

# Are You Your Avatar? Users' Perception Toward Their Avatars in The Sims Social Game

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## Abstract

*This study aims to examine how people build their identity in virtual world and how they perceive their virtual identity through virtual interaction. By applying observation and interviews as method of data collection, this study found that people tend to create avatars that are different from their physical appearance in the real world. Their desire to create an ideal body is the main reason they construct their virtual identity. In addition, most users think that their virtual identity and virtual interaction has nothing to do with their real world.*

*Keywords: Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Art & Humanities, Avatar, Virtual Identity, Virtual Interaction, Fragmented Identity*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of internet technology and the virtual world has "become a new medium of social relations" which presents a new form of human "interactivity". This phenomenon "inevitably leads researchers to see the effects of socio-cultural changes that occur in society" (Ida, 2011). The virtual world is considered a promising research ground for its large-scale and non-traditional environment. In order to inhabit the virtual world, people create a representation of themselves in a three-dimensional digital anthropomorphic form known as an avatar. The term 'avatar' itself comes from the Sanskrit '*avatara*' which translates to 'embodiment' or 'incarnation'. In the context of the virtual world, the term 'avatar' refers to a graphic object that corresponds to the virtual body of the user in the virtual world. Avatar becomes a medium of interaction among its users and between the users with the virtual environment (Messinger et al., 2008).

An avatar is always personal. The way it is constructed always depends on the user's perception of the avatar he or she creates. Previous studies found that there are many motives behind an avatar creation. From wanting to have qualities that a user does not have in the real world (Feldon & Kafai, 2008; Kafai et al., 2010; Turkle, 1999), to being a completely different person by doing deceptive communications (Galanxhi & Nah, 2007). The way avatars are built is also varied. Most of the studies found that users tend to build their avatars differently from their real selves (Galanxhi & Nah, 2007; Turkle, 1995, 1999). By using *The Sims Social* game as the object of research, this study aims to explore some of the points those previous studies left out. This study seeks to answer questions such as: is the behavior of the users in the virtual world systematically different from their behavior in the real world (Messinger et al., 2008)? Or do users think that their avatar is more than just a representation of their physical self in cyberspace and treat the avatar as another identity that affects their image in the real world?

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the perception and interaction of the avatars in virtual world. Therefore, in collecting the data, this qualitative study applies participatory observation and in-depth interviews with five informants which are selected based on certain criteria.

## 3.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

It is worth mentioning that the reason someone makes an avatar in an online application—game-oriented or not—is that he or she will interact with other users' avatars in the virtual world. Therefore, any avatar made by a person is usually considered to reflect that person (Boellstorff, 2008; Gottschalk, 2010; Messinger et al., 2008). By displaying a certain avatar, his/her image will be reflected with the intention that trust from other users will be gained in his/her interaction.

The informants of this research have various opinions about avatars in the game *The Sims Social*. Informant #1 thinks that the Sims avatar or character in the game is a puppet for them. For Informant #1,

the avatar is like a doll that doesn't have any properties and she as the creator of the avatar embed the traits that she has into the doll. Informant #1 said that she did not create an avatar based on them. However, there were other things in the avatar that were deliberately made to reflect herself and their daily lifestyle. Informant #3 shares the same view as Informant #1 regarding their avatar. She also has a unique way of constructing an avatar. Informant #3 said that she deliberately made her avatar completely different from herself physically. For instance, she gave her avatar quite different physical characteristics. However, Informant #3 admitted that the avatar is a representation of them if seen from the nature, behavioral patterns as well as knick-knacks and furniture in the house.

Informant #3 stated that at first, she wanted to make something different by making an avatar with the opposite gender. She imagined what it would be like if she was a man and wanted to see how the interaction between Sims of the opposite sex would be carried out from a male point of view. However, as time goes by in playing the simulation game, Informant #3 unconsciously incorporated elements of herself into the 'life' of the male avatar that she made. Even though her initial desire was to do something different, she still could not help but do something that did not reflect her personality.

The avatar character is physically male, yet the nature, behavior, and tastes in the selection of items in the simulation are still based on them and a reflection of their personality. For Informant #3, in the game, the avatar is still considered as a representation of herself even though physically is much different from herself in the real world. She felt unable to let go of their personality in playing the simulation game. In line with what was stated by Informant #1 and #3, Informant #2 also felt that the avatar was a "representative" of himself. As the creator and owner of the avatar, for him, the avatar is the embodiment of how he wants to "look in a game". Informant #2 was deliberately making an avatar based on himself. Therefore, it can be said that the avatar represents himself physically.

Slightly different from the three informants above, Informant #4 and Informant #5 have almost the same opinion with each other. Informant #4 said that his avatar is partly a representation of herself and partly an imaginary body whose characteristics he cannot have in the real world. As for Informant #5, the avatar is the embodiment of her representation in the virtual world and at the same time is the form of the body in her imagination whose characteristics they do not own in the real world.

From the information from the informants above, their avatar is an entity that they deliberately created to play in the game. The features that are available in the game allow them to give 'personal touches' to the object. Therefore, as explained by three of the informants above, the physical appearance of the avatar and the appearance of other objects regarding the avatar are very reflected in the personality of the users. This explains why they feel as if the appearance of the avatar interface in the game represents herself. Although most of the informants said that the avatars, they made were not the same as their physical condition in the real world, in general, they agreed that many of their aspirations could be accommodated and even implemented in the game. Thus, what was in the game and became part of the avatar they make is their own will and very much reflects what they want.

In general, the researchers found that these informants saw their corporeal body as something separate from their avatar's hyperreal body. They do feel that the avatar they make is a representation of themselves in the game. However, this does not necessarily mean that what they do in the game affects their real-life or vice versa. This can be understood in the context that the meaning of 'representation' of the avatar here is not 'representing' which brings all kinds of consequences from the task of the representative but only in the sense of being a 'pawn' or 'puppet' in a game. So, for the informants, the avatar here is a kind of pawn that is used to play in the game *The Sims Social*, and not as a 'second self' in the game. Furthermore, with the presence of the avatar as a 'puppet', the informants feel they have the authority to do anything to the doll, including dressing it in such a way and even making it a representation of its identity in cyberspace.

This can be seen from how the informants, consciously or not, still include elements of behavior that are attached to their identities in the real world, yet the avatars have very different real appearances from them. The emergence of typical things that are usually found in the personality of the informants into the avatar and the surrounding environment shows that there is something Stuart Hall (1996) calls "fragments" of actual-world identity that enter into virtual identity. As a result, it can be confirmed that the virtual identity is part of the identity of the informants as individuals.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this study, the researchers found that most of the informants built their avatars' appearance differently from their real-world physical appearance. They separated their real-life from the reality in the game. To them, what happened in the game had nothing to do with what happened in the real world, and the actions of their avatars did not represent or reflect their real-world personality. For them, the identity they create in the virtual world is very dynamic and fluid.

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