

What can your online avatar say about your personality?

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More communication among individuals is occurring online, and often between individuals who do not know each other offline. Researchers at York University are looking to understand the potential impressions and their limitations of those we meet in a digital context. In a study published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, the researchers specifically looked at what personality traits are conveyed by a user's avatar.

Design of the study

An avatar is typically an image that represents the self in a virtual world, ranging from simple drawings (e.g., Mii characters on Nintendo Wii) to detailed three-dimensional renderings of characters (e.g., World of Warcraft). Avatars allow individuals to express, or suppress, various physical or psychological traits in a digital world. Previous research has shown that individuals typically choose and prefer avatars perceived to be similar to themselves.

The researchers included two components of profile similarity in their analysis—overall accuracy and distinctive accuracy. Overall accuracy is how well personality can be predicted as a whole, and is the sum of both distinctive accuracy and expectations based on typical norms. "For example, if my perception of someone's extraversion closely matches their true level of extraversion, without any reference to how this related to average levels of extraversion, this is overall accuracy," explains lead

researcher Katrina Fong. "If I can accurately perceive how much more extraverted than average a person is, that involves distinctive accuracy."

In the first phase of the study participants created customized avatars, and in the second phase of the study a different set of participants viewed and rated the avatars created in the first phase. Creators were assessed on five major traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

Results of the study

According to the analysis, some [personality traits](#) are accurately communicated better than others. For instance, how outgoing or anxious a person is was easier to perceive based on an avatar compared to how open to new experiences or conscientious the person is. Outgoing and sociable individuals tend to create avatars that communicate their personality. In contrast, people who are high in neuroticism tend to create avatars that don't communicate their personality accurately. People who are more agreeable and more typical of the general population in personality tend to create avatars that elicit friendship intentions of others.

Avatars with open eyes, a smile or grin, an oval face, brown hair and/or a sweater were more likely to elicit friendship intentions. In contrast, avatars with a neutral expression, or any other expression other than a smile, black hair, short hair, a hat, and/or sunglasses were less likely to elicit friendship intentions. Two cues were specifically related to creator agreeableness and friendship intentions—open eyes and a neutral expression (a negative predictor). Based on the results, customizing an avatar to have open eyes and avoiding a neutral expression would be more likely to elicit agreeableness and friendship intentions.

Gender differences were also examined in the study. The researchers

found that when rating avatars created by females, perceivers tended to rate them as being more contentious and open, even after taking into account the creator's actual traits. Based on previous studies, the researchers expected to see individuals relying on gender associations to inform their personality judgments. Surprisingly, avatar gender didn't influence judgments in typical gender stereotypic directions. "One possibility is that digital contexts activate different gender stereotypes than in real-world contexts, but more research is necessary to explore this," Katrina Fong says.

The avatars in the study are basic and simple avatars, so the researchers caution on extending these results to more complex and dynamic avatars, like those found in three-dimensional digital worlds. The study does show that avatars can offer accurate information about the creator's [personality](#), and [individuals](#) high in agreeableness tend to create an [avatar](#) that others want to befriend—not unlike the real-world.

More information: Fong, K., Mar, R.A. (2014). What Does My Avatar Say About Me?: Inferring Personality From Avatars. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(2).

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