

Public Abstract

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Title:THE EFFECT OF AVATARS ON PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY
OF COMMENTS POSTED TO ONLINE NEWS STORIES

An experiment tested whether participants feelings about a text comment posted to an Internet news story could be influenced by an image accompanying the comment. Specifically, the research examined how credible participants thought a comment was based on whether the image, also known as an avatar, was human or animal and appeared to be making either direct or indirect eye contact. It was predicted that participants would find comments paired with human images more credible than comments paired with animal images. It was also predicted that participants would find comments paired with direct eye contact images more credible than comments paired with indirect-eye contact avatars. Next, it was predicted that participants would more often recommend human images and direct eye contact images to other readers than images that did not have those qualities. Finally, a test was performed to see whether certain images would make people feel more present with the commenter.

Results showed that comments paired with direct eye contact human avatars were rated as more credible than indirect eye contact human avatars. But none of the original predictions were supported.

First, this suggests that an avatars humanness may matter little to online newsreaders. Second, it suggests that a lack of eye contact may no longer be associated with lying but rather a behavior that is perceived as more credible than direct eye contact. Finally, this study represents perhaps the first attempt to present avatars alongside text in an online news setting to test participants feelings about story comments.