

Virtual selves can help boost better real world health and exercise habits

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Customizing an avatar to better resemble its human user may lead to improved health and exercise behaviors, according to a team of researchers.

"There's an emerging body of research that suggests that avatars in virtual environments are an effective way to encourage [people](#) to be more healthy," said T. Franklin Waddell, a doctoral candidate in mass communications, Penn State. "What our study was trying to do was finding out why avatars have these effects and also to determine if avatars can encourage people to be healthy, particularly encourage those who might have rather low interest in exercising and healthy eating."

In a study, people who customized their avatars to match their offline gender—a task the researchers used to test the similarity of the [avatar](#)—were more likely to have better exercise intentions and choose better [health](#) behaviors than ones who created an avatar of the opposite sex, according to the researchers, who reported their findings in a recent issue of *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*. After customizing their avatars, both people who were already health-conscious and those who were less likely to think about health chose healthier intentions, such as selecting coupons for a fitness club rather than coupons for a [fast food restaurant](#), as compensation for customizing their avatars.

"Our other research has shown that customizing avatars can make users feel more agentic and take charge of their welfare," said S. Shyam

Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory, who worked with Waddell and Joshua Auriemma, a software engineer at DramaFever. "This study shows that even individuals who are not normally health-conscious are motivated by customizing a same-sex avatar to better take care of their health."

The act of customizing an avatar seems to create a personal connection between people and their virtual alter egos and sticks with them in real life, said Sundar.

"Perhaps more important, there is the sense of agency we get from being able to shape our online persona," added Sundar. "This agentic feeling transfers over to our offline motivations and actions."

Waddell said that online health and diet counselors could one day use this avatar customization technique to reinforce advice and treatment for their clients.

"There are a variety of options and ways that this technology could be used in the future and online health counseling is certainly an option," said Waddell. "But, people are also increasingly being brought in for a mix of traditional and virtual reality methods of counseling and this might be another way to reinforce healthy behaviors."

The researchers recruited 132 students from a university to customize an avatar in Second Life, a popular virtual reality environment that allows users to customize their avatars in a number of ways. The participants were then assigned to build either a same-sex avatar, or an opposite sex avatar. Another group of participants could see their own image on a small separate screen as they customized their avatar.

The researchers used the customization of the gender of an avatar as a

way of modifying self-awareness and a sense of control without hinting that health was the focus of the study, Waddell added.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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