



## Choosing Buddy Icons that look like me or represent my personality: Using Buddy Icons for social presence



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### ABSTRACT

People choose aspects of the self to present that they believe will lead others to have positive impressions of them. The diffusion of telecommunication technologies has led to some of this self-presentation being done using Instant Messaging and other social media applications and devices. When people use Instant Messaging, they select graphical representations to represent them called Buddy Icons. This project asks users to describe the Buddy Icons they are currently using and what they intend to self-present in selecting them to test the extent to which self presentation theory can explain the choices people are making. Overall, participants reported that they felt their Buddy Icons accurately reflected physical characteristics, psychological aspects of the self, or both, which is consistent with previous research that people are relatively honest in their self-presentation online. Those who selected more human like (anthropomorphic) Buddy Icons reported them as more representative of the physical, as opposed to the psychological, self. Finally, users who felt their Buddy Icon accurately represented them reported a stronger sense of identification and felt their Buddy Icon could increase social presence. Implications of these results for online self presentation and impression management are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

People can selectively use online communication to self present information to an unprecedented number of people (Birnbaum, 2008; Van Der Werf, 2007). Though online communication systems allow people to present specific attributes while concealing, altering, or inventing others, this does not necessarily mean online self presentation is less honest or accurate than offline self presentation (Back, Schmuckle, & Egloff, 2008; Mitja Back et al., 2010; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009). During the online self-presentation process with some systems, people can select computer generated visual images to represent them (Vazire & Gosling, 2004). This feature is available in a variety of online settings including synchronous text-based chat applications called Instant Messaging (IM), where they are called “buddy icons”. All of the most frequently used Instant Messaging applications including as AIM, Yahoo Messenger, Google Chat, and MSN Instant Messenger allow users to display or even create a Buddy Icon of their choice. These Buddy Icons are a widely used (Tamborini & Westerman, 2006) form of self presentation.

This project asks current IM users to evaluate the Buddy Icon they are currently using. It examines how realistic and anthropomorphic people report their Buddy Icons to be and the extent to

which they feel the Buddy Icon accurately represents them either physically or psychologically and how much they identify with it. It uses structural equation modeling to examine whether Impression Management Theory can predict why people select their Buddy Icons and evaluates whether those who report their Icons to be anthropomorphic and realistic feel more or less physical or psychological homophily, and identification as well as the extent to which users selected the Buddy Icon because they believe it would increase social presence, or salience and connections with others.

### 2. Self presentation and Impression Management strategies

Self-presentation is a process through which people present information about the self intended to influence the impressions others have of them and includes everything people use to express and present the self to others (Arkin & Shepperd, 1990). Impression Management Theory predicts that individuals manage self presentation based on their goals and understanding of what is expected in a situation (Goffman, 1959). Impression Management Theory can be applied to online communication and self-presentation and Impression Management do not happen exclusively online or offline and whether online or offline, people self present in ways that they believe will give others impressions of them that will help fulfill their interaction or relationship goals (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2010; Myers, 2008).

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## 2.1. Self-presentation strategies online

People adapt their self presentation strategies to utilize the features and social norms of different systems of the medium or system, the goals of the interaction (Back et al., 2008; Birnbaum, 2008; Tamborini & Westerman, 2006), as well as targeted audience for the message (Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2008). Some argue that self-presentation online (using blogs and web pages) is really a 'staged performance' in which an identity or aspects of identity can be selectively targeted for presentation (Chandler, 1998; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). They point out the lack of a visible spontaneous reaction in many computer mediated interactions that allow for more planning time. Users can carefully consider what to say or how to represent themselves, giving them more control over what others see and know about them (Birnbaum, 2008; Bortree, 2005; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996).

Individuals express themselves offline while integrating the many facets of communication technologies to their impression management strategies. It is important to understand that online communication is not isolated and face-to-face and online communication frequently occur in tandem with the same people and sometimes even at the same time (Birnbaum, 2008; Mitrano, 2006; Turkle, 1995). Online systems can be used to enhance and maintain friendships and relationships that began offline (Dwyer, 2007) and most offline relationships eventually move offline (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Thus, the information people self-present online is not necessarily different from what they present offline, but the way the information is presented is clearly different. Communication media require people to adapt and modify the methods and strategies of self-presentation (Boyd, 2004; Chandler, 1998; Vazire & Gosling, 2004). Offline, people use language, clothing choice and behaviors (Schlenker, 1980), and online people use screen names, text and Buddy Icons (Ellison et al., 2006) for this part of the process.

The perception of increased control over impression management online may allow for more selectivity and self-censorship and a wider variety of strategies for exchanging information about the self (Birnbaum, 2008; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Vazire & Gosling, 2004) but does not make the self presented online less authentic. While some users do lie to others, distort, or misrepresent information, the fears that people will take advantage of features of computer mediated communication to deceive others more online than offline seem unwarranted. People report a desire to present honest representations of themselves even when online, likely because intimacy and relationship maintenance relies on acceptance of the authentic self and most people seek to establish and maintain favorable but believable impressions while presenting information to help them reach their goals (Back et al., 2008; Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Ellison et al., 2006).

The affordances of computer systems may give communicators greater control over some of the information others have about them, but it gives less control over other information. Online information can be created with a particular audience in mind but the user cannot control what others see, who views their information, or when. A user cannot control who has access to information once it is shared because it can be shared and re-posted by friends to others without the permission or knowledge of the original sender of the information (Back et al., 2008; Birnbaum, 2008) so family and coworkers can see pictures and posts from friends, and friends of friends, or even strangers. This poses problems with peoples' ability to control their images and makes targeting messages and sides of a self to particular audiences harder (Boyd, 2004; Chandler, 1998; Vazire & Gosling, 2004). The fact that information is available across multiple groups of people including different groups of friends, as well as family, make it unlikely that deception would go unnoticed or unchallenged, which could lead to more open and honest self-presentation than in offline environments (Ellison et al., 2006). Users

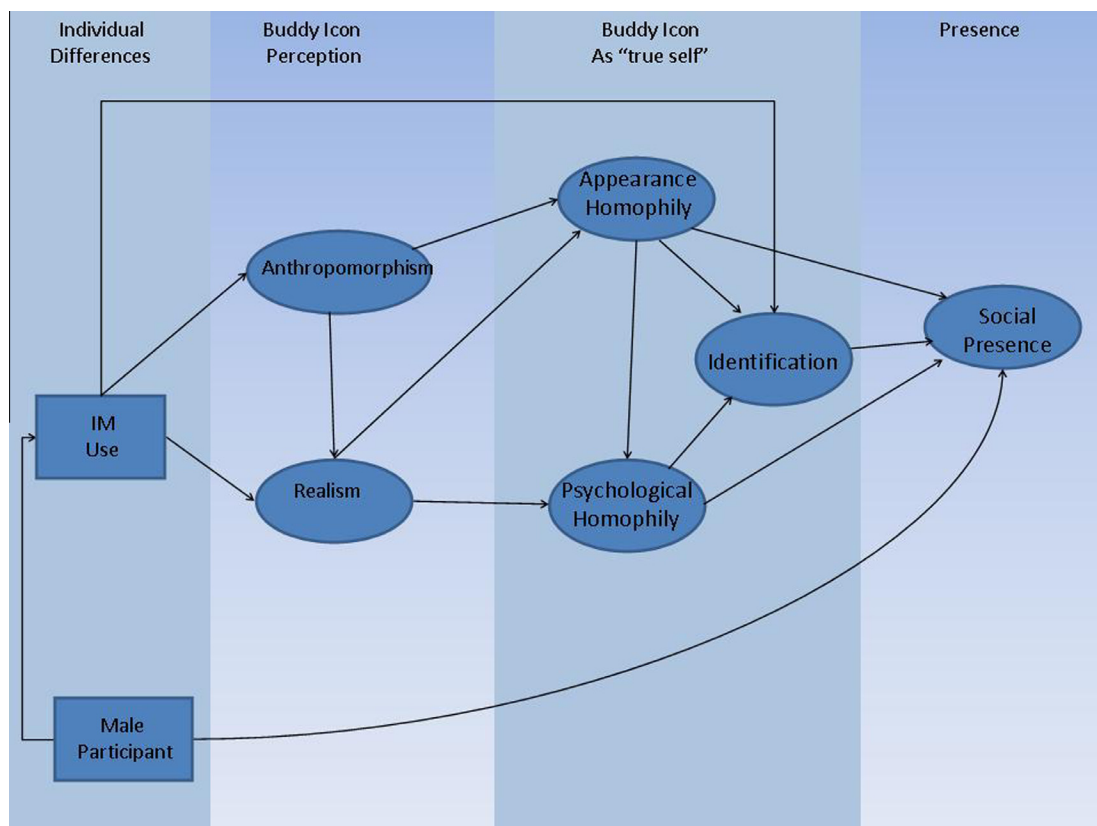


Fig. 1. Predicted model.

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