

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AVATARS FOR INTERNET FORUMS USERS

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ABSTRACT

The questions of virtual representation and online identity are growing in salience for academicians ever since the inception of the Internet. Although the main flow of public online interaction and research into it have shifted towards social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, or audio-visual environments of digital games, online forums still occupy a sizable niche for thematic and more professional or hobby-oriented communication. Current paper is analyzing one of the main visual elements used to create identity of forum users, the avatars: small (usually static) images that users choose to represent their virtual selves with. The focus of this research is on the degree of attachment and the kinds of meanings that users attribute to their avatars in online forums' asynchronous interactive environments. This research applies grounded theory approach and relies heavily on triangulation of data collection and coding. The implemented sampling strategies are typical case sampling on the forums selection level, criterion sampling on the respondents' replies level and subsequent diversity case sampling as means of collected data reduction. Coding procedures are applied consecutively as follows: open coding, selective coding, theoretical coding, resulting in 29 sets of data produced from 75 pages of raw data. The main findings suggest that key factor determining users' attitude towards their avatars is the forum thematic. As a result, although overall attitude patterns diversity is rather high, such patterns are consistent and stable within the specific microcosms of individual forums.

Keywords: Avatars, Virtual Identity, Internet forums

İNTERNET FORUMLARI KULLANICILARI İÇİN AVATARLARIN ÖNEMİ

ÖZ

Sanal temsil ve çevrimiçi kimlik sorunları internetin kuruluşundan bu yana akademisyenlerin dikkatini çekiyor. Herkese açık, çevrimiçi etkileşim ve araştırmanın ana akışı Facebook, Twitter ve Instagram gibi sosyal ağlara veya dijital oyunların görsel-işitsel ortamlarına doğru kaymış olsa da, çevrimiçi forumlar hala tematik, daha da profesyonel veya hobi odaklı büyük bir niş işgal ediyor iletişim. Mevcut makale, forum kullanıcılarının kimliğini oluşturmak için kullanılan ana görsel unsurlardan birini, avatarları analiz ediyor: kullanıcıların sanal benliklerini temsil etmeyi seçtikleri küçük (genellikle statik) görüntülenir. Bu araştırmanın odak noktası, kullanıcıların çevrimiçi forumların eşzamansız etkileşimli ortamlarındaki avatarlarına atfettikleri bağlanma derecesi ve anlam türleri üzerinedir. Bu araştırma, temellendirilmiş kuram yaklaşımını uygular ve büyük ölçüde veri toplama ve kodlamanın üçgenleştirilmesine dayanır. Uygulanan örnekleme stratejileri, forum seçim düzeyinde tipik durum örnekleme, katılımcıların yanıt düzeylerinde ölçüt örnekleme ve toplanan veri azaltma aracı olarak müteakip çeşitlilik örnekleme kullanılmıştır. Kodlama prosedürleri ardışık olarak aşağıdaki şekilde uygulanır: açık kodlama, seçici kodlama, teorik kodlama, sonuç olarak 75 sayfa ham veriden üretilen 29 veri kümesi elde edilir. Ana bulgular, kullanıcıların avatarlarına karşı tutumunu belirleyen anahtar faktörün forum teması olduğunu göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak, genel tutum kalıpları çeşitliliği oldukça yüksek olmasına rağmen, bu kalıplar bireysel forumların spesifik mikrokosmos içerisinde tutarlı ve stabildir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avatarlar, sanal kimlik, internet forumları

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INTRODUCTION

Since investigation of the usage and meanings of various kinds of “avatars” in contemporary virtual environment in all of its aspects is a project far exceeding the scope of a single publication, current paper focuses explicitly on static avatars² that residents use in Internet forums³. Investigation of the degree of attachment as the most important parameter, standing at the center of other attitudinal correlations laid foundation to current research, further expanding to the analysis of the diversity of meanings that users attribute to their avatars. Consequently, connections have been established with functions, choice/making of an avatar procedure and the kind of association that users share with their avatars. As the research progressed, the initially envisioned set-up has evolved through a series of changes implemented throughout the research process, starting with the sampling procedure and scope and continuing with the data analysis steps described in further sections.

Although an attempt has been made to generalize findings to the overall public forums’ population, it is important to admit to a failure: various forums illustrate different patterns of attachment and meaning assignment. Nonetheless, enough data has been collected and analyzed to form a basic grounded theory regarding the correlation between users’ attachment to avatars and the various meanings assignment preferences.

In order to successfully carry out this research, triangulation approach (Flick, 2004, pp. 178-182) to data sampling and coding has been applied: data was assembled from diverse sources, coded with grounded theory coding procedures (Böhm, 2004) (Holton, 2007) and related to previous research on the topic.

Overview of prior research

It is essential to reiterate that together with evolution of World Wide Web and its usage, the common understanding of the concept of avatar has also evolved, shifting towards a more complex often animated 3-dimensional computer game character inhabiting virtual worlds with sound and action at times even enjoying a degree of autonomous action. It is this latest incarnation of animated dimensional audiovisual “avatar” concept that has been at the heart of academic research for the past decade with papers like “Identification with the avatar in a

² The term “avatar” is used to describe a small image (50-100x50-100 pixels) selected by the user to appear next to every his or her post on the Internet forum. A user usually cannot have different avatars for their different posts in forums.

³ The term “forum” is used to refer to an online notice board, where users can post their comments on specific topics.

commercial 3D virtual world: a dynamic perspective” (Garnier & Poncin, 2013), and “They may be pixels, but they're MY pixels: developing a metric of character attachment in role-playing video games” (Lewis, Weber, & Bowman, 2007).

Other researchers focused on how avatars are perceived by the viewers rather than on how the users themselves feel about them by relying on fMRI imaging (James, et al., 2015); or how the perception of avatars by others might be related to the users’ personality (Fong & Mar, 2015), (Korkeila & Hamari, 2020). Vasalou, Joinson, Bänziger, Goldie, & Pitt (2008) investigated avatar phenomenon with experimental setup and participant observation.

Yet another popular approach to studying the phenomenon is related to politics, protest and extremism (Gerbaudo, 2015) as well as ideologies with feminist research papers such as “Villainous avatars: the visual semiotics of misogyny and free speech in cyberspace” (Turton-Turner, 2013), “Self-presentation of female athletes: A content analysis of athlete avatars” (Shreffler, Meg G., & H. Schmidt, 2016).

Even similarly used static avatars of such social networks as Facebook or Twitter referred to as “profile picture” are bound to a both more covertly restricted policy (Facebook, 2020) (Twitter, 2020) and more public online exposure when compared to the more specialized and now somewhat niche platforms such as forums. For this reason, locating recent research into specifically *forum* avatars proves challenging. A holistic overview of research and phenomenon evolution illustrating this point and state of affairs is evident from the overview paper “Avatars and computer-mediated communication: a review of the definitions, uses, and effects of digital representations” (Nowak & Fox, 2018, pp. 30-53).

Two different publications have been chosen specifically as precursors to ground current research: one of an exploratory nature and the other one – a strongly methodological empirical study. Both papers deal with the issue of avatars, however, neither focuses strictly on current area of interest: forum avatars. The major difference in this respect is that both publications analyze online chats: real-time conversation environments, with their own dynamics, avatar functions and meanings, as well as anonymity patterns.

“The Palace” environment, which John Suler is analyzing in his book “The psychology of Cyberspace” (Suler, The psychology of cyberspace, 2005), permits for a much greater (comparing to forums) freedom of altering and positioning avatars, making them an actively changing integral element of conversations and the virtual environment itself. The pattern of anonymity, however, is similar to the forums’ one. While the second precursor titled “The

visual characteristics of avatars in computer-mediated communication: comparison of Internet relay chat and instant messenger as of 2003” (Kang & Yang, 2006) focuses on two different chat systems: IRC and IM with one of the major differences being one-on-one communication (IM) as opposed to larger more anonymous groups’ discussions of defined topics (IRC). In this case avatars usage is more similar to the one in forums and IRC environment besides its real-time interaction nature is even closer to the forum one. This permits one to actively use both articles and their findings to inform current research.

John Suler’s book is offering a broad overview of the phenomenon of avatars (their application, meanings, functions, diversity and reference to personality of owners). Although his publication is chaotic in terms of methodology, it nevertheless offers inciteful introspective into the subject matter: the phenomenon of avatars in free graphical chat environment – “The Palace”. In the chapter “Psychology of avatars and graphical space in multimedia chat communities” (2001), Suler brings up an inspiring observation: “In cyberspace, most people don’t want to be totally anonymous. But they DO like control over how their identity is expressed.... They like it a lot. Hang out at the Palace for any length of time and a seemingly endless parade of avs of all shapes, colors, and styles pass before your eyes.” (Kang & Yang, 2006, p. 309) He then proceeds with developing classifications and talking about his experience with avatars, which he furthermore generalizes to common experience with avatars of The Palace users and to a certain extent – all avatar users. What is missing, however, is that there is little to no input from other users, regarding what they think and maybe even feel about their avatars. Suler often makes various conclusions without presenting evidence or statistics. Being in a sense the main subject of his research, clearly deeply immersed in the environment, he is able to perfectly communicate key experiences, while his academic background in the field of psychology makes the observations insightful and analytical.

Therefore, current study relies on the strongest part of methodological research: the procedural systematic analysis of actual data with minimal personal involvement, to fill in the gaps and even correct the weaker points of his inspiring publication. Furthermore, Suler’s dualistic classification of avatars is partially applied here as well. The first one he based on psychological personality types presented in “Psychoanalytic diagnosis: understanding personality structure in the clinical process” (McWilliams, 1994). The second suggested classification relied on the formal properties of the avatar itself. Similarly, with current

selective coding, both references to meaning of avatars in the user's comments as well as the types of avatars by general formal properties are included, to both better understand the meaning and the relation of users to their avatars.

“The visual characteristics of avatars in computer-mediated communication: comparison of internet relay chat and instant messenger as of 2003” (Kang & Yang, 2006) offers a comparison between two different avatar-enabled chat systems: Instant Messaging (IM) and Instant Relay Chat (IRC) with emphasis on identity and anonymity as the driving forces for particular avatar patterns manifestations. This article is radically different from Suler's publication in that it is very concise and provides a helpful example not only in terms of the analyzed subject matter, but particularly in a detailed and well-structured research methodology (they are using surveys and then qualitative statistical methods to identify correlations). Kang and Yang suggest that personal familiarity, common for IM users, will result in their choice of more realistic avatars, while IRC users will use more imaginary identity, which they manage to provide evidence for (although looking at only two sources). They furthermore explore relationship between avatar usage with groups of different gender and age: these aspects are not in focus in current study.

Although chosen methods of data analysis differ on all levels, their paper proves insightful in terms of illustrating how the topic can be handled in a strictly methodological fashion. A weaker part of their research being exactly the data collection method: questionnaires with given statements, which participants were made to rate on a fixed scale. Although this is a better way to go about testing initial hypothesis, it, however, greatly limits response possibilities and diversity, potentially letting important correlations remain unpronounced if they remain outside initial theoretical claim due to the research design sampling choice.

For example, both publications attribute high degree of importance to anonymity of online interaction environments, however, one may wonder if this aspect is really that pronounced for contemporary generations of online interactive environments frequenters in terms of their choices and preferences and not a merely “natural” property of the said communication environment itself. Is absolute anonymity even possible?

Kang and Yang compared two instant messaging environments, basing their initial theory exactly on the anonymity degree of both mediums. Yet they admit that “each cyberspace and communication medium has its own identity. Visitors are aware of and try to

conform to the cyberspace characteristics or cultures that they inhabit. When people know what they want to accomplish, they choose the appropriate medium. Once the medium is chosen, their behaviour will conform to the rules of that medium.” (Kang & Yang, 2006, p. 1181) Considering that, for this research the anonymity factor was a constant, yet the forums were different and each forum of the same general theme demonstrated different patterns of avatars significance suggesting that one should be somewhat skeptical about the importance of the anonymity issue. They suggestion here however foreshadows findings of current research – salience of forum thematic. Furthermore, homogenous validity permitted focus on internal diversity of meanings and attachment patterns. Furthermore, the sources (forums) of avatars have been diversified to be able to better generalize the findings, contrary to their design, where both IRC and IM sources were internally homogenous and the IM users were all personal acquaintances.

It should be pointed out that current research focus of interest does not lie with the reasons behind the significance of avatars in themselves, but rather in the significance and meaning as related with their user’s choice, thus becoming immune to the issue of false causality.

Sampling

Since there is no academic definition of what a typical forum should look like, the ones chosen for sampling are those, which are open to general public, are in English, have an avatar support, disallow pornographic content and are not discriminatory or extremist in thematic. To narrow down the scope even further, the forums of three very general categories in terms of thematic have been selected: entertainment & news, software & services, subcultures & fan communities, although these criteria are more of a guiding than restrictive nature and are not homogenous internally. The data sources are diverse in terms of the forums thematic and population (age, gender, experience, country of origin, background), although due to pseudo anonymous nature of virtual identities it is not possible to get reliable distribution statistics without privacy violation, an issue (Vasalou, Joinson, Bänziger, Goldie, & Pitt, 2008) specifically focused on by creating experimental observation set-up with observed participants. The sample is therefore limited to the population members, who chose to participate in the on-line questionnaire.

When selecting the actual forums to sample the data from, focus was placed on the most popular, yet very diverse sources in order to be able to make generalizations about the

common average forum user (which as became obvious in the course of research was similar to trying to talk about an “average human being”). This is why originally thematically diverse categories of popular online forums were defined and then the ones topping the search results for them were selected (for this search terms of the kind of “politics forum” were used with Google search engine).

Sampling has been carried out in two forums with political focus (www.politicsforum.org, www.politicalcrossfire.com), one forum of Japanese animation fans (www.kickassanime.org), and one forum for websites developers (<http://forums.digitalpoint.com>).⁴ According to diverse spheres of social debate, political forums were chosen for the “news” category, since people there discuss news and events of political and related nature. “software and services” were represented by the webmasters community forum, since they essentially deal with both software and marketing, making the chosen forum represent an even larger group of people. The “subcultures and fan communities” were represented by Japanese animation fans forum, covering perhaps the biggest or the most active subculture present online. Therefore, on the level of forums the sampling was closest to the typical case sampling.

For the second sampling level, criterion sampling was used, with the coherent, complete and at least a little detailed reply as criterion. Such “filtering” was necessary to allow for the preservation of quality data, while permitting for the representative quality of a typical case sample (sampling method used on the forums level).

Results from political forum www.politicalcrossfire.com have consequently been excluded from coding since the majority of respondents did not significantly contribute to the diversity and some did not respond fully to the questions. Therefore, a clearer sample from www.politicsforum.org, which is a forum of the same thematic, was used for analysis.

As the following step diversity case sampling was applied, to further reduce the data sample to a manageable volume, removing replies, which did not substantially contribute to the range of findings.

Sampling by gender has not been carried out, since it is not a parameter present in every forum, nor can its authenticity be reliably verified online. There has been no need and actual possibility to apply a sampling strategy to the countries since in a large number of cases a

⁴ Appendix: “Original collected material (irrelevant posts excluded)” section.

fictional location was given and it was important to keep this parameter as close to the default forum condition as possible, rather than excluding users with fictional locations.

The avatars themselves have been preserved, as well as time of user joining the forum and location elements, since they illustrate the points of participants' replies and their forum experience, although the elements themselves are not subject to analysis.

Furthermore, sampling by experience (as illustrated by the number of posts) has been carried out in an attempt to recreate a typical pattern of experience of forum visitors. The samples range from few people with under 100 and over 4000 posts with most common and more numerous samples being in the range of 1000-3000 posts (which in some cases should be scaled in respect to the minimum and maximum number of posts for the specific forum, since different forums have different posting activity patterns and have appeared online at a different time). This approach is consistent with typical case sampling strategy illustrating the usual forum distribution.

Upon application of all the aforementioned sampling strategies, 29 sets of data were produced; although many more samples could have been acquired, even this volume proved challenging to manage encompassing over 75 pages of raw data⁵.

Data Collection

Considering the sampling strategy, the original intention was to collect existing data (posts in various forums regarding the meaning of avatars), extract relevant information and then process it. Although it offers the obvious advantage of unobtrusive investigation, not only does this advantage have little relevance for current research, this method has furthermore created an issue of having both boundless and restricted sources to work with. Boundless in that some forums contained a lot of discussion of the related matters making it immensely difficult to process and structure, while others (political or software ones) offered nothing to sample, which would have forced research to exclude them, thus endangering the generalizability of resulting findings. Therefore, the strategy was changed towards own data generation. Short surveys with open answer questions proved to be the most suitable approach, considering the exploratory character of the paper. Users of each sampled forum proved to be very active with responding and in only three (25th – 28th of November 2006) days over 80 replies were accumulated⁶. This provided the research with selected samples of

⁵ Appendix: "Sorted open coding and selective coding with avatar and additional forum information" section.

⁶ Appendix: "Original collected material (irrelevant posts excluded)" section.

data already focused on the subjects the analysis was concerned with initially while minimizing less relevant information input.

In order to better blend into the forums' atmosphere and gain participants trust and interest, the less formal questionnaire formulation was implemented, containing, however, the necessary questions⁷. Such an approach can be strongly recommended, considering how effective it has proven to be. On each forum the participants were asked to reply to the following questions:

What does your avatar mean to you (is kind of the general question) ...

1. How often do you change it?
2. How long did it take you to make one? (or did you get one from somewhere?) By making I mean looking for picture, editing, deciding etc...
3. Why did you pick this avatar?

In what way do you think your avatar reflects you? (or doesn't at all) ...

With these questions the degree of attachment (derived from the effort put in making, meaning, consistency and justification of choice), importance, motivations of choice and explanation of the meaning of avatar, identification with the self were measured. The participants were addressed in an informal and welcoming tone at the same time informing them that their replies will be a subject of research paper.

From critical perspective, the fourth question is slightly imposing in a sense that it assumes that the participant thinks that the avatar reflects him or her. However, this possible effect is negated with addition in the brackets, allowing participants to elaborate. By definition though any avatar reflects its user, although not necessarily directly, since it is the user, who selects to set this and not any other image for the avatar, which already signals the user's preferences, sympathies or communicational aims (Korkeila & Hamari, 2020). To further boost trust and participation willingness an unobtrusive example with own questions answered was provided for participants:

Fair and square, I'll answer first.

1. Roughly 3 times a year.
2. Over an hour.
3. It is a character for my website, - sort of this is who owns the website. I think it is friendlier this way. I like Japanese animation, character is a bit shy from the look of it, which I think I am too, character looks like she is in need of help and is a bit alone, which I can associate with.

Personal example not only helped to guide users into the kind of format of responses that was sought after, but also illustrated that the researcher is one of them: respectful, personal and open. A possible critique of such approach is that it may precondition future

⁷ Appendix: "Initial question" section.

replies. This criticism, however, does not hold in the face of the observed diversity of responses that were obtained.

During the information gathering phase interactive communication with the forum participants continued to keep the topic active and their interest high. Technically only active (with fresh posts) and fixed (by forum administration) topics stay on the front page, which is where users actively respond. However, most forum rules forbid meaningless posts to artificially keep a topic among the active ones. This situation forces a researcher to regularly come up with various ways to keep posting something relevant within their thread. Considering that the communication in the forums is usually slower comparing to online chat environments, it was sufficient to make about 15-20 posts per forum a day to keep the topic on the front page. Natural interaction was emulated by making posts thanking people for participation, clarifying the research-related questions and even following a small share of irrelevant questions and side talks to make sure participants would not find themselves psychologically in a stale “lab” environment.

Data Analysis

As the primary analysis method, the data-driven coding was chosen to capture the diversity of reflections on the theme of avatars and to ground the theory in the findings as they emerge from the data. Furthermore, considering the range and format of the acquired data, coding is the most efficient way of processing, allowing to efficiently extract and focus the data towards the research question. Furthermore, the three-step process is efficient considering the quantity of the data: it allowed to gradually process texts acquiring insight into general patterns and then to organize and group results with selective coding and establish relations patterns with theoretical coding, based on the acquired data. In order to accommodate the data within the coding frame on the level of selective coding in particular, some of the data richness has unavoidably been lost. For example, the processes of making and choosing avatar have been united into one category, subtle emotional patterns and larger contexts of the avatars’ origins had to be excluded or grouped as well. Even though going back and forth between the various stages of coding throughout the process was necessary to make sure that no vital patters got lost in the process, by the time data analysis has reached the theoretical coding stage, personal level involvement has been excised from the data.

All text coding was initially carried out with actual avatars removed to establish a certain distance from the texts and approach them more in terms of *how things are said* as

opposed to getting individually involved with each case. Avatars however were once again added afterwards (after selective coding stage) to illustrate what the coded texts refer to when necessary. The avatar types have furthermore been consequently integrated into selective coding frame and placed in the map of theoretical codes.

Overall, an attempt was made to approach various forums as a whole and not as separate different mini-universes aiming at making general conclusions about the online population and not pointing out the, clearly present, differences between the forums themselves. Alternatively, content analysis method could have been implemented, which would have helped more with placing the data into predefined categories, making it even more organized, yet forcing the research to discard even more meanings.

The procedure followed three steps firstly “cleaning” the sample piece with open coding (Glaser, 2016). Side remarks and external context references (an aside communication between the readers, comments towards the actual research and the researcher) were removed⁸. Furthermore, various figures of speech which did not contribute to the meaning or obscured the coding procedure (bits like “Well I suppose it reflects” were changed to “it reflects”). Excessive descriptions of the ideological, historical and political agendas and figures have been reduced, since the area of the meaning of avatar was sufficient for current research and the details of various ideologies are not in focus of analysis in this paper. Sentence structure as a result has in many cases been reduced to meaningful phrases.

The following step was selective coding: the data resulting from open coding was interpreted into more general selective codes permitting to limit, organize and group the findings⁹. For example, when a person claimed to change their avatar often, on a whim, the case was interpreted as a lower degree of attachment as opposed to the cases when people claimed to have been very conservative in respect to keeping same image for avatar. As an example of generalizing, elaboration on the political agenda of the person depicted on the avatar was transformed into “political message” (the code, which was also used for ideological message), “political affiliation” codes; or a lengthy description of which animation series certain character comes from to “subcultural reference” or “personal interest” depending on the intensity and context. This enabled a list of clear codes. In total, 9 categories and 43 codes (14 of which refer to emotion, viewpoint and attitude and are not actively

⁸ Appendix: “Sorted open coding and selective coding with avatar and additional forum information” section.

⁹ Appendix: “Sorted open coding and selective coding with avatar and additional forum information” section.

compared in theoretical coding) were produced¹⁰. Categories were created based on the emerging codes in order to better structure them. Considering the codes, which referred to viewpoint, attitude and emotion expressed by the user, a laxer procedure has been applied, allowing them to form selective codes even in the cases, when such emotions were only mentioned once (for example, *comfort, pride, radical, open mind*). Such level of detail was necessary to illustrate the diversity of emotions that users manifest when asked about their relation to avatars, even though technically they could have been reduced to more general categories of “positive” or “negative” emotional response and attitude. A compromise is reached with the theoretical coding map, where categories are used instead of the codes themselves and exceptions illustrated.

Considering difficulties and deviations with the procedure, similarly to the situation with sampling strategy choice, the original coding had to be adjusted as well on the levels of selective and theoretical procedures. Since the initial selective codes were too broad or too specific. Frequently, a different code was used to define similar information sets, a complete reworking was necessary. A separate table containing all selective codes has been created, which was filled in gradually, while coding, to standardize the procedure. It offered invaluable help during the theoretical coding procedure¹¹.




When creating theoretical coding table¹², an attempt was made to illustrate all interrelations between the categories and codes, though a need to establish a balanced solution and arrangement to avoid excessive cluttering of links had to be taken into consideration as well. As a result, the final theoretical coding does not illustrate all links between the codes, but rather the main, most common and important ones. The reason being excessive number of subcategories (nevertheless preserved to accommodate diversity), which even post processing makes their visual linking somewhat difficult to follow. At this stage of coding “medium” attachment was pointed to on a number of cases when the link between a code (for example, *relevance to real life*) and attachment is often manifested between the high and the low value. Specific emotions and viewpoint/attitude codes are not present in theoretical sampling map, since they illustrate the same pattern of relation on the main category level. Low and high

¹⁰ Appendix: “All codes” section.

¹¹ Appendix: “All codes” section.

¹² Appendix: “Theoretical coding” section.

attachment came to be the most “popular” linked points, defining the resulting theory¹³. Example of coding procedure is provided in the following table.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rarely. Can't find one that suits more. Had it when choices were limited. Experimented with Keira Knightley, Leo Tolstoy and Oscar Romero. Didn't represent me. Couldn't stop staring at my posts. others didn't look great 2. Boon created it for me from a large image 3. E.Z.L.N is one of the few movements I sympathize with. Marcos is considered a liberation theologian and libertarian socialist 4. It does. Would like to live a life like the man in avatar. Also a Libertarian socialist. Have slightly different beliefs. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Devoted, suitability sense, strong association 2. Specifically made on request, effort made 3. Political message 4. Idealizing avatar and wanting to resemble the person avatar represents. Ideological similarity 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Konulu</u></p>  <p>Joined: 29 Mar 2006 Posts: 4013 Location: Calgary, Alberta Ideology: Social anarchism, liberation theology, anarchist triumvirate</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Don't have a schedule. Change it whenever I feel like it. 2. MS Paint + Copy/Pasta + Resizing = 5 minutes max. Use images from manga and wallpapers. Google the images. 3. I love the Emma manga. I think the art is quite beautiful and i like the story as well. It's a maid show that has almost no fan service and that is a plus for me. 4. It shows people what manga/anime I'm interested in. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sporadic changes 2. Quick to average making time 3. Aesthetic interest, reading preference, subculture affinity, fetish 4. Subculture specific interests area 	<p style="text-align: center;">potter</p>  <p>Joined: 24 Mar 2006 Posts: 537 Total Words: 17,203 Location: Norway</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. had for almost a year. Had same picture before 2. A couple minutes. Googled a picture of Henrik, cropped and bordered. 3. like Ibsen as a playwright. He has striking appearance. political figures that I considered using (Keynes, Ataturk, Disraeli, some others), but couldn't find them in the limited selection. Gotten used to Henrik's approval over my posts. so decided to keep him. 4. Not a lot. share some cynicism and distant Norwegian-ness. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strong devotion – rarely changes 2. Medium effort to make 3. Personal interest, historicity, aesthetical quality. 4. Similar character trait, origin 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Clausewitz</u></p>  <p>Joined: 30 Nov 2005 Posts: 1123 Location: Texas. Yee-haw.</p>

Results

Reiterating the question, what significance do internet forums avatars hold for their users? Firstly, there is no single universal significance. As even the unprocessed data suggests, forum space mirrors real life with its diversity of opinions and values. What really seems to matter is the general forum theme, since different patterns manifest themselves in different forums. One can explain this by community factor and make claims that various virtual spaces with time develop particular attitudes in their visitors, or perhaps attract certain

¹³ Appendix: “All codes” section.

kinds of users. On the other hand, it might be that the theme of the forum itself attracts people with particular attitudes and values and the resulting community is secondary.

Just like in real life, different avatar users (people) show different degrees of attachment to the image (clothing, style, make-up), which is usually increased whenever user puts more serious meaning into it. Just like in real life, people feel strongly attached to avatars (political leaders, symbols, flags), which represent their national identity, political affiliation and ideology.

Relevance to real life, personal interests and positive emotional and aesthetic associations seem to increase attachment to virtual avatar as well. One can compare this to the kind of attachment that people develop towards clothing or decorative items, which remind them of pleasant memories, reflect their individuality and interests or simply make them feel comfortable. Similar reasoning explains lesser attachment, in the case of humorous avatars and an avatar, which its user attributes as symbolic of radicalism (through association with radical party), - the degree of attachment is low. One can once again establish parallels with attitudes towards objects of temporary entertaining character: people tend to not take seriously something they joke about (a funny hat for example). With regards to the radical views' affiliation correlated with low attachment, one may hypothesize that the user's statement about affiliation with such ideologies is not sincere. Curiously, even though the person himself set the Black Panthers movement leader photo as his own avatar and claimed to associate with ideas of the latter, his attachment to this avatar is low, - not something one would expect in relation to ideological leader attachment.

Another interesting finding shows that avatars seem to be much more often associated with positive emotions and viewpoints: an observation derived purely on the basis of which words people use when talk about their avatars even if not directly referring to them (in the table the ratio is particularly clearly manifested)¹⁴.

Contrary to the clothing parallel, putting more work into making or choosing an avatar does not seem to make the person any more or less attached to it. This can possibly be explained with the effort-result correlation: a person, who makes the avatar him- or herself is perhaps more technically skilled, so that making an avatar does not require as much effort to really link the person to the resulting avatar for this reason alone, though one would have to resort to speculation to explain such correlation.

¹⁴ Appendix: "Summary" section.

Further findings suggest that subculture groups seem to be less attached to the avatars manifesting their affiliation with subculture or interest in particular series (or at least they claim to be changing avatars more often) contrary to their supposed and in fact manifested (mostly female anime or manga character avatars) higher attachment to subculture itself. They furthermore seem to be most technically apt (make their own avatars) and it is them who put most effort into making avatars. Two possible reasons for such attachment patterns emerge: it might be that subculture members are shy to admit or unaware of how long they really keep the same avatar. Alternatively, this might be a general trend for subcultural forums; - an observation requiring focused analysis for a thorough theory.

Webmasters forum boasts rather high attachment ratio: avatars are rarely changed. One would imagine that the more professional environment would result in lesser attachment to such visual, somewhat decorative element. However, without the competitive ideological environment or homogenous subcultural environment people seem to be more open towards expressing either parts of their real life, or bits and pieces of personal viewpoint on life, perhaps linking them stronger to the resulting avatars.

Remaining element that seems to be important is the communication function – such attribution seems to diminish attachment to the avatar itself. Perhaps, such pattern follows from the changed perception of an avatar from individual representation, towards a mere communication device.

Evaluation

The validity of the research is achieved by both estranging the researcher from the sampled material through several coding steps and by matching the developed codes against the collected data samples on every level. Thus, while it is possible that a different method of primary data analysis could have yielded a different clarity, a substantially different result is unlikely. A follow-up study could focus on forums of the same thematic, in order to avoid numerous factors influencing possible meaning and association patterns.

The validity of the theory is achieved through the chosen approach: it is grounded in the data itself and the process is perfectly reversible. However, since the theory itself suggests that the thematic of the forum appears to be the most salient element determining avatars' significance, it is possible that different patterns are likely to be manifested on forums of different thematic, which current findings may be unable to account for. Furthermore,

explanations of the reasons behind the resulting data are to a degree speculative and require separate empirical validation beyond the scope of current research.

Regarding ethical considerations, current research data was sampled from open forums in 2006 and was accessible at the time of collection to any internet user without registration. The subject of the research is not in a sensitive area, in that although participants at times seem to have spoken openly about important personal matters (referring to pets and political views), not only have they been notified that they are submitting the data for a research project, but they have also submitted their replies in the open public forums, which is in effect similar to broadcasting this information on radio or printing in newspaper. All forum users have furthermore agreed to the relevant forums privacy policy making their messages openly available.

Lastly, all participants remain anonymous – their personal information such as name, location, gender etc. have not been collected.

DISCUSSION

Before comparing to previous research findings, it should once again be pointed out that current research paper not only dealt with different virtual space of avatars use, but was also exploratory in nature. As a result, although the findings are based on the collected and analyzed data, a holistic theory needs to be further subjected to empirical tests on the levels of various thematic forum groups in order to make any claims of a more general scale. The main finding is that forum thematic seems to strongly influence the pattern of avatar significance, more so than individual factors pertaining to the users themselves.

Furthermore, people tend to illustrate similar attitudes towards their avatars, as they would to their clothing and accessories in the real life. Such findings are coherent with Suler's claims that virtual reality can be viewed as an extension of our reality:

Cyberspace is indeed an extension of the mind, which means it can extend all facets of mental life - including hypnotic reveries and other altered states of awareness. Under the right conditions, cyberspace becomes a dream world, not unlike the world which emerges when we sink into sleep. [...] Cyberspace is not simply an "information super-highway," It can offer the human psyche much more than facts. Virtual space can flex the boundaries of conscious and unconscious realities. It can tell us something about the meaning of "real." (Suler, The psychology of cyberspace, 2005)

Current findings to a certain extent contradict theories of Kang and Yang: contrary to their observations, in that various forums environments (which is closer to IRC than to IM in terms of anonymity) offer various degrees of realistic (photos) or fantasy-like avatars, which seems to follow from the forum thematic alone, where interpersonal familiarity does not seem

to play a crucial role, like for such patterns in IM. As mentioned earlier, revision of significance of anonymity for virtual environments is worth consideration, since it does not seem to offer explanation for all cases, where it is relied upon.

Debating possible follow up research and considering the relative ease of data collection procedure, it would have been interesting to focus on correlations between avatars significance and specific user properties, such as experience, gender, or country of origin.

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