

# “Where avatars come from: exploring consumers' motivations in virtual worlds”

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## Where avatars come from: exploring consumers' motivations in virtual worlds

### Abstract

As the popularity of virtual worlds continues to grow, millions of individuals around the world are engaging in virtual lives through avatars in virtual worlds like Second Life, Gaia Online and Zwiinktopia. These individuals' avatars engage in a broad range of activities from socializing to consumer behaviors, in many cases with real, rather than virtual, currency. These avatars, as virtual representations of self, clearly exist. What remain unclear are the motivations underlying consumers' desires to create avatars, and the choices they make in constructing their avatars and choosing the behaviors in which their avatars engage. Here we propose three factors as useful in furthering our understanding of these behaviors: possible selves, openness to experience, and social comparison theory. Better understanding of what motivates consumers' avatar construction will help marketers frame their advertising, promotions, and product offerings to better appeal to consumers who participate in virtual worlds. Specifically, we propose factors like openness to experience and social comparisons which may be used to identify market segments that are most likely to respond to marketers' advertising and promotional programs to buy goods and services for their avatars, or to buy experiences, such as social or recreational activities for their avatars. In this conceptual paper, we describe the factors and create a series of propositions. We conclude with a discussion of the potential future research directions and the managerial implications of this research.

**Keywords:** possible selves, virtual worlds, avatars, consumer behavior, self-concept, self-schema theory, openness to experience, social comparison.

### Introduction

In the film *Being John Malkovich*, John Cusack's character (Craig Schwartz), who is in a dead-end job as a filing clerk at the fictional LesterCorp, discovers a portal that allows him to temporarily transport himself into someone else's body (John Malkovich's). Soon thereafter, John Cusack's character and Catherine Keener's character (Maxine Lund) decide to form a business, selling customers the experience of being John Malkovich. Keener places an ad that reads in part: *Ever want to be someone else? Now you can. No kidding. Only two hundred dollars for fifteen minutes. Visit J.M., Inc. Mertin-Flemmer Building.* The following are excerpts from the script ([www.imsdb.com/scripts/Being-John-Malkovich.html](http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Being-John-Malkovich.html)):

*Customer: Hello, I'm here about the ad.*

*JC: Please, have a seat.*

*Customer: When you say I can be somebody else, what do you mean exactly?*

*JC: Exactly that. We can put you inside someone else's body for fifteen minutes.*

*Customer: Oh, this is just the medical breakthrough I've been waiting for. Are there any side effects? Please say no! Please say no!*

*CK: No.*

*Customer: Long-term psychic or physiological repercussions?*

*CK: No. Don't be an a...*

*Customer: Can I be anyone I want?*

*CK: You can be John Malkovich.*

*Customer: Well, that's perfect. My second choice. Ah, this is wonderful. Too good to be true! You see, I'm a sad man. Sad and fat and alone. Oh, I've tried all the diets, my friends. Lived for a year on nothing but imitation mayonnaise. Did it work? You be the judge. But Malkovich! King of New York! Man about town! Most eligible bachelor! Bon vivant! The Schopenhauer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century! Thin man extraordinaire!*

*CK: Two hundred dollars, please.*

*Customer: Yes. Yes. A thousand times, yes! (Customer takes out his wallet.)*

These excerpts would suggest that the desire to "be someone else" is strong enough that some individuals might even be willing to pay for that experience. Virtual worlds such as the popular site *Second Life* allow individuals, in a sense, to do exactly that – be someone else. For a nominal fee, anyone can create an avatar, endowing the avatar with any set of characteristics the creator chooses. The avatar can be rich, thin, sophisticated, jet-setter or all of the above. Through the avatar, the consumer is able to experience that persona while in the virtual world setting. Today, millions of individuals around the world are engaging in virtual lives through avatars in virtual worlds like the aforementioned *Second Life*, as well as others such as *Gaia Online* and *Zwiinktopia*. In addition, the range of activities these avatars take

part in within the virtual worlds is very broad. Avatars can socialize, date, attend meetings, establish businesses, and learn about, shop for, and purchase consumer goods and services (both real and virtual).

The list of activities avatars may participate in is growing as virtual worlds continue to be used in increasingly innovative ways. For example, *Naughty Auties*, a virtual resource center for those with autism, provides visitors with the opportunity to practice social interactions through their avatars. Simon Bignell, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Derby in the UK, believes that for autistic people with social, emotional, and communication problems, virtual reality can be used to simulate new environments that allow them to get familiar with an environment before they actually try it out in real life (Naughty Auties Battle Autism with Virtual Interaction, CNN.com/health, 2008). And recently in Italy, about 2,000 IBM employees' avatars staged a virtual protest against a new pay settlement at IBM's corporate campus in *Second Life*. The following month the head of IBM Italy resigned and the RSU union agreed on a new pay deal (*On Strike, Virtually, The Economist*, 2008).

Firms are also using virtual worlds for a variety of reasons. Selling products ranging from designer clothes and accessories to real estate, companies are engaging in commerce with consumers in these virtual worlds who pay with real currency. Companies such as Coca Cola, General Motors, Warner Brothers, and Giorgio Armani use virtual worlds to retail their products, promote their brands, and conduct marketing research. Commerce taking place in the virtual world known as *Second Life* illustrates the potential. *Second Life* has created and continues to manage an economy currently trading at more than \$1 million US dollars per day (Bringardner, 2007).

While the presence of consumers and marketing activities in virtual worlds is established, significantly less clear is an answer to the question: why. Little is known about the motivation behind consumers' choices to spend real currency on virtual goods and services, or to engage in transactions with real currency for real goods and services through vendors in the virtual worlds. In particular, few conclusions have been drawn as to why individuals flock to the opportunities to create the avatars that represent them in the virtual world, how they make choices about outfitting their avatars with goods and services, and how they make choices about conducting consumption activities in the virtual worlds. Because virtual worlds are a relatively new phenomenon, there has been limited research to date on what drives consumers as they engage in virtual world behaviors.

In this paper, from a theoretical standpoint, we propose one avenue to enhance our understanding of the motivations behind consumers' construction of avatar identities and the consumption behaviors they choose to engage in within virtual worlds. We propose that a close examination of the possible self concept may help with our understanding of the motivations behind the creation of an individual's avatars. From a managerial standpoint, learning about individuals' motivations in the constructions of their avatars will help marketers operating in virtual worlds to better frame their advertising and promotional messages to appeal to those consumers most likely to purchase the marketers' goods and services for their avatars. The paper is organized as follows: we first explicate the concept of possible selves, focusing specifically on the work of Markus and Nurius (1986). We then review the literature on the application of possible selves in various contexts. Next, we propose how the concept of possible selves may, from the consumer perspective, provide some explanation for the appeal of virtual worlds. Next, we consider two individual difference variables that may also motivate these virtual world behaviors. A series of propositions is then generated. These propositions are followed by a general discussion regarding the implications of and the need for research to validate the propositions.

## 1. Possible selves

Nearly 50 years ago, Levy (1959) called for a broader understanding of consumption behavior, recognizing that one's consumer behavior might be less influenced by functional properties of the product than by the interaction of the product's image with the consumer's self-image. Over the next decades, consumer researchers have answered this call, examining consumer choice, and relationships between self- and ideal self-concepts and purchase decisions (e.g., Birdwell, 1968; Dolich, 1969; Grubb and Hupp, 1968; Hamm and Cundiff, 1969; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Landon, 1974; Ross, 1971). One important self-concept construct, the possible self, was introduced by Markus and Nurius in 1986. They describe possible selves as a type of self-knowledge that has to do with how individuals think about their potential and about their future. Possible selves "represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and especially what they are afraid of becoming" (Markus and Ruvolo, 1989, p. 212), and include hoped-for possible selves such as the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, and dreaded possible selves such as the alone self, the depressed self, the alcoholic self. In other words, possible selves provide both representations of the self in the past, and in the future. Moreover, Markus and Nu-

rius (1986) posited that possible selves provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation, and are important because they provide incentives for future behavior, as well as a way to evaluate and interpret one's current view of himself or herself.

As conceptualized by Markus and Nurius (1986), possible selves may be positive (e.g., "environmentally conscious", "educated", "healthy", or "successful") or negative (e.g., "out-of-shape", "debt-ridden", or "addicted"). Thus, one might hope for "a powerful or leader self, the elegant and glamorous self, the revered and esteemed self, the famous self, the lottery-winning self, or the trim, in-shape self" (Cross and Markus, 1991). These positive or negative possible views of self, then, can provide individuals with motivation that may result in approach or avoidance behaviors to achieve or avoid realization of the possible self.

Further research on the possible self concept has added to the body of knowledge in this area. Markus and Ruvolo (1989) consider possible selves as personalized representations of goals, and posit that the key determinant of whether a particular goal will "guide and sustain instrumental action is thus the ability to create and maintain the possible selves that allow one to appropriate a desired end state and to make it one's own (Markus and Ruvolo, 1989, p. 212). They describe possible selves as the manifestations of one's goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats.

In a study of individuals aged 18 through 86 years old, Cross and Markus (1991) found that respondents who scored low in life satisfaction generated different possible selves than those high in life satisfaction. Respondents who were low in life satisfaction generated *personal* hoped-for selves most frequently (e.g., happy self, being content), but those who scored high in life satisfaction generated other possible selves, such as occupation or family-oriented selves. They also found that low life-satisfaction individuals' feared selves were more "extreme" (e.g., "being a criminal", "being a rape victim") than high life-satisfaction individuals.

## 2. Possible selves in various contexts

Since possible selves were introduced to the developmental psychology literature, the concept has been empirically studied and applied in a wide range of contexts, including academic achievement (e.g., Clements and Seidman, 2002; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, and Hart-Johnson, 2004), delinquency (e.g., Oyserman and Markus, 1990), career choices (e.g., Chalk, Day, and Meara, 1994), health behavior (e.g., Ouellette, Hessling, Gibbons, Reis-Bergan, and

Gerrard, 2005), and aging (e.g., Hooker and Kaus, 1992; Waid and Frazier, 2003).

Dunkel (2000) proposed that the generation of possible selves acts as a mechanism of exploration in the identity exploration process, that is, that creating one's own identity begins with the generation of future possibilities. Unexpectedly, he found that males spend significantly more time thinking about their negative possible selves than females, although the difference was not large. Dunkel and Anthis (2001) extended these findings using a longitudinal approach and found that, as expected, identity exploration was positively correlated to the number of possible selves generated. Moreover, they found that identity commitment was related to the consistency of hoped for, but not feared, possible selves across time, which they posit may reflect the role of commitment in setting and working toward personal goals.

Granberg (2006) studied possible selves in the context of personal transformation, specifically weight loss. Through a series of in-depth interviews, she examined the self and social processes that operate during efforts to validate possible selves after self-change is complete. Her findings suggest that the gap between potential and actual selves must be dealt with before individuals can consider their weight loss successful. Granberg (2006) further posits that the conceptual question of what happens when hoped-for possible selves are not fulfilled applies to a wide range of intentional self-change contexts, such as marriage, parenthood, and retirement, where exaggerated or unrealistic expectations are not uncommon.

Leondari (2007) provides a comprehensive review of the literature that links possible selves achievement with motivation toward academic achievement, and concludes that by increasing their level of understanding of the role of possible selves as determinants of both motivation and achievement, educators can help learners to visualize their future and relate their present academic involvement with future selves (Otto, 1991; Oyserman, Terry, and Bybee, 2002). King and Hicks (2007) studied adults who experienced challenging life transitions, that is, a significant change in the possible self areas of their lives. They examined adults' views of their lost (which would be expected to increase regret) and found (which would be expected to enhance well-being) goals, and relate these to an individual's abilities to invest in new goals.

Martz (2001) discusses the application of possible selves in the area of employment counseling, and proposes that because possible selves can promote greater perspective-taking, that they can serve as

means by which employment and career counselors can increase their level of empathy. This arises as a result of “the counselor’s enhanced ability to objectively take different perspectives (i.e., the expected, hoped-for, and feared selves)” (Martz, 2001, p. 133). From the client’s perspective, possible selves can help them expand their views of themselves and future career possibilities.

In a consumption context, Davis and Gregory (2003) examined the creation of new Diderot unities (products consumed together and that have an internal consistency based on lifestyle). They further suggest that consumers may break away from their usual Diderot unity when an impulse object’s symbolic properties are consistent with an individual’s aspirational Diderot unity and their self-concept, and offer possible selves as “one possible explanation that determines when an ‘impulse purchase’ is a key departure product for a new Diderot unity” (Davis and Gregory, 2003, p. 1). Hoyle and Sherrill (2006) consider the role of possible selves in self-regulation, and suggest that rather than assuming that possible selves mediate personal functioning, that possible selves are instead involved in processes that mediate personal functioning. They argue that possible selves are not themselves a significant regulator of individuals’ behavior, but instead are an important component in processes by which behavior is regulated. Advocating studying the construct of possible selves as it contributes to the process of self-regulation, Hoyle and Sherrill (2006) examined health-promoting behavior by healthy college students. They found that when an unhealthy future self was made salient, students were more likely to engage in health-promoting behavior, as this increased the discrepancy between future and current self-representation.

### 3. Possible selves and virtual worlds

Participation in virtual worlds happens through the consumer’s creation of one or more avatars, as discussed above. The nature of these avatars varies significantly from one consumer to the next. We propose that several factors including possible selves and two individual difference factors come into play as motivating factors guiding the creation of these individual avatars. We propose these factors in an effort to better understand some of the motivations for consumers to assume specific virtual identities as avatars. In what follows, we generate a series of propositions regarding likely relationships between possible selves and two individual difference factors and consumers’ behaviors in virtual worlds. Specifically, we focus on the relationships of these factors to the creation of consumers’ virtual world avatars.

Regarding the possible selves construct, we propose:

*P1a: Hoped-for possible selves will influence the creation of consumers’ avatar(s).*

*P1b: Hoped-for possible selves will influence the choice of consumers’ avatar(s) behaviors.*

*P2a: Feared possible selves will influence the creation of consumers’ avatar(s).*

*P2b: Feared possible selves will influence the choice of consumers’ avatar(s) behaviors.*

In addition, we propose that the creation of an individual’s avatar(s) is influenced by individual factors. One such individual factor is *openness to experience*. This trait is one of the Big Five personality traits (see, for example, John and Srivastava, 1999; McCrae and Costa, 1999) that have been the basis of a number of studies in psychology. The basic idea behind this personality trait is the willingness to accept novelty and to depart from routine. People who are high in openness to experience differ from those low in openness to experience because of their willingness to pursue novel activities or to entertain changes to routine. McCrae (1996), in his discussion of the intrapsychic nature of this trait, argues that “[O]penness is a broad and general dimension, seen in vivid fantasy, artistic sensitivity, depth of feeling, behavioral flexibility, intellectual curiosity, and unconventional attitudes” (p. 323). McCrae (1996) also provides a brief review of constructs to which openness to experience has been shown to relate, among them need for cognition, typical intellectual engagement, esoteric thinking, preconscious activity, and creative personality.

Vaughn, Baumann, and Klemann (2008) contend that “people higher in openness to experience tend to be more creative and less conventional and to adopt a broader focus in the ideas they generate and the information they think deeply about” (p. 887). In a study of the link between openness to experience and regulatory focus, the authors predicted, and found support for, the hypothesis that people who were higher in openness to experience were more likely than those low in openness to experience to pursue hopes and aspirations. In addition, those who were higher in openness to experience would also be less likely to pursue routine activities and obligations.

The virtual world allows consumers to engage in a number of novel activities and to depart from routine through the creation and maintenance of avatars. Thus, there should be a link between openness to experience and consumers’ conduct in the virtual world. This leads to the following propositions:

*P3: Consumers with high levels of openness to experience are likely to report spending more time in virtual worlds than consumers with low levels of openness to experience.*

*P4: Consumers with high levels of openness to experience are likely to create more elaborate avatars in virtual worlds than consumers with low levels of openness to experience.*

*P5: Consumers with high levels of openness to experience are more likely to create avatars as expressions of their possible selves in virtual worlds than are consumers with low levels of openness to experience.*

*P6: Consumers with high levels of openness to experience will expend more funds as avatars in virtual worlds than will consumers with low levels of openness to experience.*

Another theory that may enhance our understanding of the behaviors of consumers in virtual worlds is social comparison theory. The theory of social comparison posits that consumers are likely to engage in comparison between themselves and other consumers. They engage in both upward social comparisons, where they compare themselves to consumers they perceive to be better than them, as well as downward social comparisons. In the case of downward social comparisons, they compare themselves to others they see as being worse than they are on a given social dimension.

Social comparisons can have significant affective consequences, and can fulfill important psychological functions. For example, individuals who are experiencing negative affect can enhance their subjective well-being by comparing themselves to a less fortunate other (Aspinwall and Taylor, 1993; Wills, 1981). Through a contrast effect, downward social comparisons can cause individuals to feel relief that they are not in the same situation as the subject of the comparison. Both types of comparison, then, cause individuals to experience either positive or negative affect (depending on upward or downward) and may lead to possible positive or negative behaviors.

Indeed, some researchers use the notion of social competition to classify the kinds of behaviors in which people engage, based on social comparison (see, for example, Shipley, 2008). Shipley (2008) found that the inclusion of social competition and social comparison cues in request for donations to community food drives from a group in his study led to increased donations. His results also underscore the possibility that consumers may attempt to enhance their standing on salient dimensions of comparison. This ability to enhance one's standing,

given social comparison, is likely to extend to virtual worlds that allow people to create avatars as expressions of their possible selves. In fact, additional research on social comparison reveals that among the motives for engagement in social comparison are self-evaluation, self-enhancement, and self-improvement (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons and Buunk, 1999; Wood, 1989).

Researchers in the area of social comparison, however, also suggest that consumers differ in the extent to which they engage in social comparison (see, for example, Gibbons and Buunk, 1999, who developed and tested a scale to measure social comparison orientation). Some consumers have higher tendency to engage in social comparison than other consumers. This notion of *social comparison orientation* can be used in an effort to understand consumers' participation in virtual worlds and the kinds of behaviors these consumers are likely to undertake in these virtual worlds. We propose the following, based on the idea of tendency to engage in social comparison:

*P7: Consumers with high tendency to engage in social comparison are likely to report spending more time in virtual worlds than consumers with low tendency to engage in social comparison.*

*P8: Consumers with high tendency to engage in social comparison are likely to create more elaborate avatars in virtual worlds than consumers with low tendency to engage in social comparison.*

*P9: Consumers with high tendency to engage in social comparison are more likely to create avatars as expressions of their possible selves in virtual worlds than are consumers with low tendency to engage in social comparison.*

*P10: Consumers with high tendency to engage in social comparison will expend more funds as avatars in virtual worlds than will consumers with low tendency to engage in social comparison.*

#### **4. Discussion**

We have proposed a set of potential factors which may motivate consumers in their creation of avatars, as well as their choice of avatar behaviors. While examination of possible selves, openness to experience, and social comparisons as motivating forces for consumers' behaviors in the virtual world is intuitively appealing, empirical work is needed to verify these relationships clearly exist, and if so, to understand how these factors may influence construction of avatars and their identities. Through this work, we propose to examine virtual world members' abilities to identify and articulate a possible self dimension, and further to attribute certain consumer behaviors in the virtual world to the approach

of envisioned positive possible selves or the avoidance of envisioned negative possible selves, as well as their ability to attribute construction of avatars and their identities to openness to experience and social comparisons.

In terms of possible selves, it will be interesting to explore whether a difference in motivational level is felt between positive (hoped for) and negative (feared) possible self components. One part of our examination will consider whether individuals use virtual consumption behaviors to create the possible selves they hope for, or to avoid possible selves they seek to avoid.

### Conclusions and considerations for future research

The next steps for this research will focus on construction of a specific research design. The research design will likely involve a multi-method approach involving qualitative and quantitative data collection measures. Possible selves may be measured through a variety of methods including creation of narratives, journaling, individual depth or semi-structured interviews. The virtual world setting provides an appropriate venue for research of this type, examining several key constructs through a combination of various methods. These interviews can be conducted directly with “real world” respondents who have created avatars in virtual worlds or via the consumer’s avatar(s) by creating a research avatar managed by a trained interviewer. These interviewer avatars can come to life in-world, recruiting participants for the research and conducting actual interviews or guiding respondent avatars through a journaling or diary process.

To measure our individual difference variables, survey items provided to the consumer respondents in the “real” world through the use of a survey will be the most efficient means of data collection. We should note one of the difficulties inherent in research on virtual worlds is determining the best channel for survey questionnaire distribution. Although providing the survey directly in the virtual world is intuitively appealing, in many worlds, the evolving technology and method of constructing virtual world properties does not easily accommo-

date questionnaire distribution. For this reason, researchers may choose to post a link in the virtual world to a survey on an external Internet or survey site or alternatively, may choose to provide the survey questionnaire to respondents through more traditional “real” world methods.

Another important challenge to overcome will be the task of recruiting participants for research studies on virtual world activities. As noted earlier, individuals create avatars to participate in virtual worlds for myriad reasons. One reason not likely on that list, however, is to participate in consumer interviews and surveys. Further, given the nature of the avatar as an individual’s personal creation, he or she may be reluctant to provide specific details or share the motivations behind construction of specific characteristics of the avatar or the avatar’s behaviors and activities. Thus, recruitment of individuals willing to step away from their participation in the virtual world for a time to candidly participate in the research process will take a significant incentive.

Enhanced understanding of individuals’ motivations for creating avatars and selecting activities for their avatars to engage in will further our understanding of the virtual world phenomenon. Examining the factors proposed here will add to the literature on both virtual worlds and consumer behaviors. Further, studying these factors will be of significant interest to those marketers with, or considering, a presence in virtual worlds.

Better understanding of what motivates consumers’ avatar construction will help these marketers frame their advertising, promotions, and product offerings to better appeal to these consumers. For example, finding that consumers who are high in openness to experience spend more time in virtual worlds would help marketers to tailor their advertising and marketing programs to more appropriately appeal to these individuals. Specifically, factors like openness to experience and social comparisons may be used to identify market segments that are most likely to respond to marketers’ advertising and promotional programs to buy goods and services for their avatars, or to buy experiences, such as social or recreational activities for their avatars.

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