrated in ZS's remark *'It takes less effort to look good in SL so people are more bothered by people who do not make any effort' (ZS)*.

All these mentioned in the above paragraphs illustrate how important the avatar's appearance is and consequently how appearance can have an impact on the interaction between individuals and obviously how it influences the communication between them: *'I expect I have*

preconceptions if people are brand new, then I often offer them stuff I have that they can use - skins, clothes but if they've been around a lot and look somehow... can't find the English word... antipathic? I probably won't strike up conversation also, looking at profiles is interesting, so before deciding 'oh boy what a mess', I look' (AK).

6.2.3.3 Social Interactions as Interactive Performances

While interacting socially, people are aware of and react to the feedback that they receive by the other people in an environment. They adjust their body posture, their facial expressions, and their general presentation. These adjustments are made not to be artificial but to convey appropriate social information for the situation. As articulated best by Goffman (1956), all social interactions can be seen as a series of interactive performances, where the actors are constantly altering their presentation based on their assumptions about what is acceptable in this situation and the reactions that they receive from others. People perform aspects of themselves in order to generate specific impressions, often so that others will perceive them in a positive light. This is the case for ZS when she states *'I think people have more respect when they see that someone took the time to represent themselves' (ZS)*.

Of the many symbols and expressions of self, the body holds a place of paramount importance both psychically (Belk and Austin, 1986; Rook, 1985; Secord and Jourard, 1953) and culturally (Obeyesekere, 1981; Polhemus, 1978; Vlahos, 1979). Therefore, an important component of self-concept is body image, the perception and evaluation of one's own

body in terms of such things as size and attractiveness (Fisher, 1986). This is highlighted in NM's and MidS's remarks *'Certain looks arouse sexual expectations i guess others repel but why? Who can tell' (NM)*; *'Some men go for the more scantily dressed female avi' (MidS)*. Social roles also constitute basic components of self-concept (McCall, 1987; Turner, 1987), acting as symbols of identity with which individuals create self-understanding and communicate self-relevant information to others (Blumer, 1969; Firth, 1973; Hewitt, 1976; Mead, 1934). The body and its adornments may be particularly self-relevant as symbols of specific role identities: *'I am definitely aroused by a male avatar that has the same physical profile as me. I found one once at a conference didn't talk to him though (no point), had tattoos like mine, black hair, singlet, jeans' (CP)*. Extending the metaphor of role performances, Goffman (1959) and Schlenker (1980) discuss the deliberate manipulation of such symbols for purposes of impression management.

Impression management seems to be important in both SL and in the physical world, with SL winning. Residents appear to care more about their appearance in SL than in the physical world. HH notes *'I think in sl, ppl choose who to approach and talk to based on their appearance. The same may be true in rl as well first impressions. Yes, I care about both, probably more in sl than in rl because I think it might be easier to talk to others in rl initially depends on how long you have during that encounter, be it in sl or rl' (HH)*. This clearly shows that an attractive body and appearance is a valuable personal attribute, found by researchers to facilitate success in social, romantic, and economic endeavours

(Berscheid et al, 1973; Brislin and Lewis, 1968; Hatfield and Sprecher, 1986).

Appearance is a very important signifier (at least at first), as it reveals certain information about the person. GL comments that *'We say things like "the habit doesn't make the monk/nun" but well... it does... on a first impression. That applies to RL as well as SL, but I would even say, "more so" in SL, but for a different reason: if you don't care what you wear in SL, you transmit this subtle impression, that you really don't care about SL or find it worthless. That's quite reproducible.' (GL)*. This is associated with the consumer rituals of self-care (Rook, 1985). Drawing from Goffman's performance theory, there are three fundamental components to the passage of social information between individuals. When information is to be conveyed explicitly, it is *given*, but these messages are also impacted by the subtle, and perhaps unconscious messages that are *given off* by the actors, as well as the intention that the observer might infer (Goffman, 1956: 2). Hence, any social message is not simply a set of factual data, but a negotiation in communication relying on both the signals presented by the actor as well as the signs perceived by the observer. The observer's impressions of a situation are based on inference, which results from mental models derived from previous interactions. The individuals that care about SL and about the presentation of their avatar monitor themselves in order to undertake impression management and/or to enhance their own sense of self-image (Goffman, 1959). From this view, fashion apparel, self-care practices and other vehicles of consumer-based identity construction are essentially self-directed consumer choices that

enable individuals to accomplish goals and feel more satisfied with their lives. LK cares more about her presentation in SL than in the physical world '*for one thing, it's sort of a major pastime in SL shopping, decking yourself out. For another, I think avatar appearance is very important. Our avs reflect our inner selves in a way that our RL bodies don't, always. In rl, we're subject to things beyond our control; […] Here, we are whatever we choose to be so the avatar is more nearly a reflection of the inner person' (LK)*.

6.2.3.4 The Aesthetics of Appearance

As outlined above, residents pay much attention to their avatar's appearance as they believe it is very important for them to be presentable in the VW of SL. A common associated theme within this were residents who reported association of clothing and appearance in general with an expression of artistic ability. AL believes that clothing and appearance in general *'certainly represents an imaginative side of anybody's personality an artistic side too' (AL)*.

As Campbell notes "[I]n modern, self-illusory hedonism, the individual is much more an artist of the imagination, someone who takes images from memory or the existing environment, and rearranges or otherwise improves them in his mind in such a way that they become distinctly pleasing. No longer are they 'taken as given' from past experience, but crafted into unique products, pleasure being the guiding principle. In this sense, the contemporary hedonist is a dream artist, the special psychic skill possessed by modern man making this possible" (Campbell, 1987:

78). GL's comment clearly reflects Campbell's statement: *'An aspect of creativity :). Your "look" is your work of art — even if most people don't think about it that way. It's a form of self-expression. And like on other art forms, it's not unbounded, rather the contrary (but some artists also say that the best artistic representations come from having *constraints*). In RL, it's bounded both physically (unless you have unlimited resources for plastic surgery :)))) and by social norms and expectations. In SL, the shape is not a problem — it becomes part of the self-expression too. But it's *still* bound by social norms as well. So the act of wearing clothes is an exercise in art :) "What can I do, within the rules, to create a visual thing that expresses my feelings/moods?"' (GL)*.

Art provides one way of understanding consumers and consumer culture (Brown, 1998; Holbrook and Grayson, 1986; Schroeder, 1997a, 1997b). Artists are able to react to the realities of life and also to influence consumers' conceptualizations and experiences of the same. The body is central to consumer culture (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994). It is a site of multiple representations and acts as the basic element by which we understand and represent the world. While in the social sciences, the ascendance of the mind as the privileged term in the mind/body split has shaped our thoughts and discourse, it is the body which underscores individuals' relationships with the world (Meamber and Venkatesh, 1999). Today, art is (re)turning to the body as a site for exploration of the conditions of contemporary consumer culture, providing insights on consumers' relationships with their bodies: *'Clothing is like a visual language. Like how art tells a bit about the artist' (ZS)*; *'I view my av more*

as a form of expression. Like a drawing I am able to tweak, that then comes to life before my eyes, and that I am able to slip on. Imagine looking at a picture of a dragon in a book, and being able to jump in and be the dragon' (II).

Postmodernism has given great significance on the aesthetics of everyday life, this referring to the tendency to focus more and more on the design and appearance of goods or objects. According to this view, the style and imagery attached to consumer objects becomes of primary importance when judging your purchase. Indeed, some may argue that the consumer lifestyle in itself becomes a kind of work of art. More and more people act as if they are the main character in the film about their own life, and their activities and styles have to be selected carefully in order to meet the quality and excitement criteria of this personally staged biography (Featherstone, 1991). Featherstone (1991) forcefully argues that Western societies are becoming increasingly aestheticized. Products and services potentially signal a particular lifestyle, and style has become a 'life project', where consumers' individuality is displayed in an assembly of artefacts, practices, experiences, appearance and body dispositions (Featherstone, 1991). An increasing number of human activities are undergoing aestheticization (Löfgren and Willim, 2005). Consumer spheres such as the home, the body and the soul are now subject to individual design: *'Avatar looks say a lot about people's aesthetic tastes since some people can wear freebies and look fab and others just dont seem to get it together'* as AL notes. An aesthetic image serves as a stimulus, a sign or

a representation that drives cognition, interpretation and preference (Zaltman, 2002).

In addition to representing the aesthetic and the artistic side of the residents, appearance projects what they would like to be. VWs provide a place where individuals can be whoever they wish to be; they can put aside their unwanted character traits if they so wish and enact traits considered more ideal. This is reflected in RJ's statement *'It is more than just a blob running around. It is the projection of who we would like to be if we could be anything or anyone!. Boys are girls and girls are boys and men are cats and women are dragons. The clothes are a big part of that' (RJ).* The Internet provides individuals with a never ending supply of people who have no expectations of them, allowing them to try out new virtual selves that may embody personal characteristics both actual and of their ideals. A significant number of participants seems to believe that their avatar is the projection of who or what they would like to be, as is demonstrated in the following quotes: *'Well we project into what we would like to be. My avatar is probably a projection of how i would like to be and dress' (CP)*; *'I am better able to make my avatar look like who i want it to be' (DA)*; *'The avatars may be representations of how we would want to look or express' (ZS)*. When unable to do so in the physical world, individuals could become more like who they want to be through the creation and enactment of online personas, perhaps reaping psychological benefits similar to those associated with 'real life' change (Higgins, 1987; Moretti and Higgins, 1990).

6.2.4 Stigmatized Identity

Even though, as described above, the VW of SL is reported to be a place where everyone can experiment with their looks and be whatever they want to be with few limits, have any shape and gender (even no gender at all) they wish and in general inhabit in an avatar that can take any form they desire, residents often reported various categories of stigmatised identities. Stigma, as used by Goffman, refers to attributes associated with a stereotype of a discredited identity. Goffman (1963) states that stigma is related to information about an individual's "abiding characteristics" as opposed to thoughts, feelings, or intentions (p. 43). As CP notes *'I don't mind be talked to by a cat though but he/she will probably have to go extra length to be take serious' (CP).*

SL residents appear to label individuals that belong to certain groups within SL. There seems to be 3 categories that can be labelled 'stigmatized'. Firstly, individuals are labelled as holding a stigmatized identity when they belong to the furry subculture as well as to the Gorean, slavery and BDSM subculture. Residents report their views regarding these two SL subcultures, first the furry community: *'[…] People that dress like animals, weird outfits does make me wonder. I usually don't. Interact i mean. They have different interests than me. I don't see how dressing up like an animal is interesting' (KT)*. Second, as far as the Gor community is concerned, DA reports *'if a female avatar is dressed as a gorean slave, i don't even talk to her. Or to her so called master […] I am against human*

trafficking in all forms, and i find it ridiculous to play act at slavery when real women and children are in sexual slavery all over the world' (DA).

The next category is newbies or avatars with the default shape or avatars dressed 'badly'. Newbie or 'noob', within a VW, is the title that is given to social actors who lack knowledge of the environment and in some key way can detract from the environment for themselves and others. Through inexperience the newbie is a potential hazard to the work of other social actors and thus the identity of the newbie is stigmatized to a degree (Boorstom, 2008).

However, the newbie is often treated differently than an avatar that is quite old, but has not made any effort to try to fit in, to be part of the SL community.

The feelings that the residents show when they run into a newbie are illustrated in the following quotes: *'if someone is a new resident, you forgive them for it and try to help them I am always giving out LMs and notes full of resources' (DA)*; *'When I see someone who is clearly new, I say hello and offer help. When I see someone who is new according to their profile, but isn't acting or talking or looking new...I tend to wonder who they are… pretending to be new is very different from actually being new to sl […]Then you feel taken advantage of when you try to help so appearance does matter in situations like that' (HH)*. Now, the last quote is very interesting as it is clear that people differentiate the newbie from the non newbie (regardless their rezzing day). HH notes that she would share her knowledge with a resident who is new, which is easy to spot, but when

she sees someone who is new only according to their profile, but not from their actions and the way they navigate, she seems to be cautious.

When GL comes across an avatar with ‘freebie/newbie clothes’ she believes that this person is *‘a) too new to be in SL, and possibly uninteresting, or a griefer ;) or b) not really committed, so why should I waste my time? (actually, on a side note, when I help some friends doing their academic research work in SL, the first thing I do, *if* they allow me, is to go through a shopping spree ;))…But yes, it DOES make a difference and QUITE a difference too’ (GL)*. The above quote clearly demonstrates how important GL believes appearance in SL is.

Labelling an individual with a kind of stigmatized identity can often come from visible characteristics. The individual may carry some kind of symbol that is used by others to assign stigmatized identity (Goffman, 1963). When talking about bad-looking avatars KH states *‘if i see someone wearing a noob looking outfit (bad texturing) or prims[9] outta place i either run for the hills or try to help them depending on how much is on my plate at the time.’ (KH)* and KM notes *‘I think, "ah, you didn't just keep your noobie appearance, you went and got a worse one"’ (KM)*.

The third category concerns child avatars, adults that have a child-shaped avatar. Among other forms, an individual can choose to inhabit in a child avatar shape. This seems to be perceived by many residents strange, as CF notes *‘I think that having a child avatar is strange. I don't mean that in*

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[9] Prim(s) or primitive(s) is a single (multiple)-part object. Virtual physical objects such as cars, houses, jewellery, hair and clothing are made out of one or more prims. Objects made from prims are usually created in-world using the built-in object editing tool.

a judgmental or harsh way. I just think SL is an adult world. I act in a way that I would not in front of children, so the idea of hanging out with children (real or not) makes me uncomfortable' (CF). This indicates that people do not feel comfortable being around a kid avatar, even though they know that the individual behind it is an adult, since in order to be a part of the SL mature grid one needs to have their age verified by registering their passport number. Nevertheless, residents keep feeling that they cannot act freely when they know that there is a child avatar around. This is also demonstrated in DH's statement *'It's not that I don't like kid avatars, it's that most times I'm in an adult mood, doing adult things, and most certainly dressing adult. Not the sort of thing I would ever associate with kids, so it does make me uncomfortable at times' (DH)*.

6.2.5 Relationship with the Avatar

Developing the ideas presented above, although all participants seem to care a lot about their appearance in the VW of SL, it is clear that the levels of connection, engagement and emotional attachment to their digital representation varies, in addition to the phenomenon explained above, the extent to which they feel that their avatar is an extension of their body, mind or personality.

Throughout the research process five subcategories emerged under the category 'relationship with the avatar'. These are presented in the following paragraphs.

6.2.5.1 Extension of the Body

Regarding the degree to which the residents feel that their avatar is an extension of their body, it emerged that some residents view their avatar as just a means through which they are able to communicate and interact with the other people in the VW of SL, as indicated by the following quotes: *'My avatar is just like my email address. It represents my "self" in a specific environment […] at a very very simple level, one could just say — avatars are the "interface for communication" in this VW — like email is an interface for communication in the SMTP world […] It just has waaaaay more degrees of personalization. Avatars well... are just soooo much richer' (GL)*; *'It is like a ...tool for communication ... phone for example' (VF)*.

On the other hand there are some other residents who feel that their avatar is an extension of their body and they feel as like their physical body is the one that does all that their avatar does, as illustrated in the following narratives: *'My avatar will be dancing and my rl fingers and feet will be tapping' (HH)*; *'Yes sometimes when I step off a high place, my heart stops for a moment […] once I was padding in a canoe, and I came upon this huge suspension bridge and it was like it happened in real life. I can still feel that moment, of looking up at this enormous structure I felt so small but really I am looking at a little screen. Or if I dance...usually the guys are bigger than me and I feel a sense of their solidity (or lack thereof). I react a lot to things. It's similar to when I watch a movie or TV except it's more physical, more whole body here' (KM)*; *'In a way, like if*

you are dancing or sailing which is very realistic […] and when dancing you can feel it i think the sense of the other of movement and touching. It is or can be quite sensuous with the right partner – erotic […] it was with my friend i was telling you about...i was surprised…I was surprised because i did not believe that ones feelings could be affected by a mere simulation but its not a mere simulation. There's a real person on the other end with whom it seems possible that a real connection can be made' (KJ).

There are people that react to things that happen to their avatar. This means that the individual behind the screen almost 'feels' everything that happens to their avatar body in-world, for instance when dancing, when falling off high building, when being really close to another avatar ('physical proximity') they tend to move a bit further etc. As NW, VF and EN state: *'Somewhat…I do tend to react to things that happen to my avatar as if they happen to me, like being uncomfortable in a crowded room' (NW)*; *'Very unusual feeling. I felt the flight very physically. I could feel the chill in my stomach when my avatar was falling down like suicide even touch when dancing sometimes it felt very real' (VF)*; *'Well I'm not sure, not sure I have the words […] if I hold my lover in sl I "feel" it' (EN)*.

6.2.5.2 Extension of Self

Moreover, there are some residents who report that they do not really feel their avatar as being an extension of their body, but rather an extension of their self, personality, their mind and brain and of emotions. The residents who feel their avatar as an extension of their self and their personality

have provided the researcher with the following statements: *'What I am here is a very real extension of who I am in meatspace*[10]*… and an extension of myself […] there is very little distinction for me between meatspace and virtual space' (MS)*; *'[my avatar is] not really my body .. but my personality def' (KH)*. Some other residents reported that their avatar is an extension of their mind and brain, and of emotions since their virtual bodies do things that they would (or could) never do in the physical world. This can be depicted in the quotes that follow: *'It is an extension of my mind in a way i would love this to be real and walk around in a silly dress with a flower behind my ear and knee socks' (RJ)*; '*More so of my mind and emotions' (NM)*; *'… My avatar body does things couldn't or wouldn't do in RL so it is an extension of my brain, more than my physicality. I have terrible fear of heights in RL. Here, I have jumped off the Eiffel tower... and routinely fall from great heights, having learned to open the FLY just before splitting' (DA)*.

Apart from these views there is also another very interesting point on the subject that comes from GL, who believes that the virtual body (the avatar) functions as the biological body does in the physical world: *'I prefer to see it as a "manifestation" which actually comes from the original meaning of "avatar" really. Our physical body is a manifestation of our self in a world made of atoms, our virtual avatar is a manifestation of our self in a world made of pixels.. It's the "same" self. But since the medium that each world*

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[10] Meatspace refers to the physical world as opposed ot cyberspace or virtual environment.

is made of is different, the "avatar" in each case (physical body vs. virtual mesh) is necessarily different' (GL).

6.2.5.3 Emotional Connection

As far as the emotional connection that residents have with their avatar is concerned, there seems to be a variation; there are residents that do not have any emotional connection to their avatars and others who have. The former group of residents report that they are not emotionally attached to their avatar and that they can easily make another avatar, as noted by KH *'I dont have any emotional attachments to her hehe […] No thats just silly hehe... i could make another ava tom and be fine with ...just all the money i spent dressing this one up and toys i have ugg i couldnt just delete them…i have several alts actually hehe' (KH)*. Another resident, AL, although she says that she does not have emotional connections to her avatar, she is emotionally connected with her SL partner and she adds that it is not the content or the setting that counts but rather the context *'no emotionally involved no however I am emotionally involved to my partner not GB but the man behind GB however I would add this we chat just as much on msn and it is the same it is not because it is sl that is just a support a tool when we chat on the phone or talk on msn .. it is the content what counts not the setting the content not the form' (AL)*.

On the other hand there is the latter group of residents who do feel emotionally involved with their avatar. This happens mostly because through their avatar they go through different emotional states within the VW *'i get angry. i get excited., aroused, happiness when a very bad thing*

happened to me, i had a huge fight or flight response...heart pounding, etc. my avatars are part of me and my brain seems to recognize that… a personal thing, a betrayal' (DA). Some report that what happens in SL has an impact on their moods, just as is illustrated by CL, HH and KJ *'[…] i am happy when you say you like my creation, or, i can be sad if some love experience get bad i have some rl feeling from my avi' (CL)*; *'I feel emotions the same as the avatars would when talking to others like when that friend died my avatar was sad...but I didn't have any tears for her I had them in rl. ppl say funny things and I laugh in rl and use a gesture or words to laugh in sl […] it is great' (HH)*; *'Things that happen in SL can affect our moods in RL like the gf is was telling you about i was really sad about her not for myself i was so sorry for her and the misery she was obviously enduring and i couldnt help *shrugs* and my cousin is currently in love again! Thats clearly a real emotion. She gets so excited when she has a date in SL' (KJ)*.

SL, where the avatars operate in an entirely virtual society, the emotional relationship between the individual behind the keyboard and the avatar, which is directed by him/her, is the closest. The process of developing avatar capital seems to invoke exactly the same risk and reward structures in the brain that are invoked by personal development in 'real life' (Castronova, 2001). Residents are emotionally connected to their avatar as they report that SL would be just a boring video game if there was not any emotional connection: *'I have a huge affection for my avie, huge […] if there wasn't any emotional attachment it's a boring video game with no monsters to fight' (RJ).* BT is another resident who had once deleted her

avatar due to a love-related situation, and she was unhappy as she states '*i felt sad depressed even when i deleted B some time ago…at the time i had another alt and stayed in sl about a week after i deleted B […] i missed her in a way akin to you losing a close friend […] what happened was i misread the rules and B went a lot quicker than i thought so i hadn't had time to say good bye to friends and in doing so using my other avi it was like talking about a dear friend who had died....i went through a whole load of tissues that week :0' (BT)*.

6.2.5.4 Reflection of the Self

Furthermore, some residents during the research project reported that they believe that their avatar is a reflection, a representation of their personal identity. This is indicated in the statements of CL, EN, and ZS *'My sl avatar is the reflection of me in rl' (CL)*; *'I'm just me, here, myself. I look rather younger, and I have more animals :), two wives but I'm me […] she and I are one person :) she's prettier. The inner person is identical' (EN)*; *'It is about identity […] Z represents me. This is not how I look in RL but how I would look if I was younger slimmer etc.. Identity can show through avatars who look nothing like you too' (ZS)*.

6.2.5.5 Identification

For people outside of SL, people who have no idea about what is going on in SL, would probably find statements like *'I identify strongly with my avatar's look in SL. I'm comfortable with him and I feel really displaced in a different shape, skin, whatever' (TR)* or *'I feel very comfortable in that*

avatar - she really feels like me, my virtual identity… She doesn't feel like me if she changes her skin to a more human color.' (MM) weird and funny. It is not so strange or funny though, if they consider the connection that exists between the individual behind the keyboard and the avatar. This is the identification that the residents feel with their avatar.

This can be associated with residents who try many different looks and styles until they see the result on the screen and feel that 'yes, this is me now', as expressed by KM and CP: *'…that's why my appearance bothers me sometimes, if it's not quite right. It's not vanity. Like my face is not quite right now. I know it looks good, but it's not right, not [for] me…too wide, wrong shape it's not like an aesthetic; it's like, you could choose between any number of avatar shapes and skins and hair but you stop at a certain combination. Why? It's because you say, "that's me!". You can look equally beautiful, or maybe even more so, in another combo, but you wouldn't' (KM)*; *'I created a first av, then wandered about forever not knowing where to go and I didn't like my avatar (funny that) just didn't like the look of it. So I created C' (CP)*. CP demonstrates how much she identifies with her avatar's shape and look, and how difficult is for her to adopt (even temporarily) another kind of style *'I cannot evolve with an avatar I don't like. If I was doing role plays I would look exactly the same for e.g. there is a medieval role play I was invited to and we need to dress in medieval clothes; that is already a deterrent for me […] I don't feel comfortable in very sexy clothes in SL either…' (CP)*.

In the physical world, this reflection provides a source of feedback that allows people to adjust their presentation in order to convey what they want to project. In fact, performing in front of a mirror takes on an entirely different aura than performing without one. Yet, in our embodied selves, we have a decent sense of what we are projecting (Boyd, 2002). In the VW, individuals lack the body with which to project themselves. Therefore, they project their ideas, values, and desires into a digital representation that serves as their online agent. GL, who has not thought of that before our chat, wonders why she does not wear gothic or kinky outfits when in public: *‘I think there *has* to be something e.g. I don't *usually* dress goth or kinky ;) (that doesn't mean I don't have any of those outfits haha — but I don't wear them in *public*) So, why not? I guess it's just because these kinds of outfits don't really show my 'personality'. They're "wrong" for me. I wouldn't feel "right" in them; and if I wouldn't feel right, I would convey the wrong signals; people would read me differently; and infer a different personality. But mmmh — isn't that exactly the same iRL too? :) :) I believe so :) (granted, I don't wear the same things iRL and in SL, but that's because the shapes are sooooo different haha)’ (GL)*.

By operating their agent, they are able to perceive themselves. While this may seem deceptive since people may mislead others in terms of how they represent themselves to others online, Boyd (2002) points out that it is not; in fact, it gives people access to all that could potentially be seen about them. It also helps them understand how their different facets of self operate online and how they can adjust them.

CP said to me what one of her friends has commented on the identification process *'…once a friend of mine, a very experienced avatar, said it is only a piece of plastic which was not even plastic when you think about it...we get to link with our avatars one way or another; that is why the identification process is weird somehow… We need to, this is our cognition in a wild world that takes us back to what we know so we reproduce I guess' (CP)*. In spite of how weird or strange or funny this identification process sounds, people seem to go through it, very often demonstrating not feeling comfortable when in certain outfits: *'I have been a non human avatar a few times, but it always feels like me in a costume, rather than me' (NW)*; *'I know its funny when we say we don't feel comfortable in this and that outfit. Funny and even silly but still..... P is me and at best, represents me' (PK)*.

Apart from not feeling comfortable or right in certain outfits, there is another situation, concerning where to leave the avatar body when logging off: *'I don't like to leave myself in an awkward position, like halfway in a wall. I react to rezzing*[11] *on top of another avatar as I would to bumping into someone in RL. I am only lately getting to where I feel comfortable closing SL without finding a good place to leave my avatar. For the longest time I would go somewhere that "I" could sit comfortably until I logged back in. Once I brought in my alt and was able to see my other self disappear when she logged out... I became more comfortable with just abandoning myself wherever. I do try to move into a corner where I won't*

[11] 'Rez' means to create or to make an object appear. 'Rezzing' an object/prim can be done by dragging it from a resident's inventory or by creating a new one via the edit window. The term "rezzing" can also be used for waiting for a texture or object to load, such as "Everything is still rezzing." or "Your shirt is still rezzing for me."

rez into somebody when I come back […] I know objectively that my avatar is never physically or psychically uncomfortable... but it's another of those identification things. It was several months before I would wear really high spike heels. Yes [in SL]. There is no way I could or would wear those things in RL' (LM).

In addition, the identification process is apparent when residents who have 'alts' differentiate between them, demonstrating that they feel that they identified only with a certain avatar, mostly their main avatar. This is illustrated in the quotes that follow: *'I found a script, pet follower that gets one to follow the other, so I always follows C, C takes decisions […] I always present myself as C. So i must admit i definitely identify with C even if she doesn't look like me…the other one is a slave' (CP)*; *'I created an alt and I m keeping it as a bot for my business, but I do not feel the same with it, as I feel with L. This avatar (L) feels different than the other and it means so much more to me' (LT)*; *'well, out of the 8 alts that I have I identify only with two in particular, this one (K) and one other' (KM)*.

6.3 Theme 2 – Escaping from Real Life

The second theme that emerged out of the gathered data is 'escaping from Real Life'. This theme demonstrates how SL gives its residents the feeling that it is a place for escapism, since Second Lifers can temporarily escape from possible problems and concerns of their first life, simply by logging in to the fantasy world, where one can do anything that they have dreamt of and be anyone they fancy.

This theme has been further subcategorized into five categories: escapism in the fantasy of the dream world, transitions between worlds, sky is the limit, fulfilling a fantasy or wish – nostalgia and reincarnation, and exploration/discovery.

As has been explained above, SL captures the imagination of individuals who wish to create new lives that may or maybe not – based on choice - free from societal and physical limitations of ethnicity, gender, geography, sexual orientation, status etc. Residents are the protagonists of their own unfolding narratives, be that as businessperson, family person, child, warrior, submissive, fairy, furry, robot, semi-human etc. Regardless of the kind of avatar, the driver of the avatar is involved in a classic tale of character development. The avatar is their character, the system is their story environment, and the events that happen to the avatar are all steps along a narrative chosen by the driver of the avatar (Meadows, 2008): *'SL is really a sort of escape, but a nice one. Just like any movie -- only difference is you are the leading character. And you can cry and laugh, as I do frequently' (RJ)*. A very important motivation for people to become Second Lifers is the fact that they can easily escape temporarily from the various pressures and concerns that they may have in RL. Although television and other media can also provide an escape from the real world, VWs are far more powerful because they "actually offer the missing aspects of the players' real lives," including "a sense of adventure, social interaction, a sense of participation or purpose, the feeling of achievement, [and] the chance to explore" (Kelly, 2004: 64; Levine, 2006).

6.3.1 Escapism into the Fantasy of the Dream World

Scholars have studied consumption experiences in commercially created fantasy settings, including Las Vegas (e.g., Belk, 1996; Gottschalk, 1995), Hawaii (e.g., Costa, 1998; Whetmore and Hibbard, 1970), the Disney amusement parks (e.g., Fjellman, 1992; Pastier, 1978), luxury hotels (e.g., James, [1907] 1968; Zukin, 1991), and seaside resorts (e.g., Shields, 1992; Thompson, 1983). Such fantasy environments typically evoke playful activities and attitudes and create a climate of escape, pleasure, and relaxation (Belk and Costa, 1998). In such fantasy environments we would also include VWs like SL: *'[…] it's peaceful :)' (AK)*; *'[…] An excellent place for relaxation :) (HH)*; *'I come to sl to relax and have fun […] I go ice skating, especially if I'm feeling a bit stressed […]' (MidS)*. While similarly arousing playfulness and escapism, VWs like SL are fantasy consumption spaces essentially created by the participants, Second Lifers themselves, through emphasis on fantasy and imagination. SL, due to the fact that it is a form of play, makes its residents escape from their 'everyday lives' (Nikolaou et al., 2010). Therefore, one thing that residents enjoy the most about SL is that they can escape from the real world and have some time for themselves. When logging in SL, residents' minds get occupied, giving them a valuable break from anxieties in real life, as the following quote excerpts illustrate: '*Escaping into my own private garden […] time to myself […] things that are not associated with my friends and family; true escapism' (AL)*; *'I would call it a 'secret garden'... […] JUST for you away from family, work, problems […] SL is*

that' (AK); *'A place to escape everyday drama and financial stress and strains […]' (KM)*; *'A place to vent some of my rl frustrations' (HH)*; *'…My tiny place, away from everything!' (GL)*.

The role-playing elements of SL can also be understood in terms of this escapist discourse. Many people come to SL mainly to role-play and they are in-character, either permanently (they log in SL only to role-play) or temporarily (as part of their life in SL), like actors. The avatar allows its driver to become an interactive character in which they can affect, choose, or change the plot of the story, since the avatar is the protagonist, whose development comes from events that happen within the system, and the driver of the avatar is the director, actor, and audience (Meadows, 2008). In the following quote KM describes her role-playing experience: *'For a while I worked in a Victorian brothel. So that was one whole milieu - the clothes, the manners, the curtsies and the sex. I was pretty wild in that area at first….it was fun! After that, I lived in Gor for three months. Well, the whole male-dominance thing can be very heavy at times. In the end it wore me out but I was a free woman, not a slave but the thing is, it's just a role. Most ppl are there for the roleplay. It's like improvisational theatre but the sexual/dominant thing is always there' (KM)*. KH on the other hand plays a different kind of role when in SL: '*i play my roles...mother wife socialite heheh […] i try to treat my SL kids like the children they play but only to a point ... i think they play those avas because they want the love and attention of a parent' (KH)*. Finally, BT explains how her friend role-plays a child avatar: '*one of my girlfriends has a child avatar, totally different name so completely separate and i know those who have the*

same name but different shapes ie child adult and some stay in character that is to say they act and speak like a child […] that girlfriend I told you about, let me give her a name it will be easier lets call her "daisy" […] daisy will go in areas like shops and wait for adult sized ppl to challenge her being a child and the fact is that she can string a few words together' (BT). From these quotes, it can be seen that SL is open to any kind of role-playing, either permanent, or temporary. As Cohen and Taylor (1992) observe, "The world of fairy tales, adventure stones, romances, pop heroes gives fantasy a richer quality: we can deliberately act as if we are someone quite different. Very little is needed to trigger off this type of fantasy, and once the images get going, they can be of a totally absorbing, or even obsessional kind" (pp. 92-93).

6.3.2 Transition Between Worlds

So far it has been mentioned that the element of escapism from the physical world is a very significant reason for people that join SL and a good motivation for them to keep visiting SL. At this point, it is worth noting that residents report not only escaping from their RL but they often note that they escape from SL itself as well! This can be done in two ways.

The first way is by logging off SL. This is clearly demonstrated in the quotes that follow: *'I escape from my rl routine, but I enjoy returning to them (my family and friends) once I have escaped from them a bit :-)' (AL)*; *'My SL is very happy full of fun and when it is a bit dull on odd occasions I log off and do something else' (AK)*; *'The fact that I can use SL when I like*

it, and I can leave it when I don't like it, is the only thing that can make SL enjoyable for me. If I didn't have that ability to escape back to RL, then SL would be a miserable place for me' (VF). The second way is by creating an alt in order to escape from the social life that their main avatar is living, as illustrated below: *'Some say you come to SL to escape First Life, and I was escaping my SL with my alt' (PP)*; *'I have actually made alts for the purpose of being alone…I mean to not get IMs, to not always get involved with people. I find I can't help connecting with people, and I like that, but sometimes I want to be alone' (KM)*.

6.3.3 Sky is the Limit

Another kind of escapism that SL residents reported was that SL offers the prospect of other "worlds" free of some of the problems and constraints of planet Earth (Lin, 2007).

Residents are free to experience anything they can imagine, everything that they can dream of, as CL notes *'In rl we have to make our dreams and sl is the place to search for the dream and we can make it come true!' (CL)*. Just a few clicks and their dream, whatever that is, comes true: *'The freedom to express yourself and be the fantasy character you always felt in the inside / dreamt of being' (XB)*. What they enjoy a lot is the freedom that SL gives them; be it any avatar form '*I can be who I want a robot a guy a bird a teddy bear whatever, total freedom' (CP)*; be it involvement in various activities *'I spend time with my boyfriend, exploring SL, dancing, riding motorcycles, Ice skating, etc. we go to art exhibits, and to special*

events. We go dancing regularly where a certain few djs are, or hear live music' (DA). Second Lifers emphasize the fact that in SL they are doing things that they would like to do in the physical world but they do not or cannot. HH and KM stress how their avatar does things that thry would probably never do in the physical world: *'exploring places like mountains, rivers…I don't dance in rl...but I love to dance in sl' (HH)*; *'I've gotten to do things that I always wanted to do but can't and now I feel as if I've *really* done them [like] riding motorcycles skydiving sexual things the whole dressing up in Victorian clothes ...' (KM)*.

One element that residents reported as contributing to this feeling of escapism from the physical constraints of the 'real world' was the ability to open their wings and fly everywhere within the SL grid: *'Personally, I love to fly, explore, meet nice people, generally do things I would like to do in RL but don't. I enjoy being able to do things I can't or don't do in RL. Things like dancing, owning and wearing large numbers of wildly varied clothes. Flying and teleporting are still amazing to me. Being able to chat more or less in person with people from all over the world, even England' (LM)*. SL enables its residents to experience different aspects of the VW as well as parts of the world they might not ever be able to visit in reality. MidS emphasizes how she is able to travel around the world easily and quickly *'Well you can travel anywhere in the world within minutes which you couldn't do in rl. Go round lots of shops which would take you months. Take part in sports of any kind, drive fast cars, bikes, fly planes, lots of stuff. I'd say it's a lot of fun. It's a good way of getting to know others in the world. Exploring different countries'*. VF points out how differently she

behaves in the physical world and in SL, how free she feels when in SL, where she can behave as she fancies *'In rl I am mother... educator... etc... etc. I have to behave in a predefined way with possible little variations to not shock surrounding. In sl I can behave different crazy.. silly.. funny' (VF)*.

Due to the opportunity to escape from one's first life complexities and responsibilities, SL residents are free to experience the various and diverse aspects that the VW of SL has to offer. SL facilitates experimentation without real-world consequences and therefore has no need for the constraints of the physical world. People's first and SL identity are supposed to be two different sides of them. The name of itself 'Second Life' implies that. This means that residents, who separate those two, have the freedom to live their SL in a way that they might not feel able to do in their first life.

Residents have freedom of expression and choice and this freedom allows experimentation on the different aspects of the people involved; be something different than they are in their RL, or at least re-experience the thing from another perspective, as clearly illustrated in the saying of BT '*At first to be honest it was the pseudo porn *smiles* and the excitement i guess of trying things you or I would find hard to in RL'*.

SL is often reported as a fantastical place, and residents are free to enjoy the creation of their own environments. VWs, in other words, "allow users to make their own stories." (Benkler, 2006). It is like a free-form canvas where residents can do anything they want, and be what they want as

anyone logged in SL can freely unleash their imagination, as LK notes *'The "point" of it (SL) is whatever you want it to be. Friends, money, exploring, creating... it's up to them'*.

At this point what needs to be mentioned is that compared to the physical world, the norms are different in SL. What's considered standard in SL would be considered a risk in first life. SL is a place that facilitates people's aspirations in a way few people in first life can experience. In SL they get a taste of what they can do to be rich, or do something extraordinary for example and without any responsibility or conscience. This amount of freedom of expression, due to the anonymity that SL offers, has in many cases dreadful consequences, since there are some people that exploit the fact that they can 'hide' behind their avatar, as an avatar can take more risks without long term consequences. There are residents that have been hurt, used, and tricked one way or another by fellow residents, as indicated in the quote excerpts that follow: *'I have been hurt in SL… I was very naive and silly at first […] ended up cheating over money […] I was disappointed' (AK)*; *'Here you can ALWAYS say no be rude talk back to ANYONE and thats quite powerful feeling' (RJ)*; *'People will say mean things to you on the Internet when in RL they would keep it to themselves; it's the safety of anonymity […] I can confront you and if you respond in a way I don't like, I can block you, log off […] Whereas in RL it's a lot harder to escape from a situation like that' (IO)*; *'sl can be very dangerous […] not always evident who you are dealing with ... one of my girlfriends has turned out to be a man lol but he has gender issues and say that he was not trying to fool anybody and I accept that' (AL)*.

6.3.4 Fulfilling a Fantasy or Wish – Nostalgia and Reincarnation

In addition to all the above, SL has the ability to fill in a RL gap in some way, like a dream that comes true. Residents feel that SL is a chance for them to either re-live a certain period of their lives that they missed or that they didn't have the chance to really enjoy it, or substitute a specific part of their lives. Indeed, SL can offer the missing aspects of the residents' first lives. RJ describes how SL fulfils her hidden dream of being a child again: *'It's a time of magic for me well it was. I like the time just before i grew up and i can look after myself this age here better than i did then. Dreams are a strong influence in my life and this seemed like a lucid dream. [Being a child in SL] enables me to be a part of myself i keep hidden. I had a difficult time when i was younger, and it is something i dont really talk about rl. So being like this is an expression of how i would like to have been. I cant voice that rl but in sl i can actually be it. For me SL is like an expression of the inner me; a reality where i am a part of me that doesn't get aired otherwise. It's my subconscious walking around a collective lucid dream' (RJ)*.

LK, on the other hand, focuses on the fact that she has already made her choices in her life and SL is a chance for her to take a different path *'I'm in my late 50's most of my life choices have been made. Here, I can go back, take a different path, experience life again, with a new set of choices' (LK)*.

Second Lifers are able to become something else within the VW and feel less isolated and restricted in their movements. In a virtual environment like SL, maintaining multiple facets can offer relief and empowerment for marginalized individuals, as they can find acceptance and support in certain communities while being shunned by society as a whole (Boyd, 2002). This is the case of DA, who feels that SL restores her sense of being a citizen of the world and NM, who feels that she can have more impact on the environment: *'Having a PHD, having been an academic in a school that was not very sociable, and raising a child by myself made for a pretty isolated life. I love to travel. So, meeting people from around the world, having an intellectual life in here that I missed from grad school days, being part of making something new. And, i have a boyfriend. In my age group in the US, there is a definite shortage of single men […] having my primary romantic relationship in a VW…beats the heck out of being mate less, as I had been for more years than you would believe…all these things...make it complex… Also, SL restores my sense of being a citizen of the world. I grew up in one city, then traveled for 20 years…Then came home. SL gives me a sense that i am still a traveler. And I am, in RL...but not as much as I'd like' (DA)*; *'my SL persona is more open about expressing my fears and desires and I feel that I can have more impact on the environment. I think I meant that I can have more impact in SL in terms of my interactions with other than I can in RL so I take measures to optimize that' (NM)*.

Another case is HH, who was feeling lonely in her first life and SL seems to have filled that gap, making her feel happy: *'My hours don't allow me to*

get a SL job so I spend some of my hard earned real money and I think of this as one form of entertainment for myself. I rarely do fun things in my first life for myself, so I spend it here. SL has affected my relationship with my rl partner in a negative way. But I am happier overall due to my sl immersion. I was very lonely before.....I don't feel that way at all anymore' (HH). Moreover, VF notes that she is more socialized in SL than in her first life *'I have to spend a lot of time at home in rl last years. I feel lack of it' (VF)*.

Other residents feel that SL fulfils a fantasy or a wish, which due to RL constraints is difficult to do so. EN talks about how she expresses her sexuality in SL, which is impossible in the first life: *'Well E is gay and I'm nominally straight in rl by default […] I think I've always wanted to be gay in RL but it's just not possible' (EN)*.

KM believes that SL is another chance, a place where one can be and do whatever they want '*It's like being reincarnated without dying *smiles*' (KM)*. This is very important since when discussing virtual bodies, scholars are primarily concerned with "avatars". The term avatar, as has already been mentioned, is derived from the Sanskrit *avatara*, which is meant to suggest "the idea of a kind of transubstantiation, the incarnation of life in a different form" (Tofts, 2003: 56).

6.3.5 Exploration/Discovery

SL residents can discover aspects of themselves that otherwise they would not in RL. Free-form environments such as SL challenge users to

try new things and to explore avenues that are impossible in 'real life' (Jones, 2007). This happens due to the fact that people in SL are open to challenges. SL is shaped by the millions residents' minds, as GL notes *'[…] the mind shapes *this* world immediately, directly, and without doubt, e.g. we ALL know that SL is just a collective work of millions of minds. There is no question about that :). Content doesn't "just happen" :) Someone has to imagine it and place it here'*. Residents are able to better explore themselves just because they have the chance to experiment with almost anything! Residents report having met new friends from all over the world, discovering parts of themselves, getting more life experience, being able to see how others view the world, as well as being creative and imaginative; Second Lifers seem to believe that all these experiences can contribute something back to their first life '*we can use some sl experience in rl… sl is good for it' (CL)*.

Restating the aesthetic elements of the SL life, the ability to be creative seems to be one very important factor for the residents to have an enjoyable SL: *'SL gives me the opportunity to do virtual art' (NY)*; *'I love building. I just bought the high rise hotel next door and I've been remodeling…this gives me opportunities to be creative, the possibilities for the small business person. Well, I play at several. I rent out apartments in the high rise I mentioned and I am slowly building an inventory of houses. I sell those on the XStreetSL website *grins*....but I always think of it as play. if it isn't fun here...why bother? There are lots easier ways to make money' (LK)*; *'I think more than anything I enjoy the creativity; building things, learning to script a little' (NW)*.

6.3.5.1 Suspension of Morality, Different Rules, Different Moral Codes

SL is a whole world, which is generally quite a replication of the physical world, with a lot of differences though. In SL there is suspension of morality since the rules and the moral codes are different. Moreover, social distance and detachment from the social are quite apparent in this VW. Overall, there is a sense that "What happens in SL, stays in SL". Residents can swap gender, form relationships (with either gender) and they can even get married in order to make their SL relationship official. They can have a nice wedding in a chapel or anywhere they choose and after that they have the reception in a romantic place. There is even gift registry! Moreover, they form families (cousins, aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers etc), and they can even have children, if the couple wishes to.

People who are married in the physical world may have partners, with whom they develop intense and intimate relationships in the safe place of SL and this is a very common phenomenon. Partnerships and intimate relationships are developed and terminated a lot easier and faster than in first life. The next narrative comes from EN, who in her first life is married, and who has a very strong intimate relationship in SL *'With Lin and Cin, I am intimately close, I mean as far as it can safely go. However, there's no rl crossover at all, not in the fam, no none […] The ties are not equal in all directions, but Leo and I are very tightly bonded […] a year ago last month, my partner vanished from sl. I was very attached…well after a year, I still cry sometimes. Real tears. If I lost either of these two here, or*

Lin I'd be the same way. Very strong, genuine emotional attachments […] we're proud of what we have. That's really the purpose of our family. It's a lifeboat :) a refuge but see, it works because we share a long history RL years of time. Cin and I are partnered nearly a year, but knew each other far longer. Leo and I just about a year but close... not sure. But in any case, deep roots. We work hard to create the happiness we have sl can be a brutal place (emotionally brutal). Our family is meant to' (EN).

As residents often note, in SL they are able to either experiment with hidden aspects of themselves, probably due to the anonymity that exists in the VW, or use SL as a testing ground in order to explore freely their needs and wants that may not be easy or socially accepted in the physical world. As Turkle (1995) describes, the anonymity that the Internet provides, and as a result, virtual life, offers individuals plenty of room for exploration and experimentation with different versions of self, especially with the constructions and the reconstructions of self that are intrinsic to postmodern life.

KM is a man in first life, who has a female avatar. When I first met her, the first thing that she said to me was that '*I would like to tell you that in RL I'm a man because it's pretty significant to me. In real life I'm not gender dysphoric, but if it were possible to change gender, I would. I like who I am in RL - a lot, I have a good life but I would massively prefer to be female if that were possible, so…here it is'*.

This reinforces the fluidity of gender and sexuality subject positions that VWs enable. Judith Butler (1993) argues that when heterosexual and

gender norms are disrupted, "gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm" which pose a threat to the current sexual regime (p. 10). In the virtual, these fissures are quite clear, at least with virtual bodies. In some ways, the entire space is "queered" because the ability to take on the appearance of any body and to express self however one wishes is freely available in a way that the physical world does not allow. Identity position, at least in the virtual space, is fluid. And, due to this, many people do choose to live their SL in forms that are not as they are in first life, be it as anthropomorphic animals, vampires, aliens, or others.

For KM, the avatar represents the woman that this biologically male transgendered person massively prefers to be. The "carbon copy" is of the idealized-I rather than the conflicted Ego in physical space (who is only beginning to step through transition, which will be difficult due to personal complications in real life). In that way, the avatar becomes a site for the ideal self to be expressed.

EN narrates her experience of being a lesbian in SL, whereas in first life she is straight, or as she puts it *'closeted bisexual'*: *'What keeps me in SL is love. Grace, I've been married to one man since 1981. I've been completely monogamous with him since 1977, for most of that time, I've been what I guess is called "closeted bisexual" so you can sort of guess the rest, I'm sure […] I can't be gay in rl […] in here I am a lesbian, with two wives and a little slave girl :)))) .[In SL] there's a certain safety that I seem to have found with my "wives" […] I'm just a bit shy about my life*

here, of course I tell NO one in rl. My husband is diabetic and we've not had much of a sex life for about ten years. Anyway I came to sl and got very lost in it. I got severely hurt, and I knew I had to figure out why, and how. Then eventually I met Cindi and it all changed and Leo and Lin. I've made my peace with it, but without cin, lin, and leo and sophie who are truly my family here? I'd be long gone' (EN).

In EN's narrative the element of repression in first life is evident, which she overcame in the safe place of SL. Similarly, NM has come to SL in order to explore her own sexuality, which she has been repressing over the years. Here is what NM narrates: *'What i originally thought about SL was it might help me explore my own sexuality and confirm, or otherwise, my lesbianism which i must say i have really tried to repress over recent years. There was also the possibility it might be fun i guess not sure that is a very good reason for using SL - as a sort of sexual testing ground […] i enjoy the company of women, women intelligent and sophisticated with whom one can develop a friendship ok so it within a virtual environment. Have you any idea grace how many married women there are in lesbian environments. It surprised me but i didn't feel alone […] I also, by and large, feel safe here feel safe […]' (NM)*.

The same is the case for LT, who has not have any sexual experience with girls in first life: *'......firstly i was coming into SL about sexy games. I'm a lesbian Grace… […] truly lesbian and i dont have any experience with girls in RL yet…and after discover SL…i become addict of this...because i was able to do this while cannot do in RL was still living with parent's*

home etc. […] im a slut in here but i dont have sexual experience with girls in RL yet; makes us more free; we shouldn't care that much about some things […] before SL.. i was tense about my sexuality.. i was feeling strange... but after SL.. after i ve seen many people like me and they accepted me.. i become more calm.. became more selective […]' (LT).

For LT the queer virtual body seems to be a site of experimentation, fantasy and learning about the queer subject position prior to further acceptance or expression of that position in first life (that is, "coming out"). It could be used as an "outlet" for certain desires that are held back in her physical world existence. Or one could choose to present as queer (in EN's case, bi) in SL because they enjoy virtual sex there more with female avatars than with male. In any case, the virtual queer body is chosen as either an expression of self, a potential self, or a fantasy self.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter concerns the construction of the identity of the "avatar-as-consumer" within the specific limitations and possibilities of the context of SL. What has been mapped out here is a paradoxical context within which the identity concerns of consumers emerge in three distinct ways:

1) *Hyperbolisation of the socialisation process*. There are a few limitations on self construction, therefore expectations for appearance are higher and concomitantly sanctions are more severe. This is an interesting and powerful way to examine the social construction of acceptable identities.

2) *Exaggerated and articulable multiplicities of self*. Postmodernism talks about multiple identities and fragmentation. SL pushes this to its limits, allowing full expression of multiple personas. This is interesting because it allows a mapping of what the consumer is constructing as the "real self".

3) *SL as a site for testing possible RL identities*. Exploration of what might be taken as risky identity choice. This is interesting as it encourages and allows articulation of queer identities with regard to questions of how those identities are produced and enacted through consumption.

These three paradoxes related to the construction of consumers' identity makes SL a highly complex and contradictory world. So, there is a need to better understand the construction of the "avatar-as-consumer" and how the participants' consumption choices enact the virtual materiality of the self. Therefore Chapter 7 presents consumption around the avatar body and the emergence of the "avatar-as-consumer".

Chapter 7 : Data Analysis Part 2: Consumption and the "Avatar-as-Consumer"

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the second part of the analysis of the collected data, which deals with consumption around the SL avatar and how the "avatar-as-consumer" emerges. In this part three themes emerged: 'pleasure in the act of shopping', 'ways of looking and ways of being' and 'the shaping of identity through the consumption of clothing'. All three themes have been subcategorized into three, four and three subcategories respectively.

Under the theme 'pleasure in the act of shopping' the three subcategories are: 'seeking information before going for shopping', 'where to buy from this time?' and 'quality matters'. Under the second theme 'ways of looking and ways of being' the four subcategories are: 'looking good, feeling good', 'first impressions matter ... so what to wear?', 'projecting a certain image ... or just my mood', and 'uniqueness of conformity?'. Finally, the third theme 'the shaping of identity through the consumption of clothing' has been subcategorized into three categories; these are: 'I shop therefore I am', 'shopping for a reason', and 'hyperconsumption fantasies'.

This part is of great importance to the current thesis as it gives a deeper understanding of the consumption practices that Second Lifers go through

as they develop their unique avatars, by providing more profound insights about the underpinnings of Second Lifers as consumers.

As with tangible goods, virtual goods are connected to establishing identity. In a VW, like SL, with around one million distinct residents logging in monthly, uniqueness becomes a significant reason for buying virtual goods with which to identify the avatar. Nevertheless, as much as the resident may wish to establish their looks and identity within the world for their own reasons, there is also ongoing pressure for them to do so beyond their original avatar creation and alterations. As outlined in the previous chapter, SL offers residents a highly complex and contradictory world, with a hyperbolisation of socialisation processes, exaggerated and articulable multiplicity of "self" and a space where potential RL selves can be rehearsed.

Within this complexity purchases are driven by the resident's yearnings and by social pressure. Residents may value goods for their aesthetics or functionality, yet this appreciation can exist in association with broader social support or even pressure to an individual identity or appearance, or to establish membership within particular groups.

Part 2 of data analysis concerns the expression of the "avatar-as-consumer" and SL, and more specifically *how* residents do their shopping in the VW in order to satisfy their and their avatar's needs and how shopping for specific items signify the identity they want to convey in the VW of SL. Residents care about their looks very much as they believe that their purchase behaviours 'say' something about their self.

The rest of the chapter presents in detail the three themes and their subcategories that emerged regarding consumer identity in SL.

7.2 Theme 1 – Pleasure in the Act of Shopping

The first theme that emerged concerns the pleasure that Second Lifers have documented that they obtain from the act of shopping. This theme has been further subcategorized into three categories. There are: ‘seeking information before going for shopping’, ‘where to buy from this time?’, and ‘quality matters’. These subcategories are discussed below.

7.2.1 Seeking Information before going shopping

Residents report that one of the major activities in SL is shopping. Residents shop for different garments, hair, skins, accessories, props etc in order to customize their avatar in any way they want to. As consumers do in the physical world, before going for shopping they seek information about specific products and do a search about what is in the market. SL is no different; consumers in SL search for relevant information before going out in the shops. However, in the hyperbolised socialisation of SL, as explained in the previous chapter, often information search before purchase is heightened. This is reported as occurring even with products that would be seen as trivial in RL.

Consumer research documents that there are two types of information search: the internal and the external. The internal search is the process of recalling stored information from memory (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2009;

Rowley, 2000; Bettman, 1979; Blackwell et al., 2001; Mitra et al., 1999). DA, for instance, has been visiting specific fashion shops to which she has already been a customer, she has already experience with these designers, and who apparently fit her taste, as she notes *'in RL, i don't go for brands so much well, the thing is, my tastes are so different compared to the SL norm that i have to really look for designers who fit my taste. so..i mostly am going for SL brand names because i have experience with those designers. and i have not gone to a big "mall" in Sl really since my first year or so. Most of the laces i shop are on their own sims. if i spend more than 300L on an item, it is unusual. so. i mostly also am not following the fashion trends in SL. that whole industry... (DA)*. Similarly, AK generally prefers to shop from the same places *'[…] I do look at the fashion blogs for ideas. And some addresses wander round malls ;) I'm fairly 'faithful' to some places and also don't always have the patience to go' (AK)*.

The external search concerns the process of collecting information from outside sources, e.g. magazines, dealers, ads etc. Consumer research identifies two types of external search (Bloch et al., 1986; Hoyer and MicInnis, 2009): 1) ongoing search, a search that occurs regularly, regardless of whether the consumer is making a choice, and 2) prepurchase search, a search for information that aids a specific acquisition decision.

Ongoing search, or 'browsing' (Toms, 2000), includes activities that are independent of specific purchase needs or decisions. That is, ongoing

search does not occur in order to solve a recognized and immediate purchase problem (Bloch et al., 1986). Ongoing information searchers, are not driven by an immediate purchase decision, but are interested in building a bank of information for future use and are often driven by the entertainment value of information gathering (Bloch et al, 1986; Schmidt and Spreng, 1996). This builds general product-class knowledge. Not always search activity is linked to purchase intent; search outside a purchase context can involve a wide range of activities; for example, reading a fashion magazine or fashion blog to see the newest styles or discussing fashion trends with friends can serve the same purpose as browsing through a clothing boutique: *'[…] fashion blogs and e-zines are by FAR the largest SL websites in terms of readers' (GL)*.

Residents keep up on checking SL fashion updates, including bargains and new collections through SL fashion magazines, SL designers' websites and even SL TV fashion shows! '*There are some periodicals in SL that show the latest styles and there is also a fashion show on Treet TV. If I saw something in the show or in a SL fashion magazine I would go to the shop to see what else they have. Do you know about the TV? And the magazines? You find them outside of some high end shops usually. Sometimes I see what is on Treet TV and watch a bit of a fashion show' (ZS)*. DA notes how she checks a specific fashion website daily *'i scan each day a website called Fabulously Free in SL....which is very good at finding nice thing for free or very cheap....' (DA)*.

Another very important source of updates regarding the SL fashion news is the fashion groups formed in SL, and which are '*by far the ones with more members' (GL)*, attracting a large number of members. These fashion groups send to their members notices about sales that may be on, new arrivals etc. and have become a great source of information for those who intent to make a purchase: *'I have had my "periods" for different designers lol so when I like somebody I join the group and keep up to date with what he/she is doing i like it when things are well made' (AK)*; *'[…] only weekly or so, dollarbies and sales may be every few days it really depends on what notices I get from groups I/we belong to. My other av is a member of Fashion-R-Us and many other individual store groups'. (HH)*.

Prepurchase search has been defined as "Information seeking and processing activities which one engages in to facilitate decision making regarding some goal object in the marketplace" (Kelly, 1968: 273). In the case of SL blogs the easiness of searching for fashion-related information is a great facilitation, and time saving, as AK notes '*I read the fashion blogs rather than spend hours and hours at shopping sims […]? I get impatient when I'm shopping here I want to find things quickly' (AK)*.

This information search tends to be product-specific (Wolfinbarger and Gilly, 2001; Berthon et al., 1999). Again, residents tend to read SL fashion-related blogs and fashion magazines before going for shopping: *'I follow some freebie blogs and I see looks that appeal to me […] I saw a cute winter outfit yesterday on a blog, and I want it but not because it's winter it's just a great outfit. So that changed, it's different. I went from buying*

nothing, to buying more frequently and better, and then to buying lots of shoes, they are fun' (KM); *'i read some of the magazines for SL work purposes, and i sometimes will go after a few things i see in the magazines (DA)*. Residents do not only follow the blogs, magazines and TV in order to see what is in fashion, before doing a purchase, but also in order to help them create a great look, if they are not so imaginative and creative, as is the case of AL *'I know that I do not have the visual imagination to create a great look so i stick to things that I see in the blogs and that appeal to me and that is enough for me I dont really know but I wear the things that I see and that I like' (AL)*.

In a context where information search is heightened, as has been found here, it is unsurprising that word of mouth is as highly important by residents. Using a variety of forums and blogs SL residents regularly discuss the need for generalized differentiation, customization, improving the self and, perhaps of greatest concern, not looking like a new user (noob) so that they will not be negatively judged. As KM notes *'I belong to the Forum Cartel group and often we tell each other of sales […] People will say, "last night I went to Simone's and I spent almost $3000" and they talk about what they got. Sometimes people put up a picture in the forums and ask, who made this hair? These shoes? This dress? and people know who made them, just from looking. I think it's because some people are outstanding good at making certain things, and you want them and also you get educated about different levels of quality. Making things is a big part of SL'. (KM)*. Vilpponen et al. (2006) examined individual on-line use and referrals to others concerning Internet findings of information. Their

work suggested that traditional "face-to-face/word of mouth" information sharing behaviour may be extended to the Internet environment. SL is one environment like that, in which consumers can discuss their purchasing experiences with knowledgeable friends and fellow residents, get and give recommendations of specific products and in general exchange ideas and feedbacks related to shopping experiences, among other issues *'I usually ask some fashionista friends for advice ;) […] I follow recommendations a lot, e.g. I have this idea that people with far better taste than me, and understanding what the market is offering, will tell me "shop here and not there, because you'll get better things". So good recommendations are *usually* a criterion too' (GL).*

Within this situation of enhanced concern over appearance, and where appearance can mean instant life or death to the avatar, copying other avatars seems common and accepted. Residents reported that they often see an outfit worn by another resident and without any hesitation they ask them 'Can you please pass me the LM[12] of the place you got it?' As BT and PK demonstrate *'I have never been asked if my clothing is from a or b designer here that seems to be the way it works here I have been asked for the LM to the shop though […] Same with me, if a fiend is wearing something nice i usually ask for the LM and go take a look' (BT); 'Definitely word of mouth is working here as well. More so than in rl. i find women are eager to pass a lm from a shop that you just complimented their outfit… […] my friends drag me around mostly... or i see a cute outfit and ask*

[12] LM is a shorted form of the word landmark

about it... and get the landmark.. and i'll spy out the place' (PK). Residents reported that in contrast to their behaviour in RL, overt and open copying, asking for details from the admired avatar was a commonplace activity in SL.

7.2.2 Where to Buy from this time

Shopping research has long focused on the utilitarian aspects of the shopping experience (Bloch and Bruce, 1984), which has often been characterized as task-related and rational (Batra and Ahtola, 1991; Engel et al., 1993; Sherry 1990b; Kempf, 1999; Arnold and Reynolds, 2003; Childers et al., 2001; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Jones et al., 2006; Fiore and Kim, 2007; Lim and Ang, 2008; Bridges and Folrsheim, 2008) and related closely to whether or not a product acquisition 'mission' was accomplished (Babin et al.,1994). Nevertheless, traditional product acquisition explanations may not fully reflect the totality of the shopping experience (Bloch and Richins, 1983). Due to this, the last several years have seen resurgent interest in shopping's hedonic aspects, particularly as researchers have recognized the importance of its potential entertainment and emotional worth (Babin et al.,1994; Langrehr, 1991; Roy, 1994; Wakefield and Baker, 1998; Bridges and Florsheim, 2008; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Jones et al., 2006; Overby and Lee, 2006; Kwortnik and Ross, 2007), as many consumers derive intrinsic enjoyment from the process of shopping (Guiry and Lutz, 2000).

Hedonic consumption has been defined as those facets of behaviour that relate to the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). This viewpoint proposes that consumption is driven by the fun a consumer has in using the product, and the criteria for 'success' are essentially aesthetic in nature (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982).

Moreover, hedonic shopping motivations are defined by the shopper's judgment of the experience-based benefits and sacrifices, as consumers may shop for the experience over completing a task. Thus, the hedonic aspect of shopping consists of fun and enjoyment of the shopping experience (Babin et al., 1994; Bloch and Bruce, 1984; Sherry, 1990a; Kim and Forsythe, 2007). Compared to shopping's utilitarian aspects hedonic value's 'festive', ludic, or epicurean side has been studied less often (Sherry, 1990a). Hedonic value is more subjective and personal than its utilitarian counterpart and results more from fun and playfulness (Spangenberg et al., 1997; Dhar and Wertenbloch, 2000) than from task completion as mentioned above (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Therefore, hedonic shopping value reflects shopping's potential entertainment and emotional worth (Bellenger et al., 1976).

In SL there seems to be an extended hedonic connection to the act of shopping as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an end and as such rather than reflecting the fun the user has with the item shopped for, in SL residents reported that the shopping experience itself is extended and supersedes by some way the fun of using the item. This relates to

Arnold and Reynolds' (2003) hedonic shopping types: adventure shopping, gratification shopping, idea shopping and value shopping. Adventure shopping recognizes that shoppers seek sensory stimulation while shopping for escapism, simulation, and adventure. This is the case of MidS who finds shopping an adventure as she comments *'For me shopping is an adventure…looking around in all the different stores that exist in SL…well not all hehe…what I mean is that even if I cannot find something that I want to buy that's ok as I know that there are many other places I can look…normally I am not like that…I mean in RL…I do not really have the time to go all around the stores…too time consuming…but in sl is totally different…the teleporting is great and I enjoy very much going from one store to another in less than seconds….its a great adventure for me ☺' (MidS)*.

Gratification shopping often helps consumers overcome a bad mood, relieve stress or indulge in a self-gift or personal indulgence. In SL this also seems heightened in consumer comparisons to RL. CP and VF note that for them shopping is a solution to their bad mood, as they respectively note: *'[…] that is what we cling onto…that is where i lash out (LM= huge free market). Better than RL retail therapy, it really fills a hole when needed' (CP); 'From time to time... actually when I feel in a "blue" mood I can spend a lot of time and money shopping…it makes me feel much better….bad habit hehehe' (VF)*.

Babin et al. (1994) recognized the value of shopping as a self-gratifying, escapist, and therapeutic activity, describing respondents who view

shopping as a ‘pick-me-up’ and a ‘lift’ when they feel depressed. Similarly, Tauber (1972) identified the self-gratifying benefits of shopping, such that the process of shopping to make the shopper feel better. Finally, shopping has been acknowledged in the literature as a form of emotion-focused coping in response to stressful events or simply to get one’s mind off the problem (Lee et al., 2001). All of these elements were reported by residents as being more evident within SL than their RL consumer behaviour.

Idea shopping entails shopping to seek out innovative products, and the latest fads, fashions, and trends – generally to gather information more so than products. BT’s shopping can be said to be idea shopping as she visits different stores frequently in the search of new fashions and trends: *‘the clothing here is on the whole very good once you get the right shops…I enjoy looking around checking out the new trends in the various stores without necessarily buying something…I find this activity very pleasurable and enjoyable’ (BT)*. This motivation corresponds with Tauber’s (1972) personal shopping motive of learning about new trends and keeping informed about the latest trends in fashion, styling, or innovations. As outlined above, in SL browsing to obtain information is an end in itself, not to make a particular purchase (Bloch et al., 1989). Ongoing search represents a leisure pursuit as an end goal (Punj and Staelin, 1983)

Last, is the value shopping which comprises the thrill and rewards associated with finding a deal and acquiring a product on sale, looking for

discounts, and hunting for bargains (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). As has emerged from the respondents' narratives, most of them seem to belong to this shopping category, since a significant number reported that they go shopping for the sheer excitement of bargain hunting. DA reports how she is going everyday to a specific store for the daily free dress *'until recently, this avatar, sounds odd to talk in third person, went daily to Mrs. Wetherbys for the daily free dress... i am wearing one of the casual ones from there. The dresses are free...and she makes a mint selling shoes, bags, etc to go with. So this dress was free and the shoes were 20L….feels good to buy either for free or a bargain…makes my day ☺' (DA)*.

Value shopping is grounded in McGuire's (1974) collection of assertion theories (McClelland, 1961), which view the human as a competitive achiever, seeking success and admiration, and striving to develop his potentials in order to enhance his self-esteem. Consumers may obtain hedonic benefits through bargain perceptions, which provide increased sensory involvement and excitement (Babin et al., 1994). This is clearly demonstrated in BT's account '*The enjoyment for me is to search for and find bargains….I just love it…why pay more when you can find something almost the same on sale? In sl there are so many choices, so if you do a good search you find good garments in a good deal' (BT)*. In addition, value shopping may be related to the choice optimization dimension identified by Westbrook and Black (1985), given that finding a discount or bargain may lead to satisfaction from personal achievement. This is reflected in CP's narrative: *'… am still unsure about spending money*

because I shop (love doing so) for free stuff not always good quality but I need a precise goal to spend on SL sounds like I am to serious hey? The thing is if you look well enough there is so much out there for free that it feeds my yearn for more stuff in my inventory. I must have around 20 houses to play with billion scripts, textures and sounds all that for free. I have a total island with dolphins and all apparently and I haven't even rezzed it yet. For the moment I have more than what I need. I feel I can start spending if I can't find what I want. The interesting feeling is when you get stuff for free and your excitement if not obsession to acquire because you don't pay. Greediness is full blast then unless it is just me?' (CP).

In the shopping literature, the pleasures of bargain hunting have gotten little attention. Bargain-oriented shoppers have often been portrayed as cool and calculating in contrast to pleasure-driven recreational shoppers (Cox et al., 2005). In his classic study of urban shoppers, Stone (1954) described the price-oriented 'economic' shopper as an "…approximation to the 'economic man' of the classical economist…"caring only about "…quick efficient sale of merchandise…" and "…able to participate in the market in a detached, interested, alert manner" (pp. 38-42). Likewise, Bellenger and Korgaonkar (1980) described price-oriented 'economic' shoppers as disliking shopping, while pleasure-oriented 'recreational' shoppers are less concerned with price. On the contrary, some researchers have suggested that the hunt for low prices is not driven exclusively by cool cognition but may also by a source of emotional satisfaction. Schindler (1989) discusses "…the emotional response which

a price promotion can generate" (p. 447) and posits that paying a low price can induce feelings of pride, intelligence, and a sense of achievement, as HH reports *'Oh I love the MM boards :) who doesn't love the freebies? Lol […] I tend to look for sales or deals or dollarbies[13] if possible…it makes me feel proud'*. Morris (1987) suggests bargain-hunting shoppers gain pleasure from beating the system. Equally, Mano and Elliott (1997) argue that paying a reduced price can cause consumers to feel pride, excitement, and a sense of accomplishment. This is illustrated in AK's narrative *'…after a while you find 'good' freebies like skins for group members, etc. I go for them…why not? And you know what? The feeling is soooo good…it is like an achievement for me :P like … how can I say…knowing that I can find good free stuff around the shops? Feels great!' (AK)*.

7.2.3 Quality Matters

Several manufacturers, retailers and marketers use quality as a way to differentiate their product from their competitors. Several studies have been conducted on consumers' perceptions of clothing quality, yet it remains an ambiguous concept. Many previous qualitative studies have been limited to unidimensional scales that concentrated on the effect that concrete cues (for instance, country of origin, workmanship and price) had on consumers' evaluation of quality. Results of these studies have been mixed. The assessment of an apparel item is an important step in the

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[13] Dollarbie is any item in SL that is sold for 1$L.

decision-making process. It includes such an assessment of the quality of the item, which may not only be limited to the functional aspects, but may also include the aesthetics (De Klerk and Lubbe, 2008). SL aesthetics can be defined as the study of human reaction to the non-instrumental qualities of an object or occurrence. A total aesthetic experience includes the appreciation of the formal, expressive and symbolic qualities of a product, appearance or environment (Fiore and DeLong, 1994; Karnes et al., 1995; Fiore and Kimle, 1997; O'Neal, 1998).

In SL, residents reported that quality was a key marker for them in making choices to clothe and decorate their avatar raising the question of how quality is defined in this specific context. In consumer research Swinker and Hines (2006) developed research into how consumers define quality (see also O'Neal, 1988; Lennon and Fairhurst, 1994; Hines and O'Neal, 1995). What is remarkable is that most of the issues raised are also evident in the VW of SL, despite its virtuality. SL residents, as with RL, use intrinsic cues: concrete characteristics that are inherent within the product (e.g. fabric and workmanship), which seem to be very important in both the physical world *'in RL I look for quality construction' (DA)*; *'…a mix of really nice fabrics' (AK)* and in SL, since a significant number of Second Lifers reported their concern about good texture apparel, some indicative accounts are: *'…I'm so idiosyncratic. I mean, either jeans and a tee or zen robes a really nice bikini? …Beautifully made…a nice fabric texture' (EN)*; '*The textures are the most important is the shading realistic? does the fabric look "real"? is there detailing? lace, buttons, etc. … do the seams and edges line up? (LK); 'The quality of texture. when I choose the*

clothes here... they should either be unusual or have a look of natural textile, real textile. It is caressing glance… correct? Like some kind of arts' (VF); *'things that are well made that look more natural on your avatar, shading is important, how light is used to sculpt the garment, very important is clothing design…look at my jeans or yours, see how the light blue add to the sense of volume gives a 3D quality; remember that most clothing that is not sculpted has to create 3D by shading, 3D the appearance of wrinkle that are not there' (LM)*; *'Quality it's nice textures knits that look like they were knit leather that looks like leather clothes that have some volume, so they don't look painted on dresses that flow well. I guess clothes that look as much like real clothes as possible' (KM)*. Texture as a category denoting quality is morphed into a visual element rather than one derived through feel. Residents also reported extrinsic cues to rate quality: concrete characteristics that can be changed without altering the structure of the product (e.g. brand and price), which are usually less important than intrinsic cues, both in the physical world *'[in rl] I favor brands that have a look I like but a reputation for quality that will wear well J Crew over Ralph Lauren but that are well made' (MS)* and in SL '*CoCo Designs is very famous in SL and busy, great quality AND... if you buy something in a pale colour you can tint it, as it's sold 'modify' so for instance if you buy a white T-shirt, you can just tint it as you like…so I like buying clothing items from CoCo design because of their good quality, the choices that I have to change the color anytime I want to suit different outfits…and of course because of its name, which reassures me of the great quality' (AK).* SL residents also reported using appearance cues

both in RL and in SL to assess quality: appearance cues are characteristics that affect how the product looks (e.g. style and fit), which seem to be central in both the physical world *'…rl if somebody makes clothes that suit my body then I will return' (AL)*; *'[in rl] they [garments] have to fit well not too tight and look good flatter my figure if you will, or should I say hide some of it :) (HH)*; *'…when shopping for clothes in rl I mostly look for original style, flattering shape…' (IO)* and in the VW of SL: *'Well, the first is the quality of the overall design […] The second is "do I *like* it?" :) That's totally a personal taste thingy :) Normally, the third criterion will come from the completeness of the outfit e.g. different clothing layers; accessories; etc (designers, these days, are so generous with their customers!!!). Then it'll also depend on *where* I can wear it e.g. I tend to buy too many formal dresses — but don't have enough occasions to wear them. Personalization is also important: how many different outfits can I create out of the box? (GL)*; *'….. color, design, quality, amount of editing needed... these are how i make my choices. hahaha well if it looks like it came from freebie dungeon.... walk past it fast! i look at the texture, prim, the overall style of the design…whether it fits me or not etc' (PK)*. Unsurprisingly though performance cues, like characteristics that affect how the product functions (e.g. durability and wrinkle resistance), were significant when people buy apparel in the physical world *'these days, i prefer fabrics that can be washed... can't afford and prefer not to pollute with dry cleaning…but...it has to be able to survive the washing…' (DA)*; *'when I buy clothing in rl I care about durability with just a touch of chic' (EN)*; *'…in rl you have the added problem of wear :) are my knickers worn*

out ? that sort of thing…in sl you dont have that problem' (BT); *'*If* I'm *not* on a budget, I opt for things that last *long* — I still have a trenchcoat bought in London in 2000, just because I felt it would last quite a long time (GL)* but in SL it seems that these performance cues are not at all important due to the fact that the garments bought in the world are pixels, so there is not really any reason to care about durability or wrinkles.

Consumers in SL clearly are borrowing some RL markers of quality, adapting others and rejecting some in order to make their judgments. Primary concerns are aesthetic: image and style expectations of a high-quality garment (e.g. more style details, more fashionable) (Swinker and Hines 2006). Many respondents reported being concerned about the details of the item's design: '*nicely made items…no rough seams, blurry textures and lots of layers, good colours, nice shapes… if it's something I'd use regularly, I don't buy cheap horrible stuff. (I'm a snob...). Good freebies are great (also not that common) […] I don't care what people wear, but really badly-made clothes - SL and RL - look bad […] In SL, some designers just throw out anything... and others spend ten times the time to make it 'good'... technically, but also visually […] And the same in RL, I guess […] I don't do sloppy editing or writing, so why would I buy dresses with dodgy seams? Particularly if I can find ones that look good, and people have taken the trouble to make their seams match? I think I appreciate people taking the time and effort, but I do know details are not important to a lot of people on SL (so yes, I think I'm a snob, but not a 'wealthy' one…I don't break even on my sales here, far from it. But I try to make things that are as good as possible in terms of 'quantifiable' quality*

whether people like them is another thing…it's a question of personal pride' (AK); *'SL shoppers are fussy about good clothes and I think they also learn what makes clothes good in SL… seams should be matching, details have to be clear and clean not blurry. I just threw out some tennis shoes that had wobbly lines on them, I just hate it' (BT)*.

Residents also reported in terms of the aesthetics of their clothing that clothing design classes were a popular activity. ZS talks about her taking these classes: *'I took classes about good clothing design so I know what to look for like seams at the shoulders… look at the top of your shoulder and see that the lines do not exactly match. It is very hard to get that right in SL due to how avatars are constructed. One size does not really fit all. Wrists ankles and a few other places are hard to get just right too. One designer is great at that. Nicky Ree. I have never seen an unmatched seam on her clothes and the detail is great. But her designs cost lots more than most places. So I only have a few pieces of hers' (ZS)*. Perhaps surprisingly, SL residents discuss their shopping choices using language with suggests physiological expectations: that is, comfort and fit expectations of high-quality garment (e.g. feels better, fits better); PK, explains about her feeling comfortable not in all outfits! *'the glitch pants are black not matching.... grrrrr everything else is fine, but the pants.....sooo i feel weird wearing it. The outfit comes in this, light blue.. dark blue and black but the pants are in black only. A small detail like that is enough for me to not visit the shop again' (PK)*.

7.3 Theme 2 – Ways of Looking and Ways of Being

The second theme emerged regards ways of looking and ways of being, demonstrating how Second Lifers feel good when they look good. The subcategories of this theme are: 'looking good, feeling good', 'first impressions matter...so what to wear?', 'projecting a certain image...or just my mood,' and 'uniqueness or conformity?'.

Clothing and more specifically fashion acts as a main symbolic system that communicates meanings about individuals' identity and social relationships (Coskuner and Sandikci, 2004). It communicates not only how people want to be seen by others but also how they see themselves (McCracken and Roth, 1989). Although much of the fashion literature explains how clothing acts as a symbolic non-verbal form of communication little attention is given to the expressive role of the emotions people feel when wearing these clothes (Tombs, 2006). However, people do wear fashion to make them feel good. The fashion designer Pierre Cardin briefly expresses the notion of fashion being a symbolic expression of how people feel: "Fashion is a symbol of human emotion in each situation; it is also a symbol of modern life and developing society" (Cardin, 2005). If this is true then fashion as 'a symbol of human emotion' implies that others must understand the symbolic meanings held within the clothing. For instance, one may wear a smart business suit into a meeting to show feelings of optimism and confidence. Likewise, a sexy dress may express the wearer's feelings of passion, love or even excitement.

Not only do people dress in symbols and language that communicate with others, they dress for themselves depending on their existing or desired emotional state. People consume fashion to fulfil emotional needs (Tombs, 2006). As emotions can be thought of as "self-reflective, involving active participation, identification and management on the part of the individual" (Lupton, 1998: 16) then the consumption of clothing should be considered as a means by which emotional needs are experienced.

Tombs (2006) proposes that these feelings may be understood by others, since fashion is not only used as a form of communication through the symbols and meanings within people's worldview and their place in society, but it also influences the wearer internally through cognitive and emotional processes. Internal processing of the symbols and meanings of clothing may reinforce self-identity. For instance, when one wears national dress (Crane, et al., 2004) or sporting apparel (Wann et al., 2000) they use this clothing to create a sense of belonging or a means of self completion (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). These internal processes have an impact on the way people dress and the type of clothes they wear. They are likely to be influenced by the situation as well as the individual's personality, attitudes and emotions (Goldsmith, 2000). Coskuner and Sandikci (2004) found that the purchase and consumption of fashion was linked to feelings of power and status. They stress that "attending socially or professionally important meetings, it becomes almost embarrassing to show up in clothes that were worn before. Not only do people wear new clothes to impress other people, they also judge others by the clothes they wear in those occasions" (p. 287). This means that the

clothes people wear affect them positively (through the confidence and status associated with new clothes), or negatively (through embarrassment of not portraying the expected image). Confidence and embarrassment are just as likely to be associated with an affective state brought on by the clothes individuals wear than just knowing they are inappropriately dressed.

7.3.1 Looking Good, Feeling Good

Apparel has been recognized by scholars to be a product category likely to induce high involvement (Bloch, 1986; Goldsmith and Emmert, 1991; Kapferer and Laurent, 1985/1986; Kim, 2005). Scholars have commonly used a single dimension ‘fashion involvement’ to indicate interest with the apparel product category (Fairhurst et al., 1989; Rhie, 1985; Shim et al., 1989; Auty and Elliott, 1998; O’Cass, 2004, 2000; Chae et al., 2006; Engel et al., 2005; Kim, 2005). However, Gurel and Gurel (1979) provide evidence of multiple dimensions that explain clothing interest, discussed within the next few paragraphs.

Researchers of dress and human behaviour attempted to measure interest in clothing so that its relationship with other relevant behaviours and traits can be studied. Interest in clothing may be defined simply as “the extent to which an individual is favourably predisposed toward clothes” (Kaiser, 1990: 295). More specifically, clothing interest refers to "the attitudes and beliefs about clothing, the knowledge of and attention paid to clothing, the concern and curiosity a person has about his or her own clothing and that

of others. This interest may be manifested by an individual's practice in regard to clothing itself-the amount of time, energy and money he/she is willing to spend on clothing; the degree to which he/she uses clothing in an experimental manner; and his/her awareness of fashion and what is new" (Gurel and Gurel, 1979: 275). Indications of such a predisposition may include the amount of time, money and attention paid to matters of dress (Park et al., 2006; Gurel and Gurel, 1979; Kaiser, 1990).

Gurel and Gurel (1979) explored the multi-faceted nature of clothing interest through factor analysis of Creekmore's "Importance of Clothing" questionnaire (1971). Their analysis revealed five dimensions or factors of clothing interest. These are: 1) interest in clothing as concern for personal appearance, 2) interest in clothing as experimenting with appearance, 3) interest in clothing as heightened awareness of clothes, 4) interest in clothing as an enhancement of security, and 5) interest in clothing as enhancement of individuality. These factors can surely be applied in SL.

From these five factors the four (first, third, fourth and fifth) have been identified in the current part of the data analysis, leaving the second factor out; this factor, concerning clothing as experimenting with appearance, was identified and analyzed in the first part of the data analysis.

Let's start with the fourth factor concerning interest in clothing as an enhancement of security (Daniel 1996; Bell, 1991; Katz et al., 2003), which describes those who use "clothing to boost morale and to increase feelings of security and self-confidence" (Gurel and Gurel, 1979: 277). Individuals characterized by this form of clothing interest rely on clothing to

enhance self-confidence (O'Cass, 2004). These individuals are aware of the impact clothing has on their behaviour *'dressing nice gives me more confidence I suppose… having an avatar that looked nice helped me in the sense that I felt more comfortable saying hi to ppl around me. I'm a very shy person initially. It makes me feel good about myself; it makes me feel a little more confident in sl' (HH)* and are concerned with creating the "right" impression '*… if I feel good and confident in the clothes I wear people will see me confident, they might like what I wear but they will perceive a confident person […]' (CP)*. For a person inclined to this type of clothing interest, it is logical that satisfaction with one's appearance would enhance feelings of comfort in social situations (Fiore and Kimle, 1997), possibly even leading to assertive or authoritative behaviours '*I change often and never wear anything i am not happy with. If I feel uncomfortable in my clothes I don't feel comfortable when meeting people' (CP)*. Such feelings of self-confidence would naturally be accompanied by positive emotions (Tiggermann and Lacey, 2009). On the other hand, dissatisfaction with dress for this individual could lead to feelings of self-doubt and anxiety (Cosbey, 2001). This suggests that clothing interest as an enhancement of security may be related to the emotional stability trait itself *'I care about what I m wearing in SL… everyday!!!!!!!!!!! hahaha i change before i log off at night… i like P to look good coz it feels good…you know when you meet someone and you wear clothes that you are comfortable in it gives you a feeling of [pause] what shall I say here… hm success maybe? Whereas if you wear clothes in which you do not feel*

comfortable you may project that to the other person and you may feel anxious and not so confident' (PK).

For the purpose of this study the first, third and fifth factors have been grouped in order to constitute one category under the title 'Enjoying getting compliments and attention', as seen below.

7.3.1.1 Enjoying Getting Compliments and Attention

Second Lifers feel that the look of their digital representation is very important when communication with other fellow residents comes into play. They like to dress up nicely and be careful of what they are wearing when in-world. It is often that SL residents talk about being attractive and getting the attention of other avatars, who may compliment their outfit and their overall avatar adornment. They seem to be very self-conscious when it comes to appearance. The first factor, which refers to interest in clothing as concern for personal appearance is defined by Gurel and Gurel (1979) as "concerns about one's clothes as they contribute to or detract from one's appearance" (p. 276) *'clothes is for me the most important part of one's appearance, what you see first… that is why I believe that we should care a lot about what we are wearing…be it in SL or RL' (BT)*. The third factor (interest in clothing as heightened awareness of clothes), is described as an impersonal, academic interest in clothing and the subject of dress (p. 276). Gurel and Gurel (1979) defined this type of clothing interest as sensitivity to the subject of dress and to clothing itself rather than how it affects personal appearance. This might include an awareness of the symbolic and communicative function of dress, and knowledge

concerning the quality of clothing material and construction (Banister and Hogg, 2004). Such an individual may tend to avoid taking risks with clothing by avoiding unconventional styles of dress (Cosbey, 2001; Banister and Hogg, 2004), as is clearly indicated by LM: *'I dislike being mistaken for a newbie. That usually happens when I am wearing a certain kind of outfit and hair…let me show you…' (LM)*. The fifth factor (interest in clothing as enhancement of individuality) refers to an interest in dress as a means to draw attention and distinguish oneself from the crowd (p. 277). LK, LM, KH, VF and NM speak about how they like other fellow residents to pay attention to them and how they enjoy when getting compliments on their look: *'I love getting compliments on my look. Sure [in RL as well] just doesn't happen quite as often there :)' (LK)*; *'Somewhat, I enjoy compliments as much in SL as I do in RL. Interesting, now that you ask... At meetings like SL roundtable it doesn't matter a lot. It is more important at social events… In both lives I like knowing I have on a fitting and attractive outfit.' (LM)*; *'…it doesnt hurt getting attention from guys even had quite a few woman comment they liked my ava just makes me feel good i guess' (KH)*; *'Of course I care about my appearance in SL :) …Instinctive probably :) mmm actually I am attracting the different types of people and attention depends on my look as I rarely start conversations myself' (VF)*; '*…i want to feel good by looking good and i want to attract ppl the right kind of ppl of course but i guess you have to filter them out' (NM)*.

7.3.2 First Impressions Matter ... So What to Wear?

J. C. Flugel, whose important book ‘The Psychology of Clothes’ (1930) analyses the uses and effects of bodily adornment, defines the crucial role of clothing in interpersonal articulations of identity among subjects: “Apart from face and hands ... what we actually see and react to are, not the bodies, but the clothes of those about us... indeed the very word 'personality', as we have been reminded by recent writers, implies a 'mask', which is itself an article of clothing. Clothes in fact, though seemingly mere extraneous appendages, have entered into the very core of our existence as social beings”.

Barthes (1967) cites Hegel's poignant observation that 'as pure sentience, the body cannot signify; clothing guarantees the passage from sentience to meaning.... Fashion resolves the message from the abstract body to the real body of its reader' (p. 258). The assumption of 'real' bodies aside, Hegel notes that it is clothing that allows communication to occur between subjects, that allows one to speak to the other as a discrete being (signified as 'different' through dress). Without clothing, Hegel argued, both bodies would appear 'the same' (Hegel, 1944, cited in Barthes 1967); clothing marks differences in the body image, as LM points out *‘people are so accustomed to relating to others on the basis of what is visible; visible cues like clothes’ (LM)*.

As in the physical world, first impressions and attractiveness are very important in a VW like SL as well. That is the reason why SL residents try

to dress up nicely, always according to their preferences *'I think looks do count for whatever reason because I think we're made that way we evolved to choose "beauty"' (EN)*. It is not a coincidence that most of them are using avatars that are attractive, powerful, youthful, and athletic '*An attractive avi is always popular ☺' (BT)*. This illustrates that Second Lifers want to look nice both for themselves and for the other avatars around them, as they have realized from their experiences in SL that appearance and look has a significant impact on the way individuals interact with each other in-world, as CP notes *'…the interaction is soooo important because that is why we are here for interaction… clothing is very important at this stage as it is the first approach' (CP)*.

With the evolution of Hollywood movie-making techniques, contemporary consumer culture is more and more defined and expressed by images. It seems that culture itself is built upon its ability to fabricate images and meanings and distribute them on mass (Ewen and Ewen, 1992; McQuail, 1994). With the power to access mass audience, commercial media disseminate and promote images, therefore, make the commercial traffics in images, each with a sale to make, become a central force of culture, delineating the ideals and norms of behaviours and social life. Images diffuse throughout modern consumer culture and shape the experiences, motivations, lifestyles, self-concepts and consumer values (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). The impact of image on social life lies in the fact that people socialize and interact based on their impressions of each other, which in turn are formed based on the images portrayed by individuals themselves: '*The way I look is important for others because i think the*

others see the way you look the first time and make their judgment, and it is this first impression that is going to affect the way they see you the second time…if there will be a second time of course hehe…'. (CL).

In material terms, clothing, fashion, or adornment has become an essential part of conspicuous and material embodiment of the image which one wishes to express. Moreover, clothing, fashion, or adornment constitute an important arena of popular expression, often a self-defined voice (Wan et al, 2001). As William James once wrote, "The old saying that the human person is composed of three parts: soul, body, and clothes is more than a joke" (James, 1890: 292). He considered clothing to be a vital component of the "material self", which constituted a major part of the self. It seems that what we choose to wear and possess is the extended forms of our self-expression *'…this is a social world, and I think I want people to think well of me, or at least people I think well of... I want to express myself by choosing to wear specific clothes and not others for instance, so that ppl can see who they are talking to through my clothes mostly and maybe some accessories…you know?…' (NW)*.

Clothes both affect and express our perceptions of ourselves. Ruggerone (2001), as cited in Crane and Bovone (2006), suggests that clothing has a special character as a material object because of its location on our bodies, thereby "acting as a filter between the person and the surrounding social world". Research on impression formation has long demonstrated that people tend to draw inferences about the personal characteristics of others based upon outward appearance (Jackson, 1992): *'ha yes I do care*

*about what I am wearing in SL, a lot — I should be ashamed of admitting that!!....people have first impressions. We can say we don't — but we have! First impressions *really* count…we judge according to the first impressions we get from the others, don’t we?’ (GL).* Stable judgments about a person's character and capabilities are often made within a 100-millisecond glance (Goffman, 1959; Locher et al., 1993) *‘Of course I do care about my looks, vanity darling hahahaha. Yes. We all do ... first impressions matter’ (PK)*. Due to the fast paste nature of the world today, it is often necessary to evaluate another person in a limited encounter situation. The tendency to renew the encounter is based to a large degree on the impression formed during the first encounter *‘I think that appearance means a lot in SL, as in RL I guess…your first point of contact. After all think how ppl often avoid newbies not all of course’ (KJ)*. In light of this, researchers have attempted to determine the degree to which first impressions influence social interactions (Kelley, 1950; Darley and Cooper, 1972; Burns and Lennon, 1993; Forgas, 2011) and to delineate the factors that act to convey these impressions (Thornton, 1944; Douty, 1963; Hamid, 1972; Jones, 1996).

Our interest in clothing, the reasons we choose particular garments, the effects of clothing on behaviour, and even the way in which we perceive clothing are all dependent upon social and cultural factors (Fiore et al., 1996). Dorothy Dickens (1944) says, "Clothing serves in the main a social purpose just as food serves in the main a health purpose" (p. 346).

If human beings were not reacting to other human beings in social situations, then there would be no felt need for clothing beyond, perhaps, the protection it offers from cold *'What is projection without a recipient?. if it was just me here, would i bother dressing up? no i would not so yes i care about my clothes, the way I look…everyone cares even if they wont admit it…It's the only projection we have in SL' (RJ)*. Certainly there would be neither fashion nor change of fashion. There would be no desire to have one style of garment instead of another. Knowledge of the social-psychological aspects of clothing is, therefore, basic to the study of clothing (Cox and Dittmar, 1995).

So, first impressions seem to play a very important part in the later social interaction between individuals **'***absolutely…I believe that avatar appearance DOES influence the way residents interact with each other…a lot…i experienced this when i did my overhaul it matters to some in some communities. With a name like "pet" and only slut-gear... the Christians wouldn't talk to me. Then i cleaned up my clothes (a little - i still like sexy stuff, just not slutty)... and after a while... they realized i was not some lost wayward girly on the wrong sim hahahahahaha. it took me forever to get out of those cuff... i didnt know how to detach them hahahaha…ok jokes aside,,,some of the Christians needed some time in order to be sure who they were dealing after I had to change the way I was dressing up… ' (PK)*. If a first impression is poor, it may create avoidance, or at least halt any effort for a further meeting, *'I know if I meet someone who looks odd, it sets me off in a way, like I'm wary because I feel, don't you see how weird your avatar looks. It's like in RL if you meet someone who has stains*

on their clothes, spittle on their face' (KM), while if the first reaction is favourable, a pleasant stimulus toward a renewal of that encounter may evolve. In situations where individuals are introduced or accidentally meet, the interaction between them will be colored by the first impressions of each. Our treatment of another person will be cordial or cool according to our impression of him *'I think that our appearance in SL is the first impression so it is somewhat important. Once I get to know someone, then I try to relax a little […] the better you look, the more people you might meet or so; that could be one reason even if I didn't know what I was doing or how to manage in sl yet' (HH)*. Clothing, because it is one of the clues used by people in first reactions, may therefore play a part in the actual selection of our friends and acquaintances *'... i ve noticed ppl that wear gothic looking clothes or more urban styles on their ava end up finding it easier to talk to ppl with similar tastes because they find they will have similar interests…a lot of ties with rl its very similar ... you see someone with similar style to yours the chances that you will have the same interests seems a bit higher' (KH)*. Given that fashion is a form of communication (Kuruc, 2008; Guedes, 2005; Lemon, 1990), it must say something to another person in order to effect some change in that other person (Barnard, 1996). We may dress like others around us to signal we belong to that particular part of society and so generate some acceptance from those who dress the same (Roach-Higgins and Eichter, 1992). For instance, people wear business suits and not jeans and a tee-shirt for important meetings. People wear sports apparel to a sports event to signify allegiance to a particular team. Likewise the same people may

wear leather jackets to fit in with fellow bikers. Therefore fashion is the outward symbol of conforming to their society.

Moreover, the evaluations of each will be influenced by the clothes he is wearing and what he thinks the impression is upon the other. This is clearly illustrated in KM's statement about appearance: *'People tend to believe in them, in the appearance. I always tried to look approachable, and people do approach me […] Beauty intimidates too. I have a friend who's a model, and she is so lonely. She is INCREDIBLY beautiful - her avatar. So all the men are either afraid to ask her out, or they figure she can pick and choose which man she wants but it isn't true' (KM)*. As you meet anyone you are not only forming impressions of him but you know he is forming impressions of you. You are aware of your own appearance and may have ideas of the way he will be perceiving you. This will influence your behaviour toward him. For instance, if you think you look sophisticated you try to play the role of a sophisticated person. If you are caught doing something you think is slightly ridiculous you may act the role of a clown or wit. The same will be true of the other person. Similarly in any situation involving people the clothing may help in enriching or clarifying the perception of the total situation.

7.3.3 Projecting a Certain Image ... Or Just My Mood

In social and cultural terms there is perhaps no single issue that dominates the modern psyche as much as fashion and consumption. It not only forms an important part of everyday consumption decisions, but is

also a central component of almost all daily events, influencing what and where people eat, the clothing they wear, the furnishing they decorate their homes with, how they communicate and inherently the very nature of their thinking. Many products, particularly fashion clothing and apparel, are oriented towards individuals displaying their image to others, where in effect they are a code to communicate one's personal status.

Clothing both defines and obscures the gendered, sexual body, veiling its physical form with a mask of signifying material (Jones, 1995); it acts as what Roland Barthes (1967) calls a 'poetic object' to be exchanged between wearer and observer in the negotiation of identities (which, while clothing works to fix them, always remain open in 'a double dream ... of identity and play' (Barthes, 1967: 236).

Clothing is not regarded as an object separate from the person but as a portrait of the self, as an organized picture of oneself existing in one's awareness. This is true not only in the physical world but in the VW of SL, since the way avatars are dressed shows who the individuals behind the avatars are or who they would like to be. MS notes on that: *'I think in sl and in life your appearance is a marker for who you are. What is important to you…so I don't want to look like I have been on a steroid drip or taken testosterone shot […] I feel that people reveal as much in here about who they are as they do in rl even when they have an anonymous avatar. In fact it may be more distilled in world' (MS)*. Clothing is a mirror that reflects much about the person, such as one's image, personality, values, attitudes, beliefs or moods. This is clearly illustrated in DA's quote *'I want*

my clothes to say, serious, professional, but fun, creative […] the appearance in SL is as much an expression of various aspects of myself as can be' (DA). DA believes that clothing contributes to a sense of unity and constitutes part of her identity. DA seems to be confident that her clothing choices are consistent with the image she wishes to project.

Another very important observation is that if residents who believe that clothing is a mirror reflecting one's personality wear clothing inconsistent with their self-image, these persons tend to feel uncomfortable. For instance, PK and ZS narrate about how they feel when their avatars are wearing clothes that they believe do not suit them *'i know its funny when we say we don't feel comfortable in this and that outfit. Funny and even silly but still..... P is me and at best, represents me even the pants dont match the black outfit grrrr' (PK)*; *'…I also choose comfortable looking clothes in SL, which makes ME feel comfortable when interacting with other people….once I tried to wear something that didn't fit my sense of self and felt really really uncomfortable…funny, but true…big mistake of mine…felt awful in them […] How I dress tells how I want to be perceived by others and also how I see myself' (ZS)*. Consequently, one may try to choose clothing to increase consistency between clothing and the self-image (Govers and Schoormans, 2005), like RJ, who even though she is an adult in the physical world she has a little-girl avatar in SL. So with her clothing choices she shows that she is a child in SL, yet she wants to give an indication that she is not just a young girl, by adding some other accessories to enhance her avatar's appearance: *'oh i care A LOT about what I m wearing…It's the only projection we have in SL…so I guess i go*

for summery, sweet stuff but the shoes and piercings give an indication that im not just a youngish girl there is a bit more to me ie im adult really! i like the edge it gives and i think people do go for contradictions or and edginess they dont have rl. I dont have my lip pierced RL and i only have a small nose stud here i get the chance maybe i wear all the things i would like to be but how i look is important in that i would not like to dress in an overtly sexy manner but sometimes i like short skirts, and i suppose that could be construed as a bit flirtatious but as a child avi it is just an expression of .... bright sparkles and excitement with life i suppose freedom; i like to be free to wear a short skirt without it being sexual you see?' (RJ). Through clothing, individuals create and send messages about their identity, attitudes, moods, status, and self-regard according to culturally prescribed rules, as DA reports *'My appearance in sl sends a message. For D, serious, professional, and ...class message as well. i want to look like a professional, to be taken seriously […] clothes have to fit my sense of self…to help me achieve the look i wish to project. I guess i want to appear sophisticated, and to have good taste...and to signal things. D is not in the bf market...so my interactions here are less complex' (DA)*. This demonstrates that individuals consciously select or coordinate clothing to achieve self-defining goals. Clothing helps them to enact their social roles. Social roles such as age, gender, or occupation are linked to stereotyped images of clothing and behaviour. A person can learn and enact the social role by wearing clothing required by the role. Clothing also provides opportunities for experimenting with and representing identities to others. NW reports how she enjoys being creative and able to experiment

with different roles and identities: *'I would say that I do care about what I wear in sl, quite a bit. I think because it's a way of being creative and expressing myself. In SL, you more or less become what you show to the world, and I like experimenting with that. I think there's also an element of wanting to fit into a particular environment... "Let's see if I can put together an outfit for that" (NW)*.

Tombs (2006) developed a model illustrating how fashion impacts on the consumer indicating that purchasing and consuming fashion has four distinct outcomes that can be categorized into those factors that affect the consumer internally (self-concept and emotional well-being) and those factors that express to others either consciously or subconsciously something about the consumer (symbolic and emotional expression). Each of these factors is influenced by the consumption of fashion and used in some way more than just wearing clothing as protection. In the context of fashion self concept is reinforced by the clothes we wear and the acceptance or otherwise of others around us (Cosbey, 2001; Thompson and Haytko, 1997) as indicated in the following quote: *'Identity is tied to appearance. So even when you think you are not making a statement based on what you are wearing or the clothing choices you have made you are; and not just from other people looking at you but also in terms of how you look at yourself. We are all in uniforms of one kind or another' (MS).* Here fashion becomes more than just a mask to project our desired image. What we wear is much more personal and is influenced by the personal meanings, context-specific reference points, life goals and self-conceptions that we hold as important to us (Thompson and Haytko,

1997) *'In SL, clothes help me craft my avatars to fit my self image... to signal things about me that take time to get to learn otherwise…my image is a shorthand that helps me sort out folks worth knowing or not' (DA)*. Furthermore, emotional wellbeing occurs when people dress to either change existing mood or dress because of their existing mood (Colls, 2004). In the current research residents' mood was a very important factor which had an impact on the way residents choose to dress their digital representations: *'What I wear changes dramatically based more on my mood than anything else' (IO)*. This happens due to the fact that people consume fashion in order to fulfil emotional needs. AK describes how dressing sexy helps her defeat her bad mood *'when I feel down I may wear a very sexy outfit which helps boost my emotional state…and it is always successful…' (AK)*.

As emotions can be thought of as "self-reflective, involving active participation, identification and management on the part of the individual" (Lupton, 1998: 16) then the consumption of clothing should be considered as a means by which emotional needs are experienced. This is clearly indicated by what KM, MidS and VF report about their emotional experiences when it comes to clothing choices: *'Sometimes I dress to match my mood. When I was down I wore jeans a t-shirt and some ballerina slippers and often I've worn gowns because they are so amazing looking, which of course makes me feel good ☺' (KM)*; *'Sometimes I like to dress according to my mood. If I feel down, I dress down. If I feel cheerful I like to look good' (MidS)*; *'[…] the previous week I spent with "pirate mood"*

hehe […] my mood when I was in this costume was a bit aggressive adventurous and .. I felt I can fight and win anyone :)))' (VF).

It has often been suggested that fashion plays an important societal role in terms of individual wellbeing. This, it is maintained, comes through enhanced self-esteem and acceptance by peers and various other social groups through the 'correct' choice of clothing and use of other image-developing accessories (Katz et al., 2003).

The third factor indicated by Tombs (2006) was symbolic expression, which comes when individuals dress to signify something about themselves to others (Belk et al., 1982; Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Piacentini and Mailer, 2004; Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). This happens in the case of KJ, who talks about how he wants to project a certain image, which signifies particular aspects of himself *'I do more socializing than i used to. I even consulted Riali about my beard LOL. I want to project a certain image. A nice balance of gravitas with cool which i never bothered with much before LOL […] Clothes and appearance in general are a projection of one's personality either as it is or as one wishes it were. A simplification I suppose...' (KJ)*. This may be a reflection of his own self concept or what he wants to portray as his desired self to others (McCracken and Roth, 1989; Roach-Higgins and Eichter, 1992). Nevertheless, McCracken and Roth (1989) suggest that as clothing resembles a language the addressor and addressee must share the knowledge of the same 'code' the clothing carries in order for this symbolic expression to occur (Davis, 1994; Vieira,

2009): *'The clothes show that I care about myself. How I fit into society. They show, for example, that I'm not a slut. That's the easiest way to dress here, which is different from RL' (KM)*. McCracken and Roth (1989) note that the degree of fashion involvement may be a relevant variable in the interpretation of clothing codes. Fashion involvement is likely to be associated with differences in sensitivity to social surroundings in that those who are highly motivated to fit into a particular group will need to be aware of the fashion cues not just of that group but of other less desirable groups so that the 'wrong' cues may be avoided (Rhie, 1985; Fairhurst et al., 1989; Shim et al., 1989; Auty and Elliott, 1998; O'Cass, 2004, 2000; Chae et al., 2006; Engel et al., 2005; Kim, 2005). This is illustrated in MidS's narrative that follows: *'i prefer to be dressed […] i like to dress appropriately in what suits me…what suits my tastes and not too sexy, I don't want to give off wrong impressions. I know its kinda weird to say that in a VW that no one knows you really…hm…but I wouldn't be true to myself. I feel if you dress provocatively you are sending out the wrong message and I like to appear that I'm a decent person. I don't like dirty talk from the word go, it doesn't appeal to me…and that's what I don't want to do here is call the wrong type of man. Sometimes the real person comes out in the avi' (MidS)*.

The fourth and last factor, identified by Tombs (2006) is the emotional expression, which occurs both consciously through overt symbols, such as wearing a sexy dress or business suit, and subconsciously through emotional leakage from the emotional wellbeing of wearing particular garments, as demonstrated by RJ: *'To project how you feel and to be*

clever […] you dress to project your SL persona in SL and your RL persona in RL' (RJ).

All the above mentioned in category 3, show that physical appearance seems to be perceived as one of the most accurate sources of information about the personality of others (Shevlin, et al., 2003), not only in the physical world but in a VW like SL. Zero-acquaintance studies have found that personality ratings of strangers that are solely based on exposure to physical appearance are significantly correlated with personality ratings of acquaintances (Berry, 1990; Borkenau and Liebler, 1993) and self-ratings (Borkenau and Liebler, 1992). This does not only imply that people use physical appearance as a source of information in impression formation, but that this information, at least with respect to some personality traits, may often be fairly accurate as well (Shevlin et al., 2003).

It is the combined effects of social cues (e.g., possession and physical appearance) that gives rise to a holistic image that shapes subsequent consumer experiences (Bloch, 1995; Grove and Fisk, 1989). In other words, people are usually perceived in the context of their environments and it is the physical appearance in combination with the context that affects the impression of others (Maslow and Mintz, 1956).

7.3.4 Uniqueness or Conformity?

Researchers into the psychology of consumer behaviour generally agree that for products with a high degree of shared product meanings, such as apparel, product choice depends mainly on the consumer's desire to be

associated with those meanings (Douglas and Isherwood 1978; Bourdieu, 1984; Mayer and Belk 1985; McCracken and Roth 1989; Lee, 1990; Dittmar 1992; Govers and Schoormans, 2005; Auty and Elliott, 2001; Piacentini and Mailer, 2004; Petruzzellis, 2010; Liao and Ma, 2009). Differences among individuals are articulated by association with particular images. Recent research has highlighted the identity-construction role of fashion (Schofield and Schmidt, 2005): 'People buy goods solely to be different from others' (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Moreover, Thompson and Haytko (1997) note that 'through this logic of self-identity construction, the sense of 'who I am' is constantly defined and redefined through perceived contrasts to others.'

As far as fashion clothing is concerned, consumers use it in order to identify and differentiate themselves from others (Simmel, 1957; Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006), negotiate their public images to manage appearance and balance their sense of affiliation and autonomy (Banister and Hogg, 2004), since being different from others or becoming distinctive among a larger group often results from signals conveyed by the material objects that consumers choose to display, in this case apparel.

At this point it is worth mentioning that conformity and individuality in human nature are reflected perhaps more visibly in clothing than in other types of consumption (Hawkes, 1994). Both conformity and individuality are fundamental for the formation of fashion and, without one or the other fashion would abruptly end (Simmel, 1957).

The current research showed a variety of attributes concerning its participants' consumer choices. It is observed that some SL residents have a need for uniqueness, others feel the need to conform to their peers and some feel both the need for uniqueness and conformity. The part that follows analyzes the different attributes evident in Second Lifers' narratives.

Seldom do consumers operate in a social vacuum. Instead, they compare themselves with reference groups when making decisions on product and brand purchases (Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Bearden et al., 1989; Grubb and Stern, 1971; Zhou and Hui, 2003; Wooten and Reed, 2004; Mourali et al., 2005). The influence that reference groups have on purchase behaviours is apparent across a variety of product categories (Lessig and Park, 1978; Yang et al., 2007) with the apparel category being one of the most important. One way reference groups have an impact on consumer behaviour is through the establishment and enforcement of social norms (Fisher and Ackerman, 1998; Yang et al., 2007; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Coleman, 1983; Levy, 1966; Nicosia and Mayer, 1976). Social norms can be defined as group-prescribed rules or expectations that specifically identify appropriate behaviours for group members (Burn, 2004). Norms are infrequently formalized in writing; however, groups use normative pressure to exert influence over a multitude of individual behaviours (Feldman, 1984). Apart from social norms in the physical world, in the VW of SL residents need to conform to the social norms that exist in the world. This is evident in OL's report: *'Go to a Rock club for example or Black Hearts [and] take a look at what everyone else is*

wearing...those two have different cultures of clients, different styles and people change to 'fit in' as they perceive it' (OL).

The importance of norms to consumer research is undeniable owing to its inclusion in seminal models of behaviour that are applied to consumer research (Belk, 1975; Kakkar and Lutz, 1981; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), such as the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Asch (1953) and Sherif (1963) established conformity as a behaviour whereby individuals respond to normative pressure with compliance. For instance, KJ describes how he chose to conform to the norm due to peer pressure: *'Fortunately i have generally moved in an SL social group where ppl are incredibly civilized and polite and generally very nice so i tended to be regarded just as a bit of an eccentric until i chose to conform to the norm….so i bowed down to peer pressure' (KJ)*.

Willis (1963) conceptualized conformity as a dimension of social response to social influence along with the nonconforming responses of anti-conformity and independence. Nail et al. (2000) subsequently expanded Willis's diamond model of social response in a series of studies on social response theory. Conformity is dramatically influenced by situational factors as was demonstrated in the Milgram (1963) experiments. However, personality plays a major role in the tendency to conform as well (Krech et al., 1962). This tendency to conform can be described as an enduring trait in which the individual possesses a global tendency to acquiesce to normative pressure rather than go against the social norm prescribed by the group (Goldsmith et al., 2005). KM narrates how she changed her way

of dressing her avatar when she started making friends *'In the beginning I was just exploring, and although I always wanted to look good, I didn't spend money and I thought I looked much better than I did. Well, then I started making friends, and seeing how they dressed...and going to the stores they frequented, things changed' (KM)*.

Indeed, conformity is often rewarded with social approval and group acceptance; nevertheless, there can be a negative stigma associated with ''following the crowd'' (Simonson and Nowlis, 2000). Thus, consumers with a high need for uniqueness want to distinguish themselves from other group members. In a similar vein, status consumers desire to be elevated to a unique position in relation to the group. The purchase of prestigious products and brands can help the consumer to feel unique from other members of the group.

7.3.4.1 Consumers' Need for Uniqueness

Despite the influence of normative pressure, many consumers do not follow the majority (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). Some individuals intentionally go against social norms to distinguish themselves from the group (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977). In a consumer context, individuals express their uniqueness through the purchase of products and brands that are not preordained as socially acceptable to the group (Simonson and Nowlis, 2000). This tendency is indicative of an enduring personality trait referred to as 'consumer need for uniqueness' (Tian et al., 2001).

Consumers acquire and display material possessions for the purpose of feeling differentiated from other people. Consumers' need for uniqueness is defined as an individual's pursuit of differentness relative to others that is achieved through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's personal and social identity (Tian et al., 2001). This concept is grounded in Snyder and Fromkin's (1980) uniqueness theory, which manifests itself in the individual's pursuit of material goods in order to differentiate themselves from others (Tian et al., 2001). Consumers' need for uniqueness is very important as it can have a significant effect on a consumer's purchase decisions (Simonson and Nowlis, 2000).

Consumers' need for uniqueness is demonstrated in three types of consumer behaviour: 1) creative choice counter-conformity, 2) unpopular choice counter-conformity, and 3) avoidance of similarity.

In the first type of consumer behaviour, creative choice counter-conformity, consumers purchase goods that express their uniqueness and also are acceptable to others. It is the tendency to acquire products and brands that are not perfectly aligned with norms of the consumer reference group, but are still perceived as acceptable (Tian et al., 2001). AK and NY describe what they look for when they buy apparel: *'it has to be either very different or very good quality - just like RL…I'm somebody who likes both: quality, and 'different' (AK)*; *'hm…let me think…mainly originality I'd say. [By originality] I mean, for example, to wear something not common, something that you do not come across often, just like the one I m wearing*

right now!' (NY). Consumers identified as market mavens (Solomon and Rabolt, 2004: 419) are part of this group. Therefore, brand names that can offer some distinguishing attribute (e.g. unique features, exclusivity, prestige) appeal to consumers who demonstrate this type of consumer behaviour. EN talks about wearing unique outfits *'…I do have some lovely outfits some are quite unique – not from a famous designer. Here's one, Zen robes quite nice ones I'm just me :)' (EN)*.

Other consumers, in order to establish their uniqueness willingly risk social disapproval by selecting products that deviate from group norms though unpopular choice counter-conformity consumer behaviour (Tian et al., 2001). This is the case of LT who is a Goth girl, a figure that is quite unique and different from the norm *'...im a goth girl, both in SL and RL.. you will never see me in pink or green for example. i have my own aesthetic sense, quite unique I'd say… i don't need some brands to decide what i should wear and I do not care about how others see me…Grace.. my point is aesthetic.. i think aesthetics rules the world;... im not that showy but i can say without care im a quite good vampire goth girl' (LT)*. Consumers who perform this type of behaviour have the tendency to make choices that are counter to group norms to distinguish oneself from the group (Tian et al., 2001), just like LT.

Interestingly, this risky behaviour may eventually enhance their self-image. These consumers are not worried about criticism from others; in fact, they tend to make purchase decisions that others might consider to be bizarre

(Simonson and Nowlis, 2000), contrary to consumers who make purchase decisions to conform to peer pressure (Rose et al., 1992).

The final type of consumer behaviour regarding the need for uniqueness concerns the avoidance of similarity, with consumers intentionally avoiding goods that are part of the mainstream, and that are purchased by the consumer's reference group (Tian et al., 2001).

AK reports how she does not want to be one of the many that wear certain clothes *'I'm not a fan of 'designer logos' whether real or fake…I don't want to be a sheep' (AK)*. This consumer group tends to select products or brands that are not likely to become too popular, but that will distinguish them from others. In order to avoid similarity with others, consumers may develop a variety of strategies. For example, they may purchase discontinued styles, shop in vintage stores, or combine apparel in unusual ways. RJ designs quite unique clothes and sells them in her small shop. Her creations are rather exclusive as she is mainly inspired by Mini-Boden '*Mini-Boden has a wonderful website from which i have extracted some patterns for dresses, and then i use photoshop for my designs…i suppose it is the RL brand that has inspired me most my dresses never end up looking quite like theirs, but the patterns are very nice now when i see kids in their stuff RL i think Oh! Mini-Boden!' (RJ)*. Therefore, she does not buy from other stores clothes, as she wears her own creations *'i very rarely shop for clothes these days...i wear my own…these shoes are the exception i bought them from Discord, and i think they are the most wonderful things in the whole of SL…99 prims each! I m very proud of*

myself on these shoes… they are so beautifully distinctive and I believe that they add to my image as 'that little girl with the pretty, yet not so youngish shoes ' (RJ).

7.4 Theme 3 – The Shaping of Identity through the Consumption of Clothing and Bodily Adornments

The third and last theme of part two deals with how Second Lifers' identity is shaped through their consumption practices, and more specifically the consumption of clothing. This theme's three subcategories are: 'I shop therefore I am', 'shopping for a reason', and 'hyperconsumption fantasies'.

In consumer culture, consumption is central to the meaningful practice of people's everyday life, since even ordinary products that individuals use in their daily life are self-expressive. What to have for breakfast, what to wear to work, and whether to read or watch TV tonight are not dramatic considerations; however they present individuals with self/product congruity issues. So what people consume, in order to perform even mundane activities, both contributes to and reflects their sense of identity - of who and what they are (Belk, 1988; Holbrook, 1992; Kleine, Schultz Kleine and Kernan, 1992; Kernan and Sommers, 1967; Solomon, 1983; Henry and Caldwell, 2006; Dunning, 2007). That is, people make their consumption choices based not only on the product's utilities but also on their symbolic meanings (Levy, 1959). Mainly individuals employ

consumption symbolically not only to create and sustain the self but also to position themselves in society (Elliott, 1994a, 1997; Kleine et al., 1995).

Everyday life in the western world has become dominated by the individual's relationship with consumer goods (Miles, 1998). With apparently infinite choices, and relative wealth, shopping and consumption have emerged as major leisure activities (Ger and Belk, 1996; Phillips, 2003). In fact, Stearns (2001: ix) states that 'we live in a world permeated by consumerism'. Increasingly, acts of consumption are being said to be driven not only by practical needs but also by consumers' desires to make statements about themselves in relation to others (Benson, 2000; Dittmar, 1992; Kadirov and Varey, 2006; Moynagh and Worsley, 2002). Piacentini and Mailer (2004) refer to processes of 'symbolic consumption', whereby individuals use products as mechanisms to create, develop and maintain their identities (Phillips, 2003). Clammer (1992) argues that this is true even of the most mundane consumption choices, which can reflect an individual's identity, tastes and social position (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Slater, 1997). Hence, there has been a growing interest amongst social scientists in the relationship between identity and consumption (Dittmar, 1992; Elliott, 1999; Hogg and Michell, 1996; Lunt and Livingstone, 1992; Phillips, 2003; Piacentini and Mailer, 2004; Solomon, 1983; Wattanasuwan, 2005).

More and more, what people wear and what they do not wear define who they are and where they are located on the social map. Therefore, belonging to a particular social class now entails consuming a requisite set

of goods and services. The key feature is that consumption yields well-being or satisfaction not on the basis of its absolute level but always in relation to the level of consumption others have achieved (Rosenblatt, 1999). So, in order to figure in the status competition, the goods must be visible, or public, in their use and ownership. Clothing is a product category that has traditionally been such an important status symbol due to the fact that it is accessible to public view and its use is easily verifiable, as DA reports *'Clothes are a way to protect ourselves from the elements in RL, and to signal our status, mating accessibility, aspirations…they are a form of dominance… (whether you are a fetishist or not...and i have learned about that sort of thing by being in SL)…in SL, clothes help me craft my avatars to fit my self image... to signal things about me that take time to get to learn otherwise…my image is a shorthand that helps me sort out folks worth knowing or not' (DA)*. DA stresses out how important clothes are for her for both the physical world and SL, since they signal something about her.

In a VW like SL what an individual wears is of great importance; SL residents, like DA, often report that the clothes they choose to dress their digital representation with, represent something about their self and social class. Moreover, CL notes *'Well…what I am wearing in SL symbolize my personality and maybe the social level' (CL)*.

7.4.1 I Shop Therefore I am

Everybody shops! Catchphrases such as “shop till you drop” (Channel 4, 1997), “I shop, therefore I am” (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993: 244) appear in everyday discourse as referents to an increasingly important facet of shared cultural awareness. They symbolize the extent to which consumption dominates the shaping of present day identities, gradually eclipsing traditional value systems. This is exemplified by Campbell's (1997) discussion of the framing of the shopping experience as a leisure activity in its own right. Consumption has become “very much a social act where symbolic meanings, social codes, and relationships, in effect, the consumer's identity and self, are produced and reproduced” (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993: 235).

Many modern societies are characterized by a strongly held belief that to have is to be (Dittmar, 1992). Associated with this is the view that life’s meaning, achievement and satisfaction is often judged in terms of what possessions have or have not been acquired (Belk, 1985; Richins and Dawson, 1992; Richins, 1994; Kashdan and Breen, 2007; Ferraro et al., 2011). This is related to the benefit obtained by an individual’s relationship with their possessions. Therefore, individuals often define themselves and others in terms of their possessions (Christopher and Schlenker, 2000; Ahuvia, 2005; Ferraro et al., 2011). The latter have come to serve as key symbols for personal qualities, attachments and interests and as Dittmar (1992: 205) has noted “an individual’s identity is influenced by the symbolic meanings of his or her own material possessions, and the way in

which s/he relates to those possessions". A possession that holds a significant position in society is fashion clothing. Fashion clothing has been described as possessing something similar to a code (O'Cass, 2004). This is clearly illustrated when MS reports *'Identity is tied to appearance. So even when you think you are not making a statement based on what you are wearing or the clothing choices you have made you are; and not just from other people looking at you but also in terms of how you look at yourself. We are all in uniforms of one kind or another. (MS)*. Davis (1994) argued that in the context of this code clothing styles and the fashions that influence them over time constitute a code, nevertheless, such a code is quite different from the codes in others areas or languages. Whilst drawing such an analogy, Davis (1994) also identified that, in reality, it is a code that is ever shifting or in process.

7.4.1.1 To Have is to Be – Possessions and the Extended Self

The significance of material objects to people has been of interest to consumer behaviour researchers since psychological theories of development were used to approach how people attached meaning to objects (Piaget, 1957; Erikson, 1979). Exploring the formula, "I am = what I have and what I consume" (Fromm, 1976: 36), Dittmar (1992) elaborates "material possessions have socially constituted meanings …this symbolic dimension of material objects plays an important role for the owner's identity …This suggests that material social reality in an integral, pervasive aspect of everyday social life, of constructing ourselves and others" (pp. 204-206).

According to Furby (1978), possessions are multidimensional; she points out that possessions take on meaning from the society in which they are used. Lancaster and Fodly (1988) suggest that the use and control of objects are principal characteristics of ownership. Csikszentimihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) made the psychological connection between objects and personal meaning in their study of ownership which investigated how extensively things shape the identity of the users. These authors, and later Walendorf, Belk and Heisley 's (1988) research from the Consumer Behaviour Odyssey, demonstrated that possessions are infused with meaning by those who own them, just as KH reports '*you buy things that you like and in essence show others a piece of who you are' (KH).*

Consumers both consciously and unconsciously know that their possessions are intimately tied to their sense of the self (Goffman, 1959; Belk, 1988). For instance, in the VW of SL, as far as clothing is concerned, there seems to be a significant number of people reporting that they believe that the clothing they are wearing represent some aspects of themselves: *'my SL clothes definitely reflect a part of me, even if that part doesn't get out much in RL' (LM)*; *'Our clothes here define an identity. Is like expressing one part of you, so is like your fingerprint in VWs… Clothes represent nothing if they can't reflect a bit the personality' (NY)*; '*Our clothes are just a part of our expression here…I believe that here it is more important than rl cos it is a greater slice of who you are you have shape, skin, clothes in rl you also have the way you speak and your mannerisms and stuff but also here is an expression of the different self to*

RL or else we would all dress much more boringly here' (RJ); *'it is the reflection of the current identity "keeping up with joneses"...proof of your current status' (DA)*; *'A fresh perspective, an aspect of personality, and extension of it a projection of a wish, aspiration, desire...' (NM)*. These quotes clearly illustrate how Second Lifers perceive their avatars' clothing as something that has become a part of their extended self as they hold a sense that they have created, controlled or known them (Sartre, 1998). Indeed, to be able to create, control or know anything, they need to invest 'psychic energy' such as effort, time, and attention in it; and this energy has not grown or emerged from anywhere else but the self (Csikszentimihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

Product ownership and use help consumers define and live out their identity. Belk's (1988) essay played a pioneering role in bringing this topic to the forefront of consumer research literature. His stream of papers on this topic (Belk, 1983, 1988, 1990) clarifies the role possessions play in consumers' sense of the self. The importance that people attach to owning worldly possessions is called materialism (Solomon, 1996) and the people that place great importance on possessions are called materialists. It appears to be a potentially important dimension of consumer behaviour because of its influence on forming attachments to possessions. Having stronger materialistic values has been associated with using possessions for portraying and managing impressions (Belk, 1985) and with an understanding by individuals that possessions serve as a communication device or signal to others (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978). Materialism, may, thus, represent a key variable in the development of a consumer's

involvement with products, particularly fashion clothing. PK talks about how her way of dressing in the VW of SL represents her identity, which is what she wants to communicate to others '*Avatar's clothing represents aspects of your personal identity 100% P is me! That is why i did not create a separate persona for P. So she represents me completely here clothes hair complexion nails home and designing my land…everything…' (PK)*. On this issue Browne and Kaldenberg (1997) make an explicit link between materialism and involvement. This argument is particularly relevant in the context of fashion clothing, as it allows the fulfilment of values such as acquisition, happiness, etc. and assists in portraying acceptable images. Fashion clothing as possession may be seen for its role as a code and as such this materialism-consumption nexus appears to be a significant issue, as materialists have been found to rely heavily on external cues, favouring those possessions that are worn or consumed in public places. GL reports how important the clothes that she wears in SL are, since they communicate something to others *'…I don't wear the same clothes twice in a row!!!!' 'I don't know [why], I guess it shows some sloppiness — giving the idea that I don't even wash the clothes properly or something […] even though there might not be a wide selection, that's no excuse of wearing the same thing twice in succeeding days….it's not really to "show off" how many clothes I have (because there are so few anyway!). More like to show that I respect others, I don't wear crinkled or dirty clothes either. Tidy appearance is a sign of a tidy mind ;)' (GL)*. This indicates GL's high fashion clothing involvement. Here, involvement is viewed as being linked to the interaction between GL and her clothes. In

the context of consumer activity and fashion clothing, involvement is defined as the extent to which the consumer views the focal activity as a central part of their life, a meaningful and engaging activity in their life. High fashion clothing involvement implies greater relevance to the self (O'Cass, 2000), just like in the case of GL when she notes '*Tidy appearance is a sign of a tidy mind'*. Involvement has been discussed and utilized to examine fashion clothing in a number of prior studies (Tigert et al., 1976; Fairhurst et al., 1989; Flynn and Goldsmith, 1993; Browne and Kaldenberg, 1997; O'Cass, 2001, 2004; Vieira and Slongo, 2008; Vieira, 2009; Khare and Rakesh, 2010) and, in reality, the importance of involvement in the domain of fashion clothing can be seen via the defining role of fashion clothing in society.

The important aspects of possessions for materialists are utility, appearance, financial worth and ability to convey status, success and prestige (Richins, 1994). Such products are thought to include fashion clothing, because this product category is particularly susceptible to differences in consumption stereotyping, and therefore to differences in ability to encode and decode a range of messages. RJ describes how the clothing that she chooses to wear in SL represent her identity and the messages she wishes to communicate through them *'100% how can it not represent aspects of my personal identity? at first, you get the stuff that looks the least Noob for free thats the start right? looking not-noobie :) so anything that looks a bit accomplished you wear then it's the best stuff for the least money. Then, finally, when you can wear more or less what you want, it becomes pure expression of an aspect of your personality even if*

you dont realise it' (RJ). This suggests that consumers with stronger materialistic tendencies use clothing for impression management (Richins, 1994), leading to greater involvement. As such, consumers' involvement in fashion clothing will be significantly affected by their degree of materialism, with more materialistic consumers' being more involved in fashion clothing.

7.4.2 Shopping for a Reason

Scholars distinguish between shopping as an activity performed for utilitarian (functional or tangible) or hedonic (pleasurable or intangible) reasons (Babin et al., 1994; Ahtola, 1985; Langrehr, 1991; Roy, 1994; Wakefield and Baker, 1998; Arnold and Reynolds, 2003; Bridges and Florsheim, 2008; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Jones et al., 2006; Overby and Lee, 2006; Kwortnik and Ross, 2007). This distinction reflects the difference between performing an act "to get something" as opposed to doing it because "you love it" (Triandis, 1977).

The satisfaction of utilitarian needs implies that consumers are concerned with purchasing products in an efficient and timely manner to achieve their goals. Utilitarian consumer behaviour has been described as ergic, task-related, and rational (Batra and Ahtola 1991; Engel et al. 1993; Sherry 1990b; Kempf, 1999; Arnold and Reynolds, 2003; Childers et al., 2001; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Jones et al., 2006; Fiore and Kim, 2007; Lim and Ang, 2008; Bridges and Folrsheim, 2008). Perceived utilitarian shopping value might depend on whether the particular consumption need stimulating the shopping trip was accomplished (Babin et al., 1994). On

the other hand, hedonic needs are subjective and experiential, thus consumers might rely on a product to meet their needs of excitement, self-confidence, fantasy, and so on (Babin et al., 1994; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Bloch and Bruce, 1984; Sherry, 1990a; Kim and Forsythe, 2007; Spangenberg et al., 1997; Dhar and Wertenbloch, 2000; Bellenger et al., 1976). Of course, consumers can be motivated to purchase a product because it provides both types of benefits. For instance, a mink coat might be bought because it feels soft against the skin, because it keeps one warm through the long cold winters of Northern Europe, and because it has a luxurious image (Askegaard and Firat, 1997).

However, in the VW of SL an avatar can live without buying anything. In general, avatars in virtual social worlds inevitably do not need much – if anything – to survive. Virtual bodies in SL do not starve, dehydrate, freeze, or meet other unfortunate ends as a result of want or need. Consequently, they have no requirement for virtual food, drink, clothing, or shelter to prevent harm or death, making consumption needless from the standpoint of survival. So one would guess that residents' consumer practices are only hedonic in nature. Indeed, it is observed that one major reason that individuals purchase apparel and adornments for their digital representation is hedonic in nature, however, very often Second Lifers use words like 'need', for instance '*For the moment I have more than what I need' (CP)*; *'what we are "born" with in SL is not much-- you need good hair, so you get a ponytail, but if you want to let your hair down you need to buy another hair, and it goes on' (IO)*. This means that consumption

practices in SL are both utilitarian and hedonic depending on the initial incentive preceding the purchase and on the reason why residents have been in SL. For example, DA, HH and CP, who have come in SL for both work and fun, make their purchase decisions depending on whether they attend an event related to work or fun. HH notes *'…depends for which avatar. This one I'm looking for more professional looking clothes that don't show a lot of cleavage and are appropriate lengths; for my other avatar..... sexy, but nice…this avatar needs more professional clothing for when I'm around my colleagues and students' (HH)*. HH's narrative clearly indicates that she shops for both utilitarian and hedonic reasons, depending on whether she is in SL for work or not. Other residents that have come to SL just for fun usually buy based on hedonic reasons, but in special occasions and events their purchase decision relies on utilitarian needs. For instance, KH notes *'normally what I buy is fun, sexy, fantasy clothing and accessories, this is my style in SL, however sometimes when I am invited to a wedding or some other special event I need to shop something more formal, to show respect to the couple in the wedding or to the other people around me in a special event' (KH)*.

Whatever the reason for apparel shopping, be it utilitarian, hedonic or both, there seems to be a symbolic meaning infused in every consumption act, since products have a significance that goes beyond their functional utility. This significance stems from the ability of products to communicate meaning (Hirschman, 1981; McCracken, 1986; Govers and Schoormans, 2005), since they are symbols by which people convey something to themselves and to others (Holman, 1981b; Solomon, 1983).

This notion that many products possess symbolic features and that consumption of goods may depend more on their social meaning than their functional utility is a significant one for consumer research (Levy 1959, 1964, 1980; Zaltman and Wallendorf, 1979). Consumers do not "consume products for their material utilities but consume the symbolic meaning of those products as portrayed in their images" (Elliott, 1997: 286). Therefore, the products that are consumed are not only "bundles of attributes that yield particular benefits" (Holt, 1995: 1) but they are capable of signifying symbolic meaning to consumers.

Research streams involving self-image and product-image congruence (Birdwell 1968; Dolich 1969; Gardner and Levy 1955; Grubb and Hupp, 1968; Landon 1974; Jamal and Goode, 2001; Kressmann et al., 2006; Bosnjak and Rudolph, 2008; Coolsen and Madoka, 2009), store image (Dornoff and Tatham 1972; Mason and Mayer 1970; Stern et al., 1977; O'Cass and Grace, 2008; Chebat et al., 2006), the role of products in impression formation and communication (Belk 1978; Holman 1981a, 1981b; Rosenfeld and Plax 1977; Fennis and Pruyn, 2007; Gosling et al., 2002; Dittmar and Pepper, 1994), and symbolic consumption (Bagozzi 1975; Hirschman 1981; Hirschman and Holbrook 1981; Levy et al., 1980; Banister and Hogg, 2004; Kleine et al., 1993; Schouten, 1991; Piancentini and Mainer, 2004) share the basic premise that the symbolic qualities of products are often determinants of product evaluation and adoption. In SL the aforementioned qualities seem to be all important except for the store image which does not seem to make any difference on the purchasing behaviour of the residents; Second Lifers put more emphasis on how the

clothing that they choose to buy communicates something about their personality and self-image, as MidS notes *'I'm one who likes to dress casual, but I also like to dress smart and I want to communicate that to others….I was talking to someone the other day who dressed punky, and I asked him about it and he said he dressed like that sometimes in rl. So the way we dress either in SL or RL say something about who we are, what our values and beliefs are…we are making a statement about our selves' (MidS).* This denotes that residents pay attention on the symbolic aspects of the clothing products that they purchase in-world. As Levy (1959, 1980) notes no matter how mundane, all products may carry a symbolic meaning. This is especially the case of apparel, which is a social visible possession, therefore holding a significant position in society and as Lurie (1981) has indicated social display is a prime function of fashion clothing.

In a consumer culture, where people no longer consume for merely functional satisfaction and where consumption becomes meaning-based (Schroeder et al., 2006), such deep symbolic meanings become embedded in products through a society's institutions, such as fashion and advertising (McCracken, 1986) and are transferred to brands, allowing the consumer to exercise free will to form images of who or what he or she wants to be (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998), since brands are often used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). LK describes how she constructs her self through her brand choices based on congruency between brand image and self-image *'Some products sell because of their name. Gucci, Jimmy Choo, Versace, Chanel. A woman might buy something from these*

*makers just *because* they come from one of these famous names. It's the same way in SL. I own some shoes from Stiletto Moody, and a pair of Bax Cohen ankle boots. They're good products, but I bought them because of the *name* and I believe that they suit me' (LK)*. Hence, the meaning and value of a brand is not just its ability to express the self, but also its role in helping consumers create and build their self-identities (McCracken 1989; Elliott and Davies, 2005; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). A similar example is NM who notes *'I only buy shoes from stiletto moody's because i think they enhance my image of myself. They fit my persona' (NM)*. For NM it seems that Stiletto Moody is positioned as a symbolic brand enhancing her self-image as well as her social image. Moreover, NM considers this specific brand as an extension of her self, since it contributes to and reflects her identity and sense of self, as she points out.

The contemporary consumer is engaged on a symbolic project, where he/she must actively construct his/her identity out of symbolic materials, and it is brands that carry much of the 'aestheticization of social life' due to the fact that it is widely assumed that the techniques used by individuals to perform identity concern aesthetic or cultural practices and, in addition, that these performative aspects of the self increasingly constitute cultural resources or cultural capital (Adkins and Lury, 1999).

Additionally, the possession of branded goods may be an aspect of 'symbolic self-completion' where individuals who perceive themselves as lacking in a personal quality attempt to fill the gap using symbolic

resources (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). Fashion brands can be part of a system of meaning transfer from culture to the individual (McCracken, 1988). This is demonstrated in VF's narrative, where she describes how she buys branded apparel in SL that she could not afford in the physical world *'The country I come from is not a wealthy one, so I cannot dress in clothes and brands that I would like to because they are very expensive…however, in SL with quite a few Lindens I can afford designer garments, very well known and appreciated in the SL society, like Stiletto Moody, Redgrave, Nicky Ree, Bare Rose etc.' (VF)*. VF talks about designer clothing famous in the SL community, indicating that SL residents have a common shared conception of these branded fashion clothing's meaning, as Elliott (1993) argues that in order for a product to function as a symbol it must have commonality of meaning among consumers. This common shared conception seems to have been achieved among Second Lifers with clothing brands, since they have a homogenous view of what the product means and the values they associate with it.

7.4.3 Hyperconsumption Fantasies

Much contemporary consumption is playful and imaginative (Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2005) allowing individuals to create and explore consumption based daydreams. McCraken (1988) and especially Campbell (1987) advocate that consumer goods might be perceived as resources with which to build imagined 'better' lives. For instance, people might envisage that if they had a particular car or clothes then their lives would be better, as very often portrayed in mass media.

From this point of view consumer goods give individuals hope that imagined ideals are achievable, acting as ‘bridges’ to them, without ever actually fully attaining them (which would reveal them as nothing but dreams). In this sense, commodities offer pleasures of the imagination. The actual pleasure is in the dream that the consumer good symbolically represents. In the VW of SL however, things seem to be different; residents are able to really achieve their imagined ideals through the consumption of commodities that SL provides to them, as one resident notes *‘SL is a place where dreams come true…in SL anything is possible…I am so happy that I have found SL ☺’ (RJ)*. A significant number of residents report that the daydreams and fantasies that they entertain as consumers may therefore be actualized in various ways through performance in these spaces, as KJ and LM stress out *‘i think our aspirations are the same; its just that SL facilitates them in a way few ppl in RL can experience. They get a taste in SL of what it can be to be rich and without any responsibility or conscience’ (KJ)*; *‘I look a lot more idealized in SL and I can get lots more things in SL. I spend lots more time shopping in SL, there is no way I could spend that much time even window shopping in RL. I get things in SL that I would never think of owning in RL: styles of clothing especially. In SL I am not nearly as limited as in RL. I buy things I like even if I really don't need them… in SL I can afford to be more extravagant and buy "wild and crazy" things’ (LM)*.

As Gabriel and Lang (1995) state, “The enjoyment of products as parts of fantasies and the fantasies about products are a crucial feature of modern consumerism and may explain why window shopping or looking at

magazines of unaffordable items can be enjoyable” (p. 106). In SL residents can surely afford to buy fantasy items not easily worn in the physical world: *‘In many cases, I wouldn’t buy the same garment in RL. The norms are different here. What's considered standard in SL would be considered risque in RL; I mean, I own several latex bodysuits here. I wouldn't buy that in RL’ (LK)*; *‘well in SL i shop around a lot more….i am more adventurous and have more opportunity to be so eg. - the latex cat suit i mentioned wouldn’t be seen dead in it in RL here it looks pretty sexy’ (NM)*; *‘In SL, we shop like we would in RL if no one was watching. I don't mean we'd shop a lot. I mean what we buy would change. Something subtle like buying hot pink shoes instead of black, or something more complicated like leather fetish wear, etc’ (IO)*; *‘I guess N, the avatar, is a bit of a fantasy - she's able to buy and dress in ways the person behind her could never dream of...’ (NW)*.

At this point it is worth mentioning that VWs and the ‘metaverse’ more generally, are a huge, global, digital simulation where inhabitants of the material world go for recreation (Stephenson, 1992). Stephenson’s material world is presented as a dystopian parody of American consumer culture, where all space and acts are owned by corporations. But far from being a separate, utopian space where the problems of the ‘real world’ are forgotten and inhabitants enjoy hedonistic, virtual lives of abundance, the metaverse is also structured as an extreme parody of a consumer society.

Even though it may not be immediately evident why individuals should want to spend time in a VW so closely modelled on a material society that has been criticized for its focus on consumption, in some respects

Stephenson's speculation about the worlds we might build in virtual reality can now be seen in VWs and on the Internet (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2007). It is now possible to experience numerous virtual-reality simulations of commodities and consumption experiences. This is absolutely the case of SL, where its culture revolves around consumption practices. One has to consume in order to blend into the SL community and to be successful in their relationships and interactions with their fellow residents. This urgency for consumption has given Second Lifers the opportunity to live out desires and seemingly unattainable dreams, as NY notes *'… the boots I wear, are from a movie (Resident Evil) and I paid for them and also I paid to get the entire dress of the main character…it is the movie version of the videogame, more or less. I love all these kinds of movies (sci-fi) and characters and I would REALLY LOVE to be able to dress like them in my daily life but unfortunately I cannot due to social constraints of course and my job…but thats fine as I can be any movie character I want in SL and if I want I can alter the outfit a bit using my imagination…it is very exciting for me!!!' (NY)*. Extant research shows that desires and fulfilment of fantasies serve as the impetus for many consumption activities (Belk et al., 2003). SL is ripe with occasions to engage in behaviour to fulfil these types of longings, as CP remarks *'I am more free to be wilder in SL…more free to do and be anything I have always wanted and dreamt of' (CP)*.

Exploring different facets of oneself is within reach and an exciting feature of VWs (Turkle, 1995). Applying Belk's (1988) concept of the extended self, virtual possessions can "symbolically extend the self", which he states

“allows us to do things which we would otherwise be incapable” (Belk 1988: 145). Whether it’s an avatars form, apparel items, a sports car, a mansion, a club or an island, these possessions allow users to explore different facets of their identity. CL talks about her clothing choices in SL and what they represent for her: *‘the clothes that I choose to wear in sl I believe represent more what I can t wear in rl because it s not good for my image or it s "taboo" you know… in sl I can realize some fantasy not possible in rl it s like a sublimation of the personality, in sl’ (CL)*.

It is evident that SL residents embrace the opportunity to explore their creativity and support the notion that in SL dreams become reality and consumption based daydreams that are otherwise unfeasible are attainable (Molesworth, 2006). BT notes how she always wanted to own and wear a lot of formal outfits as well as high-heel fetish shoes but due to financial constraints mainly (and the fact that heeled shoes are really uncomfortable for her) she could not. SL has given her the chance to be a pretty, elegant young woman as she comments: *‘I don’t know why, but since I was little I was imagining myself rich, dressed in really expensive nice outfits with my high heels highlighting my nice calves…however I never got rich to be able to own luxurious attire…I have bought high-heeled shoes though but realized that I cannot walk in them haha…In SL I can own and wear anything I can imagine with just a small price or beautiful free stuff and I have become the pretty, elegant young lady I have always imagined to be. It really feels fantastic!’ (BT)*.

Consumers select commodities to build daydreams, but the pleasure is in the dream that the commodity symbolically represents. Although highlighting the autonomy with which consumers create daydreams, Campbell (1987) also recognizes that dreams may be framed and encouraged by the media, including advertising. LK talks about how she can look like a model in SL without much effort *'my SL partner tells me I have a very good eye for style. I don't know, exactly [why]. Because I can. Here, I can look like a TV fashion model without anything like the effort of doing so in RL' (LK)*.

All the aforementioned indicate that consumption has begun to be seen as involving a steady flow of fantasies, feelings, and fun encompassed by what Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) call the 'experiential view'. This experiential perspective is phenomenological in spirit and concerns consumption as a primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and aesthetic criteria. Due to the fact that VWs are constantly changing and expanding, they offer the prospect of satisfying – at least temporarily – the desires of those who are looking to consume new pleasures and experiences *'i would say K is what i would look like if i could click myself in rl ... im rather ditzy which is more generally attributed to blondes in rl so thats what ive done with her on sl.... ive have two kids so my stomach will never look like hers but its nice to pretend hehe and i would love to tear thru stores with a couple grand in my pockets but not seeing that happening anytime soon either so this is more of a utopia/ fantasy for me…and about the clothes that K*

wears in sl…omg I would never dare dressing like that in rl…everything i bought for K i could never wear in rl' (KH).

The increasingly prominent role of desires, as opposed to physical needs, in driving modern consumption gives hope for reducing consumption by satisfying those desires in VWs (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). VWs can gratify desires for pleasure and new experiences in a manner akin to how material consumption satisfies these desires. LM notes how her desires are satisfied through consumption in SL and how she gets pleasure from saving money in the physical world as a result of her gratification from the act of virtual consumption: *'to be honest I enjoy shopping much more in SL. It fills many gaps, since with a small amount of money you can get ANYTHING you want and most importantly actualizing fantasizing desires, which in rl I do not even dare to mention to people. I can surely assure you that for me consumption in sl has almost replaced consumption in rl. In rl there is only a limited variety of apparel and accessories that I need to own due to my work, in which I spend most of the day. In sl my wildest dreams have come true so it fills me. I do not feel the need to spend money for rl clothing anymore…I prefer saving it and this gives me the ability to spend more in sl…how fantastic is that!' (LM).*

Campbell (1987) understands consumption of real goods as reflective of a dynamic, romanticized relationship between consumers and objects. The daydreaming, romanticized qualities that Campbell finds in real consumption likewise characterize participants' engagement in VWs. If, as Campbell suggests, "[t]he essential activity of consumption is . . . not the

actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product lends itself," (Campbell, 1987: 89) then virtual consumption seems to provide an experience equivalent to – and substitutable for – what real consumption provides. Just as people escape the ordinary routines of everyday life by visiting "temples of consumption" such as Disney World or the local shopping mall (Paterson, 2006: 72-74), VW users enter a realm comprised of a similar combination of deceptions, myths, fantasies, and daydreams (Lastowka and Hunter, 2004: 8).

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter concerns Second Lifers' consumer identities expressed through the decoration and development of the "avatar-as-consumer", demonstrating how they perform their consumption acts. In SL commerce and shopping are very important aspects of the residents' experience. In order to customize their avatars in any way they wish, they need to go shopping to the several malls and stores that exist in SL and most of the times they have to pay for anything they get. They keep informed about SL fashion updates, such as bargains and new collections through SL fashion groups' notifications, SL fashion magazines, SL designers' websites and SL TV fashion shows. Second life is a shopping context in which contrary to the expressions of freedom and liberation, the stakes for getting it wrong are reported as higher than in RL, and hence extended or heightened information search and the importance of word of mouth and imitation are more evident. Second Lifers care a lot about the quality of

the garments and accessories that they buy, and this is expressed within SL very particularly, utilising the language of feelings, emotions and employing metaphors of touch and other sensory aspects not actually available to them in this context. In SL the potential to articulate fully a multiplicity of selves leads to a context in which shopping becomes the primary activity and an end in itself. The hedonic aspects of shopping in SL therefore skew dramatically towards the processes involved with shopping and away from the pleasure of use of the item. It is almost as if the purchase process is hyper extended, and then the purchase utility is often truncated to the instant hit of recognition and admiration, requiring a return to the shopping process in order to recreate that hit. First impressions are paramount, and this process is also linked to the rehearsal of potential selves found in the previous chapter.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 developed an understanding of the specific consumer culture of SL and the construction of the identity of the “avatar-as-consumer” demonstrated in how residents perform their consumption acts in relation to clothes, accessories, decorations and bodily adornments. So now we can move on to the next chapter where the discussion of the research findings is presented in addition to the main contributions of the thesis.

Chapter 8 : DISCUSSION AND MODEL OF PARADOXES

This chapter provides a comprehensive and detailed discussion of the analysis of the findings and results of the current research study, presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

8.1 Major Contributions

These are my contributions to the literature/theory:

8.1.1 1st Contribution: Model of Paradoxes

In this section the researcher develops a model derived from the theory presented in Chapters 3 and 4 and the data analysis in Chapters 6 and 7. This model, which the researcher calls ‘Model of Paradoxes (Figure 8-1), is able to encapsulate that rather than categories of action, the construction of the “avatar-as-consumer” seems to be performed along a series of important paradoxes. Therefore, the researcher presents this Model of Paradoxes with arrows moving between personas in order to represent how consumers deal with the tension of these opposing forces that they are presented with and how the consumption choices that are made by Second Lifers facilitate this deferral and thus enact their virtual materiality.

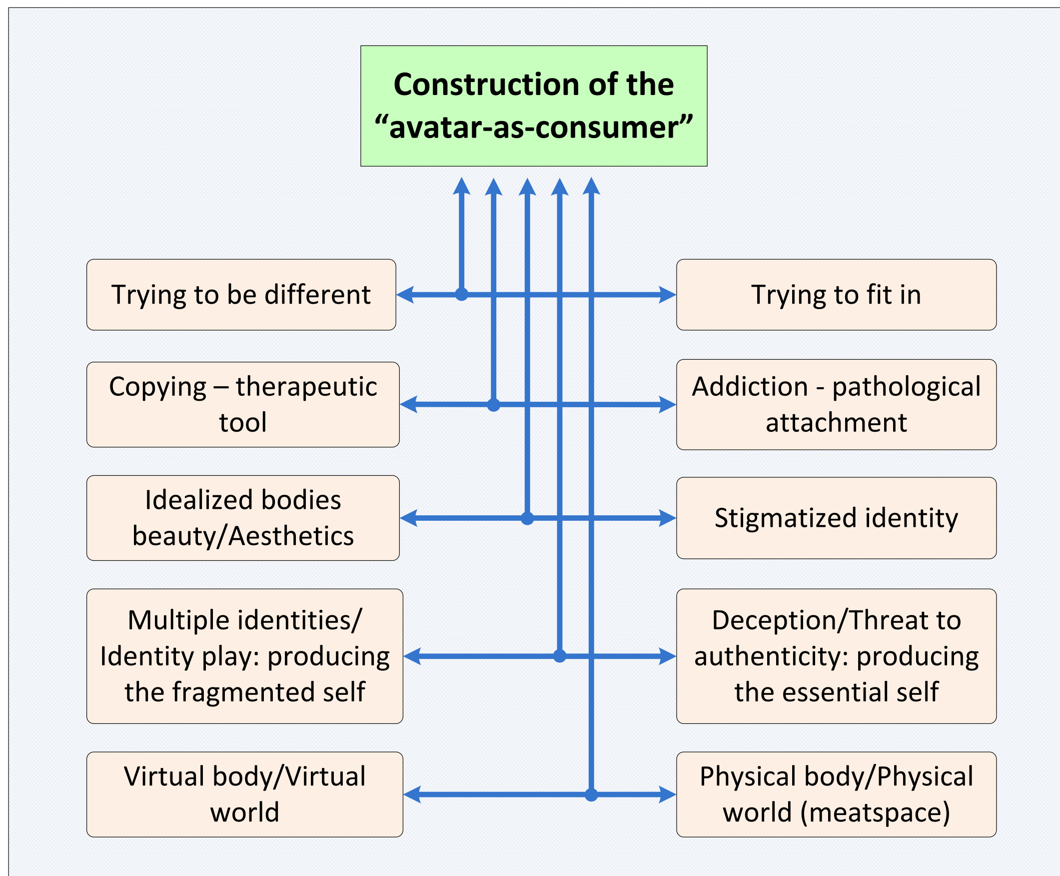

Figure 8-1: Model of Paradoxes

In order to do this the researcher is going to discuss each pair of paradoxes separately and examine how consumers use consumption within SL to reconcile those paradoxes.

8.1.1.1 1st Paradox

The first pair of key paradoxes is 'trying to be different' vs. 'trying to fit in' (Figure 8-2).

Figure 8-2: 1st Paradox: Trying to be different vs. Trying to fit in

In SL residents enjoy the freedom provided to them and the fact that the only limitation encountered in the VW is their imagination and fantasy as LK notes *‘The "point" of it (SL) is whatever you want it to be’* and creativity *‘...more than anything I enjoy the creativity...’ (NW)*. This entails that residents can represent themselves in any way they feel like as they note ‘*I can be who I want a robot a guy a bird a teddy bear whatever, total freedom’ (CP); ‘freedom to express yourself’ (XB)*.

The contradiction that they are presented with in this case is whether to conform to the norms or be different in a symbolic space like SL where consumer’s imagination dominates. These two opposing forces create a gap in-between leaving room for the enactment of consumers’ utopian imagination and the virtual materiality of their avatar body in a world where fantasy and reality become malleable concepts serving consumers’ sense of identity, as IO stresses: *‘SL is part of real life, a part of me’ (IO)*.

The analysis of the data revealed that the “avatar-as-consumer” purchases items related to their visual representation, such as clothes, accessories, decorations and general bodily adornments, that may be driven either by their yearnings or by social pressure that they feel in SL, as often reported, depending on the specific social contexts they are in, as educator HH notes *‘…depends for which avatar. This one I'm looking for more professional looking clothes that don't show a lot of cleavage and are appropriate lengths; for my other avatar..... sexy, but nice…this avatar needs more professional clothing for when I'm around my colleagues and students’ (HH)’.*

Like in the physical world, SL seems to have social norms that some consumers feel the need to conform to (‘trying to fit in’). OL notes how different the avatar ‘look’ of the residents appears to be in two different clubs in SL noting that ‘...*those two [clubs] have different cultures of clients, different styles and people change to ‘fit in’...’*. There are residents in SL that respond to normative pressure with compliance, like KJ and KM *‘i chose to conform to the norm….so i bowed down to peer pressure’ (KJ); ‘In the beginning I was just exploring...then I started making friends, and seeing how they dressed...and going to the stores they frequented, things changed’ (KM)*.

Even though there is the influence of normative pressure, many residents do not follow the majority (Bearden and Etzel, 1982), but deliberately go against social norms because they want to distinguish themselves from other group members; they desire their avatar to ‘stand out’ from the crowd (‘trying to be different’), as RJ notes *‘[these shoes] are so beautifully distinctive...they add to my image as 'that little girl with the pretty, yet not so youngish shoes '*, as they report: *‘...I don't want to be a sheep...it has to be either very different or very good quality’ (AK)*. In order to be different, the “avatar-as-consumer” needs to make consumption choices that emphasize their yearning for uniqueness and in this way enact their virtual materiality, as NY notes *‘...originality...wear something not common, something that you do not come across often...’*. What seems really important for some other residents who belong in the ‘trying to be different’ category is the fact that they represent themselves differently because this is actually their deeper style but which they cannot portray in their first life,

just like CP who points out *'I want to be identified as the rebel, which actually is my deeper style... a projection of how i would like to be and dress'.* However, another resident notes how she is uniquely representing herself in SL just like she does in her first life *'a goth girl, both in SL and RL...i have my own aesthetic sense, quite unique I'd say' (LT)*.

So, it can be argued that the residents choose to represent their selves in SL differently and for different reasons. On the one hand, some residents feel the need to conform to peer pressure in order to fit in and have the feeling of membership and belongingness and on the other hand they just prefer to represent themselves in a unique way, as they perceive it. What facilitates their choice is the consumption of clothes, body decoration and adornments, as through these visual cues they are able to construct the "avatar-as-consumer" and the virtual materiality of their avatar body so that they can achieve their desired identity.

One way residents reported as dealing with this tension is through the expression and maintenance of several avatars, some which clearly "fit in" and some which clearly "stand out".

8.1.1.2 2nd Paradox

The second pair of paradoxes concerns 'copying-therapeutic tool' vs. 'addiction–pathological attachment' (Figure 8-3).

Figure 8-3: 2nd Paradox: Copying-therapeutic tool vs. Addiction-pathological attachment

Residents in SL seem that they need to deal with another very important tension. SL on the one hand can be a copying tool for therapy, providing its residents with positive emotions about themselves, making them feel good, and on the other hand, residents can get immersed and addicted to SL, as the latter can be an environment which consumers can get very engaged to, often with reverse consequences.

As the analysis has presented, consumers in SL very often make purchases and consume in order to get over a bad mood as VF notes *'...when I feel in a "blue" mood I can spend a lot of time and money shopping…it makes me feel much better'* and relieve their stress through indulging themselves with a self-gift probably. The purchasing of particular products may portray idealized vistas to which consumers may aspire through their consumption, indulging their aspirations for imaginative ideal states, therefore constructing a very particular sense of identity.

Indeed, unlocking the imagination seems to play a crucial role in the construction of residents' identity in SL, through the decoration and development of the "avatar-as-consumer". Residents seem to perceive the purchase of a product as less important than the overall experience, with the desire for, rather than the actual purchase of goods, often serving as a bridge to displaced hopes and ideals (Belk, 1996; McCracken, 1988), and as nostalgia and reincarnation as documented in the analysis; the joys of longing though often rivalling those of actual gratification.

SL provides consumers with sophisticated and fantastic shopping locations which encourage leisure and browsing, with utopian qualities that

make consumers truly escape the routines of their everyday lives and inject some desired excitement. This way shopping in SL can be said to be a form of emotion-focused coping in response to stressful events or simply to get one's mind off the problem.

Moreover, the fact that consumers can find a deal and acquire a garment on sale in SL or a freebie, provides them with real and strong feelings of success, admiration, emotional satisfaction, pride, intelligence and a sense of personal achievement, giving them ample room for the enactment of the virtual materiality of their avatar, as HH points out '*I tend to look for sales or deals or dollarbies if possible…it makes me feel proud'*, enhancing their self-esteem and obtaining hedonic benefits through bargain perceptions as BT says '*The enjoyment for me is to search for and find bargains….'*, which offer increased sensory involvement and excitement (Babin et al., 1994), as according to CP '*The interesting feeling is when you get stuff for free and your excitement if not obsession to acquire because you don't pay'*.

Furthermore, it is revealed that the consumption of apparel is linked with feelings of power and status, and the clothes residents wear affect them positively, boosting their morale, resulting in feelings of security and self-confidence, as has often been reported: *'dressing nice gives me more confidence I suppose... It makes me feel good about myself; it makes me feel a little more confident in sl' (HH)*. This might include an awareness of the symbolic and communicative function of apparel, and knowledge concerning the quality of clothing material and construction, as noted by

CP *'…if I feel good and confident in the clothes I wear people will see me confident, they might like what I wear but they will perceive a confident person […]' (CP)*. However, sometimes consumers feel dissatisfaction with their dress which could lead to feelings of self-doubt and anxiety as CP and PK point out *'I change often and never wear anything i am not happy with. If I feel uncomfortable in my clothes I don't feel comfortable when meeting people'*; *'...if you wear clothes in which you do not feel comfortable you may project that to the other person and you may feel anxious and not so confident' (PK)*. In addition, the possession of branded apparel may be an aspect of 'symbolic self-completion' where individuals who perceive themselves as lacking in a personal quality, or have financial problems, attempt to fill the gap by using symbolic resources (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982) in the symbolic space of SL, as VF notes *'The country I come from is not a wealthy one, so I cannot dress in clothes and brands that I would like to because they are very expensive…however, in SL with quite a few Lindens I can afford designer garments, very well known and appreciated in the SL society, like Stiletto Moody, Redgrave, Nicky Ree, Bare Rose etc.' (VF)*.

On the other hand, residents in SL often get immersed and addicted to the VW, being lost in it without being concerned about what is going on in their surroundings and even neglecting their first life, as KM notes *'I did neglect my RL in favor of SL for a few months... I was in here in all my free time. It was fun, I don't regret it, but I really had to give more attention to my family otherwise I would mess it up'*. When they enter the magical world of SL, residents are so drawn in it that they forget their first life, and their only

concern is to live out the lives that they have created in this fantastical VW and perform their desired identities, with the only drive being their imagination and creativity, as ZS stresses *'I forget about RL needs sometimes when I am in SL, like I have not had any food so far today. I forget my RL body. Sometimes I log off or take a break and notice that my back hurts or it is hard to get up from the chair because I am stiff from sitting so long […] I am on SL a lot. Usually 8 to 16 hours a day and I rarely am not on at all'*.

Another issue related to this immersion/addiction is that due to the nature of SL and the nature of the relationships built in it, there is often disappointment, sadness, and even depression in case a virtual friend suddenly disappears and never logs in SL ever again: *'I would be very upset…i was frantic today when i couldn't log in id miss my friends (BT); 'It would be hard ... It's terrible when someone just disappears […]' (KM)*. This is also the case in the thought that one day SL may stop operating, which is clearly frustrating and devastating: *'Losing SL, i would be devastated […] i spend 3-4 hours a day here on slow day... sometimes longer, but...sometimes more like 16... Weekends especially...' (DA)*; *'I'd be disappointed cos I would lose touch with all my friends here' (MidS)*; *'I never experienced such "close" relation to people as in VW. It is direct brain-to-brain relation, very open and fair in some cases and after being experienced once it becoming a drug :) emotional […] SL is part of my life not second. The way I have fun.. rest.. know a lot of people. I feel "disconnected" without it' (VF)*. SL residents often report that these feelings are true and real in the sense that they would feel exactly the

same thing if they lost a beloved friend in their first life, as EN narrates after her partner disappeared from SL *'a year ago last month, my partner vanished from sl. I was very attached…well after a year, I still cry sometimes. Real tears'*.

8.1.1.3 3rd Paradox

The third pair of key paradoxes is 'idealized bodies-beauty/aesthetics' vs. 'stigmatized identify' (Figure 8-4).

Figure 8-4: 3rd Paradox: Idealized bodies-beauty/Aesthetics vs. Stigmatized identity

Even though the VW of SL is reported to be a world where its inhabitants can take any form they wish to, be anything or anyone they desire and imagine, residents in SL seem to be faced with another pair of opposing forces regarding the way they represent themselves. On the one hand, there is the element of beauty, idealized bodies and the element of aesthetics as being the SL norms and on the other hand is the cultural 'stigma' attached to those who substantially deviate from the norms of beauty, which actually the residents themselves have created.

As has been revealed from the analysis, the way residents choose to construct their avatar body is very important and a crucial factor that determines their social interaction in the world. Bodily appearance has often been interpreted as symbolizing the moral character of the self (Fallon, 1990) as GL notes *'Tidy appearance is a sign of a tidy mind ;)'*,

therefore residents in SL believe that in order to show that they care about the VW that they inhabit and that they have the appropriate knowledge of what the SL culture is about, they need to assert self-control over their avatar bodies, and manage their appearance so it meets the SL standards – idealized beauty with an artistic touch, as CW points out *'if you've been here for several months and you look like you got here a week ago, I tend to be dismissive of you […] this isn't RL so you have complete control over your appearance and you should at least make some effort to be attractive... 'you don't have to be some knockout looking AV but look like you know what you are doing in here'*. In order to do that they need to 'get out' of the default 'noob' avatar shape in which they were 'born'. This means that the residents need to buy and consume products, such as skin, shape, hair, clothes, accessories, decorations and bodily adornments etc, and therefore the construction of the "avatar-as-consumer" takes place, as GL notes *'when I first got in SL I spent 90(!) whole minutes tweaking my avatar until it felt good!...after that I was hooked'*. This consumption act is portrayed as a decision to take control over one's life and (re)construct their look so that it follows the SL norms: *'In rl, we're subject to things beyond our control; genetic inheritance physical disabilities age financial situation. Here, we are whatever we choose to be' (LK)*, which is central to the contemporary consumer culture, where residents' perceived responsibilities include careful monitoring and controlling of the (physical) appearance of their avatar bodies, and thus the enactment of virtual materiality.

There are many consumers in SL reporting that they can be young, beautiful, and perfect, just like a model as is the case of KM and KJ when they note *'You can look any way you like here perfect like a runway model stunningly beautiful sexy in almost any way';* 'Here *everyone can look young and beautiful if they chose'*, clearly demonstrating how the rise of consumer culture and technological developments give consumers the choice of controlling and investing in their bodies as a source of symbolic capital, as ZS points out *'It takes less effort to look good in SL so people are more bothered by people who do not make any effort' (ZS)*. This possibility of transcending corporeal determinism, under the conditions of postmodernity, has rendered the body increasingly malleable (Shilling, 2003), plastic (Bordo, 1993) and bionic (Synnott, 1993). Therefore, the body represents consumers' self-identity and is consequently critically important to them, as noted by KM *'I think looking good makes things better. It's like a social duty. It's nice to be with people who care about how they look. It's kind of like a living museum or art gallery in RL and SL. did you ever look at someone and just say, "Wow!". It's a nice feeling and it's good to give that to others in both SL and RL'*.

Due to the massive rise of the body in consumer culture as a bearer of symbolic value, there is a tendency for people in high modernity to place ever more importance on the body as constitutive of the self, which is also the case of residents in SL who have the opportunity to manipulate signs and to play with the symbols of the VW constructing themselves as "avatars-as-consumers", and who have the ability to express themselves in numerous bodily representations, ideal or possible, real or fantasy. As a

result, it can be said that contemporary consumers live in a visual culture that is full of signs and symbols: *'… to convey that identity to others, we need other, physical means to do so. Shopping (especially for clothes and accessories, since they represent something which is in other people's permanent visual field when you talk to them) is definitely part of it' (GL)*.

Moreover, residents seem to pay a lot of attention to the aesthetic and artistic side of their avatar's body appearance, as illustrated in KM's narrative: *'I know if I meet someone who looks odd, it sets me off in a way, like I'm wary because I feel, don't you see how weird your avatar looks. It's like in RL if you meet someone who has stains on their clothes, spittle on their face' (KM)*, since they strongly believe that appearance and consequently first impressions affect residents' interaction with each other as often reported: *'in sl, ppl choose who to approach and talk to based on their appearance...first impressions' (HH); 'We say things like "the habit doesn't make the monk/nun" but well... it does... on a first impression...if you don't care what you wear in SL, you transmit this subtle impression, that you really don't care about SL or find it worthless. That's quite reproducible.' (GL)*. This happens because as LM points out *'people are so accustomed to relating to others on the basis of what is visible; visible cues like clothes' (LM)*.

Residents pay much attention to their and others avatar's appearance as they believe it is very important to be presentable in the VW of SL. There are residents, like AL, who associate clothing and appearance in general with an expression of artistic ability: *'...certainly represents an imaginative*

side of anybody's personality an artistic side too' (AL). Postmodernism has given great significance on the aesthetics of everyday life, this referring to the tendency to focus more and more on the design and appearance of goods or objects. This is clearly demonstrated in ZS's, II's and GL's accounts, where they point out how they perceive the way they represent themselves in SL as creative and artistic *'Clothing is like a visual language. Like how art tells a bit about the artist' (ZS)*; *'I view my av more as a form of expression. Like a drawing I am able to tweak...' (II)*; *'An aspect of creativity :). Your "look" is your work of art — even if most people don't think about it that way. It's a form of self-expression...the act of wearing clothes is an exercise in art :)' (GL)*.

The way residents choose to represent themselves in SL signifies something about themselves, and the clothing, accessories, decoration etc. choices that they make show others a piece of who they are, including their aesthetic tastes as AL notes '*Avatar looks say a lot about people's aesthetic tastes since some people can wear freebies and look fab and others just dont seem to get it together'*.

Therefore, in order residents to be able to show others that they have artistic and aesthetic tastes they either ask for advice from 'expert' friends on how to dress as reported by GL: *'I usually ask some fashionista friends for advice ;) ... I have this idea that people with far better taste than me, and understanding what the market is offering, will tell me "shop here and not there, because you'll get better things"'*. Moreover, others follow the blogs so that they get ideas of how to look great and pull a nice image

altogether, like KM and AL: *'I follow some freebie blogs and I see looks that appeal to me […]' (KM)*; *'I know that I do not have the visual imagination to create a great look so i stick to things that I see in the blogs and that appeal to me and that is enough for me...' (AL)*.

Another factor that seems to be very important for residents in order to be aesthetically dressed is the quality of the garments that they buy, which as they say is a big deal for them as they often report: *'…I'm so idiosyncratic.…Beautifully made…a nice fabric texture' (EN);* '*The textures are the most important...' (LK); 'The quality of texture. when I choose the clothes here... they should either be unusual or have a look of natural textile, real textile. It is caressing glance… correct? Like some kind of arts' (VF); 'things that are well made that look more natural on your avatar...' (LM); 'Quality it's nice textures knits that look like they were knit leather that looks like leather clothes that have some volume, so they don't look painted on dresses that flow well. I guess clothes that look as much like real clothes as possible' (KM)*; *'Well, the first is the quality of the overall design...' (GL)*.

Furthermore, they seem to care a lot about image and style, being very concerned about the details of the item's design: '*nicely made items…no rough seams, blurry textures and lots of layers, good colours, nice shapes… if it's something I'd use regularly, I don't buy cheap horrible stuff. (I'm a snob...)... In SL, some designers just throw out anything... and others spend ten times the time to make it 'good'... technically, but also visually […]...I try to make things that are as good as possible in terms of*

'quantifiable' quality whether people like them is another thing…it's a question of personal pride' (AK); *SL shoppers are fussy about good clothes and I think they also learn what makes clothes good in SL… seams should be matching, details have to be clear and clean not blurry. I just threw out some tennis shoes that had wobbly lines on them, I just hate it' (BT)*.

As is demonstrated above, regarding SL residents' perceptions of digital representations and virtual materiality, there are some particular categories that are culturally stigmatized and negatively judged, *'if a female avatar is dressed as a gorean slave, i don't even talk to her. Or to her so called master...'* as DA notes. These categories may carry some kind of symbol that is used by others to assign stigmatized identity (Goffman, 1963), usually coming from visible characteristics, such as clothing, shape, accessories etc as KT and KM note *'[…] People that dress like animals, weird outfits...I don't see how dressing up like an animal is interesting' (KT); I think, "ah, you didn't just keep your noobie appearance, you went and got a worse one"' (KM)*. According to SL residents these categories do not conform to the norms of the culture that they have entered, deviating above implicit body appearance norms, which often entail the attribution that these individuals have not put enough effort and self-care to avoid such a situation (Fallon, 1990).

8.1.1.4 4th Paradox

The fourth pair of paradoxes concerns ‘multiple identities/identity play: producing the fragmented self’ vs. ‘deception/threat to authenticity: producing the essential self’ (Figure 8-5).

Figure 8-5: 4th Paradox: Multiple identities/Identity play vs. Deception/Treat to authenticity

Cultural pressure, social mores and individual desire and imagination, or a mixture of all, leads residents in SL to either construct idealistic virtual representations of their ‘real world’ selves or digital selves that have nothing to do with their physical selves. Having the opportunity and ability to send away the years and to add a little virtual muscle, or employ any form, there are obviously few residents who can resist the temptation to act upon such impulses. SL avatars all contain an element of performativity in their makeup, since our ‘life on the screen’ (Turkle, 1995) embodies, to one extent or another, a life on the stage, albeit a digital one. Nevertheless, the selves that residents in SL (re)construct and (re)invent are inevitably in some part them, re-creating themselves in digital form, as KM points out ‘*...in RL I'm a man...I'm not gender dysphoric, but if it were possible to change gender, I would...I would massively prefer to be female if that were possible, so…here it is...It’s like being reincarnated without dying’*. This account illustrates how SL is a safe site for testing possible RL identities, as revealed in Chapter 6, encouraging the enactment of

queer identities, as EN notes '*[In SL] there's a certain safety that I seem to have found with my "wives" […]*'.

When unable to do so in the physical world, individuals could become more like who they would like to be through the creation and enactment of online personas, as noted by RJ *'It is more than just a blob running around. It is the projection of who we would like to be if we could be anything or anyone!. Boys are girls and girls are boys and men are cats and women are dragons. The clothes are a big part of that'*, the creation of something new, perhaps better, but ultimately 'other'.

Indeed, in virtual environments, such as SL, multiple self-ing occurs, once players become immersed in the 'consensual hallucination' (Gibson, 1984) of the collective drama, as they are able to invent, reinvent and generally experiment and play with multiple online personae, as pointed out by AL '*What I really like is having lots of different styles. I have my black A and my japanese A my punk A and my chic A my blonde A and my brunette A tattooed not tattooed pierced, not pierced goth neko and I have a very dumpy housewify one lol she brandishes a rolling pin is short and fat she is no more like me than the Barbie by the way (I hasten to add) LOL but what I wanted to do was to create a "look"'*. Consumers in SL indulge their fantasies without fearing the consequences that would follow in the offline world due to the fact that the variety of acceptable expression and behaviour in virtual environments far surpasses that in the mundane world as NW notes *'it's a lot harder to change a look in RL than in SL but the sheer enjoyment of trying on different clothes and hairstyles - a lot less in*

RL than in SL…It's so easy in SL - all it takes is a click, and there is so much available […] it's easy on a psychological level in SL as well - I don't think people expect as much consistency in how an individual looks...in RL, if I went and had a makeover, people would have to get used to the new look all over again' (NW).

Residents are free to perform any identity they can imagine because SL is a world of fantasy as AL notes '*the fantasy element is always present for most people in my opinion'*; therefore residents tend to experiment with their identity by customizing their avatars without any limit. In order to decorate their digital representations the way they feel they need to construct the "avatar-as-consumer" identity by going for shopping in order to obtain all the appropriate clothing, accessories, props etc so that they can perform their desired identities as DA notes '*I will spice up something dull with a jacket that is not conservative, or a pair of almost fetish boots'*, and endlessly experiment with them, as PI notes *'I change to experiment. Experiment with myself and with other ppl's reactions'.* As the analysis of the data revealed the customization process is never ending and it is a very pleasurable activity for the residents.

Being free to experiment with their looks and consequently with their identity as VF points out *'I can mix different outfits from different designers to make my pirate costume for example. it is funny* :) *with eye –patch and pipe' (VF)*, SL challenges residents to try new things and to explore avenues that are impossible in 'real life', like KM who notes *'I've gotten to do things that I always wanted to do but can't and now I feel as if I've*

**really* done them [like] riding motorcycles skydiving sexual things the whole dressing up in Victorian clothes ...' (KM)*.

Even though residents report that SL is like a free-form canvas, where everyone can enter it, produce and enact the fragmented self, taking on any form they desire, and representing themselves as they fancy unleashing their imagination, that appears not to be the case at all. The data disclosed that residents have created their own rules and norms in SL and more or less everyone 'has' to conform to them in order to be accepted by the community. Therefore, the two opposing forces that consumers are forced with are the freedom for identity play, and therefore the enactment of multiple identities, and experimentation on the one hand, and aesthetics of appearance on the other hand. However, these two forces can be said to be subjective as individual's imagination may be totally different and what is perceived by one as 'good aesthetics' may be not for another individual.

Even though the construct of identity is a crucial element for any social interaction, identities are highly ambiguous in VWs, like SL. Consider the simple cues that humans employ in the physical world to decipher identity: physical appearance, age, gender or ethnicity. In VWs, given the ability to explore and experiment with different identities, these cues may or may not match reality, simply because virtual environments are the domain of liquid identity and as a result, residents in SL have the opportunity to employ multiple identities and experiment with them as part of the fantasy, without ever having to disclose any of their physical traits. As noted by KM

‘I had 12 [alts] about a month ago...Each one was ending up with her own life, her own friends...I have eight now. I had one alt who lived in the desert and one in a city. Two were for Gor - two places in Gor […] well, it's like, when you step into one, you take on that life...’. This account clearly illustrates the exaggerated and articulable multiplicities of the self in SL, as revealed in Chapter 6. Thus, it is evident that cyberspace in general, and virtual communities in particular, makes tangible the postmodern condition of fluid, decentred, fragmented identities, that can be multiplied without limit; on the Internet individuals self-fashion and self-create, and therefore are able to go through infinite changes if they wish to: *‘In SL, I can be blond and fair in sweater and slacks one day, and purple and bald in leather the next, and a giant bird the day after that’ (NW)*.

Given that consumers are free to employ anytime any identity they wish, what happens to the element of authenticity? Does the employment of multiple selves in SL entail deception? AK considers this issue when she notes that some friends of hers who are men in the physical world have a female avatar in SL: *‘I have a couple of friends who are men, using a female avatar. Is that fraud?...I don't know....Both of them told me. Neither of them are into the 'sex' thing... So perhaps if you don't 'do harm', then it's just a question of exploring certain sides of yourself. But if you then get into a relationship... and don't 'confess'... then it's harder to accept… (AK)’*. The data revealed that consumers in SL do not deliberately hide specific aspects of themselves through the choice of their digital representation in order to purposefully deceive the other members of the community. They report that the way they choose to present themselves in the VW that they

inhabit, the ‘back stage’, is a reflection of who they really are, but due to the constraints encountered in the physical world, the ‘front stage’, they cannot employ. Many SL participants testify to the reality of their virtual selves and describe online selves that are ‘more real’ than the selves they possess in the physical world, by producing the essential self, as noted in the quotes that follow: *‘Sometimes the real person comes out in the avi’ (MidS)*. Moreover, LK, AL and BT note how their avatar says something about their ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ selves: *‘I can be whatever person I want, in my head. That's who I "am". I might not be like that on the outside but I say the person on the inside IS who we are […] I feel my avatar reflects myself more here’ (LK)*; *‘A reflection of our deeper subconscious’ (AL)*; *‘Is the reflection of the true personality’ (BT)*, which seem to be increasingly performative, and thus current.

This can be linked back to Chapter 4 where the structuring binaries of authenticity/non authenticity, real/false, body in the net/the physical body are mentioned. This work takes a position that goes beyond these binaries as seen through the participants’ understanding and negotiation of these binaries.

Moreover, the use of multiple identities may result from the fact that people very often present themselves differently in particular social contexts, where some behaviours are more appropriate in one context than another. For example, DA and HH, who are educators and are in SL for both fun and work, note how differently they present themselves when they are in SL for work or for fun, having different avatars for different

social situations: *'[…] In order to participate in a real academic conference in here, VWBPE 09, i had to give my RL name and my original avatar...wanted to keep her privacy....so I created this avatar for work purposes...Sometimes…when you are well known in some SL circles...you need to be able to be online and not findable... i may wear another identity. That no one knows... i can protect my privacy...i have two houses. Two different wardrobes, i collect SL art, and i swap back and forth between them…'*; *'I have met some wonderful people that have become very close friends who are not educators - that is my fun part of sl and non-working so I created another avatar for that 'other' life. It helps a couple of my close sl friends know when I'm here for fun...or when I'm here for work and me too...lol'.*

The above paragraphs demonstrate that cyberspace can be conceived as deconstructing the essential self, which has been reconfigured to something more flexible and mutable, as has the notion of authenticity. As a result, when consumers talk about 'real' selves or identity, it is implied that the authentic is also a temporally situated construct just like the self, identity, gender etc. Due to the destabilization of the self, identity, gender, etc. there is a need for the notion of the authentic to be redefined, so that the employment of multiple identities do not constitute deception and dishonesty that conceals the unitary self. Hence, the notion of authenticity needs to be deconstructed and decentred so that any concept of multiplicity of self to be truly liberatory, outside of the singular, essential self.

8.1.1.5 5th Paradox

The two opposing forces of the fifth paradox are 'virtual body/virtual world' vs. 'physical body/physical world (meatspace)' (Figure 8-6).

Figure 8-6: 5th Paradox: Virtual body/Virtual world vs. Physical body/Physical world (meatspace)

As cyberspace erases the boundaries of time and space, it also erases the materiality of our bodily boundaries. Online, we seem to break free from the limitations of bodily existence. SL provides "an unrestricted freedom of expression and personal contact, with far less hierarchy and formality than is found in the primary social world" (Heim, 1993: 73).

In SL residents are able to enact any desired identity, as has already been discussed. SL allows its residents to construct a digital self that is at once fluid, protean, amorphous and temporary. Residents have the opportunity to change their appearance every minute if they wish to do so. Often residents go through this customization process until they feel satisfied with what their digital self looks like, and when they feel comfortable with it through the enactment of virtual materiality of their avatar body, as the narratives of KM and CP demonstrate: *'…that's why my appearance bothers me sometimes, if it's not quite right. It's not vanity. Like my face is not quite right now. I know it looks good, but it's not right, not [for] me…too wide, wrong shape it's not like an aesthetic; it's like, you could choose between any number of avatar shapes and skins and hair but you stop at*

a certain combination. Why? It's because you say, "that's me!". You can look equally beautiful, or maybe even more so, in another combo, but you wouldn't' (KM); *'I created a first av, then wandered about forever not knowing where to go and I didn't like my avatar (funny that) just didn't like the look of it. So I created C...I cannot evolve with an avatar I don't like. If I was doing role plays I would look exactly the same for e.g. there is a medieval role play I was invited to and we need to dress in medieval clothes; that is already a deterrent for me […] I don't feel comfortable in very sexy clothes in SL either…' (CP)*. However, to those unfamiliar with VWs this might seem nonsensical, even trivial. After all, SL is a body of binary digital information: ones and zeros rendered on a computer screen. Yet, what such interpretation would miss is how residents immerse within this virtual environment and how much they attach to their avatar, as the following accounts illustrate: *'i get angry. i get excited., aroused, happiness...heart pounding, etc. my avatars are part of me and my brain seems to recognize that… a personal thing, a betrayal' (DA)*; *'...i have some rl feeling from my avi' (CL)*; *'...ppl say funny things and I laugh in rl and use a gesture or words to laugh in sl […] it is great' (HH)*; *'Things that happen in SL can affect our moods in RL...and my cousin is currently in love again! Thats clearly a real emotion. She gets so excited when she has a date in SL' (KJ)*; *'I have a huge affection for my avie, huge...' (RJ).*

Body is a mystifying concept, which becomes more subtle as its technologically re-produced versions come around. Embodied experiences in and with digital technologies transform both the body and consciousness, and this transformation stimulates a whole new series of

features associated with the body, as we often talk about telematically-transmitted bodies, bodies that are immersed, extended, composed, substituted, etc. As digitalization becomes a central part of our everyday lives, some of these technologies become like extensions of our bodies, and mind. This is the case of many consumers who repeatedly report *'My avatar will be dancing and my rl fingers and feet will be tapping' (HH)*; *'sometimes when I step off a high place, my heart stops for a moment...It's similar to when I watch a movie or TV except it's more physical, more whole body here' (KM)*; *'...when dancing you can feel it i think the sense of the other of movement and touching... I was surprised because i did not believe that ones feelings could be affected by a mere simulation but its not a mere simulation...' (KJ)*; *I do tend to react to things that happen to my avatar as if they happen to me, like being uncomfortable in a crowded room' (NW)*; *'Very unusual feeling. I felt the flight very physically. I could feel the chill in my stomach when my avatar was falling down like suicide even touch when dancing sometimes it felt very real' (VF)*; *'Well I'm not sure, not sure I have the words […] if I hold my lover in sl I "feel" it' (EN)*.

It can be argued that VWs encourage societal fantasies to be developed within the mind/body discourse going beyond the deficiencies of human flesh. The VW of SL, which allows complete customization of avatar bodies, and thus the construction of the "avatar-as-consumer" identity, promises to give participants an opportunity for a second chance, a second life, as RJ notes *'It is an extension of my mind...i would love this to be real and walk around in a silly dress with a flower behind my ear and knee socks'*, lived through a virtual body that can improve on the corporeal

and be changed like a suit of clothes, according to the participants needs and feelings. If one buys into the mind/body duality, it is simple to be seduced into creating the ideal body with just a few clicks and to have that body in higher regard and respect than their own embodied flesh. In such a case, the virtual body becomes the preferred vessel for the non-corporeal mind which is the essence of the self.

SL is a society of its own with diverse residents taking part in a vast amount of activities, such as socializing, shopping, going to a club, dancing, skiing, role-playing, building, creating objects etc. These people/residents have a multiplicity of identities and roles both within their first life and their SL. The identities that residents employ matter due to the fact that many residents spend a great deal of time embedded in these roles as virtual actors. The time lived within SL is valuable to the residents since it gives them opportunities for creation and imagination as well as for identity exploration and experimentation, opportunities that otherwise they would be difficult for them to have in the physical world**.**

In the physical world, people interact, communicate and act through their corporeal bodies and they are judged by them and engage in the world through them. Avatars function in the same way in VWs. The only difference is that in a VW like SL one can change his/her appearance with a click of a button, like changing clothes. The resident can be a fairy, Neo from Matrix, a robot, a warrior or a Victorian Queen, as “there are more than 150 unique sliders for altering an avatar’s traits, from foot size to eye color” (Baig, 2003). Unlike the physical world, Second Lifers are not stuck

with the body that they are given, but can remake or create their body in any way they wish.

However, this longing to construct a body that allows individuals to portray their selves as a means of signifying a desired image to others is a complex phenomenon when the realm of the digital universe comes into play. As Meamber and Venkatesh (1999) put forth, “how do consumers reconcile their urge for physicality with the non-physicality of cyberspace?” (p. 192).

Body concepts and corporal representations, can be argued, are very important in VWs. In the contemporary information society, the Internet has introduced a new way for people to communicate, since relationships and exchanges gradually become more fluid due to the fact that individuals can perform temporal roles or convey multiple selves based on a variety of experiences. As Nguyen and Alexander (1996) point out, visual representation of one’s physical self is achieved through the manipulation of digital images, due to the emergent semiotic potential of VWs, like SL. Consequently, digital images facilitate consumers’ desire for physicality with the non-physicality of cyberspace in symbolic forms. Reid (1996) suggests that “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” (p.328). This results in the construction of the body in these VWs being more fluid; when individuals are freed from the limitations of the

physical body, they playfully engage in new forms of self-presentation and symbols are turned into personal expressions (Schau and Gilly, 2003).

Our virtual life in cyberspace paralyses our bodies, since cyberspacetime promises individuals liberation from the constraints of space, time and materiality. Thus, it is the virtual body that allows individuals to explore and experience the VW, as it is the corporal body that helps individuals with exploring and experiencing the actual world. In cyberspace, we no longer need to stand physically in the world to see all different sides of situations, since this can be now done through the virtual body.

When in their avatar body, as it has been reported, residents often come to SL in order to escape from the various pressures and concerns that they may have in their first life. SL creates a climate of escape, pleasure and relaxation which feels like a paradise, a utopia, for the residents in which they can be deeply drawn without any distractions as the following quotes show '*[…] it's peaceful :) [...] a 'secret garden'... […] JUST for you' (AK)*; '*[…] An excellent place for relaxation :) (HH)*; '*Escaping into my own private garden […] time to myself […] true escapism' (AL)*.

However, even though SL is viewed as a place where residents come to escape their first life it has been reported that they also escape SL by either logging off '...*when it is a bit dull on odd occasions I log off...' (AK)* or by creating another avatar whose existence is not known to the social circle that the main avatar has: '*I was escaping my Second Life with my alt' (PP)*; *'I have actually made alts*...*sometimes I want to be alone' (KM)*.

8.1.2 2nd Contribution: The netnographic researcher within virtual worlds and from netnography to virtualography

My data is not adequately explained on existing ontological assumptions built into the netnography discourse, since the latter is mainly focused on text-based online environments ressearch, such as chat rooms, discussion boards, forums, blogs, etc (Kozinets, 1997; 2001; 2002b). In the netnography discourse a real/virtual binary exists with the real being 'out there' and the virtual being 'in here' 'online' etc. In consumer research, ethnography and netnography have retained the flavour of research methods rather than methodologies, and as such there is a conflict between the presentation by the researcher of a world "out there" which is fluid, iterated, constructed and often performative, and the presentation of the researcher self which is either invisible, or holds together as a secure subject standing in a controlled position and observe, theorise and write up the world they see. In the current study the netnographer traces a path within the VW of SL that is of the researcher's own making; it is the researcher that writes the field.

My data showed that the real and the virtual are being actively constructed by participants in SL. Therefore, a different theoretical lens would explain this better. I suggest a Butlerian lens as it provides an ontology of not either/or but simultaneity, emergence, and (co-)construction.

Ethnographic research conducted on VWs and consumption practices around them so far have mainly focused on a one-dimensional view of online environments, since they seem to ignore the multiple nature of the online environments and the co-creation of the ethnographic field between the researcher and the internet context and vice versa (Kozinets, 1997, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998, 2004). Moreover, they seem to ignore that online communities can be studied as the activity of systems where meanings are built, co-constructed and negotiated among members, which means that each participant decides what to portray about him/her self in that particular context, but also that the context itself plays a dynamic role in directing and modelling the possible choices.

One example of this relates to the traditional notions of "access" and "entrée" which reinforce the dualistic models of research engagement. The presentation of dualistic, objectivist models of the researcher/respondent relationship seem particularly inadequate to deal with the complexity of the research vista presented to the ethnographer.

As can be seen in Figure 8-7, this is a realist approach, which can be said to be scientifically detached; the Internet is assumed to be "the field" where the researcher enters as an external entity in order to conduct his/her research, collect the appropriate data and exit. This is a one-dimensional approach to online environments and a non-reflective approach to the part that the researcher plays within the environment that he/she enters. This makes it a constrained model, a closed system.

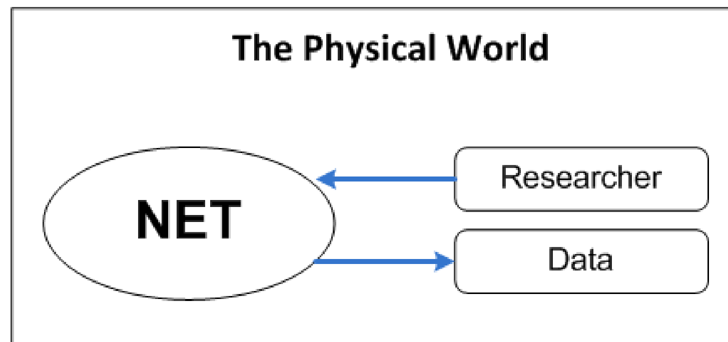

Figure 8-7: Realist Model

Moreover, in the main, consumer research on online communities does not deal with the 'virtual/real' binary and how consumers actively produce it. Theorizing the 'real/virtual' binary is not useful in this realist model, since consumer identities are theorized in a very specific way. The realist model looks at consumers as being constrained as far as creative roles and identities are concerned, limiting their human freedom by reinforcing particular views of reality, and making their everyday life less diverse and more passive. Moreover, the consumers are not placed outside of the totalizing logic of the market (Murray and Ozanne, 1991; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Firat and Dholakia, 1998), where consumption is seen as expressive rather than productive. Diversity notwithstanding, the singular experienced reality of online social interaction is as a place where groups of consumers with similar interests actively seek and exchange information about prices, quality, manufacturers, retailers, company ethics, company history, product history, and other consumption-related characteristics (Kozinets, 1999). How are consumers constructed alongside constructions of the real and the virtual? How is the real constructed as the real and the virtual constructed as the virtual? What

effect does this have on the construction of the consumer and upon their "consumer behaviour"? So far, these are questions that are largely left unanswered.

This realist model, illustrated in Figure 8-7, assumes that the researcher and the phenomena in the virtual environment, which is the researcher's focus, are two separate, independent things, making it dualistic in nature. It demonstrates that the objects under research have qualities that exist independent of the researcher – observer. The dualistic, objectivist model of the researcher-respondent relationship endures regardless of ontological shifts in the paradigm towards a post-structuralist view of the world, performing a world "out there" that we, as "epistemic subjects" enter, study, leave and write about. This approach tries to build a reality that exists beyond the human mind. It apparently supposes that human experience of the world reflects an objective, independent reality and that this reality provides the foundation for human knowledge. This view believes that a statement made by a researcher is true when it has a one-to-one mapping to the reality that exists beyond the human mind (a correspondence theory of truth, which states that the truth or inaccuracy of a statement is determined only by how it relates to the world, and whether it accurately describes (i.e., corresponds with) that world) (Weber 2004). Moreover, the nature of reality is regarded as independent of consciousness, as 'external', (loosely) 'material', and objective. Because it is "out there", it can be studied independently of the inquirer. Thus, different observers should arrive at the same conclusions, and it contains general and immutable laws which operate independently of our ability to

do anything about them - except to the extent that we study, understand, and harness them toward our own purposes (Donnel, 1999).

As mentioned above, consumer research conducted in online communities does not deal with the 'virtual/real' binary and with how consumers negotiate it. It does not deal with how consumers construct themselves by using ideas about their perception regarding the 'real' and the 'virtual' and how they construct their reality as reality. By introducing the concept of performativity in the post-human, poststructuralist consumer research body we can analyze consumer identities and the way products and brands are used to construct consumer identity in such a way as to contribute to the theory of online environments, using a model of simultaneity and emergence, as seen through Butlerian lens.

The concept of performativity, which was introduced into feminist theory by Judith Butler (1992), challenges the idea that identities are fixed and essential but are effects of expressions, through material-semiotic iteration, that are said to be their results (Butler 1990). Butler (1993) describes performativity as "…that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (p. 2). Performativity does not assume that an identity is forever changing, nor one that can be changed at will, but as Bell (1999) argues, to employ performativity as a concept is a critical impulse, "taking the performative nature of identities as a theoretical premise means…to question how identities continue to be produced, embodied and performed effectively" (p. 2).

Nothing is fixed or stable, be it online environments, their members' identities, the researcher that works on the field etc. There is constant re-negotiation of the self, with identity itself being unfixed and a constantly performed construct. Individuals write their own narratives, which change over time since other elements get into play, such as the surrounding environment, other individuals etc. Under different circumstances and different settings individuals tend to change their actions and behaviours (Goffman, 1959).

Consumption practices in online environments are thus “performative” (Butler, 1993) cultural categories (including being subject or object, natural or cultural) that are enacted through iterative processes, rather than something that has innate characteristics and capacities. Iterative processes do not assume an original entity or category but are repetitions, rituals, conventions, and practices that over time give the appearance of fixity.

Instead of ontological given and essential, identities are thought of as constructed and relational. Everything that constitutes the physical world reacts to situations. What people are doing is constructing reality as a concept, so they are constructing "what is reality", not presenting "their real self". When the ‘virtual/real’ binary comes into play consumers are constructing themselves as real and actually constructing what is real itself. The emergent ontology that the current study suggests, assumes that reality and the individual who observes it cannot be separated.

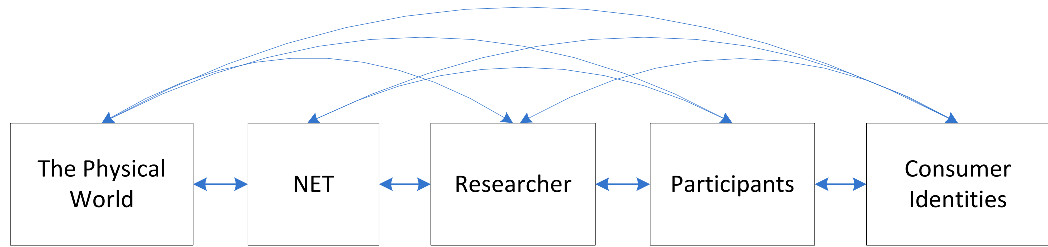

Figure 8-8: Emergent Ontology Model

In the Emergent Ontology Model, depicted in Figure 8-8, researchers subscribe to a notion of truth whereby a researcher's initial interpretation of some phenomenon conforms to the meaning given to the phenomenon through the researcher's lived experience of it. Reality is essentially subjective, and "truth" is a construction which is located within our experience (historically, culturally, and experientially). Therefore, there are as many realities as there are people. Whether or not there is a singular, persistent reality, there is no-one who occupies the privileged position of being able to know it anyway. (If anyone should happen to occupy such a position, they could not demonstrate it with certainty to anyone else, as it will be perceived or 'constructed' differently by everyone else anyway). Instead, our varying views of reality may compete, not only at individual levels, but also at wider levels such as the group. In principle, truth could exist privately (although the possibility of private experience is arguable), but in any explicit sense it necessarily exists in the form of consensus between numbers of individuals.

This extends the netnography discourse in terms of how the relationship between the researcher and the researched is brought into the analysis.

In VWs this is even more important due to the “physical” presence of the researcher within the environment.

8.2 Conclusion

This chapter offers a detailed discussion of the main contributions of this thesis. The first contribution concerns the development of a theoretical framework depicting how the consumption of clothing, accessories, decoration and bodily adornments is used in the VW of SL in order to resolve the key paradoxes shown in the ‘Model of Paradoxes’, focusing mainly on the participants’ understanding, negotiations and enactment of the virtual materiality of the self within SL and the construction of the “avatar-as-consumer”. The second contribution of this thesis firstly concerns the extension of the netnography framework from mainly text-based research to the specific visual characteristics of VWs, so that it can be useful for the study of complex online environments, such as VWs. Moreover, this thesis has critically appraised the specificity of the positionality of the researcher within VWs in relation to the respondents, which had been largely ignored in traditional ethnographic and theoretical approaches to online research in the consumer research discipline. The data of this thesis revealed that the real and the virtual are actively constructed by participants, therefore, suggesting a Butlerian lens since it provides an ontology of not either/or but simultaneity, emergence, and (co)construction.

Chapter 9 : Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter looks back at the whole research project and brings together the findings in order to draw conclusions. In section 9.2 a summary of the research will be presented, which will look at the entire research process, including the major contributions of the thesis. Section 9.3 is going to discuss the limitations of the research and finally section 9.4 is going to present recommendations for future research.

9.2 Research Summary

The dynamic development of new technologies influenced consumers in many different ways reaching far beyond the shift in consumption patterns, challenging the way consumers live their lives (Kedzior, 2007; Johnson, 2001; Shih, 1998; Turkle, 1995; Venkatesh, 1998). The role of new information technologies is continually growing in our daily lives changing the way we see the self and the world around us. Consequently, the advent of the computer culture incites a radical rethinking of who we are and the nature of being human, which clearly illustrates the postmodern age.

The recent advances in CMC have led to instant communication that is not anymore restricted by traditional understandings of space and time, but it

is also possible to identify the contravention of the virtual realm into our physical space (Jones, 1998; Baym, 2009). Indeed, the physical and the virtual realms are becoming blurred and thus difficult to separate Jordan, 2009; Markos and Labrecque, 2009) due to the loss of face-to-face contact (Ward, 1999; Donath, 1999), opening up new areas of inquiry regarding the meaning of the physical world reality and its relationship with the VW reality. The realm of VWs clearly demonstrates how the boundaries between the physical and the virtual are becoming more fluid as individuals are interacting with digitally constructed entities (Ward, 1999). VWs challenge traditional boundaries of reality and imaginary, since it embodies the postmodern condition in which rational dichotomies of real/unreal, fiction/reality are discarded and replaced with conceptions of multiple realities and subjectivities. VWs are imaginative, mouldable spaces where participants construct their own understanding and interact on an environment completely detached from the constraints of rationalism and physical reality (Voisin, 1995).

Central to this is how computers affect and will continue to affect what it means to be a human being and how one constructs identity. Questions of 'identity' have reached a notable centrality within the human and social sciences (Hall, 1997a), with online identity being in the forefront of cyberculture scholarship throughout the history of the field investigating how self-expression may change as it moves from a face-to-face interaction to an interaction through a telephone line or a fiber-optic cable (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1985).

With the introduction of the new technologies, new examinations of identity were inevitable since they have an impact on people's expression and identity due to the numerous opportunities that individuals have to present themselves in a variety of ways (Buckingham, 2008; du Gay et al, 2000). Virtual environments open the door to new identity experiences, new ways of being, of conveying and negotiating identities at stake (Suler, 2002).

Whereas in the physical world the identity and position of the people you communicate with are well known, fixed and highly visual, in cyberspace everyone is in the dark (McLaughlin et al, 1995: 93) as there is ample room for exploration and experimentation with different versions of the self (Turkle, 1995). Individuals that inhabit cyberspace are free to construct and reconstruct the self creating multiple identities and thus multiple realities, characteristics that are intrinsic to postmodern life (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

A very significant aspect of online communities is that meanings are co-constructed, with online environments being perceived as the 'place' where meanings are built and negotiated among members (Cole, 1998). This means not only that each participant decides what to reveal about him/her self in that specific context, but also that the context itself plays a dynamic role in directing and modeling the possible choices. These are all very significant aspects of how people manage their identity in cyberspace (Schegloff, 1992).

Moreover, the emergence of information technology and the abundance of interactive media, with the Internet being at the front position, changed the

ways in which people consume. The Internet has become an environment of rampant consumption, voyeurism and fantasy (Hoffman, and Novak, 1997; Childers et al., 2001; Miah, 2000). There seems to be a trend towards virtualized consumption in cyberspace, where consumption acts are fluid, symbol-oriented, and consumer-controlled, leading to consumption which is desire laden (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2005). This signifies a transition from material to experiential and symbolic commodities, with the latter creating experiences to be enjoyed. Contemporary consumption is full of hyperreal moments, where the sign becomes what is to be consumed. This clearly demonstrates how consumer culture and contemporary society are dominated by the power of the spectacle. Computer mediation intensifies this consumption of signs, with the media-mediated 'reality' seeming to be more real, vivid and intense than life in the physical world (Urry, 1995; Firat and Dholakhia, 1998; Gottdiener, 2000). Postmodernity, which emphasizes the hyperreal spectacle and signification rather than 'real experience' is liberatory for the consumer and frees him/her to construct his/her own symbolic world being able to engage in multiple experiences (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

Postmodern consumers use their creative, imaginative powers to create mental images, which they consume for the intrinsic pleasure that they provide, thus consumption takes place mainly in the mind as an aesthetic, imaginary (virtual) experience. This aestheticisation of everyday life has given way to desire and pleasure for consumers (Featherstone, 1991), creating the romantic and hedonist consumer, who appraise the evocative power of the image giving greater value to imagination than physical

capital. This is certainly the case in CMEs where the boundaries between material and immaterial seem to erode, and virtual materiality seems to emerge resulting in consumers representing themselves using digital rather than physical referents, which puts imagination over physical capital.

This netnographic research has specifically focused on the VW of SL, a RL simulation, which represents a lively consumption space, and where the elements of reality merge with fantasy, resulting in a highly immersive environment. The residents in this VW represent themselves through avatars, creating a kind of virtual materiality, a notion that is introduced in this thesis in an attempt to conceptualize this virtualilty/materiality dualism. This raises interesting questions for consumer researchers, not just about how consumption is enacted, produced and articulated within this environment, but also in relation to theoretical and methodological issues. This thesis explored and shed light on these issues as they are imperative for the construction of the “avatar-as-consumer” through the consumption of clothing, accessories, decoration, bodily adornments and ‘look’.

The distinguishing value of SL as a site of this inquiry is the fact that it epitomizes the idea of virtual materiality, since not only is the object of consumption digitized and intangible, but the consuming subject (the avatar) is also an intangible representation in the VW.

This thesis has two major contributions. The first contribution is the development of the ‘Model of Paradoxes’ framework, where the derived key paradoxes that the “avatar-as-consumer” is faced with are presented.

More specifically, this model portrays how the consumption acts in relation to clothes, accessories, decoration and bodily adornments are used by the residents in SL in order to reconcile these paradoxes as they are understood, negotiated and enacted by participants. The second contribution regards the extension and critical appraisal of the methodology of netnography. Netnographic studies in consumer research are mainly focusing on text-based online environenments. Therefore there is a need to extend the netnography framework, so that it can be useful for consumer research studies conducted in more complex online environments like SL, where the visual element is in the centre. In addition, the positionality of the researcher within VWs has been critically appraised in this thesis. So far, ethnographic research conducted on VWs and consumption practices around them have mainly focused on a one-dimensional view of online environments, a realist model, which seems to ignore the multiple nature of the online environments and the co-creation of the ethnographic field between the researcher and the internet context and vice versa. Therefore this thesis suggests a Butlerian lens since it provides an ontology of not either/or but simultaneity, emergence, and (co)construction.

9.3 Limitations of the Study

Like any research project, this thesis is limited by several constraints. The first limitation concerns the fact that the current thesis forms a comprehensive and in-depth inquiry into the construction of consumer's identity in online environments with regard to one VW, SL. Therefore, it

lacks a comparison with data retrieved from other VWs, therefore hampering generalization. The second 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, the current thesis mostly focused on participant observations on the popular sites in the VW of 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.

9.4 An Agenda for Future Research

This exploratory study has highlighted several pathways for further research. The following subsections illustrate some of the areas that this research could be extended into.

9.4.1 Interaction between 'Real Life' consumer behaviour and Second Life consumer behaviour

The role of these complex worlds as tools that individuals use to make sense of their lives in a consumer society is worth further consideration. Further studies may consider whether there is a relationship between virtual identities, Second Life consumption and 'Real Life' consumption. A

very important question that arises is whether the individuals behind the avatars are going to actually buy 'real-world' products that are marketed in VWs and possibly consumed in-world by their digital representations or not. Could an avatar who is spending Linden Dollars in order to buy a virtual shirt from a designer clothing store in SL be attracted, while visiting an in-world Gap retailer store for example, to click on a cash register and use her/his credit card in order to buy a 'real-world' Gap sweater that would be shipped to the real person's doorstep? This research agenda is a very important one as the use of interactive entertainment continues to grow.

9.4.2 Virtual Consumption replacing Material Consumption?

It has been suggested that contemporary consumption is characterized more by an electronically conducted flow than by embedded heavy commodities. Widespread experimentation with consumption of technology has resulted in the creation of newer modes of consumption and possession. CME technologies have lately become a representative form of technological consumption. It can be argued that every moment spent in a mediated environment entails another given up in the 'real world'; each act of consumption in a CME replaces an act of consumption in the 'real world'; each simulated possession replaces a tangible one. However, the notion of virtual consumption as an alternative to material consumption seems a little 'far-fetched' at first, but it is hard to ignore the fact that 10 years ago virtual goods didn't exist; now they're estimated to

be a very real $5 billion industry (Lehtiniemi and Lehdonvirta, 2007). As virtual markets grow from $5 billion to say $50 billion, how will it change consumer culture? How will the digitalization of consumption affect consumer culture? Why do consumers pay real money for digital objects that don't really exist?

9.4.3 Comparison with another VW

This thesis has specifically studied the construction of consumers' identities that are expressed through the decoration and development of the "avatar-as-consumer" in one VW, SL. However, apart from SL, there are many other 3D VWs (IMVU, Kaneva) where people reside in, spending a significant amount of their daily lives taking part in various activities within these worlds and in many occasions spending significant amounts of money, either for the subscription to the VW or for the purchase of virtual goods. A future study could compare the findings of the current thesis with one or two other VWs in order to see whether the consumers' activities have any similarities/differences in different platforms, whether and how the construction of the "avatar-as-consumer" can emerge from the consumption of products other than clothes, decoration, bodily adornment etc. and how the presentation of self through avatars is conceptualized in different VWs.

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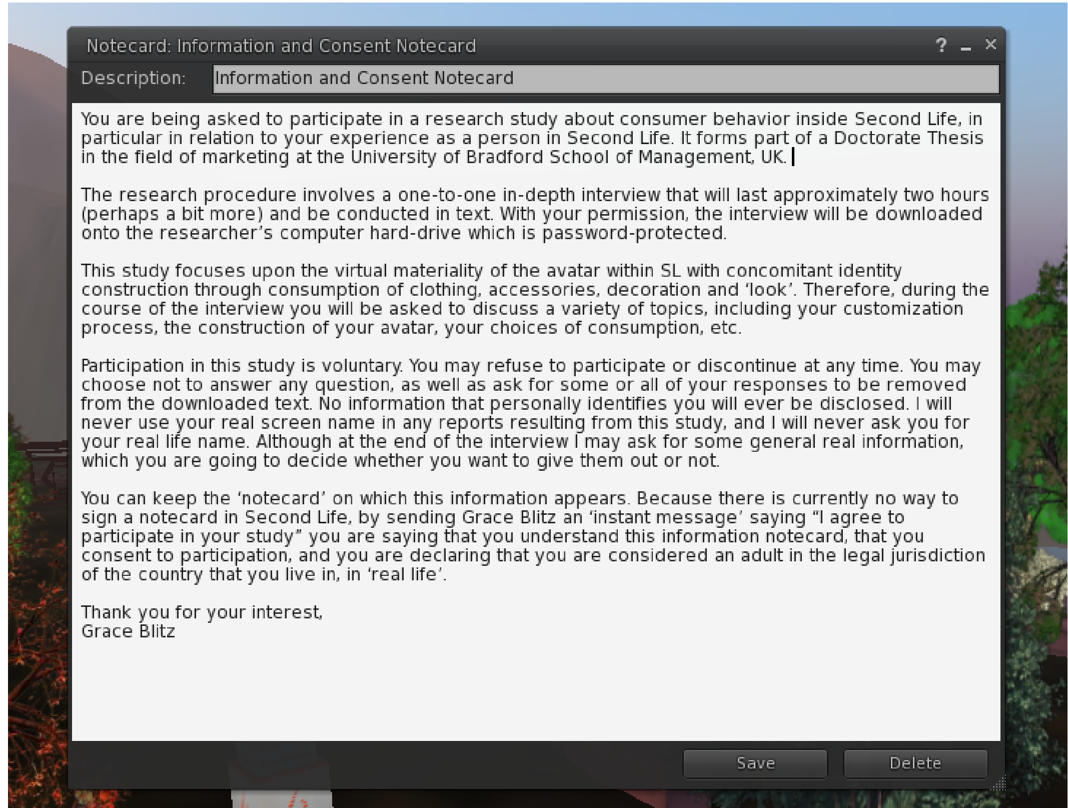
Appendix A: Information and Consent Notecard


Notecard: Information and Consent Notecard

Description: Information and Consent Notecard

You are being asked to participate in a research study about consumer behavior inside Second Life, in particular in relation to your experience as a person in Second Life. It forms part of a Doctorate Thesis in the field of marketing at the University of Bradford School of Management, UK.

The research procedure involves a one-to-one in-depth interview that will last approximately two hours (perhaps a bit more) and be conducted in text. With your permission, the interview will be downloaded onto the researcher's computer hard-drive which is password-protected.

This study focuses upon the virtual materiality of the avatar within SL with concomitant identity construction through consumption of clothing, accessories, decoration and 'look'. Therefore, during the course of the interview you will be asked to discuss a variety of topics, including your customization process, the construction of your avatar, your choices of consumption, etc.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or discontinue at any time. You may choose not to answer any question, as well as ask for some or all of your responses to be removed from the downloaded text. No information that personally identifies you will ever be disclosed. I will never use your real screen name in any reports resulting from this study, and I will never ask you for your real life name. Although at the end of the interview I may ask for some general real information, which you are going to decide whether you want to give them out or not.

You can keep the 'notecard' on which this information appears. Because there is currently no way to sign a notecard in Second Life, by sending Grace Blitz an 'instant message' saying "I agree to participate in your study" you are saying that you understand this information notecard, that you consent to participation, and you are declaring that you are considered an adult in the legal jurisdiction of the country that you live in, in 'real life'.

Thank you for your interest,
Grace Blitz

Save Delete

A. 1: Information and Consent Notecard