



Persuasive avatars: The effects of customizing a virtual salesperson's appearance on brand liking and purchase intentions[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Transformed social interaction (TSI) suggests that virtual environments have unique advantages over traditional forms of interpersonal communication. Recent research has demonstrated that a persuasive speaker can use these advantages to create a more persuasive message. However, little has been done to establish how a receiver of a persuasive message in a virtual, interactive environment might also use these advantages. Giving individuals the ability to customize a persuasive source may empower them and affect their perceptions of the persuasive message. In a 2(forewarned or not) × 2(customize source or watch customization) experiment, participants were forewarned or not forewarned that they would be hearing a persuasive message about buying a new energy drink. Participants were then allowed to customize (or watch someone customize) the appearance of the speaker's avatar before the sales pitch. Participants who had the opportunity to customize the speaker's appearance liked the product more and had higher purchase intentions than those who did not have control, regardless of forewarning. Findings suggest a new application for TSI, and that both users and sources may benefit when users have the power to customize the appearance of a virtual salesperson.

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1. Introduction

As digital technology continues to grow in popularity, persuaders adapt their messaging tactics to take advantage of these new media. Advertisements are present across social networks, websites, and video games, while millions of users can be contacted quickly and cheaply via e-mail. Virtual environments (VEs) offer another opportunity for those with the intent to persuade to find potential targets for their messages, as persuaders can closely interact with their consumers while tightly controlling the interactive experience in ways that maximize the message's effect. VEs also allow unique opportunities for consumers to engage with advertising. By offering the ability to interact with the environment, the advertisement, and the source making the sales pitch, interactive media may change the way individuals process advertisements by increasing the persuasive outcomes sought by marketers. Having control over an advertisement might empower individuals and make them more engaged with the product, like it more, and be more likely to purchase it later. For example, the Lay's "Do Us A Flavor" contest allows users to suggest a new chip

flavor and to create packaging for a bag that would hold that new chip. Users from all over the country suggested new flavors, and Lay's created and distributed the top three flavors. The winner was determined by consumer vote, and the result was a consumer created and approved product. Advertisers may be hesitant to grant total control of their product or message to consumers as Lay's did; however it is plausible that customization of some aspects of the product such as a brand logo, virtual salesperson, mascot, or website could be opened up to consumers. In this sense, the user might be able to influence some aspects of the persuasive source while keeping the core message intact, and this experience may affect their perception of the message. This study will test the effects of how customizing a virtual salesperson's avatar will affect an individual's perceptions of a persuasive speech given by that avatar.

If people were given the power to actively influence and control their experience with a sales pitch it might change how they perceive that message. Research on persuasion using digital technology shows that messages can be efficiently tailored for individual recipients, increasing persuasive outcomes (Lairson et al., 2004; Noar et al., 2007; Rimer and Kreuter, 2006). Tailoring has also been shown to be effective in virtual worlds (Fox et al., 2009, Schmeil and Suggs, 2014). Yet virtual worlds also create the opportunity for individuals to customize their experience and interact with the message in novel ways. One understudied area

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is the way in which users—that is, the targets of the persuasive message—may be persuaded by modifying aspects of the persuasive source using virtual affordances. *Transformed social interaction* suggests that virtual technologies enable communication in virtual environments to be modified in ways that are not feasible in the physical world (TSI; Bailenson et al., 2004). It is possible that affordances unique to virtual environments could be applied to increase the persuasive effects of an advertising message.

Virtual worlds typically come with the ability to create one's avatar in order to interact with the environment or other people in the world. Options for customizing these avatars vary across the virtual worlds, and users are often faced with customization systems when entering a virtual world. Because of this familiarity and the rich ability to customize, we propose that virtual worlds are an excellent space with which to test the effects of having control over a digital salesperson. By allowing participants to customize the appearance of a human salesperson's avatar we can examine the affordances unique to virtual worlds and examine their effects on advertising reception and attitudes towards a persuasive salesperson making a pitch.

2. Virtual environments and avatars

A virtual environment is a digital space in which a user's movements are tracked and his or her surroundings rendered, or digitally composed and displayed to the senses, in accordance with those movements. For example, in a computer game, a user's joystick motions can be tracked and his or her character will move forward, rendering a new environment. Or, Xbox Kinect players can physically swing their arms remote, and the screen will show a bowling ball rolling down the lane. The goal of a virtual environment is to replace the cues of the real world environment with digital ones. Thus, the affordances of VEs can be used to dramatically change the nature of communication beyond the boundaries of the physical world.

Common elements of virtual environments are avatars and agents. The term *avatar* refers to any representation of a user in a virtual environment. These representations can vary in their form and detail, or whether they are enacted in real time or not. Avatars are controlled by humans and should be distinguished from *agents*, which are digital representations controlled by computer algorithms (Fox et al., 2015). Typically, avatars are used to represent people in Internet chat, video games, virtual reality, and other mediated contexts. In 3D environments, avatars provide an essential, functional representation with which the user can enact virtual behaviors such as navigating virtual space or engaging virtual objects or other avatars. A recent meta-analysis revealed that when virtual interactants are believed to be avatars, they are more persuasive than those believed to be agents (Fox et al., 2015). At this stage, further research needs to investigate how avatars or agents can be further manipulated to promote persuasive outcomes.

2.1. Transformed social interaction

According to Bailenson et al. (2004), virtual technologies have advantages over traditional forms of interpersonal communication in three ways: sensory capabilities, situational context, and self-representation. TSI gives users the opportunity to modify and augment their senses, gaining more information than they would be able to in regular, face-to-face interactions (Bailenson and Beall, 2006). For example, perceptions could be enhanced in a virtual classroom, allowing teachers to see students' names, grades, or other measures of comprehension or attention as they look at each student's avatar. A salesperson could track the nonverbal

behaviors of customers, identifying changes in heart rate or breathing frequency indicate interest or excitement in the pitch, and change the message based on this feedback during the pitch. Thus, the messengers' senses are enhanced as they are able to detect, assess, and react to information and feedback from multiple sources at once.

TSI also allows for the manipulation of the context surrounding the situation (Bailenson and Beall, 2006). If a user missed an important conversational point, he or she could rewind and replay the conversation. Buyers having a hard time focusing in a virtual car dealership could pause the tour and step away. Alternatively, the virtual dealership itself could disappear, and buyers could step into a virtual model and explore its features on their own time, without other distractions. Altering elements of the context may improve desired persuasive outcomes.

Finally, TSI allows for the manipulation of one's self-representation (Bailenson and Beall, 2006), and as such users may choose avatars that are accurate or inaccurate representations of themselves (Vasalou et al., 2008). Individuals can change their avatar's height, weight, or hair color in a virtual environment. They can make changes drastically beyond possibility in the real world, such as inhabiting the body of a narwhal. Individuals could also manipulate their appearance based on situational contexts or change them over time. For example, a salesperson could alter his or her emotional expressions depending on the course of a conversation. The ability to alter one's self-representation maximizes the opportunity for creating the most persuasive version of the self possible.

In this study, we seek to expand the domain of TSI. Although TSI research has thus far focused on modifying one's own self-representation, the same affordances could enable users to modify aspects of *others'* representations in the virtual world. Given that VEs enable multiple viewpoints even in the same virtual space, John could customize the features of Kim's representation so that it appeared a certain way to John, although Kim would still see the representation she had chosen for herself. This flexibility could maximize desired outcomes. Perhaps a child learns more from a teacher represented by a teddy bear, or a socially anxious person may feel most comfortable inhabiting a virtual world where other people are always smiling. Customization of a product has been shown to be an effective means of increasing engagement with an advertisement (Bright and Daugherty, 2012), and the ability to customize the representation of another person could be very useful in interpersonal persuasive contexts, such as a sales pitch. Customization of the persuasive source could benefit both the user and the salesperson: users get some control over the interaction and may customize the salesperson in a way that makes the users feel more comfortable, thus increasing the likelihood of a sale.

2.2. Persuasion in virtual environments

Because of their immersiveness and unique affordances, virtual environments are ideal for many types of persuasive messages (Aksoy et al., 2006). Studies conducted in advertising contexts have found that interacting with virtual objects and virtual salespeople has a strong positive effect on persuasive outcomes. Li et al. (2001, 2002) demonstrated that interacting with three-dimensional representations of products caused users to rate the experience as more natural and engaging, and users felt more present than those who saw and could not interact with two-dimensional representations. Interacting with three-dimensional objects also increases product attitude accessibility (Schlosser, 2003), and being able to interact with an object generates more mental imagery of product use, which increases purchase intentions (Lee et al., 2012).

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