Addictive Consumption of Avatars in Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT

Avatars are a unique cyber product that hold much potential to be a market success because they provide consumers with various psychological benefits such as anonymous personalization and an artificial sense of well-being in cyberspace. However, due to the very nature of avatars, consumer psychology, and the way that they are marketed to teenage consumers, avatars may also pose considerable threat to unsuspecting teenagers through addictive consumption and associated negative social consequences causing harm to the teenagers and the general public. This study deals with Korean teenagers’ addiction to avatar consumption. Korean teenagers can be very stressed due to the pressure to excel in school. Addictive avatar consumption is thought to be a behavior that might reduce stress. An empirical study was conducted to elucidate this claim. Self-control theory is suggested as an explanation for addictive consumption of avatars.

INTRODUCTION

KOREA HAS BEEN RECOGNIZED worldwide as one of a few nations with highly developed information technology and Internet infrastructure. As for the high-speed Internet usage rate, Korea is reported as the number one country in the world. More than 10 million users subscribe to high-speed Internet services via such means as ADSL, VDSL, community LAN, and satellite. When taking the total Korean population into consideration, the high-speed Internet subscription rate in Korea is roughly 21% according to the Korean government ministry news.¹ This is a remarkably high usage rate when compared to those of other OECD countries, since the average rate of high-speed Internet subscription in OECD countries is just 1.26%. For many consumers in Korea, the Internet is just a part of their normal daily life. All the products sold via the Internet can be grouped into the following two categories: pure cyber products and conventional products sold in cyberspace. There are still very few products that can be regarded as pure cyber products. Thus, it is remarkable that a pure cyber product, the “avatar,” is so popular in Korea that the market size in 2002 almost quintupled when compared to its 2001 size.²

The avatar was first introduced to Korean online users in 2000 by a hardware-oriented Internet business, “Neowiz.com,” through its Internet community site named “www.sayclub.com.” Only a year after its introduction to the market, the avatar was selected as one of the 10 hit products in 2001 in Korea.³ Unlike other cyber products such as MP3 and online movies, which are also sold in conventional markets, avatars are sold purely in cyberspace. While avatars have shown the potential to be a successful cyber product in Korea and possibly in other areas of the world, more and more cases of compulsive and addictive shopping behavior related to avatars are observed as the frequency and intensity of Internet use increases. Addictive consumption may also pose considerable threat to the social well-

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being of avatar consumers and/or others around them. Mendelson and Mello define addictive behavior as “behavior that is excessive, compulsive, beyond the control of the person who engages in it, and destructive psychologically or physically.” As examples, they cite drug abuse, alcoholism, anorexia, bulimia, and excessive gambling, exercising, and television viewing. Contrary to our expectation, addictive consumption appears to do some good for the respective consumers because addictive behaviors reduce stress. Avatar consumption can be addictive as one may purchase props over and over again since the behavior might reduce stress. Many Korean teenagers are addicted to avatar consumption. We investigated this phenomenon empirically and provided a self-control theory-based explanation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Avatars refer to pictures, drawings, or icons that users choose to represent themselves in cyberspace. Props are objects that on-line users may add to their avatars such as a hat or cigar. Types of avatars include: animal, cartoon, celebrity, evil, real face, idiosyncratic, positional, power, seductive, and many other avatars. What is unique about avatars in Korea is that avatars and props are very popular with online consumers and props are purchased item by item by online consumers while props of avatars in the United States are not sold separately. In other words, avatars in Korea have much potential to create a successful market. During the initial stage, online users in Korea are given a free avatar of his or her choice. From then on, online users have to purchase avatar props to continue to decorate their cyber selves. Typical avatar props are sold for about $0.5 to $1.00 per piece. Recently, however, high-priced avatars and props are being introduced into the Korea’s avatar market. Freechal.com, a Korean ISP, recently opened an avatar shopping mall named “Marry Lou Nanton” offering, for instance, an avatar prop (i.e., a female avatar’s jacket) with a price tag of $7.00. Furthermore it is even possible to buy “plastic surgery” options for the avatar of one’s choice. The consumers of avatars in Korea can be briefly characterized as follows. In terms of demographics, most avatar users are in their teens or early 20s (two-thirds of them are teenagers). These generations feel very comfortable using computers and surfing the net. The number of avatar purchases reached over 10 million in 2002. It is particularly alarming that so many teenagers spent money on avatars repeatedly. Incidents of teenagers addicted to avatars committing crimes to obtain money to buy more props were frequently reported. For example, some teenage girls went so far as to offer cyber prostitution where the girls were engaged in sexually explicit conversation with adult male online chatters. These male counterparts were asked to provide the teenage girls with expensive avatar items (e.g., dresses, jackets, accessories) that were needed for decorating the girls’ avatars. More seriously, these girls did not appear to grasp the negative consequences of their cyber behavior. One 15-year-old girl who was engaged in cyber prostitution was reported to say “I do not understand why that (i.e., cyber prostitution) is bad at all! It is not real, you know.” Another tragic case of addiction is as follows. An 11-year-old girl committed suicide after getting a scolding from her mother for spending 1,700,000 won (US $1,450) over a period of 6 months on avatar items. The girl repetitively purchased avatar items before her spending spree ended tragically. In our study, we are motivated to find out what causes these teenagers to be addicted to avatars. Korean teenagers who are either high school or junior high school students are under enormous pressure to excel in academics because of the extreme competitiveness of the college entrance exam. In Korean society, which college one graduated from matters most for one’s success in life. For example, if one is a graduate of Seoul National University, which is the most prestigious college, one will have a very good chance of getting the best jobs. Therefore, many parents force teenagers to concentrate only on studying. This often makes teenagers unhappy and stressed. We posit that teenagers in Korea must be addicted to avatars because they find having alternate selves in cyberspace as a way to escape from stressful real world. The following is our proposition to explain the avatar addiction phenomenon in Korea.

STRESS CAUSED BY PRESSURE TO STUDY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN ADDICTION TO AVATAR PROP PURCHASE

In terms of determining if one is addicted to avatar prop purchase, we relied on interviews with six self-confessed avatar-addicted teenagers. They are likely to make purchases more than 10 times per week on average. This means that they purchase more than one prop every day. This behavior is similar to the pattern of other addictive behavior such as gambling. Some gambling addicts do go to
casinos every day since they cannot control their urge to gamble. We have conducted a cyberspace survey with the following questionnaire:

Background: Please answer the following questions if you are a high or junior high school student who has an avatar.

Q1: Have you purchased a prop for your avatar more than 10 times per week on average? (a) yes, (b) no
Q2: Do you feel stress reduced when purchasing an avatar prop? (a) strongly disagree [1], (b) disagree [2], (c) agree [3], (d) strongly agree [4]

This survey questionnaire was published as a web page listed in various Korean search engines and directories and had been online for 5 months, from 10/2003-02/2004.

RESULTS

A total of 267 people responded to the cyberspace survey. Table 1 shows the result of the survey.

We categorized the subjects into two groups based on their answer to the first question: those who answered “yes” (31 subjects) and those who answered “no” (236 subjects) to the first question. Then the average numeric value of answers to the second question was calculated for each group. Finally, comparison of means of two groups using SAS software was conducted. The statistical test showed that H1 was accepted with a p-value of <0.05. In other words, teenagers who are not addicted to avatar consumption are likely to feel less stress than those who are addicted. Teenagers who feel lots of pressure tend to try to escape from it by indulging in avatar consumption. It is possible for teenagers who feel lots of stress to indulge in other behaviors that might reduce stress. However, the survey result confirms that avatar consumption behavior plays a statistically significant role when it comes to stress reduction. Thus, the cause of avatar consumption addiction phenomenon among Korean teenagers can be attributed to their desperate desire to escape from tremendous stress that they have to endure while coping with pressure to study all the time.

DISCUSSION

Addictive consumers of avatars in Korea appear to enjoy stress reduction through easily controlling (i.e., purchasing and consuming) avatar items, while their self-control is undermined as they try to purchase avatars, repetitively. Baumeister11 shows that self-control failure may be an important cause of addictive purchasing. Of particular interest is a self-control failure case in which consumers may hold goals that are in conflict with regard to a particular indulgence. This situation is an accurate reflection of the condition of many addictive consumers. Consumers in general want to feel good, and when they are upset, the goal of feeling better becomes increasingly central to their actions. Thus, to the extent that a consumer is torn between spending money for the sake of feeling good and doing something good in the long run (saving money in the process), emotional distress may shift the balance in favor of making the purchase. Applied to consumer behavior of avatars, the implication is that consumers who are emotionally upset or stressed may be more likely to put prudent self-control aside in the hope that purchasing goods or services will make them feel better.

In this respect, too much emphasis on good grades at school may make teenagers in Korea emotionally stressed and eventually lead some of them to addictive consumption of avatars. Avatars are a perfect example of a unique cyber product that is not like anything in the real world. As such, the identification of the factors leading to the success of avatars can serve as a guideline for developing other new cyber products so as to be enjoyed by many more consumers. From the perspective of online businesses, increased purchase of avatars and associated props is highly likely to contribute to the generation of more revenue for online businesses and to the increase in the number of such businesses and the employment in the relevant industry. From the consumer’s perspective, avatars as a

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<td>Means</td>
<td>3.8</td>
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<td>Number of subjects</td>
<td>31</td>
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product satisfy certain needs of consumers. Even addictive consumption of avatars appears to do some good to the respective consumers since addictive behaviors reduce stress and may lead to a temporary state of feeling good. However, avatars may also pose a considerable threat to unsuspecting consumers and the general public through addictive consumption and associated negative social consequences, including crimes committed to get money to repetitively purchase avatar props. It seems that much caution should be exercised not only when introducing and marketing new products in cyberspace but also when consuming such cyber products.

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REFERENCES


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