

# Avatars as lifelike representations and effective marketing tools

July 12 2010

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It is predicted that 80% of active Internet consumers and Fortune 500 companies will have an avatar or presence in a virtual community, including social networks, by the end of 2011. A new article in the journal *Psychology & Marketing* investigates the role avatars play in the virtual and consumer environment, how well avatars reflect the personality of their creators, the psychology behind self-representation, and how these virtually made identities are perceived by other members of the virtual community. According to the study, avatars can portray a very lifelike and accurate depiction of a person's true personality, within the virtual world.

Dr. H. Onur Bodur of Concordia University and his colleagues used the sophisticated avatar-based community Second Life as their model for the study, which has its own economy and facilitates real-money transactions. The membership of Second Life has increased more than 20 fold between 2006 and 2009 to reach 15 million, and many real-world companies (e.g., Adidas, American Apparel, Dell, Nike, and Toyota) have appeared in Second Life.

Members of the community use particular avatar traits or visual cues, such as attractiveness, gender, stylish hair, or expression ("babyfacedness" is associated with cooperation), to form impressions or opinions about the human behind the avatar. The researchers argue that well-known psychological principles such as Social Response Theory (SRT) and anthropomorphism come into play at this stage of discovery and discernment. Bodur's study finds that these impressions, based solely on

fairly limited or superficial traits of the avatar, may accurately match the true personality of the real person behind the [avatar](#).

Dr. Bodur says, "This research, which aligns with other research that says that accurate impressions can be formed through access to very limited information, such as images of someone's dorm room, work space, or website. This and future research can show whether online presentations of consumers (e.g., avatars) can be used to identify and segment consumers."

This article is part of the relatively new field of research surrounding the use of this new graphic media, and plays a major role in analyzing its impact on social psychology and marketing practices.

**More information:** "Avatars as Information: Perception of Consumers Based on Their Avatars in Virtual Worlds." H. Onur Bodur & Jean-François Bélisle. Psychology & Marketing; Published Online: July 6, 2010 [DOI: 10.1002/mar.20354](https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20354)

Provided by Wiley

Citation: Avatars as lifelike representations and effective marketing tools (2010, July 12)  
retrieved 2 May 2024 from  
<https://phys.org/news/2010-07-avatars-lifelike-representations-effective-tools.html>

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