



# Choose your “buddy icon” carefully: The influence of avatar androgyny, anthropomorphism and credibility in online interactions

Kristine L. Nowak <sup>\*</sup>, Christian Rauh

*Communication Sciences, University of Connecticut, 850 Bolton Road, Storrs, CT 06269-1085, United States*

Available online 5 July 2007

---

## Abstract

In both online and offline interactions, the visual representation of people influences how others perceive them. In contrast to the offline body, an online visual representation of a person is consciously chosen and not stable. This paper reports the results of a 2 step examination of the influence of avatars on the person perception process. Specifically, this project examines the reliance on visual characteristics during the online perception process, and the relative influence of androgyny, anthropomorphism and credibility. In the first step, 255 participants fill out a survey where they rated a set of 30 static avatars on their credibility, androgyny, and anthropomorphism. The second step is a between subjects experiment with 230 participants who interact with partners represented by one of eight avatars (high and low androgyny, and anthropomorphism by high and low credibility). Results show that the characteristics of the avatar are used in the person perception process. Causal modeling techniques revealed that perceptions of avatar androgyny influence perceptions of anthropomorphism, which influences attributions of both avatar and partner credibility. Implications of these results for theory, future research, and users and designers of systems using avatars are discussed.

© 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Avatars; Person perception; Computer mediated communication; Androgyny; Anthropomorphism; Uncertainty reduction

---

---

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 860 486 4080.

E-mail address: [kristine.nowak@uconn.edu](mailto:kristine.nowak@uconn.edu) (K.L. Nowak).

## 1. Introduction

People are selecting avatars to represent them during a variety of online interactions including work related projects, and relationship maintenance and development (Schroeder, 2002). The images that people select to represent them during online interactions have been called “buddy icons”, avatars, or virtual images (see Damer, 1997; Suler, 1996) and can be created, borrowed, or even purchased. Many collaborative and communication applications, including instant messaging, have a buddy icon, or avatar. The Pew Internet and American Life project estimates that 53 million Americans are using instant messaging systems (IM), with 62% of those aged 18–27 using it and more than 46% of this age group using it more than email both for work related applications, and for keeping in touch with friends and family (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004). Companies have started using avatars in online advertising and customer support (Ikea, 2006). BBC even has a news segment anchored by avatars (Maseon, 2006).

The types of avatars are quite diverse and may resemble other humans, animals, objects, or anything the user (or designer) can dream up and generally have little or no resemblance to the user’s offline appearance (Benford, Greenhalg, Bowers, Snowden, & Fahlén, 1995; Damer, 1997; Suler, 1996). Oravec (1996) argued that the avatar selected for an interaction is analogous to clothing selected for a meeting in that both are vehicles of expression. Some users have one avatar that they use most or all of the time (Becker & Mark, 2002) but most have a variety of avatars they use to represent them that they frequently change during interactions to represent their various moods and locations (Oravec, 1996; Soukup, 2004; Taylor, 1999, 2002).

The use of avatars online influences people’s involvement in the interaction as well as their perceptions of others they encounter (Biocca & Nowak, 2002; Lee, 2004; Nowak, 2004; Schroeder, 2002; Taylor, 2002). Therefore, the increased use of avatars is likely to have implications for communication outcomes and relationship development. This project uses causal modeling techniques to examine the relative influence of the visible characteristics of the avatar (androgyny, credibility, and anthropomorphism), and the behavior of the person, on impressions of androgyny and credibility.

## 2. The role of visual characteristics in person perception online and offline

There are obvious differences and similarities between the avatar and the offline body. The effect of those differences on the perception process is not so obvious. They are similar in that both are the visible representation of another’s “presence” during an interaction, and both are used to represent and identify a person. One important difference is that a person is born with an offline body, and it stays relatively consistent throughout his or her life, while the avatar is computer generated, chosen and can be easily modified or even completely changed (Benford et al., 1995; Oravec, 1996; Taylor, 2002). This section considers the potential influence of these similarities and differences.

Despite the obvious media differences, previous research suggests that the underlying process of perceiving people online is analogous to the process of perceiving people offline. Indeed, the process of reducing uncertainty has been shown to continue in online interactions where people adapt the uncertainty reduction process to utilize whatever information is provided in an interaction (Nowak, 2004; Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002; Walther, 2007). Uncertainty reduction theory argues that people strive to under-

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/352229>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/352229>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)