

Avatars may help elicit embarrassing information

6 September 2021



One of the avatars used in the study, named Chelsea.
Credit: University of Otago

People would rather give information to other people, although an anonymous avatar might be preferred if the information being shared is embarrassing, University of Otago research has found.

The research, published in *Behaviour & Information Technology*, explored people's preference for disclosing topics of varying degrees of embarrassment to an [avatar](#) compared to a human, and found that generally most people may still prefer human-to-human contact over an avatar.

However, for topics perceived as more embarrassing by the research participants, there was a greater preference for selecting an avatar to talk to, explains lead researcher Dr. Jerry Hsu of the Department of Psychology.

The study covered 41 topics on which the study's almost 350 participants from New Zealand and overseas were asked to disclose [information](#) for the purposes of seeking help.

Rated in the top five "most embarrassing" topics, and common to the two main participating groups in the study, were three topics labelled as "committed crime", "[erectile dysfunction](#)" and "smelly private parts".

"We found that for these types of topics rated as most embarrassing by the participants, their preference to disclose information about these subjects with an avatar increased," Dr. Hsu says.

The level of embarrassment of a topic may be one factor contributing to an individual's willingness to disclose information, but the researchers also proposed that other potential aspects such as the gender and ethnicity of an avatar, or how realistic it appears, need to be considered.

Disclosing discreet, personal, and often confidential information is important in several contexts such as legal, medical or psychological sectors. Despite the importance of this information however, disclosure can often be low in these situations due to association with stigma, embarrassment, and shame.

Co-author Dr. Julien Gross adds that little is known about the nature of the topics that people might prefer to disclose to an avatar, and for the research to find that there was very little difference in people's preference to talk to an avatar or a human about topics like depression and anxiety is encouraging given the low capacity in New Zealand's [mental health services](#).

The study found, however, that overall, humans still primarily prefer to disclose information to another human, compared to an avatar.

Dr. Hsu says that one possible explanation for this is that people may find particular avatars less comfortable and less natural to interact with than their human counterpart, but this is not to say that people would prefer humans over all avatars.

Avatars are now commonly deployed in different corporate environments, for example Countdown Supermarket's Olive and Jetstar Airline's Jess, and future applications for telehealth, [online shopping](#), and working remotely are set to increase.

"One thing we do know is that as our modern lives alter and [artificial intelligence](#) is integrated into how we live, we need to understand how to make avatars more acceptable conversational partners," Dr. Hsu says.

Dr. Hsu is currently part of a King's College London research team working on the STOP (Successful Treatment of Paranoia) project, a multi-year project investigating the effects of a mobile phone app designed to help people experiencing paranoid thoughts and feelings by providing them with more helpful alternatives.

Provided by University of Otago

APA citation: Avatars may help elicit embarrassing information (2021, September 6) retrieved 26 November 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-09-avatars-elicite.html>

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