Personality Impressions of World of Warcraft Players Based on Their Avatars and Usernames: Consensus but No Accuracy

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ABSTRACT

Every week an estimated 20 million people collectively spend hundreds of millions of hours playing massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Here the authors investigate whether avatars in one such game, the World of Warcraft (WoW), convey accurate information about their players’ personalities. They assessed consensus and accuracy of avatar-based impressions for 299 WoW players. The authors examined impressions based on avatars alone, and images of avatars presented along with usernames. The personality impressions yielded moderate consensus (avatar-only mean ICC = .32; avatar plus username mean ICC = .66), but no accuracy (avatar only mean r = .03; avatar plus username mean r = .01). A lens-model analysis suggests that observers made use of avatar features when forming impressions, but the features had little validity. Discussion focuses on what factors might explain the pattern of consensus but no accuracy, and on why the results might differ from those based on other virtual domains and virtual worlds.

Keywords: Accuracy, Avatars, Consensus, Impression Formation, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing games (MMORPGs), Person Perception, Personality Judgments, Self-Presentation, Virtual Worlds, World Of Warcraft

INTRODUCTION

Every week an estimated 20 million people collectively spend hundreds of millions of hours in virtual worlds playing massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs; Van Geel, 2013; Yee, 2005). MMORPG players create avatars as digital representations of themselves that are used to interact with others, undertake solo or group quests, and explore
the virtual world (Bainbridge, 2012; Martin, 2005). The World of Warcraft (WoW) is the most popular MMORPG with an estimated 10 million players worldwide that engage in the fantasy-based virtual world (Blizzard Press Center, 2014). Ongoing relationships among players in WoW are often maintained solely through avatar interactions and written or audio chats that are central to facilitating game-play (Nardi & Harris, 2006). Yet, little is known about how people perceive the personality of players based on their avatar’s appearance. The current study examined personality impressions of WoW players by focusing on the following research questions: Do people form consensual personality impressions of players based on their avatars? Are the personality impressions formed based on avatars accurate? What avatar cues are associated with personality impressions, and which cues (if any) are valid indicators of a player’s personality?

The increasing numbers of interactions undertaken in virtual worlds has generated a growing interest in the degree to which avatars and other forms of virtual representation accurately reflect the people they represent. The type of virtual domain (i.e., blogging, dating, or gaming) is thought to influence the degree of discrepancy between an avatar’s characteristics and those of its creator (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009). One factor that may be influencing the discrepancy is the accountability associated with self-presentation in the virtual domain. For example, studies of virtual domains where presentation is tied to offline identity, suggest that personal web pages (Marcus, Machilek, & Schütz, 2006; Vazire & Gosling, 2004), Facebook profiles (Back, et al., 2010), and email addresses (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2008) elicit relatively accurate personality impressions. However, studies of virtual worlds where presentation is not necessarily tied to offline identity (e.g., SecondLife, WoW), demonstrate mixed findings (Belisle & Bodur, 2010; Graham & Gosling, 2012). MMORPG players in particular have great flexibility in creating their avatars (Bainbridge, 2012; Martin, 2005), which provides the players with many options—perhaps more than are available in the offline world—for expressing their personalities via their appearance.

Qualitative research suggests that several factors may influence MMORPG players’ decisions regarding the appearance of their avatars; these factors include the customization features available in the game (e.g., what race and clothing an avatar may possess), and the individual motivations and characteristics of the player (Isaksson, 2012; Koivisto, 2009). The customization features available to players in WoW reflect the fantasy-based theme of the virtual world called “Azeroth” – a mythical land of many races, major world powers, and wartime conflicts (Bainbridge, 2012). WoW players create their avatar by selecting its gender (i.e., male or female), race (e.g., human, elf, orc), faction (e.g., “good” characters are part of the Alliance, “evil” characters are part of the Horde), and class (e.g., warrior, hunter, mage). Players may also continue to alter their avatars’ appearance by acquiring additional objects (e.g., clothes, armor, virtual pets) by advancing their character and succeeding in battle. These character decisions at the start of the game influence the general appearance, size, mood, and stance of the player’s avatar in the virtual world.

MMORPG player motivations (e.g., immersion; Yee, 2007) and characteristics (e.g., gender, race, class) may also influence the avatar creation process (Dunn & Guadagno, 2012; Isaksson, 2012). For example, players motivated by achievement and battling others may be strategic about selecting an avatar with a particular skill set associated with its race or class, such as an orc warrior compared to an elven healer. Studies that have examined personality expression in virtual worlds, including WoW (McCreery, Krach, Schrader, & Boone, 2012; Yee, Ducheneaut, Nelson, & Likarish, 2011; Yee, Harris, Jabon, & Bailenson, 2011) have also demonstrated relationships between player personality and in-game behavior (e.g., Extraverted WoW players engaging in more group activities), suggesting that player personality may also be expressed in avatar appear-
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