



# The impact of hedonic and utilitarian value of online avatars on e-service quality



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

### Keywords:

Avatar  
Hedonic value  
Utilitarian value  
E-service quality  
Website humanization

## ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to examine the impact of avatars' utilitarian and hedonic values on the different dimensions of e-service quality. Despite the existence of many studies focusing on the impact of the avatar on user's online experience, there is a lack of research on the effect of avatars' values on the different dimensions of websites' perceived quality. We asked respondents to interact with an avatar and then fill in our questionnaire. We applied this process to 8 different service companies' websites with an avatar already integrated. We received 945 questionnaires back. In order to measure e-service quality, we used WEBQUAL. As we had several latent variables, we used partial least squares (PLS), a variance-based structural equation modeling method. Results show that the utilitarian and hedonic values of the avatar increase significantly the perception of the website's quality. The utilitarian value of the avatar impacts 9 of the 10 dimensions of e-service quality. The hedonic value impacts 5 of the 10 dimensions of e-service quality. The results of this study are relevant to the academic world, as we identified that the utilitarian value of an avatar can impact nearly all dimensions of WEBQUAL. Our results can also have immediate and direct implications for companies who want to improve a specific dimension of their website by the use of an avatar. Moreover, this study will be useful for developers of online agents in order to adjust the knowledge of their avatars to clients' and users' needs.

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## 1. Introduction

Humanization of websites is the future. Virtual worlds are receiving increased global attention in a wide range of areas (Zhang, Zhang, De Pablos, & Sun 2014a). With the proliferation of virtual worlds and social media, users are increasingly interfacing and interacting with online avatars, which are animated characters that some companies use on their websites to mimic interaction with a human customer-service representative (Cyr, Hassanein, Head, & Ivanov, 2007; Holzwarth, Janiszewski, & Neumann, 2006). These characters humanize the question-and-answer experience, providing information faster and making the experience more interesting for the users. The use of the avatar depends on the goals of the company. It can perform many roles in helping the user to achieve its goals. According to several authors such as Wang, Baker, Wagner, and Wakefield (2007), Bridges and Florsheim (2008), Keeling, McGoldrick, and Beatty (2010), Köhler, Rohm, de Ruyter, and Wetzels (2011), Etemad-Sajadi (2014), Gefen and Straub (2004), the avatar can (i) welcome users to the

website, (ii) assist the users to browse the website, (iii) answer users' questions, (iv) simulate a real-time conversation, (v) have several parallel conversations, (vi) reduce costs for the company through acting in lieu of a customer service operator, (vii) collect data on users and their needs, (viii) reinforce the company's brand, (ix) create an enjoyable or 'fun' experience for users, (x) manage relationships with current and potential clients, (xi) increase users' desire to visit the company, and finally (xii) create a positive experience that can be passed on by word of mouth. Despite very optimistic literatures, the virtual agents do not seem to always live up to all their promise. According to Ben Mimoun, Poncin, and Garnier (2012), the reasons for that failure stem from the avatars' lack of intelligence, autonomy, and interactivity. Corvello, Pantano, and Tavernise (2011) also highlight the lack of interaction. Most of the time, virtual agents are not integrated with information related to consumer preferences. An inadequacy of appearance can also impact the perception of the avatar. Nowak and Rauh (2008) argue that highly anthropomorphic virtual agents may create high expectations and when users interact with them, they can be disappointed with the knowledge and credibility of the agent.

The objective of this paper is to examine the added-value of an avatar on user's on-line experience. Although many studies have focused on the impact of the avatar on user's online experience

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(e.g., Bridges & Florsheim, 2008; Childers, Carr, Peck, & Carson, 2002; Chung, 2005; Cyr et al., 2007; Gefen & Straub, 2004; Holzwarth et al., 2006; Keeling et al., 2010; Köhler et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2007), there is a lack of research about the effect of avatars' values on the different dimensions of websites' perceived quality. We want to concretely measure the impact of avatars' utilitarian and hedonic values on the different dimensions of e-service quality which include: informational fit-to-task, tailored-communication, visual appeal, innovativeness, emotional appeal, ease of use, trust, consistent image, response time, and relative advantage. These dimensions have been selected from WEBQUAL. From a practitioner point of view, the results from this study can have immediate and direct implications for companies who want to improve a specific dimension of their website by the use of an avatar. It will help firms to manage relationships with current and potential clients through their website. This study will also be useful for developers of online agents in order to adjust the knowledge of their avatars to clients' and users' needs. Moreover, the model of this research can be used for evaluating the real impact of an avatar on the quality of service delivered through the website.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. E-service quality

Websites are evolving in an environment that responds to a variety of activities, including entertainment, exploration, communication, and learning (Huang, 2003). It is more than just a communication tool, it is a real way to create value and retain users (Boisvert & Caron, 2006; Chen, Rungruengsamrit, Rajkumar, & Yen, 2013; Sørum, Andersen, & Clemmensen, 2013; Wang & Vaughan, 2014). According to Zeithaml, 2000), e-service consists of web services that are delivered through the website of each company. Rust and Lemon (2001) defined e-service as the role of service in cyberspace. Indeed, to a certain extent, the website of each company represents the service that the company in question can provide. It is not necessarily the core service provided by the company, but it keeps a service or a supplementary service (Etemad-Sajadi, 2014). For ten years, many researchers have focused on quality and characteristics of websites and their role in attracting users and transforming them into online shoppers (Bèzes & Belvaux, 2012). Some authors used SERVQUAL dimensions to evaluate the quality of the services and products available online (Negash, Ryan, & Igbaria, 2003). Others have added new dimensions like Aladwani and Palvia (2002) who measured four dimensions of web quality: specific content, content quality, appearance and technical adequacy. Rocha (2012) proposes a global framework for evaluating websites, which takes into account the characteristics, sub-characteristics and attributes of three main dimensions: content, service, and technical quality. For Yang, Cai, Zhou, and Zhou (2005), it is important to use dimensions related to usability, usefulness of content, adequacy of information, accessibility and interaction to evaluate websites' quality. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005) suggest other items assessing electronic service quality, including: efficiency, fulfillment, system availability, and privacy. In reviewing the latest methods and evaluation studies on e-commerce, Hasan and Abuelrub (2011) provide general criteria to evaluate a website regardless of the type of service it offers: quality of content, quality of design, quality of the organization, and friendliness. Yoo and Donthu (2001) focused on dimensions of e-service quality such as the ease of use, aesthetic design, processing speed, and security. Janda, Trocchia, and Gwinner (2002) identified e-service quality based on the performance, access, security, sensation, and information. Barnes and Vidgen (2001) worked with a tool called WEBQUAL focusing on the quality of the website. As described in the article published by Loiacono, Watson, and Goodhue (2007), WEBQUAL is

based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), and marketing literature. Loiacono et al. (2007) adapted the WEBQUAL tool to account for such characteristics including: ease of understanding, intuitive operations, information quality, functional fit-to-task, tailored-communication, trust, response time, visual appeal, innovativeness, emotional appeal, online completeness, consistent image, and relative advantage. In her analysis of e-service literature, Rowley (2006) compared several tools that are specifically focused on users' online experience such as WebQual (Loiacono et al., 2002; Barnes & Vidgen, 2001), E-Qual (Kaynama & Black, 2000), SITEQUAL (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), e-SQ (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2002) and ETailQ (Wolfenbarger & Gilly, 2003). In our study, we used WEBQUAL for measuring e-service quality. Indeed, this tool is robust, frequently used, and focused specifically on customer experience and its evaluation perspective.

### 2.2. Utilitarian value and hedonic value of avatars

The recent years have seen the emergence of a number of virtual worlds with various designs and purposes (Arakji & Lang, 2008; McGoldrick, Keeling, & Beatty, 2008). According to several studies (i.e. Bridges & Florsheim, 2008; Wang et al., 2007), researchers found that hedonic and utilitarian values have a marked influence on the perception of Internet users. Utilitarian value focuses on the efficiency to reach the desired information on the website (Childers et al., 2002) while hedonic value focuses on fun, playfulness, and emotional worth (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994). Motivations to engage in online retail shopping include both utilitarian and hedonic dimensions (Childers et al., 2002). Several researchers analyzed the positive impact of a social presence on users' perception (e.g. Gefen & Straub, 2003; Hassanein & Head, 2007). Avatars give a social presence which is described as the feeling of warmth, the perception that there is personal, sociable, and sensitive human contact (Chung, 2005; Cyr et al., 2007; Gefen & Straub, 2004). Establishing a social connection with a potential user is far more difficult on the internet than in the real world. According to Kohler, Fueller, Stieger, and Matzler (2011), when participants experience an online inspiring, involving and fun co-creation experience, they participate more intensely. Zhang et al. (2014b) also focused on the importance of commitment in the case of social virtual worlds. With an online virtual agent, websites seek to enhance the feeling of being connected and interacting among users. The use of a virtual agent can reduce social distance by increasing interactivity (Keeling et al., 2010). Also called socialization agents, these sophisticated characters are designed to help new customers more effectively adjust to and function within the service environment (Köhler et al., 2011). According to the same authors, avatars help customers evaluate new or unfamiliar service offerings and let firms improve service delivery. Moreover, they not only provide social benefits, they also provide both utilitarian and hedonic functions. Wang et al. (2007) argued that social cues inherent in avatars induce perceptions of website socialness, leading to increased pleasure and arousal. According to the same authors, pleasure and arousal have a positive impact on hedonic and utilitarian values. Indeed, the integration of social cues into retail websites enhances the perception of employee presence and thus enhances consumers' online experiences. Etemad-Sajadi (2014) employed an expanded version of the technology acceptance model (TAM), which describes the intention to accept or use a new technology (Davis, 1989; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw 1989). Indeed, the original TAM has been expanded to include not only the utilitarian component, but also the hedonic component related to the enjoyment created for the user (Childers et al., 2002; Zhang & Li, 2005). Etemad-Sajadi (2014) found that social presence impacts hedonic

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