# An Investigation of the User-avatar Relationships in VRchat - Evidence from Interview Research

**Ruijie Sun[1,a,*]**

[1]*Department of Foreign Language, Jincheng College, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China*
*a. Sunruijie@cdjcc.edu.cn*
[*]*corresponding author*

*Abstract:* VRchat is a popular virtual social platform that allows users to interact with avatars as social images. Avatars have been widely used, and still has application prospects, such as the metauniverse. While recent games and other special environments may have psychological implications for users, VR chat, as a social platform, enables users to express themselves more freely. The purpose of this study is to examine and sort out how different users relate to their avatars. Using semi-structured interviews, the study aims to investigate and sort out the relationship between the users and their avatars, and what meaning does the act of dressing up an avatar give to both the avatar and the user. According to the research results, avatar dressing is not only a form of self-expression, but also has a significant impact on users' psychology and behavior. This influence will continue to expand and penetrate into real life.

*Keywords:* Vrchat, user-avatar, interview research

## 1.    Introduction

Neal Stephenson's science fiction novel Snow Crash describes how humans enter virtual worlds, and he coined the term 'metaverse' to describe this vast realm of virtual reality, which is still fairly advanced for us today. In spite of this, there is no denying that the metaverse is growing in popularity today, with research and development of related technologies in full swing. During the year 2020, a massive epidemic will limit normal travel and offline interactions, accelerating the formation of a contactless society. 2021 marks the beginning of the metaverse, with stocks relating to the metaverse being listed on the New York Stock Exchange, and the development and realization of the metaverse are just around the corner.

Despite the fact that the metauniverse is still a long way off, Avatar has become the primary media/tool for digital practice. Since the 1979 Platonic role-playing game The Second Life introduced the term avatar, it has come to mean a virtual representation of oneself in a virtual digital environment, and it remains widely used in science fiction and computer games to this day. VRchat users utilize avatars to access the platform, move around various virtual worlds and activities, and interact with other users who use virtual forms of communication and interaction [1].

Up to this point, most research on avatars has focused on the behavior patterns of users and players rather than on the two-way relationship between avatar and user, especially the connection that is brought about by users dressing up their avatars. Thus, it is necessary to find a solution to this

problem through research. Dressing up and appearance are extremely important aspects of self-presentation and information transmission. As a contemporary fashion design, fashion design, as a contemporary form of fashion design, is also a creative expression, which appears in many actions, activities, leisure and adventure games, as well as online. The study of selective self-presentation was popularized in the mid-20th century in sociology, and fashion design is also a creative expression of contemporary fashion. In an age when the metaverse is becoming a given, it is essential to explore the psychology of people who are involved in the use of virtual interactive images.

Therefore, it was curious to see what kind of experiences and changes in mindset people could bring to the virtual interaction platforms available to them, so I chose VRchat as the main subject of this research. It is possible to access VRchat through the virtual chat website (VRchat.com) as well as Steam, which is a gaming client service. It has been written by Boellstorff [2], that "the virtual is anthropology", and Peachey [3]. describes virtual worlds as social laboratories for studying identity. Mirror self, introduced by Cooley in 1902, provides an insight into the way in which the self develops regarding how we envision ourselves to appear to others [4]. Unlike in real life, users of virtual worlds such as VRchat do not see themselves from a first-person perspective, but as someone else: they observe the body representing themselves from the outside. It is intended to examine how dressing up an avatar will facilitate the connection between the avatar and its users by using these theories.

As a result, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with ten people who have been using VRchat for more than three months. It was discussed in the interview how the aesthetics of a pure avatar affects the user experience. There are three aspects to explore: whether avatars reflect some aspects of the individual's true self and their connection with something, and whether avatars reflect expectations that are difficult to achieve in real life or against popular trends.

## 2. Method

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study to examine the appearance of avatars and group identity. For the purpose of maintaining anonymity, pseudonym numbers 1-10 are used here with the consent of participants. In VRchat, participants were interviewed one-to-one via online voice or text chat for 30-60 minutes each. In order to allow for a natural flow of conversation, the interviews were conducted using an open semi-structured guide. The interview questions covered topics such as the participants' experiences on the platform, their perceptions of the group, and their identity and appearance as individuals and members of the group. A list of specific questions is attached to the research as an appendix. Field notes from session observations, interview transcriptions, and session chat logs were analyzed qualitatively for themes and patterns in participant appearance, use of clothing and accessories, and group and individual identity cues. The interview results were coded and sorted level by level, and a conclusion was drawn after the combination.

## 3. Results

When extracting and refining arguments from the interview content, it can be concluded that users prefer to customize every detail of their avatars rather than selecting from a variety of avatars. When designing avatars, they are conscious of referring to themselves in real life. It is important to note that the personalities they express when they use their avatars for social activities are very different from those they express in real life. In most cases, these differences can be attributed to their avatars rather than the anonymity of the virtual social platform. Most respondents believe that their avatar is a remedy for their expectations, and its existence enables them to compensate for their weaknesses. Also, the vast majority of respondents believe that their avatar is the realization of their own

expectations, allowing them to achieve perfection in areas where meeting those expectations is extremely challenging.

As a matter of fact, personalized dressing is the primary preference of users. It is not only possible to control the clothes an individual wears in virtual worlds, but they can also control their shape, form, species, size, etc. Thus, the choice of avatar shape and clothing is related to the meanings assigned to individuals and groups within a particular social and technological context [5]. Interviewee 2 stated that "I enjoy plush materials, so much so that my avatars are furry figures with animal ears and tails, and in VRchat, the cuteness and fluffiness of the plush reinforces the down-to-earth feel I wish to convey." There is also evidence that the material of clothing in traditional video games is likely to serve as a symbol of a member of a particular group or class. The use of symbols can sometimes bring people closer together immediately, but they can also change or remain under social relations depending on the context within which they are used. Virtual world fashion designers are capable of creating fantastic designs without regard to cost, fit, or gravity.

However, as the researchers found, users are not magically free from their bodies when they go online, nor do they disregard the norms of their social circles. According to interviewee 4, "When I model myself or commission a professional modeler to create an avatar, I go to great lengths to make a satin dress that perfectly fits my figure, just so I can look closer to the real thing". In response to this demand, more and more offline designers are working with modelers. Each individual was scanned by the Rockstar team and several 3D scans were performed for each character, changing clothing accessories, shirts, shoes, glasses, hats, and on and on. As the production of the game progressed, Rockstar also created a database of many accessories so that they could pull and add images to each character as the game progressed [6].

According to the interviewees, they desired to have more freedom to customize their avatars' details, which allows them to customize their looks and clothing. Eight of the respondents felt that a customizable avatar was preferable to a well-matched, optional set of avatars. One interviewee expressed that "I do not like homogeneity, so I need to create my own space," while interviewee 2 also stated that "if there are 20-30 people in a chat room and three to four of them look exactly like you, then what my avatar brings to the table will be diminished." The interviewer of this type may have a greater sense of agency over the avatar due to their focus on personalization. Therefore, for this group, the avatar is more relevant to the individual, which is why each avatar design on VRchat is unique. Furthermore, interviewee 4 points out that it is extremely unlikely that a fully customized avatar will cross paths with a similar or identical avatar. Nevertheless, he believes that "if I meet one at a social event, we will likely share similar interests or aesthetics, which is beneficial to our friendship."

Curiously, this idea echoes the one described in the previous chapter of this study, since the meaning associated with an item or style conveys both a sense of self and a symbolic connection to others. As interviewee 4 explained, "That is how my friends and family know me, and that is also how I know myself.".

Additionally, the majority of the inspiration for avatar design comes from animation, video games, films, and television series, as well as from the user himself. Most interviewees stated that they were inspired by video games, anime, film, and television productions, as well as celebrity icons when designing their avatars. However, these works also complement and influence one another. It is notable that a classic example - the futuristic jumpsuit, heavily influenced by American and Japanese manga and anime traditions, in addition to science fiction films - has become a symbol of a futuristic type of culture, and military and war-themed films, games, and anime have extended on these themes to become enduring ones. In Interviewee 4, the avatar refers to Chun Li, the Chinese character from Street Fighter, with a symmetrical round bun on either side of her head, which has recently become associated with Chinese girls. Results of the interviews revealed that users used other works as a

means of referencing not only the elements, accessories, and clothing styles they found appealing, but also their love and desire for the character or idol. A couple of interviewees said they were always more influenced by the scenario or mission than by the freedom to dress up as avatars in the game, but when it came to appropriating these fashion elements to a purely social platform, it was entirely a matter of personal taste.

At the same time, avatar creators combine and recreate images from a variety of sources. A perfect example of how these ideas interact is provided by Henry Jenkins. Since coining the term 'participatory culture,' he has spent considerable time exploring its potential. The earliest example of Jenkins' participatory culture was a group of fans (predominantly of science fiction and other genre television shows) who were both consumers of mass-produced content as well as creative communities who incorporated commercial entertainment texts into their own creative culture, mixing them and utilizing them as the basis [7]. As a result, this becomes a predominantly creative and appreciative culture that emphasizes imaginative exploration and parody.

## 4. Discussion

Due to the highly functional nature of avatars in VRchat, in which users are required to present themselves to other users, a close relationship has developed between most people and their avatars. In most cases, interviewees believed that their avatars were designed specifically for them, while only a small minority believed that their appearance was completely different from their avatars. Even though both results contain references to their avatars, the percentage is very small, indicating that people find similarities between their avatars and their own, rather than appropriating them extensively.

Two possible outcomes result from this phenomenon: avoiding the disclosure of one's true self, or expecting more from the avatar. As a first possibility, virtual reality avatar customization may enhance recognisability when the resulting avatar displays the characteristics of the user's true self. Since exposure requires knowledge of external group members, individuals with greater identifiability should feel a greater need to improve their attitudes toward external groups [8].

It has been demonstrated through studies that when avatars have a high degree of similarity to themselves, there is a strong tendency for such views to be recognized. There are similarities to the second possibility in similar games or platforms. For example, one study of World of Warcraft players found that across all participants perceived their avatars as having more favorable characteristics than their real-life counterparts; those with lower self-esteem were especially likely to perceive their avatars as having more favorable characteristics. In another study, individuals rated their avatars in Second Life similarly to their real selves, but with greater attractiveness and extroversion. The avatars of people are embodied with idealized characteristics of themselves, and they are portrayed with a style that reflects their aesthetic preferences [4].

In addition, avatars provide people with an ideal means of expressing themselves and communicating with others. The appearance of the avatar differs from one's own as well as one's personality when presenting oneself as an avatar for social interaction. For instance, Interviewee 7 stated, "When I present myself as an avatar, I intentionally exaggerate the characteristics of my personality and emphasize my strengths. My confidence is reinforced when I act in a way that is consistent with my avatar, and this assists me in selecting social partners. But the personality I express through my avatar is also distinct from my own in real life." Based on Goffman's [9]. theory of how individuals use appearance and behavior to shape the impression of others, as well as his discussion of the theatrical metaphor of the 'mask', performance where the avatar serves as a symbol for pre-designing the avatar. In a performance context, avatars are utilized as symbols for pre-designing or presenting an image.

Several scholars have argued that personal appearance consists of a set of non-verbal communication codes that contribute to the formation of group identities, including those based on gender, class, race, and other factors [10], as a contextualized bodily practice that is discursive and pragmatic. As a channel and means of communicating and presenting oneself, avatars serve as a means of self-expression. Virtual images serve as a way to meet expectations that users themselves cannot or are unable to fulfill in real life. They also serve as a means of expressing rebellion against social trends. This concept was put forward by Cooley in 1902 and is particularly helpful for highlighting the relationship between the way users develop themselves and their image in the eyes of others. People use this word to describe how they choose their appearance and behavior, which depends in part on how they perceive others to treat them. As a result of social interaction, users learn to see themselves reflected in the views of others. It is believed that the mirror self is composed of three main components: how people perceive themselves in front of others, how they perceive others' judgment of their appearance, and how they develop self-awareness based on others' judgments.

## 5. Conclusion

After integrating and analyzing the results of the ten survey samples, the investigation can now answer the key questions in the interview, and explain and discuss them simultaneously. Firstly, it is important to consider how avatars' appearance aesthetics influence users. In particular, it is expressed through a commitment to independence and a rejection of homogeneity. It has been observed that users tend to design avatars in a highly liberal manner, including a wide variety of shapes, materials, and even species. A symbol of self-expression is formed by these differences. As a consequence of the interview, the second conclusion is that avatars are closely related to real people and the surrounding world, especially video games, movies, and animation, or that most avatars are composed of these two components. Meanwhile, it also reflects the uniqueness of each avatar, which can help us better understand the first conclusion. According to interviews, avatars also serve to reflect expectations that cannot be achieved in real life, i.e. they carry the user's ideal self. Besides compensating for deficiencies, they also enhance certain characteristics by highlighting or amplifying them. As well, a small number of groups mentioned that avatars could be used to express their rebellious psychology and try to run counter to some major popular trends.

It is not difficult to see that there is strong coherence and causality between the viewpoints summarized at present, which is reflected in the following aspects: avatar dressing can be flexible enough to enable users to incorporate a wide range of personal preferences and a deeper self map during the design process. The ideal model formed by combining itself with network products effectively summarizes users' expectations. In this respect, they do not wish avatars to be homogenized, but rather to serve as social symbols that are distinctive to them. Using Goffman's drama theory [11], avatars are images that are designed in advance or displayed before others, and the focus of "performance" is interaction. In Cooley's "self in the mirror" theory [12], an individual's perception of himself is influenced by the reaction and perception of others. Individuals' perceptions of themselves are significantly influenced by important others. Furthermore, this theory is considered to be the precursor of "symbolic interaction theory". Currently, avatars' most important function is to socialize, and they can be completely controlled by users, which is a perfect representation of one's self. In using such avatars and associating them with each other, users are able to form a special relationship. In other words, avatars are not only their own carriers, but also affect the social psychology of users so that they can take actions consistent with the image.

From the perspective of reality, it is very important for the construction team of the relevant platforms and metauniverse to be developed in the future to pay attention to the diversity and customization of avatar costumes, enrich the materials and styles, boldly imagine and integrate into

the public or the minority, popular or non popular cultural symbols, and provide practical meaning for users to identify themselves. By increasing the awareness of avatar and participation in virtual social interaction, it will not only pave the way for a meta universe to emerge, but will also enhance the stickiness of existing user groups, thereby enabling users to maintain their avatars for a long time and enriching the diversity of social groups. With the advancement of avatar image dressing technology, users will also be able to establish a closer connection with their avatar, find themselves in the virtual world, and pursue their ideal image more boldly and freely. It is theoretically possible that the close relationship between avatar and user will promote the user's psychology into a progressive state. As users become closer to their avatars, they are able to realize their ideals and realize themselves. As a result, avatars may improve users over time by undergoing constant changes, or their real image may become more and more similar to their virtual image without too much change. In order to achieve better self-expression and lay a foundation for adapting to the life of the meta universe in advance, people can strive to establish closer contact with Avatar.

It should be noted that the research results of this study still have some shortcomings, and some parts can be studied further in the future. First of all, the number of samples for in-depth interviews is slightly insufficient due to the limited condition. Researchers may be able to obtain more credible results by selecting a large number of interviewees in the future. Moreover, this study does not offer much space for discussion of the behavior and psychology of rebellious behavior expressed through avatars. However, this idea should still be explored in greater depth.

## References

[1] Montemorano, C.,(2020). "Body Language: Avatars, Identity Formation, and Communicative Interaction in VRChat" . Student Research Submissions. 361.

[2] Boellstorff, T.. (2008). Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropolo- gist Explores the Virtually Human. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.Press.

[3] Peachey, A.. (2010). "Living in Immaterial Worlds: Who Are We When We Teach and Learn in Virtual Worlds?" In Virtual Worlds: Contro- versies at the Frontier of Education, edited by Kieron Sheehy, Rebecca Ferguson and Gill Clough, 33-51. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

[4] Rosa, M.M. & Mia, C. (2011). Performing the Looking-Glass Self: Avatar Appearance and Group Identity in Second Life , Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture, 9:3, 165-180,Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2011.583830

[5] Kaiser, S. B., Nagasawa, R. N., & Hutton, S. S. (1991). Fashion, postmodernity and personal appearance: A symbolic interactionist formulation. Symbolic Interaction, 14, 165-185.

[6] Paolo, L., (2013). "On the Upswing: Costume Design for Video Games." Tyranny of Style. Accessed February 12, 2016. Retrieved from http://tyrannyofstyle. com/costume-design-for-video-games

[7] Jenkins, H.,(2006). Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. New York University Press.

[8] Jorge, P., Grace, W., Magdalena, W., (2021). "Virtual Reality and Political Outgroup Contact: Can Avatar Customization and Common Ingroup Identity Reduce Social Distance?" , Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2056305121993765

[9] Goffman, E. (1959). The presentation of self in everyday life. New York, NY: Random House.

[10] Biocca, F., (1997). "The Cyborg's Dilemma: Embodiment in Virtual En-vironments." Paper Presented at the Cognitive Technology: Humaniz-ing the Information Age Conference, Japan, 12–26, August 25–28.

[11] Thomas, M., (2018), "Fashion and Costume Design in Electronic Entertainment—Bridging the Gap between Character and Fashion Design", Fashion Practice.

[12] Cooley, C. H., (1964). Human nature and the social order. New York, NY: Scribner's

## Appendix: Outline of Interview

Q1 How would you describe your image on the virtual interactive game VRchat?

Q2 How did you come up with the idea for the image? What type of image would you prefer? Would you prefer a completely customized image or would you prefer a system of sets to choose from?

Q3 Is there any similarity between the virtual image you designed and your real-life persona? If possible, please specify

Q4: When interacting with people in your avatar, do you express a different personality than in real life? If so, do you believe that your virtual persona influences your social behavior?

Q5 What type of avatar does your avatar tend to be? One that is aspirational, compensates for your deficiencies, or one that is rebellious, going against the general trend?