Virtual Lookers and Losers

EVEN IN IMAGINARY REALMS, people have trouble shedding appearance bias. Stanford's Virtual Human Interaction Lab studies, among other topics, how people's behavior in the real world changes after they interact online with digital characters. Past experiments have shown that people given better-looking avatars online later seek more attractive dates and that subjects assigned taller avatars become more assertive in negotiations.

Communications researcher Jesse Fox, MA '09, PhD '10, also has examined whether the super-sexualized way women often are portrayed online encourages real-world bias. After exposing experiment participants to female avatars (some dressed sexily, some not), Fox measured their "rape myth acceptance"—the willingness to believe that women who have been raped have provoked or "deserved" the attack. She also measured their levels of hostile and benevolent sexism. The former is a belief that women are out to tease or control men; the latter is a belief that women are weak or need protection.

The first experiment was simple. Half the subjects saw an avatar in a midriff top, miniskirt and fishnets. The others saw an avatar wearing jeans and a track jacket. Half of each group also saw the avatar behave submissively—the animated woman would avoid eye contact and shift away. For the rest, the avatar acted dominantly, meeting their gaze and responding to their approach. Afterward, the subjects answered questions that gauged their attitudes about rape and gender.

AVATAR ATTRACTION: Even fictional looks can be prejudicial.

Courtesy Virtual Human Interaction Lab

Two of the experiment's four formulations—conservatively dressed, submissive avatars and suggestively dressed, dominant avatars—correspond to well-known cultural stereotypes, Fox points out: the "virgin" and the "vamp." Perhaps not surprisingly, the "virgin" elicited the most benevolent sexism, and the "vamp" the most hostile sexism. In both cases, "People who were exposed to those avatars exhibited higher rape myth acceptance than people who saw these non-stereotypical, contradictory representations."

Fox found no difference in attitudes between male and female subjects, and she wondered if women would respond differently if they "embodied" the avatar, instead of seeing it as another person. In a second experiment, half of the subjects had avatars created from their photos, and the others were given

avatars that did not look like them.

This time, instead of watching the avatars, participants "wore" them—as they moved, so did their avatar. The women watched these selves in virtual mirrors and then conversed with another avatar. Afterward, the women who had seen avatars based on their own photos and portrayed in sexualized clothing expressed greater rape myth acceptance. "This just blew me away," Fox says.

Why would women feel such a powerful bias against themselves? Fox thinks that most women have internalized warnings about how "nice girls" dress. "I think you just really start to feel guilty," Fox says. "You think, 'Oh, I dressed this way, I chose to portray myself this way, so if something happens it's my fault.' " Ultimately, Fox says, how we portray ourselves online has the power not only to bias others, but also to change how we unconsciously think about ourselves.

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