



Me, myself and I: The role of interactional context on self-presentation through avatars

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates whether the nature of an online environment can prime users to create avatars that emphasize particular characteristics. Participants created an avatar for one of three contrasting settings: blogging, dating or gaming. For the most part, avatars in blogging were created to accurately reflect their owners' physical appearance, lifestyle and preferences. By contrast, participants in the dating and gaming treatments accentuated certain aspects of their avatar to reflect the tone and perceived expectations of the context. For instance, avatars in dating were made to look more attractive while avatars in gaming were made to look more intellectual. Yet, predominantly, these emphasized avatar attributes drew on participants' self-image, and thus avatars were perceived by their owners as highly similar to themselves. The implications of these results are discussed against current frameworks of online identity and behavior. Most importantly, we use our results to extract design recommendations for improving avatar-driven applications.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents an experiment that investigates how users customize avatars for self-presentation purposes in the following three online settings: blogging, dating and gaming. We go on to consider whether self-presentation as chosen for the three settings impacts on users' perceptions of similarity with their avatar and in turn, on self-awareness.

Avatars present a creative platform for identity construction in computer-mediated communication (CMC). While avatars maintain users' privacy when needed, they give expressive freedom over an otherwise anonymous and static online presence. When constructing avatars, users take care to create unique representations despite available ready-made options (Cheng, Farnham, & Stone, 2002; Taylor, 2002). This has been found to be the case even when the customization process imposed by the system was exceptionally time demanding (Cheng et al., 2002). Designers of social systems have recognized the significance of avatars for identity expression by integrating them across a variety of online applications including virtual environments, gaming and blogging.

As avatars begin to replace other conventional forms of visual identity, e.g., photographs, it becomes important to understand whether an avatar can alter users' perception and subsequent behavior during online communication. To that end, the majority

of research on avatars has focused on how an avatar's visual realism and behavioral realism can impact on the viewer's perception (e.g., Garau et al., 2003; Nowak & Rauh, 2005; Nowak & Rauh, 2008). Likewise, an avatar's appearance can influence its owner's perception and behavior. For instance, users, who perceive their avatar as more similar to their own appearance, become more self-aware (Vasalou, Joinson, & Pitt, 2007) a state that may impact on the quality of online communication by encouraging higher rates of self-disclosure (Joinson, 2001). Yee and Bailenson (2007) found that qualities displayed in an avatar's appearance can steer its owner's behavior. Participants who were assigned to more attractive avatars demonstrated increased self-disclosure and willingness to approach members of the opposite gender than participants represented by less attractive avatars. In a negotiation task, participants with taller avatars were more confident than participants represented by shorter avatars.

In regards to self-presentation, it is not known what type of environment might lead online users to create avatars that highlight particular characteristics. Are users of online dating more likely to choose attractive avatars than users of online gaming? As concerns perception, are attractive avatars perceived by users to be equally self-representative as compared to avatars that highlight more strategic characteristics? These open questions make it difficult to relate the results of the above-mentioned perception studies to particular online situations. Moreover, understanding how users choose to present themselves for certain settings can provide realistic scenarios for designing future perception studies. This information can also offer design recommendations for avatar

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customization tools. If designers are mindful of the customization options preferred by users of a specific domain, these options can be highlighted and made easily accessible in the avatar customization interface. In the present research, we experimentally manipulated the context of avatar use. Users created an avatar with the intention of participating in a blogging, dating or gaming environment. A first aim of the research was to reveal how users choose to present themselves through an avatar for each of these three contrasting settings. A second objective was to discover in which setting avatars are perceived as self-representative, and in consequence which of the three environments elicits higher self-awareness.

We first position these two objectives against existing views on self-presentation and self-awareness; this background review is used to formulate several hypotheses and research questions. We then detail the experimental study we carried out, which as described above, comprised three conditions: blogging, dating and gaming. Our two-tier quantitative and qualitative methodological approach is also presented. An analysis of the results follows which reveals that participants by and large created self-representative avatars irrespective of their context of use. Nonetheless, avatars were slightly morphed to align to the expectations of blogging, dating and gaming. As participants predominantly reported perceiving their avatars as similar to themselves, reports of self-awareness did not differ across the three experimental conditions. A discussion follows that elaborates on these findings and their implications for the design of avatar customization tools.

2. Self-presentation in computer-mediated communication

When surveying a wide range of online environments, it becomes evident that every domain encourages or discourages particular self-presentational strategies. In online dating, males tend to report being slightly taller and women tend to report being slightly slimmer than in actual fact (Hancock, Toma, & Ellison, 2007). This minor exaggeration in self-presentation results from users' desire to appear honest while at the same time impressing potential partners with a more positive image (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). In blogging, users frequently identify themselves by displaying their first name, contact information, age or location (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). This accuracy in self-presentation is not surprising given that Blogs are often visited by friends and family (Schiano, Nardi, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). Because of this, Huffaker and Calvert (2005) have proposed blogging as an extension of a user's real life. Conversely, in online gaming, male users sometimes adopt a female identity to gain attention and assistance from other players (Bruckman, 1993). Furthermore, Riegelsberger and his colleagues (2006) found that gamers preferred profiles that allowed them to infer other players' gaming style and gaming personality (Riegelsberger et al., 2006). Therefore, in this setting, users present themselves by signaling their gaming qualities (e.g., competitive, aggressive) while identity can be also used to strategically manipulate other players' behavior.

The above examples suggest that people negotiate different aspects of self, largely dependent on their communication goals. With a growing interest in avatars, a number of online environments now allow users to display an avatar in the place of a photograph. As a result, it becomes important to understand whether self-presentation strategies as chosen for environments that offer more static profiles, e.g., textual, photographs, apply to the creation of avatars. Crucially, compared to visual profiles, comprised by photographs, avatars differ in important ways. A chosen photograph inevitably depicts real life happenings and objects while an avatar user can easily select options that faithfully represent

his/her appearance or real life surroundings as well as non-representative options, for instance options of fantasy. Furthermore, when choosing a representative photograph, a user can selectively present himself/herself by controlling which of several images to display. Conversely, avatar users have to their disposal real-time tools for carefully tailoring the image they want to project to others.

Several studies have focused expressly on avatars and self-presentation. Axelsson (2002) observed that avatars in virtual environments were used to denote qualities of their owners. She argues that users create avatars that display overt aspects of themselves which become more stable over time as their participation in the online community continues. In the same domain however, Taylor (2002) reports contrasting results: some users participate with the intention to role play by constructing new personas, e.g., gender swapping, non-anthropomorphic representations. Therefore, this latter user group seizes the creative opportunities for role play, afforded by avatar platforms. To consolidate these often conflicting findings, Taylor (2003) proposes that the *context* of communication as well as the type of avatar *customization options* provided by designers can direct users to construct a particular appearance. However, so far there has been no experimental effort to investigate Taylor's view. Therefore, questions pertaining to how self-presentation is precisely negotiated with avatars remain.

The previously mentioned studies in the wider field of computer-mediated communication (e.g., Hancock et al., 2007; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Riegelsberger et al., 2006) lend support to Taylor's (2003) claim regarding the influential role of context; users' communication goals are determined by the environment they enter, which in turn should impact on how they choose to present themselves via an avatar. With this viewpoint in mind, we draw two hypotheses regarding the creation of avatars for the three domains of blogging, dating and gaming. Users of blogging have been found to represent themselves most accurately by reporting precise socio-demographic information (Herring et al., 2004; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005) as well as by documenting real life events and expressing their opinions (Schiano et al., 2004). Therefore, identity in blogging is not subject to deceptive or selective self-presentational manipulations. For this reason, blogging is used as a baseline for comparing dating and gaming.

H1: in dating, users communicate with unknown others while aiming to create a positive impression. Thus, avatars created for dating purposes will display both personality (e.g., humor) and physical qualities (e.g., attractiveness) that are inflated when compared to avatars created for blogging. However, given the need to balance honesty with a positive impression, we do not expect dating avatars to differ highly compared to avatars created for blogging.

H2: in gaming, users compete with unknown players with the objective to win. As a result, avatars created for gaming purposes will display strategic qualities (e.g., leadership, athletic ability, discipline) that are inflated when compared to avatars created for blogging.

3. Self-awareness

Self-awareness is a state of increased focus directed inwards to the self (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Increased self-awareness enables individuals to easily retrieve their personal standards, beliefs, opinions (Duval & Silvia, 2002) and emotional states (Scheier, 1976). In the context of online communication, it has been shown that high self-awareness increases self-disclosure (Joinson,

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