

Exploring the Influence of Self-Presentation through Digital Avatars on Social Media on Individual's Self-Esteem.

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the complex relationship between self-presentation through digital avatars in online environments and individuals' self-esteem. Using theoretical frameworks such as Erving Goffman's self-presentation theory and Edward Tory Higgins' Self-Discrepancy theory, we study how digital avatars provide individuals with a tool to present their desired self-image in virtual spaces. Through this study, we uncover the complex interrelationship between self-presentation through digital avatars and self-esteem. The study findings suggest that digital avatars are an important means of self-presentation on social networking sites, and discrimination between the actual self and the avatar's presentation may lead to feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. A negative relationship has been found between self-esteem and discrimination between the actual self and the ideal self. The findings of this research inform interventions to promote positive self-perception and mental well-being in the digital age, and underline the importance of paying attention to the mental impacts of digital self-presentation.

Keywords: Self-Presentation, Digital-Avatar, Social Media, Self-Esteem

1. INTRODUCTION:

In recent times, various technological advancements have significant impact on people's lives, drawing the attention of concerned scholars. One such development in the field of digital technology is the phenomena of representation of an individual through 'Digital Avatar' on Social Networking Sites. Digital Avatars are graphical representation of real life people in a virtual environment(Gottschalk, 2010). Digital Avatars are becoming prevalent part of modern day society. Originating primarily from gaming industry, their application has slowly evolved to include a substantial number of other online environments such as Social Networking Sites (SNS)(Bansal & Pruthi, 2023), Dating Sites, Virtual worlds, forums and blogs often with the purpose of social interaction(Gottschalk, 2010). Social-interaction through Digital-avatar significantly influences the well-being and behavior of an individual(Gottschalk, 2010). Self-esteem has been recognized as being vital to psychological well-being (Rosenberg 1965). It affects an individual's overall life satisfaction and associates subjective well being (Diner & Diner, 1965), decision-making process (Tedeschi and Norman, 1985) and physical and mental well-being. Since self-esteem is so important to an individual's psychological well-being, there has been a substantial amount of research aimed at understanding the factors that may influence the development and maintenance of self-esteem. Through this research paper we will attempt to explore the influence of phenomena of self-presentation through digital Avatar on Social Networking sites and its impact on self esteem of an individual.

1.1 Background:

The current generation is becoming 'Avatar-Generation' due to their pervasive use of Digital-Avatar(Ratan, 2019) as a medium of Self-presentation on various digital platforms such as Social Networking Sites (SNS), video-games and dating sites. As people are heavily dependent on Digital-Avatars for their self-presentation, it is important to

understand how it affects them and what consequences they might have on self-esteem of an individual. Digital Avatars enhances the social presence of an individual on digital platforms(Nowak & Fox, 2018). Research indicates that individuals tend to associate their personal identity with their digital avatars (Fox et al., 2009; Yee & Bailenson, 2007), implying that they view avatars as a means of self-presentation. Self presentation basically means showcasing selective aspects of oneself while concealing others with the aim to shape individual self image(Leary & Allen, 2011). Self-image is the concept of self, which means how a person sees themselves, including how they are really (Real self), how they want to be (Ideal self), and how they think they should be according to others (ought self)(Higgins, 1987). Several researches indicate that individual tend to present an ideal self image on platform such as Twitter (now known as 'X') (Venus Hikaru Aisyah & Indri Utami Sumaryanti, 2022), Facebook(Nene & Olayemi, 2023; Puri, n.d.) and other Social Networking Sites (Zheng et al., 2020) which may be different from their real-self. One fundamental theory, self-discrepancy theory suggests that when there is a gap between individual's real self and their ideal self, it often leads to lower self-esteem(Higgins, 1987).

Although there are very few researches addressing influence of Self-presentation through Digital- avatar and self-esteem, these theoretical linkages suggest that there is an important relationship to be explored. Given that many people using digital-avatar representation will be projecting aspects of their ideal selves, it is conceivable that self-esteem could be contingent on the extent of successful self-congruence between real self and Digital-avatar-representation(Hu et al., 2022). If avatars are indeed considered an extension of one's self, any discrepancies between the avatar representation and individual's real self can induce cognitive dissonance (Pimentel & Kalyanaraman, 2020). This incongruity may lead individuals to attempt to align their avatar with their real self congruency (Triberti et al., 2022), potentially resulting in negative effects on mental health. Several studies have found that when there is a difference between how someone perceives them and how they want to be, it often leads to lower self-esteem(Higgins, 1987). Similarly, a related possibility is that if someone spends a lot of time immersed in an idealized avatar that doesn't match their real self, they might feel unhappy when they return to reality(Yee & Bailenson, 2007). In the context of young people, avatars have been found to be a significant source of body image experimentation, an activity tightly linked to self-esteem(Tiggemann et al., 2020). This is certainly an area of concern, as youth populations are the heaviest users of avatars in gaming and virtual world environments.

1.2 Self Presentation:

Self-presentation stems from Erving Goffman's Social Dramatic Theory (1959). According to Goffman, people carefully manage how they present themselves to optimize their ability to fulfill social goals. He explained that people have two types of behavior: front stage, which is like a performance in front of others, and backstage, which involves actions hidden from view. These behaviors are common and aim to create a positive impression(Yu et al., 2022). Self-presentation refers to the intentional process of constructing and managing one's self-image in various social contexts (Belić & Vrcić-Amar, 2022). It involves portraying specific aspects of oneself while concealing others, aiming to influence the perceptions that others have of one(Belić & Vrcić-Amar, 2022). Scholars have expanded the concept beyond face-to-face interactions to include online platforms like Social Networking Sites, where individuals present themselves using Digital Avatars and identity tags(Hu et al., 2022).

1.3 Role of Digital Avatars in Social Networking Sites:

Digital Avatar is a medium that enables individuals to visually represent themselves on SNS (Bansal & Pruthi, 2023).These Avatars used for Self-Presentation often reflect physical, demographic and personality traits in online activity (Triberti et al., 2022).Through Digital Avatar customization individuals reflect only that aspect of their identity that they wish to share with others. Hence, Digital Avatar acts as a tool to construct and modify self- image within digital spaces (Vasalou et al., 2008). Several studies have shown that people create different avatars for different platforms on the basis of how they want to represent themselves or what they want to achieve in virtual worlds (Wei, 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2023). Digital avatar also provide opportunity to socially interact and convey emotions in more efficient manner through facial expression(Choudhary et al., 2023). Digital Avatar provide a sense of anonymity and privacy to individuals while they are sharing their personal opinion on sensitive topics(Huang et al., 2018). Thus, Digital Avatars enhance social-interaction, facilitate self-expression & self-presentation and offer a means to engage in virtual environment.

1.4 Impact of Self-presentation on Self-Esteem:

Self-presentation on SNS such as Instagram and Facebook has significant impact on the self esteem of an individual (Jeyanthi, 2022; Riswanti et al., 2022a; Ubaradka et al., 2023). Several researches have highlighted the correlation between self presentation and self-esteem (Riswanti et al., 2022a) but the relationship between them is complex. For instance, extensive use of Facebook was found to be significantly correlated with low self-esteem (Nene & Olayemi, 2023). Moreover, perfectionist self-presentation which is prevalent among teenagers on SNS such as Instagram boosts self-esteem of teenagers (Latupeirissa & Wijono, 2022; Ubaradka et al., 2023). Furthermore, teenagers who use Instagram to present themselves experience phases of self-concept and self-esteem development. Their aim is to show a positive image of themselves to the public, which can boost their self-esteem. They use self-presentation as a method to improve their self-esteem (Ubaradka et al., 2023). Thus, self presentation can both positively and negatively affect the self-esteem of an individual depending upon various factors and SNS.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Digital- avatar presentation is a method of self-presentation of an individual in virtual environment such as video games, SNS, Dating sites etc. While discussing about the self-presentation through digital avatar, two theories will be constantly involved in discussion of self-presentation through digital avatar and its impact on individual's self-esteem. One will be Erving Goffman's theory of Self-presentation (1959) and Social-discrepancy Theory (1987) by Edward Tory Higgins.

According to Erving Goffman's Theory of Self-presentation (1959), people learn about them and their self-esteem through self-presentation (Hu et al., 2022), which means how we behave and present ourselves to others influences how we see ourselves. According to self- presentation theory people endeavors to present themselves as ideal as possible. Moreover, Self-Discrepancy theory differentiates between the real and ideal self (Zimmermann et al., 2023). The real self represents the current self-image of an individual where as ideal self is how one wants to be ideally. It includes all the qualities one want to possess (Zimmermann et al., 2023). Negative emotions arise if there is any kind of discrepancy (gap) between the real and ideal self (Higgins, 1987). Self discrepancy occurs when there is gap between the real and ideal of an individual (Higgins, 1987). According to Higgins the greater the discrepancy, it will more negatively impact the self esteem of an individual. It is suggested that people tend to minimize the discrepancy (Hu et al., 2022) in order to maintain their self esteem. Both of these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital avatar representation influences self esteem of an individual. Elucidating the mechanism by which self-presentation behaviors and social discrepancies in virtual context influence self esteem.

1. Self-presentation through Digital Avatars:

Digital Avatars have become more prominent in Social networks and mobile applications. These are digital representation of their users to interact in shared digital world. Self presentation is one of the central aspects of digital avatar creation (Zimmermann et al., 2023). Self-presentation through digital avatars plays a crucial role in reflecting self-discrepancy, where individuals may aim to bridge the gaps between their real and ideal self (Hu et al., 2022). Digital avatars can also serve as a method to visualize discrepancy among individuals' actual self and their ideal self (Hu et al., 2022). Self-presentation through digital avatars can be very effective for individuals to confront and address self-discrepancy. This discrepancy arises as there is incongruence between their Real and ideal self. In order to reduce this discrepancy, individuals tend to modify features of their digital avatars (Zimmermann et al., 2023). Digital platforms provide individuals with the opportunity to shape and transform their Avatar in such a way that it better align with their internal 'self-concept' i.e. Ideal self. This in-turn helps them to minimize gap between their perceived and desired identities. While engaged in Avatar construction and customization, individuals also aim to bridge the gap between their current attributes, aspirational goals, and societal expectations (Triberti et al., 2017). This process involves a conscious effort to project an online persona that mirrors their ideal self-image. At the same time individuals also acknowledge and reconcile with the discrepancies between their virtual and real-world identities. When people modify their digital avatars, they do it in such a way that, Digital Avatars are better than their actual self and more inclined towards their ideal self, specifically young adults (Zimmermann et al., 2023).

Research indicates that avatar creation is influenced by the context in which they are used. The users assign physical, demographic, and personality traits to their avatars based on different online activity and contexts (Wei, 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2023). For instance, when a person is constructing an Avatar for Virtual games, they might create their avatar more muscular and powerful, while when they are constructing Avatars for SNS, they might create attractive and cheerful (Zimmermann et al., 2023). Furthermore, individuals may choose avatar styles that align with their self-perceived values and discrepancies between their actual, ideal, and ought selves, with preferences for idealized avatars linked to greater actual/ideal values discrepancies (Riswanti et al., 2022b). This interplay between self-presentation through avatars and self-discrepancy highlights the complex relationship between digital self-representation and personal identity exploration in virtual environments.



Fig 1: Examples of Avatar-photo Pair

Source: "Reflections of the extended self: Visual self-representation in avatar-mediated environments" by (Messinger et al., 2019) (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.12.020>)

2. Relationship between Self presentation through Digital Avatar and Self-Esteem:

The interaction between individual's self-esteem is complex and multifaceted. It is influenced by the component of self concept i.e. Real and Ideal Self, as it is outlined in Self- Discrepancy Theory. Discrepancies between these 'selves' impact individual's self-esteem. As discrepancy (gap between real & ideal self), increases self-esteem of an individual decreases. While on the other hand as discrepancy decreases self-esteem increases (Parimal, 2020). Thus, we can say that there is inverse-relationship between self-discrepancy and self-esteem. Individual tend to minimize these discrepancies to enhance their self-esteem (Higgins, 1987). By crafting Digital avatar that embodies individual's desired traits and value, individuals seek to attain congruence between their real and ideal self. Thus, digital avatars provide a platform to bridge the gap between their real self and ideal self. It leads to positive reinforcement and enhances self-esteem of an individual. To delve deeper into these dynamics, we turn to empirical evidence provided by case studies conducted in the field. Three notable case studies shed light on this phenomenon, illuminating the role of digital avatars in facilitating congruence between one's real and ideal selves, thereby enhancing self-esteem.

The first case study conducted by (Zimmermann et al., 2023) delves into identifying discrepancy between an individual's real and their ideal self which is manifested through the customization of digital avatar. Through diverse sample of participants and quantitatively analyzing the data provided by participants, the researcher uncover that participants adjust their avatar to align more closely with their ideal self. This study indicates that the discrepancy between the real self and the ideal self influences participants' self-esteem. As individuals perceive greater disparities between their actual and ideal self, their self-esteem may diminish. Conversely, as they narrow the gap through avatar customization their self-esteem increases. Findings from the study suggest that people who are involved in high level of Avatar-customization to match their ideal self report high self-esteem.

Similarly, (Parimal, 2020) conducted a survey among 209 college students. The study employed The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to assess participants' self-esteem levels. Statistical analyses, specifically Pearson product-moment correlation and independent t-tests were employed to analyze the collected data. The study reveals a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and self-discrepancy, indicating that as the gap between individuals' real and virtual selves (avatar) widens, their self-esteem decreases. Participants who heavily engage in social media to create a virtual self (avatar) divergent from their real self tend to exhibit lower self-esteem. This suggests an inverse relationship, where higher self-esteem aligns with greater consistency between real and virtual selves, while lower self-esteem is associated with larger discrepancies.

(Dominic Koek & Hua Chen, 2023) conducted a study with 40 participants to analyze the impact of Avatar creation on self-esteem. Participants were asked to create personalized avatars using a system that mapped their actual facial features onto the avatars. Additionally, participant's perception of avatar and its impact on self esteem was analyzed through interviews. Preliminary analysis indicated a potential increase in self-esteem scores after the participants construct avatar to align with their ideal self. The study suggests that avatar personalization have a positive impact on self-esteem. The study also suggests that by creating a more positive representation of oneself through digital avatar mitigate self-discrepancies and contribute to higher self-esteem

Similarly, (Vasalou et al., 2008) conducted a study to assess Avatar Constructing behavior on social media. Twenty participants who were experienced with social-media and avatar creation were recruited for the study experience. Participants were engaged in avatar creation tasks while using the concurrent think aloud protocol. This protocol involves participants verbalizing their thoughts as they engage in the task in real-time. It allows researchers to gain insights into participants' decision-making processes and underlying motivations as they customize their avatars. Verbal data was collected during the think aloud sessions. Qualitative analysis of verbal data was collected and it has been observed that user create avatar that is more inclined towards their ideal self.

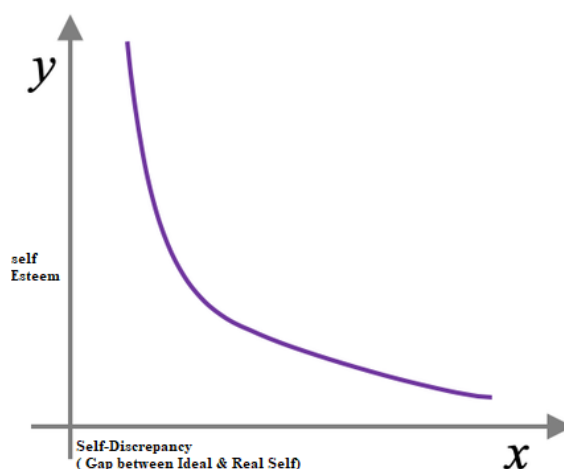


Fig 2: Graphical Representation of relationship between Self-discrepancy & Self Esteem

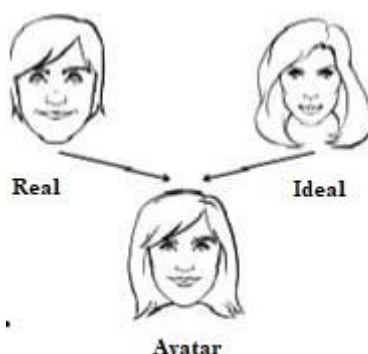


Fig 3: Digital Avatar Creation

Source: Graphical Abstract of “Reflections of the extended self: Visual self-representation in avatar-mediated environments” by (Messinger et al., 2019) (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.12.020>)

The empirical evidence from these case studies supports the notion that digital avatars play a significant role in shaping individuals' self-esteem by facilitating congruence between their real and ideal selves. As individuals strive to align their avatars with their desired traits and values, they experience a sense of empowerment and positive reinforcement, ultimately leading to enhanced self-esteem. Thus, digital avatars serve as powerful tools for promoting self-esteem and psychological well-being in the digital age.

3. NEED OF SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is vital for overall well-being and personal growth of an individual (Poston, 2009). Positive self-esteem is associated to emotional resilience, healthier relationships, greater achievement, and improved mental health (Riswanti et al., 2022a). When individuals value oneself, they are more likely to set and pursue goals, establish boundaries in relationships, and navigate life's challenges with confidence (Parimal, 2020). Additionally, healthy self-esteem also fosters a greater sense of life satisfaction and happiness.

In recent years, technology has introduced new avenues for bolstering self-esteem, one of which is through Digital Avatars. Digital Avatars are virtual representation of an individual in digital environments. It can play a significant role in self-esteem enhancement (Zimmermann et al., 2023). Through Digital Avatar customization individuals can experiment with identity and self-expression in secure and empowering manner. They can create a digital persona that reflect their desired traits and attributes (Riswanti et al., 2022a). Interacting with avatars in digital spaces provide a sense of control and agency over one's identity. It also offer opportunities for experimentation and self-discovery (Latupeirissa & Wijono, 2022; Parimal, 2020). When individuals receive positive feedback while interacting with Digital avatars, it can contribute to feelings of competence and self-worth. Thus, it can be concluded that Digital avatars serve as a modern tool for nurturing self-esteem and fostering personal development in the digital age.

4. IMPLICATION:

The findings of this research are multifaceted and have long-term implications for individuals, society, and technology. Understanding the relationship between self-presentation and self-esteem through digital avatars can inform interventions that aim to promote positive mental well-being in online environments. (Satyaninrum et al., n.d.; Triberti et al., 2022). By identifying the factors that influence individuals' self-esteem in digital spaces, such as avatar creation and social interaction, interventions can be designed to empower individuals to construct healthier digital identities and navigate online interactions more confidently (Zimmermann et al., 2023). The findings of this research can inform digital literacy programs aimed at educating individuals about the impact of digital avatars on self-esteem (Wagensveld et al., 2023). By raising awareness about the potential pitfalls of digital self-presentation and providing strategies for building resilience and self-confidence, digital literacy programs can empower individuals to engage more critically and responsibly in online environments (Wagensveld et al., 2023). Furthermore, the findings of this research also have implications for the design of digital platforms and technologies. By understanding users' perceptions of and interactions with digital avatars, designers can develop

more inclusive and user-centered platforms that promote positive self-esteem and well-being (Satyaninrum et al., n.d.). This may include features that allow users to customize their avatars in ways that promote self-expression and authenticity, as well as help reduce the risk of negative self-comparisons and unrealistic standards.

Overall, the findings of this research underscore the importance of taking into account the mental impact of digital avatars in online environments. By addressing the complex interrelationships between self-presentation, self-esteem, and digital technology, stakeholders can work together to create a more supportive and empowering digital perspective for all individuals.

5. CONCLUSION:

In this study, we delved deeper into the complex relationship between self-presentation via digital avatars and individuals' self-esteem in online environments. Exploring key theoretical frameworks, including Erving Goffman's self-presentation theory and Edward Tory Higgins' self-contradiction theory, we uncover the multi-parametric dynamics at play. We found that digital avatars serve as powerful tools for individuals to present their desired self-image, bridging the gap between the actual and ideal self (Zimmermann et al., 2023). However, this research also found that discrepancies between ideal self-presentation in virtual space and real-life identity can lead to feelings of insecurity and incompleteness. This highlights the complex interrelationship between digital self-presentation and self-esteem, in which individuals face tensions between their true self and their aspirational identity in the online environment. Despite these challenges, our study highlights that digital avatars have powerful potential to promote balanced self-esteem. By embodying qualities, characteristics, or appearance that individuals wish to possess in real life, digital avatars can contribute to a sense of confidence and empowerment in virtual spaces. This research underscores the importance of taking into account the mental impacts of digital self-presentation in promoting positive self-perception and well-being in the digital age. By gaining a deeper understanding of how individuals' self-esteem is shaped through digital avatars, we can inform interventions that aim to support healthy digital identities and promote mental well-being in online environments (Satyaninrum et al., n.d.; Triberti et al., 2022). Further investigation is needed in this area to gain additional insights and develop strategies to promote a balanced realization of self-reflexivity in the digital sphere.

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