My Desired Self, Avatar:
The Impact of Avatar Creation on Persuasion

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ABSTRACT

In computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments, users utilize their avatars as a communication channel to interact and connect with others, and they choose and create them accordingly to represent their self. As such, several major question areas arise: 1) As an extension of identity, how does a user customize his/her avatar? How is the avatar's appearance related to the avatar creator's self-concept? 2) How does avatar creation influence the avatar creator's psychological and behavioral consequences? To answer these questions, the current study leveraged a Korean social networking site, which currently provides avatars called "Minimis," in a randomized experimental setting. This study found that the more the participants perceived their avatars to look like their desired selves, the more likely they evaluated their avatars as being attractive, credible, confident, cool, capable, and persuasive, but failed to find a significant relationship between avatar users' perceptions toward self-created avatars and their attitudes toward the social network site or ads.. The limitations and implications will be discussed.

Keywords: Avatar, Avatar Creation, Desired Self, Social Networking Site (SNS)

1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of communication technology, it is remarkable that, unlike face-to-face communication, people are able to construct their identities in cyberspace. The technology enables people to create who they are. In particular, the avatar, as an extension of identity, has recently been focused on by many scholars in communications as well as online psychology.

An avatar is a graphical icon that represents users in online communities, chat rooms, or virtual reality games (Nowak, 2000). An avatar is not simply an embodied graphic that allows users to look at their creatures from a third-person perspective (Taylor, 2002) but is a visualized identification and a virtual self that is imbued with a user's feeling of presence in the virtual space. It allows users to customize and change the appearance of everything from skin color to eye size and even gender easily.

In terms of power of anonymity, avatars motivate users to activate one of their inner selves. Through avatars, users present themselves either in their actual forms that are present in the public or in ideal forms that have not been shown in public but are what the users desire to be.

Throughout the study, we attempt to explicate the sense of self that could be expressed through avatar creation and its persuasive role in influencing avatar users' perceptions and attitudes.

To sum up, the current study aims to answer the following questions: 1) as the extension of identity, how do people customize their avatars? How does the avatar look like the user? Does it look like the user's actual self or their desired self? Are there any perceptional differences between the actual avatar and the desired avatar? 2) If they are different, how do users perceive the desired avatar? 3) If users perceive them positively, what role does the perception of the desired avatar play in cyberspace, and what are the practical implications of it?

The answers will significantly contribute to the communication literature by successfully bridging the missing link between the avatar as an extension of self and as an effective communication tool in the context of persuasion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Self-Identity and Avatars

It is not a novel idea that a person possesses multiple personas, also known as *identities* in the field of psychology (Goffman, 1959; Jung, 1953). Goffman broadly classified a person's self with public self and inner self. Based on Jung's conceptualization, the inner self is one's real individuality, which resides in the unconscious self. Carl Rogers (1951) called this the *true self*. According to Rogers' argument, the true self is the one that psychologically exists in the present but is not fully expressed in social life. The true self is more often and easily expressed through the Internet than in traditional, face-to-face communication. Along these same lines, Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) also provided reasonable explanations, arguing that the Internet enables people to facilitate self-expression through two powerful features: anonymity and freedom from self-disclosing negative aspects of oneself. As the analogy of 'strangers on a train' (Rubin, 1975) implies, the Internet is like a train in which people open up and disclose their inner or true selves to strangers sitting in the next seat.

Another powerful feature of the Internet that Bargh et al. argue is the absence of a physical "gating feature" (p.44). This is an extension of the power of anonymity, which gives users freedom to manipulate their identities. Invisibility in cyberspace allows users to be anybody and activate any one of their identities without necessarily developing a new or strange identity. Although the figure or appearance of the online and offline identities may look different, they are somewhat connected (Jordan, 1999; Kang & Yang, 2006; MacKinnon, 1995).

Given that, an avatar is a graphical feature that conveys one's online identity (Jordan, 1999). It represents users in online communities, chat rooms, or virtual reality games (Nowak, 2004). Suler (1999) refers to an avatar as "a picture, drawing, or icon that users choose to represent themselves." First used in Neal Stephenson's (1993) science fiction book, *Snow Crash* (Vilhjalmsson, 1997), the word "avatar" was originally comprised of two Sanskrit words, "Ava" (meaning "descend" or "pass") and "Terr" (meaning "beneath" or "earth"). Therefore, avatar literarily, means a "descent" into a lower realm of existence. In Hindu philosophy, avatar is used to refer to the incarnation (bodily manifestation) of a divine being on Earth (Lee, 2003). Although avatars in Internet environments are only used to represent the visualized embodiment of a character, the broader meaning of the ancient Indian philosophy is embedded in the concept of the avatar. In terms of the embodied character, some researchers have used the term "avatar" with the term "agent" interchangeably. However, Nowak (2000) distinguishes the avatar from the agent, saying that the latter is controlled by a computer program while the avatar is controlled by a user. An attractive feature of avatars is that they allow people to customize their appearance by select-

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