Influence of Avatar Choice on Teacher Expectations and Perceptions of Student Success

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ABSTRACT

The gender and ethnicity of students have been shown to affect teacher expectations. As part of a Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE), people socially interact via avatars that have the capability to be customized to details of ethnicity and gender. Teachers in MUVEs instruct students with little knowledge of potential biases and prejudices toward avatars of different genders and ethnicities. This study’s purpose was to examine the influence of student avatar choice of gender and ethnicity on teachers’ expectations. Teachers were asked to review a transcript, image, and video of a student avatar and then respond about the student’s intellectual and relational abilities. Results indicate that avatar gender and ethnicity influence teachers’ expectations. Results may help teachers discover potential biases and prejudices toward some student avatars, as well as level the playing field for student avatars of differing genders and ethnicities.

Keywords: Education, Ethnicity, Gender, Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE), Teacher Expectations, Teacher Perceptions, Virtual World

INTRODUCTION

The Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE) is increasingly being used in education (Castronova, 2001; New Media Consortium, 2010). These environments allow users to experience a graphically engaging world while interacting with others as an avatar (Lastowka & Hunter, 2004). Users can choose the physical appearance of their avatar by customizing minute details that relate to ethnicity and gender (Damer, 1998; Lastowka & Hunter, 2004; Rehak, 2003). Unfortunately, we know little about the effect that choice of avatar gender and ethnicity has on the expectations and perceptions of others. More specifically, we know little about the effect of student avatar choice of gender and ethnicity on teacher expectations and perceptions (Lastowka & Hunter, 2004). This research is important because of the precedent set in similar research from face-to-face classrooms (Auwaert & Aruguete, 2008; Clifford & Walster, 1973; Guttmann & Bar-Tal, 1982; Van Duzer, 2006), and because students in MUVE’s can become anyone by customizing their avatar. Student avatar customization and teacher gender and ethnicity biases may combine to create the problems of unintentional disadvantage and unfair advantage. For example, a male teacher in Second Life (SL) may be
biased toward their own gender in their rating of IQ for student avatars. Students who don’t know this information could end up choosing a female avatar when taught by a male teacher, which could result in unintentional disadvantage to this student. However, a student who did know this information could end up choosing a male avatar when taught by a male teacher, resulting in unfair advantage. Both possibilities are troubling because the academic playing field in MUVEs may not be level – it could be biased toward student avatars of particular genders and ethnicities. As a result, we need to study the influence of avatar choice on teacher perceptions and expectations of student success.

With the similarity in appearance and movement in MUVEs to real life appearance and movement, there is reason to believe that the influence of student avatar gender and ethnicity could be as important as their influence in traditional schooling. Unfortunately, current research only addresses face-to-face student populations. Therefore, the study of student avatar gender and ethnicity and their effect on teacher expectations and perceptions of student success could help teachers in MUVEs to discover potential biases and prejudices toward some students, and level the playing field for student avatars of all ranges of detailed customization. Additionally, with the benefits to using MUVEs in education, any hindrance to a teacher’s expectations and perceptions about a student’s academic and social abilities needs to be examined. Gender and ethnicity biases are two such hindrances that this study will address.

RELATED WORK

In related research from the realm of computer mediated communication (CMC), some scholars developed the equalization hypothesis – the idea that CMC induces a state of ‘disembodiment’ that would act to dissolve negative stereotypes toward those of differing gender and ethnicity (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991; Kang, 2000; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). For example, Sproull and Kiesler (1991) demonstrated gender-related equalization effects of CMC group interaction. These and other findings suggested that physical isolation and visual anonymity contributed to equalizing group interaction by minimizing anticipated disadvantage or threats associated with one’s social identity (Bordia, 1997; Connolly, Jessup, & Valacich, 1990).

However, other CMC scholars contended that such environments actually reduced what they called, ‘individuation’ (a feeling of being less differentiated from other individuals) than in real life settings (Maslach, Stapp, & Santee, 1985; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002). This then led to participants feeling even more predisposed to the influence of factors such as gender, and ethnicity (Flanagan, Tiyaamoto-wong, O’Connor, & Seibold, 2002; Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002). This is known as the Social Identification Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE). As a result, the influence of identity cues such as gender and ethnicity could not be dismissed and would continue to have great influence on the perceptions and expectations of others (Flanagan et al., 2002).

Currently, teachers are increasingly expressing their perceptions and expectations of students through the use of technology (New Media Consortium, 2010). One type of technological environment used for learning is known as the Multi-User Virtual Environment (Castronova, 2001; New Media Consortium, 2007). MUVEs are technology-based simulations that engage people in a different, yet cohesive reality. Users navigate the world, viewing and controlling items using technology varying from a keyboard and mouse to a head-mounted display with gloves (Laferriere et al., 2002). This world is usually seen as a two or three-dimensional graphical depiction of other people (avatars) who can be represented as animals, humans, or whatever they want.

A significant number of universities, colleges, schools, organizations, and businesses are exploring the educational potential of Second Life (SL), a popular MUVE. According to Claudia L’Amoreaux at Linden Lab, the San Francisco company that created it, at least 300 universities around the world teach courses
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