

Chapter 13

Avatars for Clinical Assessment: Digital Renditions of the Self as Innovative Tools for Assessment in Mental Health Treatment

Stefano Triberti

University of Milan, Italy

Lucrezia Savioni

University of Milan, Italy

Valeria Sebri

University of Milan, Italy

Alessandra Gorini

University of Milan, Italy

Gabriella Pravettoni

University of Milan, Italy

ABSTRACT

Avatars are an important feature of digital environments. Existing both in social networks and webchats (usually as static images) and in single-player and online video games (as dynamic characters, often humanoid), avatars are meant to represent users' action and communication within digital environments. Research has shown that, when they are customized by users, avatars are not created "randomly," rather they maintain some kind of relationship with users' actual self-representation and identity. However, more recent studies showed that users may have multiple digital representations: the same person could create multiple avatars depending on which facet of the self is primed by an experimental manipulation, or on which aims they have to pursue in the given virtual environments (e.g., to seduce, to play, to work). With this background, this contribution explores the possibility to use customized avatars within psychological assessment, as adjunctive assessment tools useful to get information on patients' self-representation(s) and communicative intentions.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of new technologies and social media, a number of interesting opportunities emerged for users to understand who they are and how to communicate themselves to others. Indeed, people spend a lot of time taking picture of themselves (selfies), and updating their profiles across a number of platforms (social networks), in order to achieve a positive and desirable impression management. Sometimes, people are allowed to create a completely new image of themselves, which can be totally different from who they really are. This relates to the concept of *avatar* or users' digital, often customized, representations of themselves in virtual environments. As the first part of this contribution will show, avatars generated attention in psychologists and social scientists to the point that a number of theoretical and experimental studies on this topic have been published (at the end of 2018, a search on popular science-focused search engines with keywords such as “avatar” and “psychology” yields more than fifty thousand results).

Indeed, avatars have been recognized as an interesting resource not only to study self-presentation online, but also self-representation and identity. According to projective identity theory (Gee, 2003), it exists an “interface” between a user and his/her avatar, which features those aspects of self-representation one wants to transmit in the avatar appearance. Such contents are different from the avatar, in that opportunities for customization offered by the virtual platforms usually do not permit a “perfect” representation of user's intent, so that the final digital figure should be understood as the result of a negotiation process involving user's self, intentions, other psychological factors such as culture and personality, the virtual world and customization platform's characteristics as well.

Secondarily, research has demonstrated that avatars can influence users' behavior by modifying their self-perception inside the virtual worlds and this phenomenon (the so-called “Proteus effect”) became the foundation of innovative cyber-psychological interventions for the fields of healthcare and learning.

The purpose of the present contribution is to briefly review these areas of research, and then to extend the psychological discourse on avatars further, by advancing the idea that these peculiar tools of new technologies could offer unprecedented opportunities for psychological assessment and therapy.

BACKGROUND

An avatar is typically an image that represents the self in the virtual world. Generally used in the context of social networks and video games, it could be a static or dynamic figure that embodies actions/communications between users in a virtual

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