

# Self Concept Clarity and its Impact on the Self-Avatar Relationship in a Mediated Environment (update 2016)

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## Abstract.

Self concept has been explored (as it relates to the self/avatar relationship) from several different perspectives including the concept of extended self concept (where we put ourselves into the objects we own) (Belk 1988), the distributed self (Turkle 1995), in that one's understanding is not unitary but fragmented in to several different selves as represented by virtual identities in virtual environments and Bessiere, Seay and Kiesler (2007) state that one's avatar represents one's aspirational identity. Additionally Schultze and Leahy (2009) report on the notion that the greater the perceived presence (as exhibited by the integration of social and tele presence) the closer the relationship between self and avatar. What is consistent between these approaches is that one's self concept is not unified but has more than one dimension.

Based on the theoretical understandings presented above we wondered if one's various aspects of their self concept would be differentially impacted by external situations. We argue that one's avatar will be more susceptible to external situations and expectations if they are not as confident in who they are. The concept of self concept clarity was developed by Campbell et al (1996) and they state that self concept clarity is the “.. extent to which the contents of an individual's self concept (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable.”(p 141) To this end we posit that self-concept clarity is negatively correlated with self concept – avatar concept discrepancy.

## Methodology

To test the idea that the degree of self concept clarity would negatively impact the differences between one's perceived self and avatar concepts we conducted two experiments over the course of several years. In the first experiment students (166) were recruited to play the role-playing game Oblivion. In the second experiment students were recruited (106) to play the role-playing game Skyrim. In these games the participant creates an avatar and is expected to adventure through the land and loot dungeons, kill monsters and otherwise generally explore. Each recruited student played six hours of the game over three sessions of two hours for each game. The self-concept (Maholtra 1981) scale was used to ascertain their self-concept and after game play was used to ascertain their avatar's concept. The scales were identical with the exception of the object of the questions (self vs avatar). The discrepancy between self-concept and avatar concept as calculated to be the absolute difference between the

two scales.

### Findings

Paired t-tests were run on the scale questions. Those that had significant differences were then correlated with the self-concept clarity questions.

In general the themes of conflict, flux, security and uncertainty emerged with respect to one's avatar. However the patterns of response are different between the two games. Oblivion responses seemed to focus more on the flamboyance and dominance differences between the participant and their avatar while Skyrim responses focused more on Orthodoxy and contemporariness differences.

At this point in this study the focus is on the degree of difference between self and avatar and the strength and directions of the correlations are worth noting. As such, for this analysis we examined the absolute differences between avatar and self without looking at direction. As such, the results for Oblivion are clearer than for Skyrim. All of the significant correlations are positive indicating that the less confident in the participants were in their self concept (as denoted that larger results indicate less confidence) the greater the difference between self and avatar. This would indicate a less than clear understanding that the avatar was a character distinct from themselves. The Oblivion context, therefore, appears to promote a merging of the two as parts of the whole psyche. The Skyrim condition on the other hand was less distinct in its patterns with several notable negative correlations. Specifically with conflict and uncertainty. The negative correlations here indicate at greater clarity of self concept with respect to various aspects of self concept difference.

### Implications

Since these two experiments were conducted identically in terms of conditions and participants (indeed there was a significant overlap of subjects who participated in both conditions, albeit over a year apart) we must conclude that differences in the games had a significant impact on the overall results. This is interesting to note that the conclusion is that self v. avatar relationship is as much a factor of the game as it is the tendency of the individual. For this particular experiment we would postulate that the difference in realism may very well have had an impact. Oblivion is more cartoonish and less realistic where as Skyrim is grittier and darker. (We need to note here that Skyrim is a later release for this company, and as such, is a more advanced game in terms of representation as it is designed to take advantage of more advanced hardware) In the case of oblivion the general distinctions on flamboyance would indicate a focus on character over setting where as skyrim with its focus on contemporariness and orthodoxy would indicate that the archaic setting had a greater impact.

## Absolute values of self concept difference between self and avatar **Oblivion/Skyrim**

	Dominating/ Submissive (*)(**)	Contemporary/ Noncontemporary (*)(* )	Organized/ Unorganized(*)	Youthful/ Mature(**)	Orthodox/ Liberal	Colorless/ Colorful (**)(* )	Modest/ Vain (**)(**)
My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another.		.224*	.214*			.284**	
On one day I might have one opinion of myself and on another day I might have a different opinion.		.240*				.229*	
I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of person I really am.					.269*		
Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person I appear to be.	.203*						
When I think about the kind of person I have been in the past, I'm not sure what I was really like.				-.213*		.195* .266*	
I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality.		-.271*		.217*	-.300**		
Sometimes I think I know other people better than I know myself.					.232*		
My beliefs about myself seem to change very frequently.	.262**						.278**
In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am.			.244*				

\*significant at the .05 level, \*\* significant at the .01 level



## Issues

Aside from the usual suspects (generalizability to a larger than college student population and the need for future work) the most annoying issue is the lack of significant difference between the self-concept and avatar concept scale of Orthodox vs liberal. I am not sure what this means given that three distinct questions for Skyrim returned significant correlations with this scale. This result is difficult to interpret as it is the difference that is being correlated. If the differences were too small to be significant then significant correlations are suspect (and these are some of the stronger correlations reported). This is a methodological issue and a gap in my knowledge that needs to be addressed (and will be before this study gets sent off to a journal). Overall the main conclusion at this point is that it appears that the relationship between self and avatar concept is as much impacted by the situation as it is by the individual. This has definite implications for game design in the future.

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## Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

People are spending more time online constructing personas to be consumed by others. Understanding the gap between online and offline personalities will allow marketers to better tap into the motives that drive these behaviors.

**Author Information:**

Stef earned a Ph.D. in Marketing from the University of Memphis. His published articles have appeared in a number of journals including *The Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, *The Journal of Interactive Advertising*, *The Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, *The Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *The Atlantic Marketing Journal* and *The Journal of Business and Economic Studies*. Stef's research focuses on psychological reactions to mediated environments.

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