Chapter 95
Who Are You Online?
A Study of Gender, Race, and Gaming Experience and Context on Avatar Self-Representation

Robert Andrew Dunn
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0415-6662
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, USA

Rosanna Guadagno
Stanford University, Stanford, USA

ABSTRACT

The authors conducted an experiment to determine the effects of gender, race, online video gaming experience, and the experimental context in which participants played the video game (online vs. offline vs. no information control) on avatar selection. The qualities of the avatar compared were based on eight objective differences between avatars and individuals: attractiveness, skin tone, height, girth chest size, waist size, hip size, and height. As predicted, those with online gaming experience selected avatars that were taller, thinner, and more attractive relative to their real selves than did participants with no prior online game experience. Non-white participants selected avatars with lighter skin-tones, whereas white participants selected avatars with darker skin-tones. Surprisingly, male participants selected shorter avatars than female counterparts did.

INTRODUCTION

The computer has become an agent of change in nearly all aspects of modern life. It has revolutionized how people perform their jobs, enjoy their free time, and stay in touch with the world around them. But if this machine can change so much around us, is it also possible that it can change us as well? Researchers have examined this question by focusing on the ways in which the computer has at least changed the way we conceptualize and how we communicate our self-perception to others (McKenna

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& Bargh, 2000; Turkle, 1995; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Yee, 2006). Few arenas of technology are more important to computer-mediated identity than the avatar: a graphics-based representation of one's self in computer-generated environments (Blascovich et al., 2002). An avatar can range from a photograph or 2D cartoon image to a fully 3D customizable body. It is the notion that an avatar represents an individual that is of most importance.

Anxiety about alienation is a common experience in the online world just as it is in real life, and that anxiety can produce just as many negative reactions as well (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). The manner in which people present themselves online, and whether they are honest or deceptive in their presentation, may likely depend on their expected outcome of the interaction (Watson, 1997). Research has shown that people are able to infer personality traits from avatars, thereby providing psychological meaning to the differences in the avatars people select and customize for themselves. This, for instance, may translate into, research findings such as people high in the personality trait of agreeableness creating avatars that appear more warm and friendly and, are therefore more likeable (Fong & Mar, 2015). But what does that mean for those who are not high on agreeableness? Choosing the wrong avatar could lead one to be ostracized in an online environment. And what of those individuals who select thin avatars to be more popular online, perpetuating thin ideal toxicity, the idea that thinness is a measurement of worth? These are concerns that drive the importance of research on how and why people select and/or customize the avatars they build for use online.

AVATAR SELECTION

Though Higgins's (1987) Self Discrepancy Theory and its supporting concepts of the self (actual, ideal, and ought) would seem to be a perfect framework for understanding the avatar selection, it has its limitations, particularly within the context of self-presentation online. First, Schlenker (1980) has already noted that some people do not in fact present themselves in idealized or normative ways. They may choose to present themselves in less advantageous or even in antisocial ways. Such phenomena are not without precedent in the world of MMOs. For instance, some select evil races, such as those of the Horde – a coalition of evil races in World of Warcraft (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006). Research suggests that some of these deviations from the norm may be attributable to personality differences and players' gender, for instance openness is tied to trying on different skin tones during avatar selection (Dunn & Guadagno, 2012). Lee (2004) offers a potentially more practical way of considering self-presentation in his discussion of self-presence. He argued that self-presence exists on a continuum of measurable distance between what one experiences in reality and what one experiences in virtual reality. Thus, self-presence is the difference between the real person and the "para-authentic self" (i.e., a representation that looks like the user) or the "alter-self" (i.e., a representation that does not look like the user). Thus, the alter-self avatar could be seen as one designed more for role-playing. Therefore, a person selects an avatar somewhere between the para-authentic self and an alter-self.

Para-Authentic Avatar

Some have debated whether there is a true distinction between real life and online (Papacharissi, 2002). Research on reality-based MUDs has revealed that most players have a primary character with which they play the game most frequently. That character is usually closely reflective of the user, though may

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