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Consumer Tribes in Virtual Worlds

Case Audition Online Game

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CONSUMER TRIBES IN VIRTUAL WORLDS CASE AUDITION ONLINE GAME

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ABSTRACT

An explanation of player motivations in purchasing commodities in virtual worlds provides the foundation of understanding how players make sense of virtual products differently to one another and how motivations of virtual consumption relate to in-game social interactions. In the article, virtual ethnography was used to explore the meanings of consuming goods in a virtual world - Audition Online Game. Participant observation, informal interviews and technological supports such as screenshots, video records were conducted during data collection process. Three different ethnographic themes that make sense of virtual consumption to three different groups of consumer tribes (newbie, independent players and subgroup members or couples) are found. Simultaneously, the explanations of how in-game consumers pervade in the system of consumption and change their relationships with marketers are also revealed. The results contribute to consolidate the similar value of virtual consumption and real consumption to social relationships. This current article also suggests marketers not try to shape the market but adapt it, and based on different types of social interactions to stimulate continuously different groups of players, especially protagonists.

Keywords: consumer tribes, virtual consumption, virtual worlds, massively multi-user online role-playing game (MMORPG), virtual community, pattern of consumption.

INTRODUCTION

The world has been witnessing the remarkable growth of virtual consumption in online environment. Over the years, online worlds have proved their economic potential that significantly attracts marketers. PwC's Global E&M forecasts during period 2014-2018, the global spending on video games will increase from €66 billion to €89 billion with online gaming being a key driver (PwC, 2015). Due to online participants being willing to trade real money for virtual products even though they are aware of 'unreal' features of these commodities, this fast

growth of virtual consumption in online gaming has created aggressive positions of scholars, for instance, virtual worlds mislead consumers (Kim, 2014), stimulate capitalism (Galloway, 2006) and consumerism (Paulk, 2006).

Even though virtual consumption in virtual worlds is admittedly a controversial issue, it leads to changes of consumption motivations as well as consumer's behaviors. According to Koles and Nagy (2012), marketing theories regarding to rational, utilitarian aspects of commodities no longer are applied to predict consumer's behavior in online environments. Online consuming decisions are inclined to hedonistic and emotional reasons (Koles and Nagy, 2012). Several previous studies threw light on online consumer's motivations in purchasing virtual goods. Most of these studies explored linkages between virtual consumption and consumer identities or social status. However, to date, not many studies address the influence of online groups to consumption in virtual worlds. Kozinets (1999) claimed that the more time participants spend online, the more likely they engage in one or more online groups. Therefore, these online subgroups to some extent influence group members' consumption decisions and change patterns of consumption.

The purpose of this article is to explore *the meaning of consumption in virtual worlds*. In this article, *Audition Online Game* (AOG) was used as a case study because of its popularity and its real-money purchased feature. The intention of the article is to find out different consumption motivations of Audition participants who engage in virtual communities and purchase virtual commodities with real money and interpret how social interaction shapes virtual consumer behavior.

The article starts with a depiction of virtual worlds, followed by introduction of AOG and its technological elements. Afterwards, the article mentions previous studies regarding virtual consumption. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), especially marketplace culture research and consumer tribes theories are described in detail in Theorizing part. The next part focuses on chosen research – Ethnography. This part explains the reasons why the research method was chosen, and how it was conducted in a virtual world. Based on collected data, three different categories and the role of consumer tribes in the system of consumption are analyzed in the following part. In the last section, the article summarizes and discusses the contributions of findings and suggests further research.

Massively Multi-User Online Role- Playing Game – a virtual world
Massively Multi-User Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) is known as a place in which the player participates, collaborates and shares social environment (e.g Boellstorff et al., 2012; Yee,

2006). Individual joins MMORPG through a virtual avatar which is graphical representation of the user and is managed by the user (Koles and Nagy, 2012). MMORPG is designed in a way by which individuals interact with each other through the usages of 'mouse-driven interfaces', typed commands and even through a variety of in-game events and activities (Yee, 2006). Thus, participants in MMORPG are able to have conversations, send messages, engage in activities such as dancing, running, fighting against enemies, and express their feelings in a variety of certain ways (Koles and Nagy, 2012).

When it comes to socially-oriented features, MMORPG demonstrates its distinctive feature rather than a media of information and content sharing. Individuals in MMORPG have a multitude of abilities to customize their avatars in flexible ways, to self-represent through virtual avatars, to create their own stories, and are also passively influenced by other users and game producers (Koles and Nagy, 2012; Yee, 2006). This differentiates virtual worlds from social media such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube.

Yee (2006) claimed that MMORPG is a persistent world that exists continuously even when the player logs off. Hence, MMORPG is more than just a game. It is seen as a virtual world. Similar to a physical world, people in virtual worlds perform, identify, interact with other players (Boellstorff et al., 2012), create meaningful relationships, and make sense of virtual consumption based on their preferences and aims.

Brief introduction of Audition Online Game

Audition Online Game (AOG) is a dance battle game that is grouped in MMORPG (Zhang and Herring, 2013). AOG was released in 2004 in South Korea by T3 Entertainment. Over the years, the game has attracted more than 300 million users worldwide (Zhang and Herring, 2013). Even though AOG was released more than 10 years ago, the game continuously attracts gamers from all over the world, especially in the Asian region. After logging in, players use four different directional arrows, and space-bar to control avatars to implement dance moves. The game is designed mainly with three kinds of dance modes like Freestyle Battle Models, Team Battle Dance and Boss Battle Dance (audiosea, 2010). Each player receives experience points (EXP) and Den/Beats points depending on his final ranking position (Den is used in Asian regions, Beats in the U.S).

There is no fee charged to join the game, however, Audition's business models consist of producing economic benefits by selling a variety of virtual goods that enable user's characters to upgrade not only in strength but also in performance, for instance cards double level, clothes,

pets, platforms, DJ, accessories (wings, bags, a bunch of flowers etc) and even emotions to express users' feelings.

Figure 1 – Virtual world in Audition Online Game

The following main features of AOG are described because they contribute to stimulate the user to consume varied virtual products by real money and engage them in one or more different in-game social relationships that - to some extent - influence consumer's behaviors.

Shopping mall

Shopping mall in AOG is similar to one in the real world in which players can purchase virtual artifacts that can boost their in-game experience as well as freely customize their avatars. There are two different currencies that can be used in the shopping mall, Coins and Den. Coins are the currency that players have to buy as cards using real money, Den/Beats currency are amassed by playing.

FAM(ily)

Any player is able to create his/her own FAM (group) which holds up to 100 people (audiosea, 2010). Ideally, a FAM acts as a platform in which players gather and build up social relationships and share in-game experiences through group activities like FAM battles, construction of common house and so on (audiosea, 2010).

Coupling

Besides the FAM function, AOG also provides players couple function which gives players opportunities to be in-game relationships, and to develop potential romantic relationships (Zhang

and Herring, 2013). In-game couples have exclusive right to enter couple mall where they are able to purchase couple items such as clothes, accessories and so on.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital virtual consumption is built massively upon imagination in order to produce pleasure, and is supported by market to add actualization to those imaginations by somehow (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010). Thus, virtual consumption is seen to be similar to real consumption because it can satisfy communicative and symbolic purposes of individuals (Lehdonvirta, 2010; Lin, 2008). In order to give better understanding of virtual consumption practices, other previous studies investigated and described factors that influence on decision of purchasing virtual commodities. According to Mäntymäki and Salo (2014), these factors are related to virtual products (Koles and Nagy, 2012; Lehdonvirta, 2009); participants' motivations (Guo and Barnes, 2011; Lehdonvirta, 2009) and social virtual community (Lehdonvirta et al., 2009). Mäntymäki and Salo (2014) claimed that consumers use virtual commodities as symbolic objects in order to support self-expression, or to communicate an image. Furthermore, Koles and Nagy (2012) pointed out that in *Second Life* participants seek for unique goods with the purpose of being outstanding from the crowd and being recognized as a member of a given community. Similar to *Habbo Hotel*, Lehdonvirta (2009) claimed that players long to consume distinguished virtual goods that lead to the existence of an 'achievement hierarchy' in the community. Moreover, these virtual commodities comprise personal meanings and even personal emotions which players experienced and shared memorable times (Lehdonvirta, 2009).

When it comes to participant's motivations, Lehdonvirta (2009) pin out that virtual purchase drivers in virtual worlds is to constitute individual functional experience (game performance, advanced level characters), or individual hedonic experience (hunting rare items) or individual experiments (discovering new places, sexual experiences). Based on a study of Yee (2006) about motivations of players in MMORPG, Guo and Barnes (2011) found out motivated elements of virtual consumption, which are extrinsic motivators (effort and performance expectancy related to the purchasing process and perceived value), and intrinsic motivators (perceived enjoyment, customization of an avatar and advancement). Alongside virtual product itself and participants' motivations, social community is also considered as an influential factor of virtual consumption decision. Through purchasing similar virtual products, players in *Habbo Hotel* identify themselves with sub-culture; and the value of virtual consumption is to build up a feeling of belonging among players and strengthen group identity rather than a formal requirement of

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Second Life and Habbo Hotel are another virtual worlds

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joining (Lehdonvirta et al., 2009). Lehdonvirta et al., (2009) pinpoint a tribe's leader set up and control membership criteria regarding member rankings, possession of virtual items that are suitable to the identity of the group. Therefore, the motivation of virtual consumption to individuals in virtual worlds is not simply to possess virtual products, but to create values in return (Mäntymäki and Salo, 2014). In other words, purchasing is a means of obtaining the desired outcomes regarding to social relationships, self- expression, and enjoyable moments in the virtual environment (Mäntymäki and Salo, 2014).

THEORIZING

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) with focus on Marketplace culture research
CCT is a family of theoretical perspectives that lies in the socio-cultural literature (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). CCT aims at giving understanding about the linkages between customer's actions within the marketplace and the cultural meanings (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Individuals interact with each other within the constraints of rules, and through their experiences, feeling, actions, and thoughts, these individuals build up specific patterns of behaviors and make sense of consumption practices (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Holt (2002) claimed that groups of consumers create, communicate collective meanings of mutual environment, and build up members' experiences and lifestyles through using commercially symbolic sense of material resources. Different symbolic meanings are created, interpreted and negotiated by consumers based on their status and relationships with other members within a community (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

Marketplace culture research explores how consumption reconstructs cultural blueprint through consumption practices, explanations of consumption and vice versa (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Marketplace culture particularly has dedicated its research to brand culture and consumer tribes. The article pays attention into tribal consumers rather than brand community. Tribal consumers or postmodern customers are likely to seek for collective identification, social relationships in communities whereby they share mutual lifestyle interests or leisure avocations (Cova, 1997; Schouten and Mc Alexander, 1995).

Similar to physical world, virtual worlds allow participants conduct activities such as perform, identify, and interact with others (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Hence, theories about consumption in real world like CCT, marketplace culture research are chosen in order to make sense of virtual consumption through studying ongoing activities, purchase decisions in relation with complex social interactions in virtual communities.

Consumer tribes in virtual worlds

Consumer tribes are a group of consumers who emotionally connect to each other by similar consumption values and usages, and use 'linking value' of products or services to create communities and express their identities (Cova, 1997; Imrie, 2011). Unlike modern individuals, postmodern tribal individuals search for products and services with the purpose of creating linking value rather than individualism (Cova, 1997). In online environments, consumer tribes are introduced by Kozinets (1999) through a concept of virtual communities of consumption. Virtual community of consumption is defined as a subgroup of virtual communities in which members are connected based on common consumption interests (Kozinets, 1999). Members of these virtual consumption-oriented communities or e-tribal individuals elaborate cultural coherence, 'linking value' through their online interactive activities such as sharing enthusiasm for, knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or group activities (Kozinets, 1999). The purpose of theses virtual communities is to create, share and maintain social interactions, social ties rather than simply to share information (Kozinets, 1999). Thus, social connection is core element due to it provides meanings of products and therefore, products become catalysis (Cova et al., 2007; Henry, 2008)

Consumer tribes are considered as unpredictable and hard to manage due to tribal individuals not only consuming products but changing them, engaging in service and becoming them (Cova et al., 2007). Furthermore, Cova (1997) argued that the postmodern individuals have free choice of purchasing products at any moment they want to express or to change their identities in varied ways such as cultural symbols, references (exhibition, films and etc), sporting references etc. Marketers thus no longer have complete power to shape meanings of products (Cova, 1997). In other words, there exists sharing of power between marketer and consumer (Canniford, 2011; Cova et al., 2007). This can be also found in virtual community because e-tribes are active, deeply engage into consumption activities. Hence, Kozinets (1999) also claimed that the existence of online customer groups causes power shifting away from marketers and inclining to consumers.

Tribal membership practices

As aforementioned, consumer tribes focus strongly on 'linking value' of individuals within communities. In order to give a better understanding of the sense 'linking value', Maffesoli (2007, p.27) introduced the term of 'tribal aesthetic' which is described as "sense of people feeling emotions together". Maffesoli (2007) pinpointed that tribal individuals carry desires to be participants in communities in which social interactions are achievements rather than simple economic actions. Furthermore, Maffesoli (2007, p.30) pointed out that people in tribes express

'unconscious desires' to be like others, to "only exist through others, and in their sight". In other words, tribes are structured in a manner that everyone is a fragment of a whole community and tribal individual's existence or identity is solely recognized by/through other members (Maffesoli, 2007). Maffesoli (2007) also emphasized the role of protagonists in tribes as influencers and managers tribal members' alternative, decision, identity creation.

On the other hand, Brownlie et al., (2007) claimed that tribal membership is conceptualized by neo-tribes which are temporary and unstable. In other words, tribal individuals easily switch to other tribes, and a person might play different roles and have different identities in different tribes (Brownlie et al., 2007). Moreover, Brownlie et al., (2007) also investigated members of a tribe not target aiming at neither conformation nor exclusiveness; instead they seek a space, a communal mindset that connects all members, even outsiders together in a tribal moment. Therefore, sub-cultural communities are understood as a platform in which self-identity is expressed, self-selection is created and solidarity is built up through the share of common consumption interests of individuals (Belk and Costa, 1998; Brownlie et al., 2007).

Depending on how individuals immerse into community, and how they change the meanings of objects, consumer tribes are divided into four different categories, namely activators, entrepreneurs, double agents and plunderers, and entrepreneurs are described in figure 2 below (Cova et al., 2007). Tribal members are not fixed in one specific group, they might move between these groups (Cova et al., 2007).
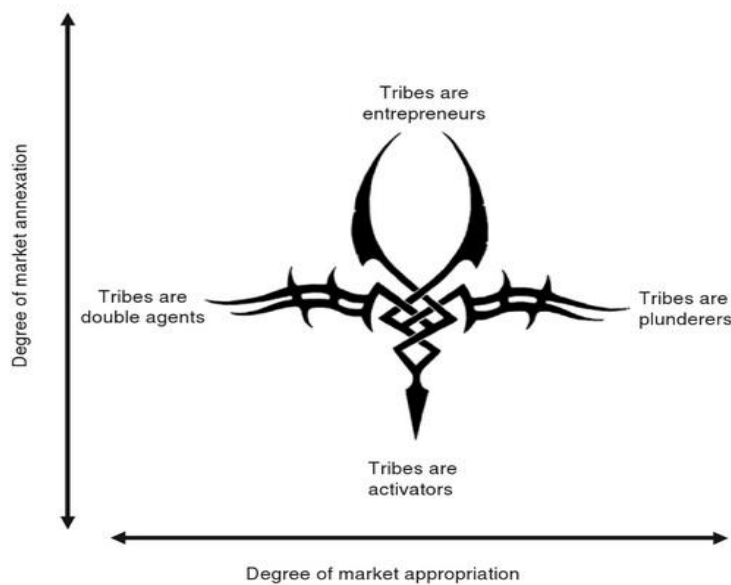

Figure 2 – Consumer tribes categories

(Source: Cova et al., (2007) *Consumer Tribes*, Butterworth-Heinemann, UK)

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Tribes are activators

Cova et al., (2007) argued that tribal members are significantly active in relationships between consumers and producers. Consumers are no longer totally influenced by marketers who used to play an important role in organizing knowledge, creating promotional language, and managing conventions of behavior surrounding the brand (Canniford, 2011). Due to consumers understand knowledge of given rules, they understand the strategies of companies, and they are able to make decisions to when, how or to what extent they will be influenced, or be controlled (Cova et al., 2007).

Tribes are double agents

Tribes are double agents once they establish meanings of commodities through shared experiences and intimate-driven behaviors in daily life in order to build up, to maintain and consolidate solidarity among members of a community (Cova et al., 2007). In addition, the degrees of market appropriation of tribal double agents are considered as spontaneous (Cova et al., 2007). In this category, tribal consumers enjoy being target groups, and even transferring information, meanings of consumption to brand owners. Cova et al., (2007) claimed that consumer tribes "complicit with, but not tricked" by the image that the company wants to transfer to the public. Thus, marketers are better to avoid being considered as trying to shape customers' experiences, and their styles, simultaneously, the marketers need to stimulate, seduce these double agents (Cova et al., 2007).

Tribes are plunderers

When tribes come to plunderers, they are active in shaping objects that they don't have right to do so, reverse and expose new meanings and even transit their own messages (Cova et al., 2007). Canniford (2011) pinpointed that tribes deconstruct and reassemble commercial resources to create passions, establish new forms of linking value. Customers plunder commercial materials in a group with others, and with unconscious of what they are doing. Therefore, tribes in this category might act either as resistance or professional fans/leader (Cova et al., 2007).

Tribes are entrepreneurs

In this category, tribes are actively involved in the expansion of marketplace. Tribes become similar to commercial producers because they are not only manufacturers of social, cultural values, but economic values. With their marketing abilities, tribal members compete with producers. Therefore, companies easily lose a substantial part of their controls over the market and are taken over by tribal entrepreneurs (Cova et al., 2007). In contrast, tribe volunteering who

supports his passionate companies with unpaid assistance or even economic contribution is not seen as economic resistance in market, but a legitimate economic factor (Cova et al., 2007).

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on ethnographic method which is used for studying cultural practices through ongoing activities in everyday life of groups of people (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Due to a virtual world consists of practices of play, performance, creativity and ritual, virtual ethnographical research enables to examine player's experiences and practices in a particular game (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Chan, 2011). In historical perspective, ethnographic research is seen as the most common method when studying MMORPG, for instance, in study of *Habbo Hotel* , Lehdonvirta et al., (2009) conducted personal interviews with users, or scholars implemented both in-game participant observation and out-game forum when studying in-game marriage in *Audition Online Game* (Zhang and Herring, 2013), or even Kim (2014) combined game playing, observation and interviews in *Animal Crossing*. Thus, ethnography is considered as a suitable method because of its historical feature in virtual worlds as well as insights regarding social phenomena that the researcher would be able to gain to answer the research question.

According to Boellstorff et al., (2012), the task of ethnographers is to engage, immerse into culture of interest, and even represent themselves as avatars in virtual worlds. Hence, when studying the meanings of consumption in AOG setting, the researcher conducted participant observation and engage in playing the game; however, the researcher did not reveal identity to other users. Parallel with observation, several informal interviews, plenty of casual conversations with participators of the community have been taken place. The intention of informal interviews with players is to give the researcher understanding of ideas, beliefs that were not come up during interaction practices (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Due to ethics problems, interviews were conducted through chat texts and often structured briefly, consisted of two to three questions and were implemented during the participant observation period.

The material collected from the field notes from the observation and photography, even video recording. Due to conversation history systems have not been equipped in AOG; screenshots and phone camera were considered as supporters in capturing, collecting data. The photographs and video records were used as visual proofs, and as tools enable the researcher to capture information with a high level of accuracy.

Habbo Hotel, Animal Crossing are another virtual worlds

Ethical and anonymous issue

Due to the researcher did not get permission of informants to publish their names and information, all names of participants and groups in the article were changed. The intention of pseudonyms is to avoid risky issues regarding the revealing information identities and confidential information. Furthermore, screenshots that were used as visual materials in the article are claimed as a method that easily reveals identities (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Hence, the researcher hid all names of informants on screenshots, and even used aliases when describing consumption activities. By doing so, the identity of informants was protected and the informants remained completely anonymous in AOG context.

Fieldwork

At the beginning of February 2016, the researcher started playing the game with limited academic knowledge about the virtual worlds, but some experiences of playing AOG on Vietnamese server several years ago. The researcher entered the game and spent first weeks on watching people play and tried to understand their conversations, special game language, and unwritten rules. During the first period of observation, the researcher experienced difficulties to get into the community as a new player even though the researcher actively communicated with other users and tried to speak the game language. Furthermore, the researcher decided not to purchase any products during this period with the purpose of challenging, and gaining understanding of the importance of consumption in virtual worlds.

The researcher decided to spend approximately three hours almost every day to play the game at the beginning of data collection process in order to be familiar with other players and observe their activities. After a couple of weeks of actively logging in the game, the researcher added around 5 players as friends, most of them did not communicate to the researcher afterwards. Moreover, activities during observation process such as staying in the same room with other players, keeping silent and taking notes their chat texts and not participating into conversations became an annoying situation towards other players. The researcher realized that the activity of passive observation did not help the researcher to understand the community as well as get into it. Simultaneously, the researcher discovered that Audition gamers prefer to play in the small groups, or with ones they know or who are from the same country. Therefore, 'getting to know a key person', and joining into a FAM or a group would leverage level of interactions with other players in AOG.

At the end of February 2016, the researcher started purchasing clothing and other virtual products. The researcher also participated in several different FAMs which were positioned at

the 1st ranking at the moment the researcher joined. This succeed must be mentioned the role of a key person who introduced the researcher to other players, explained technical problems and especially accepted the researcher into his FAMs. After joining in high ranking FAMs, and possessing several different sets of clothes, the researcher found easier to establish relationships with other players who were from the same FAM as well as with independent players.

From middle of March 2016, the amount of playing time was reduced; however, the researcher continuously logged in the game and purchased different clothes and accessories in both Cash and Beats currency. The observation was ended up in the middle of April 2016; the researcher played around 120 hours in total (based on playtime system of Stream and the researcher's calculation). The Table 1 below indicates the timeline of ethnographic research as well as specific tasks and the degree of involvement of the researcher in the Audition community.

Timeline	1st February 2016 to 19th February 2016	20th February 2016 to middle of April 2016
	Part-time participant observation	Full-time participant observation
Researcher status	- Unknown user - Accepted but not being appreciated	- Being recognized by other players - A low level member of 1st ranking FAM
Research task	- Understand in-game language, shorten writing - Understand favorite dance modes and fashion style - Identify 'key person' - Challenging roles of consumption to newbie	- Capture consumption activities, key conversations - Build a network of acquaintances - Participate in as many events as possible - Maintain neutral impact to community - Collect examples of consumption
Research emotions	- Bored - Feeling get lost in game	- Excited - Feeling apart of the virtual world - Desire to upgrade avatar appearance
Research involvement	- Own basic clothes - Do not join in any FAM - Play daily - Having 5 friends in the friend list	- Joined in several different FAMs - Bought Cash clothes, own some pets. - Being friends with several in-game celebrities

Table 1 – Timeline table of participant observation

(Based on Timeline table of research written by Schouten and Mc Alexander (1995))

Coding and thematizing

The first step of the analysis was summarizing collected data in order to refresh the memories of the researcher before coding (Boellstorff et al., 2012). The researcher went through all the material several times without interpretation and tried to note interesting, important phenomena that were observed. Later on, the data was read one more time, but this time coding data was implemented. The researcher made marginal notes about all activities, conversations that were gathered, and focused on both emerging codes that were common and unique for each observation. Afterwards, the codes were reviewed again in order to remove several words to describe the same phenomena. The second step of analysis is to thematizing the data. In this step, the researcher looked for core patterns of consumption in virtual worlds. Similar codes were gathered in the same theme; some codes were related to the literature. Connections between different codes were also found out. Different themes of consumption in virtual worlds in general or more specific in AOG are introduced in the following Findings part. The researcher also went through screenshots after making core themes in order to select the most useful images to illustrate a certain theme.

The issue of quality

Even though the observation process was conducted without revealing the researcher's identity and all visual evidences were hid names of real characters, the collected data is highly credible and trustworthiness. The data was gathered based on notes of real activities that happened and on casual conversations with players in virtual world – AOG.

The language was another issue of quality during studying AOG setting. There are numerous groups of players who are from the same regions such as Germany, Philippine or Indonesia. These groups tended to gather together and speak solely their own languages. The limitation of language ability caused the researcher not to participate in these groups.

FINDINGS

In the finding part, the article focuses on depicting and analyzing themes of meanings of consumption in virtual worlds. Table 2 shows different aspects of three different themes and consumer tribes categories that found along with these themes.

Themes	Consumer tribes categories			
	Activators	Double agents	Plunders	Entrepreneurs
A ticket to get into the community The role of commodities to newbie in virtual worlds are explained based on observations and the researcher's in-game experience				
An effective way to establish and maintain social relationships The theme explores different meanings of consumption to independent tribes in virtual worlds		✗	✗	
A catalyst to create solidarity and sense of belonging The theme focuses on two different aspects which are tribes in subgroups (FAMs) and tribal couples. The linking values that are created through consumption practices are substantially different between these two groups of consumer tribes. Whereas tribal subgroups consider virtual commodities themselves as a tool to build up solidarity, tribal couples use them to establish, express intimate relationships.	✗	✗		

Table 2 – Themes and aspects of meanings of consumption in virtual worlds

A ticket to get into the community

It is observed that 'basic-clothes-players' or beginners in Audition are previous gamers who had already knowledge and skills about the game. However, there are only two ways for the beginners to join into the community, which are (1) hanging out with other players who are equal level in terms of experience and consumed products or (2) playing alone in a room full of users with higher level. For instance, YESSY who played Audition three years ago, revealed that the first friend she made was two months after starting over the game. Furthermore, there is only Battle dance mode that 'basic-clothes-players' are able to join in, other dance modes such as Club dance, Ball dance and so forth, these players are highly likely to be kicked out or being treated as invisible. As anticipated by Cova et al., (2007), Audition tribes are considered as

'commercial-material boys and girls'. Unlike *Second Life*, the players need to 'work hard' to gain unique items and achieve higher levels. The social hierarchy thus is classified based on possession of distinguishing items and their strength (Koles and Nagy, 2012). Regardless of level, Audition participators are able to purchase all kinds of virtual products and there are not many missions that players hardly receive unique items. Thus, consumption of virtual commodities in Audition support particularly to signal differences between newbie and old member, between high status and low status, that is similar to *Habbo Hotel*. Audition tribes have ability to evaluate the wealth of other players through numbers and value of virtual products, and based on this, tribes show different attitudes to individuals. The newbie with basic items or less expensive collections of clothes often hardly gets accepted or gets difficulties in joining in-game community. It leads to existence of differences between 'rich' and 'poor' players. 'Rich' ones with collection of expensive clothes and full items tend to hangout and gather in a same group; in contrast, 'poor' players get together and rarely to play with ones of groups of wealthy players. On the other hand, these barriers to some extent create aspirations or 'wannabe' to fit into the community. Tribal individuals in a consumption-oriented community like Audition carry 'unconscious desires' to be participated, to fit in the community, and to achieve social interactions, as described by Maffesoli (2007). Thus, consumption plays an important role to new players because it is considered as a gold key to open the door to social community. In other words, the value of virtual consumption to newbie is to establish social connections per se. On the other hand, consumer tribes in virtual worlds set up barriers, unwritten rules for new players to join in the virtual community, and this stimulates, creates desires of consumption.

An effective way to establish and maintain social relationships
In order to establish and enhance real feelings during social interactions, Audition producers designed numerous motions; different attitudes of face, emotions which are able consumed in both Cash and Beat currency. By consuming these artifacts, gamers are able to express their feelings and increase social experiences in the virtual community. For instance, the players can use motions such as 'Chaplin dance', or 'Nike dance motion' to show victory feelings or change attitude of face from 'Big smiley' to 'Alligator tears face' to express upset or guilty. Individuals in Audition community take advantages of using these virtual products to leverage their imaginations and make conversations as real as ones in physical life. Moreover, tribal individuals create their own ways of using the products. It is observed that Audition tribal members often use motions after joining in a room or at the beginning of each match. For example, CABONA started playing around with several different motions. Interestingly, Bhu – DJ of the room who

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Second Life is also a virtual world

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has not met CABONA in advance, immediately caught the signs, and answered by using different or similar motions. Afterwards, both of them shared laugh icons, showed the other one that he liked their 'performance' and their conversations simply were started. The 'linking value' of products and services, social connections are achievements of tribal individuals, as emphasized by (Cova et al., 2007; Henry, 2008). Obviously, Audition tribes search for, purchase products and use them with the purpose of getting attentions and elaborating social relationships with unfamiliar players. Therefore, virtual commodities plays a role as a tool for independent participants to make friend, open and deepen social connections.

During observation process, it is seen that Audition tribes love to show off their closets and discuss with their friends about different ways of mixing clothes, different styles and so on. Figure 3 is a screenshot of a conversation between two male characters, namely Ryar and MONEY.

Figure 3 – Example of clothing discussion in AOG

MONEY showed his friend different sets of clothes that he collected, and then Ryar evaluated, commented which one he likes best. MONEY expressed happiness and gratitude when his friend said that one set of his clothes was beautiful and fit with panda pet. Both Cova et al., (2007) and Kozinets (1999) pointed out that through sharing spontaneously experiences, knowledge of

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consumption in daily life, tribes build up, maintain and consolidate solidarity among members of a virtual community. In this scene, virtual commodities become an interesting topic for participants to share inspirations of 'dressing-up', their creativity and their identities. Furthermore, tribes heavily depend on virtual products in order to create 'linking value' which helps them to start conventional conversation and to build up social relationships. Simultaneously, tribal consumers spontaneously guide their friends how to dress up and create desires of clothing or other virtual products. In this scene, consumer tribes in Audition act as double agents who are described by (Cova et al., 2007, p.12) as magical elements which are able to 'breathe magic breath into dead and dying brands, but also suck the life from thriving brands'. Audition consumers unconsciously substitute for marketers in terms of guiding other consumers how to match clothing and how to customize avatar's performance in a creative way. Especially, consumer tribes take a role of seducing and stimulating other consumers – one of the most important tasks of marketers. Through observing and giving comments on different combinations of clothes and accessories, tribal individuals establish their own interest of clothing and desires of consuming virtual commodities.

Participants in Audition tribe are also observed that they draw massively attentions into sharing joyful moment and maintain social ties. Figure 4 and 5 show Audition players purchasing in group 'funny' products. Figure 4 is a visual evidence of Audition tribes is 'herd symptom players'. Players run from one room to another with a Monkey hats and basic clothes. After entering a room, this monkey tribal group did not play; they implemented actions such as flying, digging etc or switched positions between audience and participator. Another example is indicated by figure 5, users wore Monkey costumes, gathered in the same room namely Monkey Business.

According to Cova et al., (2007) and Kozinets (1999), consumer tribes are unpredictable because they are actively engage in consumption system and change products, become them. Audition players did not simply purchase funny monkey hats or lovely monkey customs, but they utilize them to create and enjoy these tribal moments, and to maintain friendships. Through imitating monkey's actions, the group of players symbolically becomes monkey herd – naughty, funny and wants to get significant attentions. Similar to the consumption of motions, emotional cards, consumers use these virtual products with the purpose of starting casual dialogs, elaborating new social relationships rather than simply leverage imaginations as what marketers assign. Tribes in virtual worlds, thus, act also as plunderers. Consumer tribes not only use virtual commodities in the manner that marketers tell them to do or with meanings that marketers shaped, but change

meanings of products and create their own ways to utilize the products. Therefore, consumer tribes are an unpredictable element to marketer in virtual worlds.

Figure 4 – An example of Monkey style in AOG

Figure 5 – An example of sharing tribal moments in AOG

A catalyst to create solidarity and sense of belonging

Solidarity and close relationships

The pictures 6 and 7 below indicate communal consumption style in Audition Game Online. Figure 6 shows special style of ONOSIOUS FAM which recruits only German players. The FAM members purchased different products with 'hard rock style', meanings every genre wears dark color clothes with angry face and some other special items such as black wings, ghost pets, platforms and so on.

Figure 6 – An example of communal consumption within a FAM

Figure 7 indicates a FAM battle between CROWNS and MICA in which two FAMs have completely different styles. CROWNS members went for 'impressive style' with black and white clothing and masks, in contrast, MICA preferred 'innocent style' with blue outfits and cute faces.

Figure 7 – An example of different communal consumption between FAMs

Consumer tribes in virtual worlds emotionally connect to others by similar consumption values and usages (Cova, 1997; Imrie, 2011; Kozinets, 1999), moreover, tribal members seek for collective identity and linkages with other members through these communal products (Holt, 2002). In this scene, AOG is considered similar to *Habbo Hotel*, members of a subgroup select purchasing virtual products with a specific mutual style that is distinctly differed to other groups. As a FAM member has revealed that:

> We have same uniform that member can effort to buy with Beats because we don't want to put economic pressure on members. However, some rich FAMs, they bought uniforms with Cash. The uniform is not about you like or dislike. It is about others can recognize us easily when we have FAM battles. But, we only wear the similar clothes when we gather together like you go to school with uniform and when you are home, you wear normal clothes.

Differing to *Second Life,* players are recognized, identified through possession of distinguish items; tribal individuals in Audition identify themselves with the group they participate. The informant differentiates clearly between FAM uniform and normal clothes. Uniforms or similar style of clothing are used solely when FAM members gather together such as during FAM battles or hangout time. By doing so, tribes in virtual worlds create and communicate collective identity; and their existences, their identities would be recognized solely through related

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subgroup, other members, as anticipated by Maffelsoli (2007). Furthermore, tribes are able to show that they belong to a specific subgroup, and express solidarity between participators.

When it comes to tribal memberships practices, JOEK FAM is a primary example of creation of solidarity and friendship. JOEK upgraded its position from 20+ to the first FAM in the ranking ladder after 2 weeks of spamming points. SADJ - FAM master who with his partner purchased ten couple T-shirts and gave out free to some exclusive FAM staffs. It is seen that consumption decision of FAM master's is to stick core members to the FAM and to build up solidarity among specific FAM members. According to Maffesoli (2007), the role of protagonists is to influence and manage decisions, creation of identity of the tribe. The same idea is found in *Habbo Hotel* when tribal leader in charge of managing and controlling tribe membership criteria (Lehdonvirta et al., 2009). Leaders in Audition community act as both deciders and catalysis in a tribe. They manage subgroup members, constitute solidarity and friendships among members and create loyalty of tribal members through their consumption activates. Virtual products thus are utilized by tribe protagonist as a tool to stimulate the creation of social relationships between some specific members and loyalty to tribal sub-group.

Figure 8 – An example of communal consumption in JOEK FAM

It was observed that tribal members wore uniform T-shirts that were given by FAM leader, and even consumed by themselves similar platforms which written the name of the FAM. These

members often played together in a same room called JOEK. Individuals in a tribe act as supporters in building up social interaction of communal type (Cova et al., 2007). In response to leader, tribe members implemented their mutual consumption activities in order to support the establishment of close relationships with other members and express their solidarity. Tribal leader in this scene is considered as double agent. Tribal leader incidentally pervades consumption system and stimulates communal consumption of memberships. Consumer tribes in virtual worlds thus act actively and unconsciously replace the role of marketers and constitute consumption desires through their everyday activities in cultural community.

Engaging in a subgroup plays a crucial role to tribal members because subgroup is seen as a platform which enables leverage members' status in the society, and establishes close relationships between group members. Tribal individuals in subgroups, therefore, actively build up solidarity and close relationships between members through communal consumption. However, the loyalty of memberships to a specific group is easy to break. Tribal groups in virtual worlds are observed that they are unstable and easily dissolved, as claimed by Brownlie et al., (2007). Players are likely to leave their FAMs and join other ones which are positioned with higher ranking. Especially, Audition tribes love to engage in FAM which stays in the top of ranking ladder. Hence, consumer tribes are likely to purchase a variety of communal products or services after joining different tribal groups.

Intimate relationships

When it comes to couples, the intimate relationships are also expressed by the similarity of consumption of tribes in Audition. Surprisingly, all couples in Audition community often possess the same collections such as clothes, hair style, accessories and platforms, and that can be seen in figure 9. It was observed that couples are highly likely to purchase couple clothes and matching outfits and even change their names to fit with their partners.

Whilst name of avatars in *World of Warcraft* plays an important role because it consists of cultural meanings and enables to distinguish players from others (Hagström, 2008, pp.265). In contrast, Audition tribes care less about names of avatars and easily change to look alike with their partners. Through consuming changing name cards and couple match outfits, consumer tribes are able to be identified in the crowd through their partners and to show their intimate relationships, as claimed by Maffesoli (2007). Similar to tribal individuals in subgroup (FAMs), tribal couples prefer to be recognized through the existence of their partners. However, the

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World of Warcraft is another example of virtual worlds

meaning of communal purchasing to couples is different in comparison to tribal groups. Similar to idea about digital virtual consumption of Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010), tribal couples utilize virtual products such as virtual pets, clothing as symbolic evidences for their in-game relationships and by somehow, these virtual products enable to stretch their imaginations and create sense of belonging between tribal boys and girls. In other words, intimate relationships in virtual worlds are created and expressed particularly through symbolic meanings of communal virtual consumption. Hence, the meaning of virtual commodities to tribes is not only to build up intimate relationships, but to create real sense of belonging as physical couples.

Figure 9 – An example of communal consumption in couples

Tribes in this theme (both subgroups and couples) are seen as tribe activators who carefully select, display, change and use several different virtual artifacts to create solidarity, intimate relationships and their own sense of belonging. These consumer tribes immersed into the system of commercial consumption, and decide whether they would be controlled or not by marketers, as described by Cova et al., (2007). Audition tribes are aware of the stimulation of consumption of marketers when marketers develop a variety of virtual product categories. Simultaneously; tribes act as robots that follow and allow to be seduced by marketers in terms of consuming products.

CONCLUSSION

The article found three different themes of meanings of consumption in virtual worlds. The first theme '==A ticket to get into the community==' emphasized the importance of consumption to newbies in the virtual world regarding fitting in the community or establishing social interactions per se. The second theme – '==An effective way to establish and maintain social relationships==' explored social meanings of virtual commodities to independent tribes who are not engaged in any specific group. Virtual commodities, in this stage, are considered as a tool to support a communicative function (e.g starting casual conversations, maintaining social relationships or sharing tribal moments). The last theme '==A catalyst to create solidarity and sense of belonging==' depicted the role of communal consumption in creating and expressing solidarity in tribal subgroups (FAMs) and intimate relationships of couples. The value of virtual uniforms, matching clothes is also to identify tribes through subgroups or couples. The importance of the leader and participants in maintaining social ties through using virtual consumption is also explored. Tribal protagonist in virtual worlds utilized virtual commodities in order to build up and to stimulate the creation of solidarity of members. Due to tribal members easily switching between different groups, virtual communal goods act as supporters to express and constitute solidarity between participants.

Parallel with meanings of virtual consumption, the article explored three different categories of consumer tribes which are activators, double agents and plunderers. It is established that tribes have become more active, more unpredictable and unconsciously appropriate in the system of consumption. Tribes substitute marketers by seducing other customers to purchase virtual products, simultaneously; they plunder, change senses of products and make sense of products in their own ways.

DISCUSSION

The article contributes to two research areas, which are giving a better understanding of purchasing behavior in virtual worlds and adding managerial insights to marketers regarding the increasing role of consumers in the system of consumption.

The first contribution of the article is towards the development of theories regarding virtual consumption under cultural perspective. The results elaborated further the role of social and emotional values as motivations of virtual purchasing decision in virtual worlds. Unlike previous studies, the article indicates that the social bonds and enjoyable moments rather than individualism are the main purposes for consumers, when seeking communal virtual products, as

anticipated by Cova et al., (2007). Consumers in a virtual community are likely to consume similar virtual commodities and use them, to create social interactions, solidarity and intimate relationships. Additionally, the article also illuminates different social meanings of virtual consumption that are related to different groups of tribal consumers which are newbie, independent participants, and members of a subgroup or couples. The results give a more comprehensive understanding about values of virtual consumption in virtual worlds. Furthermore, based on the theoretical framework about consumption in physical world (CCT and consumer tribes), the article contributes to consolidate prior studies regarding the similarity of virtual consumption and real world consumption. Virtual consumption is used with the same purposes (e.g creating collective symbolic identity, serving communicative function) as in the physical world.

The second contribution of the article is to shed a light on managerial implications for marketers in virtual worlds. The article indicates the increasing role of consumer tribes in the system of consumption such as stimulating consumption, or plundering, making their own sense of commodities. Due to this tendency in virtual worlds, marketers no longer shape and control the market completely. Hence, marketers should adapt and stimulate continuously consumer tribes and especially protagonists rather than trying to shape customer's experiences. Furthermore, with an understanding of different social interactions that are created through communal virtual consumption of different groups of consumers, marketers can set up a strategy of interaction-based segmentation (Kozinets, 1999). Different groups of consumers in virtual worlds, like newbies, independent participants or subgroup members and couples carry different needs about virtual commodities in creating different types of social interactions. Thus, marketers need to differentiate types of interactions in virtual worlds and based on this understanding, to broaden virtual product's categories and implement marketing events that aim at reaching demands of different groups of consumers.

The article having been studied solely in an in-game setting, this leads to a suggestion of further research that might consider studying on other online communities such as Audition forums, social media like Facebook, Twitter and so on. In doing so, meanings of virtual consumption that were found in the article would be proven and deepened. Moreover, the appropriation and the annexation of consumer tribes in virtual worlds would explore new aspects and be developed substantially.

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