

Service experience participation styles in a young people's virtual world

Purpose

To understand service experience in a virtual world service ecosystem.

Service research to date has tended to use the concept of the service ecosystem as a metaphor (Mars et al, 2013). Virtual worlds in contrast are essentially virtual ecosystems, i.e. “relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system[s] of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange” (Lusch and Vargo, 2014, p. 1). The virtual world/platform owner is able to largely stipulate the rules of the environment, and regulate the resources available to the participants, whereas the vitality of the ecosystem depends on member activity. Teen virtual worlds are becoming increasingly complex offering not only social activities, but also games, competitions, creative opportunities that may include trading, virtual and/ or real world merchandise (Ward & Gummerus, 2014). Through their participation, members not only interact with particular content, but also strengthen their ties to the community (Kozinets, 1999).

Blechsmidt, Backhaus & Freund (2011), working in Second Life identified four latent user segments of socializers, refugees, creativity seekers, and specialists however it has been suggested that the teen focus of Habbo Hotel would moderate these results (Eisenbeiss et al., 2011). Habbo Hotel is reported to have 51% of users in the 13-17age range with 30% in 18-24 age range with a peak of 8.7 Million concurrent users (Sulake, 2010). It opened in 2001 and therefore means it may have users with extended experience of the ‘world’.

Methodology.

A mixed methods approach with an extended period of ethnographic research in the Habbo.com hotel (English speaking) followed by an online survey analysed using SPSS, factor and cluster analysis. Detailed statistical analysis is available and confirmed the high quality of data set.

Findings.

Initially 56 different participation styles were identified from the ethnographic work and discussions with the company. The survey had a response rate of over 1400, after cleaning leaving 979 responses. Factor analysis reduced these to eight factors including potentially negative aspects. Cluster analysis was applied as a two-stage process to the eight activity factor scores. Profiles of the six clusters were developed from a descriptive analysis of the average Habbo activity factor scores for each cluster. The profiles were extended from analysis of behavioural and demographic measures and from factors representing additional constructs. The six clusters show a much more complex view of service experience and the customer participation and co-creation styles within a young person's virtual world.

Originality/Value

This work studies a much more complex and defined service ecosystem than previous studies. It also has a focus on the 16-24 years age group which are a less studied group. A larger range of factors including potentially negatives aspects are reported. The six clusters allow a model of service experience in a teen virtual world to be developed. The results will also be discussed in the context of collective service experience.

