

## VIRTUAL ETHNICITY? DESIGNING A CONSUMER AVATAR DRAMA TO DISCOVER MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCY

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### ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the emerging virtual world marketing education literature. Specifically, it assesses how well dramaturgical avatar design activities improve the competency for analyzing consumers' ethnic identity. The findings suggest that virtual world scenarios deepen the specificity of ethnic culture analysis and widen the spectrum of ethnic culture access. Analytical depth pertains to complete conceptual alignment as well as correct cultural authenticity. Access width pertains to the fluidity with which transference occurs between students' own ethnic identity and other ethnic cultures. Besides ethnic analysis *depth* and *fluidity*, the virtual module is assessed on the dimensions of *collaboration*, *competence*, and *community*. As a practical response to course constraints, dramatic real world participation is used instead of immersive virtual world presence. Still, the virtual world module is a viable pedagogy method for exploring avatar marketing and imparting ethnic analysis skills.

### INTRODUCTION: DISCOVERING ARTIFICIAL

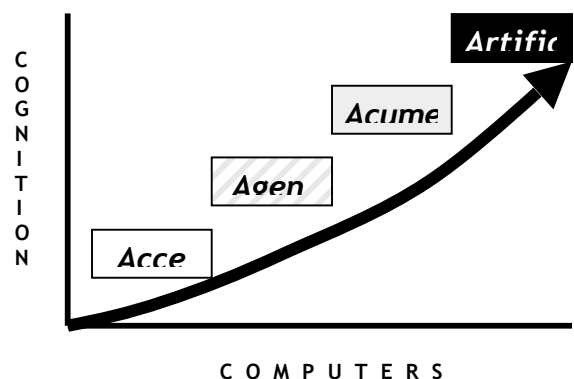
For more than a decade, marketing educators have adopted computer-based instruction (Smart, et al. 1999). Interactive technology has become integral to marketing curricula (Peltier, et al. 2003; Ferrell and Ferrell 2002; Evans 2001; Ueltschy 2001; Benbunan-Fich, et al. 2001) and online media are increasingly accessed to support pedagogy across marketing course offerings (Kaplan, et al. 2010; Hansen 2008; Henson, et al. 2003; Heinrichs, et al. 2002). Equally important, students respond favorably to the new digital learning media (Clarke, et al. 2001).

The adoption of digital technology applications among marketing educators traces the blending computers and cognition. Virtual worlds, a fusion of 3-D video games and social networking, are the latest stage of digital tool diffusion. As Figure 1 shows, the application of online digital technology in marketing courses evolves from simple tasks like finding information (access) to more strategic techniques for facilitating interaction (agency) and

functioning intelligently (acumen). At each stage, the boundary between programmed computers and personal cognition becomes more blurred. Now, with the digital intelligence of virtual worlds, marketing educators can design strategic computer platforms with simulated cognitive properties (artificial).

FIGURE 1

### Online Digital Tech in Marketing Education



Although marketing educators clearly value digitally literacy, they have only begun to envision digital life. The adoption of artificial virtual world course designs lags in comparison to other digital techniques.

Wood, et al. (2008a) defines virtual worlds as; "3-D computer mediated environments that offer rich visual interfaces and real-time communication with other residents." Like those authors, this study exposes marketing educators to the viability of virtual worlds for course pedagogy. Yet, besides affirming digital experience marketing educators are encouraged to develop virtual world course designs using dramaturgical exploration.

### Artificial Worlds of Commerce

Contemporary relevance is a primary course design objective. This is particularly true for keeping the marketing curriculum up to date on virtual world marketing success factors and trends (Tikkanen, et al. 2009). In consumer behavior courses analytical competency might be improved by learning how

virtual worlds influence actual customers and their artificial avatars (Hemp 2006; Holzwarth, et al. 2006; Suh and Lee 2005). These social identity profiles of avatars (Wood and Solomon 2009; McGoldrick, et al. 2008) may help students think more critically and intuitively about consumer influences. For instance, the virtual world marketing literature shows that animated product placement can raise brand loyalty (Shang, et al. 2006; Moleswarth 2006; Ederly 2006). Also, virtual advertising is successful (Dougherty, et al. 2002) because actual consumers gain satisfaction from avatar experience (Klein 2003).

### **INITIATION: DESIGNING DRAMATURGY**

As an extension of curricular virtual world research, this case study offers a marketing course module designed using a dramaturgical pedagogy. Vicarious role play scenarios are used to profile avatar identity and plot virtual world interaction. This drama design is aimed at consumer analysis competency, defined as identity dimension awareness and application. Textbooks refer to identity dimensions as “Individual Consumer Influences” (Blackwell, et al. 2006).

#### **Ethnicity Focus**

The multicultural interaction among avatars in the scenario, and students in class, provides a unique educational setting for observing the formation of “virtual ethnicity.” Ethnic identity is isolated as the analytical focus because of its prominence in consumer behavior and paucity in the virtual world marketing education studies. As a subjective self-identification measure (Blackwell, et al. 2006; Rossiter and Chan 1998), ethnicity can capture the cultural character of consumer behavior better than objective categories like race which are used to compile population demographics. The multicultural marketing literature (Rao 2006; Pires and Stanton 2005; Burton 2005, 2002; Xu 2004; Cui 2001) serves as a vital reference source to cultivate students’ ethnic identity analysis competency for real world and virtual world markets.

As an avatar profile attribute, ethnic identity is defined for students as a set of common collective cultural tendencies (values, language, customs, and symbolic expressions, etc.) and a distinctive set of individual traits (e.g., genetic, biological, inherited, etc.). These virtual world module considerations echo Atwong, et al’s. (2002) study of ethnic influences in the online learning experience. Like Wood, et al. (2008b) ethnicity is presented as a personified virtual avatar property.

### **Dramaturgical Framing**

Goffman (1959) coined the term “dramaturgy” to develop a micro-sociological theory for analyzing the context and not the cause of personal interaction. . Dramaturgy is widely used to analyze marketing dynamics (Zeithaml, et al. 2006; Williams and Anderson 2005; Moisio and Arnould’s 2005; Grove, et al. 2000; Sherry 2000; Rook 1985). In fact, the dramaturgical concept of “servicescapes” (Bitner 1992) has been applied to design scenes for digital market interaction (Ezeh and Harris 2007; Rosenbaum 2005; Sherry 1998; Carter 1996).

For the virtual world module, dramaturgy enables students to discover deeper layers of avatar identity through dramatic scenario enactment. Moreover, dramaturgical module designs are more readily adopted by marketing educators with less virtual world technology familiarity, less computer literate students, as well as less advanced digital classroom infrastructure. Those three constraints shaped the virtual world module examined in this case study.

In fact, curricular studies of actual virtual world participation are rare in the marketing education literature (Solomon, et al. 2009; Wood 2008; Wood, et al 2008a, 2008c). Yet, research on virtual world instruction is advancing in other fields (Twining 2010; Baker, et al. 2009; Peterson 2006; Dickey 2003). This vanguard is furthered by 3-D animated simulation courseware such as “V-Learning” [www.vlcglobal.com](http://www.vlcglobal.com). Instead, this study’s dramaturgy module substitutes role play simulation for the digital animation of actual virtual world presence. This vicarious virtual presence builds cognitive reflection skills (Peltier, et al. 2005) and resembles Russell-Bennett’s (2010) classroom simulation of markets.

### **IMPLEMENTATION: DELIVERING VIRTUAL**

The virtual world module was administered for four academic quarters at an undergraduate consumer behavior course at a small regional American university. Similar to theatrical productions, the virtual world module is implemented through a process shown in Figure 2 as:

- a) Instruction -- Preparation focus on aptitude
- b) Interaction -- Performance focus on avatars
- c) Insight -- Probative focus on assessment.

#### **Instruction – Preparation Focus on Aptitude**

Absent the resources to deliver a virtually immersive experience, students are oriented to the module with entertaining videos that explain virtual world environments and avatar engagement. In addition,

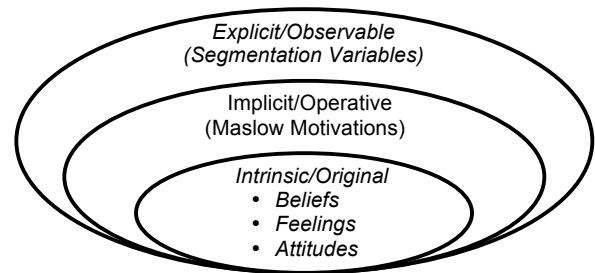
the class is shown how to create actual virtual world presence using a 30 minute “free-trial” on the Second Life website. Usually, several students will have personal experiences to share regarding virtual worlds, and these are integrated into the orientation as well. Figure 2 includes the virtual world video links as part of the orientation to dramaturgical virtual world learning. Following this contextual orientation, students are divided into teams of 5 to 7 students.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Virtual World Module Implementation Process**

<p><b>A. Instruction – Preparation Focus on Aptitude</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Contextual Orientation to Dramaturgical Scenarios             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Collaborative experiential learning: V-world marketing                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exposure to virtual world video links:                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7C6LAEQUGs">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7C6LAEQUGs</a></li> <li><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O62GHcIVKS4">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O62GHcIVKS4</a></li> <li><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CijdlYOSPc">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CijdlYOSPc</a></li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>b) Creative design of avatar profiles &amp; script plots                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard script template &amp; avatar group formation</li> </ul> </li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Conceptual Orientation to Consumer Identity             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Segmentation variables (<i>explicit/observable</i>)</li> <li>b) Motivations – Maslow’s Hierarchy (<i>implicit/operant</i>)</li> <li>c) Beliefs/Feelings/Attitudes (<i>intrinsic/original</i>)</li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p><b>B. Interaction – Performance Focus on Avatars</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Avatar identity analysis – profile traits (ethnicity)</li> <li>2. Avatar interaction analysis – plot tendencies (ethnicity)             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Planned script interaction – template dialogue</li> <li>b) Unplanned spontaneous interaction – improv dialogue</li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p><b>C. Insight – Probative Focus on Assessment</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consumer identity analysis competency</li> <li>2. Virtual world marketing cogency</li> <li>3. Multicultural marketing codification             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Ethnic culture analysis depth                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceptually complete alignment</li> <li>• Culturally correct authenticity</li> </ul> </li> <li>b) Ethnic culture access fluidity                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universal awareness of diverse ethnic cultures</li> <li>• Specific appreciation of selected ethnic culture</li> </ul> </li> <li>c) Ethnic culture activity collaboration                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within group avatar profile composition</li> <li>• Between group script performance coordination</li> </ul> </li> <li>d) Ethnic culture attribute competence</li> <li>e) Ethnic culture aptitude community</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
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An “egg-layers” diagram serves as a heuristic for composing and analyzing avatar profiles. Like an egg, “individual consumer influences” start with a consumer “shell” of *explicit/observable* segmentation variables, to a mediating “white” of *implicit/operant* consumer motives, to a “yolk” of *intrinsic/original* beliefs, feelings, attitudes (See Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3**  
**Egg Layers Diagram of Consumer Identity**



**Interaction – Performance Focus on Avatars**

Avatar interaction is designed to validate avatar identity profiles in order to improve consumer analysis competency. Dramaturgy mediates the virtual world module’s reliance on creative expression through avatar role development and its conceptual learning requirements. Ethnicity is presented to students as an essential avatar attribute because it is one of three anthropological factors, along with gender and age, which define human identity and interactions. However, “virtual ethnicity” is studied with disguised observation and evaluation. Students explore all consumer traits and tendencies as part of the tasks for composing avatar profiles, unaware of the module’s ethnic focus.

Avatar Identity – “Egg-Layers” Concepts

Segmentation variables address observable ethnic identity descriptors like race, residence, education, occupation, income, spending, household composition, lifestyle activities, and consumption preferences. Maslow’s Needs Hierarchy (Maslow 1970) is used to associate motivational drives with ethnic identity descriptors. At the deepest level of ethnic identity the avatar profile addresses specific beliefs, feelings and attitudes (BFAs). These BFAs set the threshold for middle layer motivations, as well as how ethnic identity is individually and collectively defined. Carter (2010) describes these individualized multicultural identities as “universal” because they are more ethnically inclusive, culturally fluid, and personally liberating than fixed ethnic group norms.

Avatar Interaction – Dramaturgy Context

A simple script allows for ample improvisation within the main plot. As a result, avatar interaction is generated by both planned scenario roles and spontaneous in-class exchanges. By balancing the planned and spontaneous features of avatar script interaction, instructional continuity is maintained

throughout the module. The virtual world script titles reflect these narrative guidelines (See Figure 4).

### Insight – Probative Focus on Assessment

The dramaturgic module made fundamental improvements on three learning indicators: a) Consumer identity analysis competency, b) Virtual world marketing cogency, and c) Multicultural marketing credibility. Consequently, the insights discussed here review virtual world module discoveries – including “virtual ethnicity” aspects.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Sample Virtual World Module Script Template**

***“2 Couples on a Vacation”***

**The Cast:** Profile of avatar characters and roles

**Scene 1 – “The Meeting”**  
During their pleasure trip airline flight, a liberated American couple, Oliver and J.J. unexpectedly encounter an intriguing women traveling to join her enigmatic mate in Barcelona Spain. After hours of conversational bonding, the three agree to spend the weekend as a foursome, in a spacious suite at The Hotel Majestic, located on Paseo de Gracia. <http://vimeo.com/2026796>  
THE MEETING takes place in “El Prat Airport,” a blend of old world Spanish culture and modern traveler amenities. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-s-dl6iryk>  
As THE MEETING transpires, several INDIVIDUAL CUSTOMER CHARACTERISTICS (ch.7) are revealed, and BRAND preferences emerge during the vacation.

**Scene 2 – “The Mingling”**  
Now settled into their posh Barcelona “Hotel Majestic,” the American and Swedish couple finds that a stimulating interplay exists among their varied MOTIVATIONS (ch.8). Waking after a night of drinks and chats, the foursome take to the streets of Barcelona for a day of sightseeing. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-wyE9TjRwk>  
Daylight Barcelona tourist activities are followed by separate nightlife plans for the romantic and spirited MOTIVATIONS (ch. 8) evoked by the atmosphere of venues suitable for a Spanish vacation memories. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UcCGDQH4y4&NR=1>

**Scene 3 – “The Mystery & Memories”**  
Winding down after a Mediterranean weekend escape, the foursome decides to share special secrets from their couple’s night out, in the more casual company of gender peers. The dialogue during these gender pairings, reveal deeply held BELIEFS, FEELINGS, ATTITUDES (ch. 10). The guys head for a rousing soccer game between Barcelona and Real Madrid, to share candid views. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzuF3oTh-vc>  
The ladies head for the balmy southern Spanish beach resort town of Marbella in Andalucia on the famed Costa del Sol (Coast of the Sun), to indulge in an authentic spa.

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=8008085077217441442#>

Reunited at the festive restaurant La Reina del Rival, the foursome discuss the revealing Barcelona’s vacation.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hBWJeGbFng>

Little consideration has been given to ethnicity in the virtual world marketing literature, either to design avatar identity or depict virtual world interactions. Although the focus is on “virtual ethnicity,” students are only directed to compose avatar profiles for consumer analysis without emphasizing ethnicity.

In addition to disguised observations during the module, “virtual ethnicity” insights come from probing students’ responses to questions upon completion of the script. Like the dramaturgic module design, this post-module survey calls upon students “reflective” skills of cognitive visualization (Peltier, et al. 2005).

The student responses are supplemented by module observations to affirm five “virtual ethnicity” vectors:

- 1) *Depth* -- students’ ability to compose ethnic identity on 3 levels (segmentation, motivations, and beliefs/feelings/attitudes). *Complete (conceptual alignment) and correct (cultural authenticity)* avatar profiles increase depth. Complete avatar profiles show stronger ethnic identification. Correct avatar profiles sustain ethnic interaction in the virtual world script.
- 2) *Fluidity* -- openness to diverse ethnic cultures. For ethnicity and other avatar traits, the virtual world scenario liberated students’ willingness to explore identity profiles other than their own. Fluidity opens “double-consciousness” (DuBois 1903) to “virtual ethnicity’s” universal spectrum of multi-conscious inclusion (Carter 2010)
- 3) *Collaboration* – shared discovery of ethnic identity and interaction through dramaturgical scenarios and digital simulation
- 4) *Competency* – the analytical skill of designing and diagnosing “virtual ethnicity.” These competencies can be attributed to a variety of American ethnic groups, including multi-ethnic identity and global multicultural nationality, based on the composition of avatar profiles.
- 5) *Community* -- culminates the transformation from traditional ethnicity explained by social knowledge to “virtual ethnicity” experienced through social networks. Marketing education learning communities combine brand, multicultural, and virtual online communities.

The five “virtual ethnicity” dimensions complement Wood, et al.’s (2008a) stages of virtual world project

progression: “*cultivation, focus, training, community.*”  
However, the “virtual ethnicity” module emphasizes “cultivation” (depth, fluidity), “focuses” collaboratively, and blends multicultural, brand, virtual “community” (competence, community), in a largely non-digital venue without technology “training.”

#### **IMPLICATIONS: DISCERNING PEDAGOGY**

The implications of the virtual world module for marketing education are distilled by returning to the

pedagogical aim. Two primary educational paths are presented by the module; (a) an experiential dramaturgical method enacted as a virtual world avatar scenario and (b) an activity for raising the competency of students for conducting ethnic consumer identity analysis. The first, dramaturgy, is a pedagogical input, whereas the second, ethnic identity analysis, is a learning outcome.

#### **References available on request**