Avatars in social media: Balancing accuracy, playfulness and embodied messages

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Abstract

This paper examines how users negotiate their self-presentation via an avatar used in social media. Twenty participants customised an avatar while thinking aloud. An analysis of this verbal data revealed three motivating factors that drive self-presentation: (1) avatars were used to accurately reflect their owners' offline self; participants chose to display stable self-attributes or idealised their avatar by concealing or emphasising attributes aligned to imagined social roles, (2) the diversity of customisation options was exploited by some participants who broke free from the social rules governing self-presentation offline; others used the avatar's appearance to emotionally provoke and engage the avatar viewer and finally, (3) avatars were used as proxies; participants designed their online self in order to convey a message to a significant other.
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1. Introduction

Increasingly, social system designers are introducing avatars as the new forum for identity construction in online environments, a feature users have welcomed with enthusiasm. Following Yahoo's launch of Yahoo! Avatars, 7 million users personalised an avatar for display within their profiles e.g. Yahoo! 360°, Yahoo! Answers, Yahoo! Messenger (Hemp, 2006). Likewise, four million users created an avatar after the facility (called 'weemee') was introduced to the chat system 'Windows Live Messenger'.[1] This rapid uptake of avatars is not surprising; while avatars maintain users' privacy, they give expressive freedom over an otherwise static online identity. In an illustrative example, V-Chat, a virtual chat-room, allowed users to either design their own avatar, which was particularly time demanding, or to select from already-made options. In general, V-Chat users spurned the latter option, instead taking the time to create unique representations so that they "didn't look like others" (Cheng et al., 2002).

Avatars are malleable objects as users are given the ability to choose diverse customisation combinations. Motivated by this fluid property of avatars, HCI researchers have examined the social implications of avatars by considering how users manage self-presentation through this new medium and to what extent an avatar's appearance can shape online communication (e.g. Bers et al., 2001; Axelsson, 2002; Taylor, 2002; Nowak and Rauh, 2005). This prior work has traditionally taken place in virtual environments where users' avatars serve as online embodiments for navigating three-dimensional spaces. Though members may forge friendships over time, at the onset they communicate with previously unknown others.

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[1]Retrieved from http://www.weeworld.com/about/partner.aspx?partner = 22 on 31/03/08.

More recently, avatars have been implanted in social media environments. Unlike the strangers one encounters in other online environments, users of social media predominantly interact with offline contacts such as friends and family: bloggers document their daily lives to keep their family and friends informed (Nardi et al., 2004); users of the social networking site Facebook visit the site to reconnect with old friends or to maintain ongoing friendships (Joinson, 2008). Furthermore, the open text channel available in social media provokes self-reflection that is reminiscent of diary entries: bloggers document their life events (Nardi et al., 2004), use blogging as a form of "catharsis" for working out their emotions (Nardi et al., 2004; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005), or voice their opinions on controversial topics e.g. politics (Nardi et al., 2004). Therefore, in social media, one's offline social and emotional life is merged with the online sphere.

This unity of offline and online has been found to facilitate more honest constructions of identity and self-presentation, as opposed to the role playing that often takes place in virtual environments or MUDs (e.g. Bruckman, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Taylor, 2002).[2] To give an example, bloggers frequently report identifying and accurate profile information such as their real name or age (Herring et al., 2004; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). A similar result has been shown in relation to avatars; users tend to reflect their own appearance when personalising an avatar for display within their blog (Vasalou et al., 2007). This previous work, however, does not reveal the strategies that users draw together to shape a self-representative avatar. The present research addresses this point with a qualitative study that captures the array of self-presentation strategies that users apply when constructing an avatar. By elucidating the "how" behind self-presentation, we gain a more profound theoretical understanding about identity in social media. At the same time, by exposing which customisation choices are significant to users, we extrapolate design recommendations for avatar customisation tools.

We begin by discussing how theories on identity and self-presentation apply to the unique qualities of the avatar medium. Next, we describe the experiment conducted; users were requested to construct an avatar for two social media scenarios. The qualitative "think aloud" methodology used in this work is also motivated. This is followed by an analysis of the results outlining the full spectrum of self-presentation strategies participants used during avatar creation. This paper ends with a general discussion that identifies three motivating factors guiding self-presentation in social media: (1) accurate self-presentation (2) playful self-presentation and (3) embodied messages. The theoretical implications of these results are extended to the field of online communication, while several practical implications are considered for the design of avatar customisation tools.

2. Background

2.1. Identity and self-presentation

Goffman (1959) considered humans to be actors, constantly following a social script. By using *front*, composed of *setting*, *appearance* and *manner*, an actor idealises his/her self-presentation as s/he conceals or emphasises aspects that correspond to the values governing a particular situation. More specifically, Goffman defined front as the, "expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (Goffman, 1959, p. 32). The setting is the stage which the actor chooses as a backdrop for his/her performance. A first date is arranged to take place at a restaurant; a work meeting convenes at a conference room. The actor's appearance is comprised by stable characteristics such as age, gender and race. Other aspects of appearance are malleable such as one's displayed social standing or recreational activities at a given moment in time. Manner is the expressive signals one intentionally or unintentionally gives off. For instance, a speaker presenting at a seminar, as expected, will display a calm and confident demeanour. Conversely, despite efforts to remain calm, the speaker may give off signals of anxiety. Generally, appearance and manner are expected to align. For example, during a project pitch, the creative director is formally dressed while his/her manner should transmit confidence with the team's proposal even though the client may momentarily question his/her judgment.

Unlike Goffman's microscopic analysis of self, Higgins (1987) approached the same concept from a macroscopic view. According to Higgins, there are three self-aspects, perceived either from the actor's point of view or from an imagined audience's perspective. The *ideal* self is composed of qualities which the actor or others wish for him/her to possess, while the *ought* self comprises qualities which the actor or others expect him/her to possess due to obligation. The *actual* self is composed of stable qualities the actor or others believe s/he possesses.

Goffman's and Higgins' frameworks have been used to answer questions regarding online identity and self-presentation. Aligned to Goffman's view, Ellison et al. (2006) showed that online daters have a tendency to idealise their self-presentation by controlling the cues they give off. In the wider field of computer-mediated communication, Bargh et al. (2002) found that online users, liberated by anonymity, generally express more actual self-aspects than when they communicate face-to-face. Identity construction in this previous work was limited to either text-based or pictorial representations. Avatars present two distinctive

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[2]The qualitative differences between social media and virtual environments are also understood within Schroeder's (2002) sociology-inspired framework for virtual environments: an online interaction is uniquely framed within a context and it is characterised by the social roles users are compelled to take. In addition, the technological features of the environment can encourage or discourage certain behaviours by influencing users' object of focus.