

The choices people make: the types of buddy icons people select for self-presentation online

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Abstract People are adapting their self-presentation strategies to utilize both online and offline communication in their interactions with strangers, co-workers, family, and friends. One way people communicate online is through the use of instant messaging, which includes the use of graphical representations of people called buddy icons. This project presents the results of a survey of the buddy icons 93 participants were currently using in their instant messaging interactions. It examines the extent to which self-presentation theory (Goffman 1959) can explain the choices people are making about how to self-present elements of their identity online. The icons were categorized and users were asked why they choose them as well as when and whether they change them with different interaction partners. Results show that male users select different categories of buddy icons than females but that most users select buddy icons that are human like, low on photorealism, and consistent with their biological sex. Users also reported that they rarely change their icons and that they selected human buddy icons when they want to increase social presence.

Keywords Impression management · Avatars · Photorealism · Social presence

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1 Introduction

Communication technologies provide users with the opportunity to present their identity through a variety of channels and they are adapting the process of self-presentation to take advantage of these opportunities by combining online and offline strategies (Birnbaum 2009; Van Der Werf 2007). Examining the ways people use technology in self-presentation can help us understand both how people adapt to technology and how they are using it to fulfill interaction goals. Further, knowing about how people self-present identity online provides insight into the larger process of how people self-present, how they choose what to reveal, and how they communicate their notions of self to others (Vazire and Gosling 2004), which can help us learn more about human interaction as a whole.

People are adapting their self-presentation strategies to utilize both online and offline communication in their relationships. They have continued to express themselves offline through clothes and hairstyles while also self-presenting selected parts of their identity online (Mitrano 2006; Turkle 1984). One thing that seems clear is that the distinction between online and offline relationships is virtually meaningless as people use a combination of face-to-face and online modes of communication with the same people. It is rare that people have friends they see only face-to-face or interact with exclusively online. This makes it unreasonable or even impossible to present completely different selves online than offline, though both online and offline people can present different parts of their identity in different interactions, and to different people. People take advantage of affordances and capabilities provided by online systems to enhance and maintain their friendships, whether the relationships started online or offline (Dwyer 2007).