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Avatar Personalization and User Engagement in Facebook Advertising

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Abstract

As users' online attention spans decrease and they employ various methods to avoid ads, advertisers are increasingly seeking creative strategies to enhance engagement with consumers. This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of utilizing personalized ads featuring users' avatars, with a focus on Facebook as a case study.

To conduct this research, an experiment will be conducted in a laboratory setting with 50 participants from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. These participants will be exposed to various personalized avatar ads to measure their engagement levels, brand recall, and product interest. Additionally, 100 participants from University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and 100 participants from the University of Lagos will be recruited for an online survey to assess their avatar identity, connection, and interest in personalized avatar ads.

It is hypothesized that participants with a strong identification with their avatars will demonstrate higher engagement with avatar ads. The study aims to explore how personalized avatars in advertisements can establish a deeper connection with users, leading to increased engagement levels and improved conversion rates.

Keywords: Avatar; Personalization; Engagement; Facebook Ads

1. Introduction

Engaging consumers with advertising is becoming challenging as online consumers' attention spans dwindle due to information overload, and ad-blocking technologies become more prevalent (Ben et al., 2018). Despite these obstacles, consumers continue to express their preferences, attitudes, and values through various channels such as search queries, comments, blogs, social media interactions, and face-to-face conversations (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, and Vetvik, 2009).

In response to the high rate of resistance and short attention spans of online users (Bray et al., 2015), advertisers are seeking ways to drive more engagement and enhance the shopping experience using AI. The main objective of the current research is to assess the effectiveness of utilizing a user's personal avatar to tailor personalized advertising strategies.

The word "avatar" comes from the Sanskrit word "avatara," which means "incarnation." In online virtual worlds, an avatar is a graphical representation of the user's virtual body. This use of the term was popularized by Neal Stephenson in his novel *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 1992). An avatar is simply how people appear in a virtual world (Stephenson, 1992).

Neal Stephenson (1992) broadly defined the term "avatar" as any visual representation of a user in an online community, not just complex beings in virtual reality. For instance, Yahoo avatars are simple cartoon-like characters

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that over 7 million people have created. These avatars are used as personalized signatures in various online activities like instant messaging and fantasy sports (Hemp, 2006).

In the drive for tech platforms to retain users and drive engagement, many tech companies have made avatar creation options available for users. For instance, Snap offers 1.7 billion Bitmoji Avatars, with 85% of them being used by Gen Z (Fast Company, 2023). Apple has its personalized avatar feature called Memoji, which allows users to speak through their avatars via messages and FaceTime calls on their mobile devices (Fast Company, 2023). Meta, one of the largest social networks that includes platforms like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and Threads, also offers avatar customization options. Users can customize their avatars by selecting body color, hairstyle, body shapes, and outfits that reflect their personality and style, giving them a unique online identity. This allows them to interact with friends on the social network in a more personalized and engaging way, whether it's through video calls or text communication (Facebook, 2023).

In a paper by Celia and Sophie (2019), we are now in the era of personalization, a trend that I agree with as personalized practices are everywhere in our daily lives. In the marketing field, specialized service providers, startups, software vendors, consulting firms, and in-house data scientists are increasingly using machine learning to forecast consumer behavior for large companies (Kotras, 2020). They use algorithmic models to predict customer interest in products, risk of churn, or fraud by assigning probabilistic scores to individual customers based on their past behaviors (Kotras, 2020). This data is sourced from the web or internal company databases (Alemany Oliver and Vayre, 2015).

Personalization plays a crucial role in modern algorithmic devices. Our purchasing decisions, news consumption, music preferences, and various aspects of daily life are now heavily influenced by algorithmic recommendations that are believed to be personalized to fit individual interests (Kotras, 2020). According to Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) the term "like economy" has become ingrained in our everyday actions, enabling algorithms to categorize and interact with individuals based on their digital preferences. This integration deeply connects our preferences (what we like) and identities (who we are similar to), as discussed by Lury and Day (2019) and Seaver (2012).

The concept of "personalization" is a central theme in the analysis of digital media, according to Kotras (2020). This term is commonly used to describe how platforms tailor specific content to individual users by creating user profiles through data mining and analysis.

Kotras (2020) defines personalization as the process by which users and algorithmic platforms establish a personalized connection. From this perspective, personalization is essentially a form of communication. To elaborate, personalization starts with an effort to engage users directly, making them feel like they are being directly addressed (Althusser, 2014).

A personalization agent is commonly used to help achieve two main business objectives: boosting advertising revenue by encouraging users to click on the website and increasing sales revenue through purchases (Tam and Ho, 2005, 2006).

1.1. Purpose of Study

This study seeks to understand how using personalized avatars in Facebook advertisements can influence various user engagement metrics, such as the number of likes, comments, shares, click-through rates (the percentage of users who click on the ad), conversion rates (the percentage of users who take a desired action, like making a purchase), shopping experience, and revenue generated for advertisers. The goal is to investigate the impact of personalized avatars on engagement and advertising outcomes on Facebook, as well as to explore the relationship between users and their avatars in terms of identity and connection.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Hyper-Personalization

Kumar et al. (2022) studied Hyper-personalization and Its Impact on Customer Buying Behavior and found that advertising messages can be more effective when they are highly personalized to the individual level. The objective of hyper-personalization is to enhance the data gathered from diverse customer interactions and utilize automated algorithms through process optimization.

According to Vavliakis et al (2018) Hyper-personalization involves using data to create personalized and targeted offerings for each individual customer. This means treating each customer uniquely and designing a customized experience for them specifically. The focus is on interacting with individuals on a personal level rather than grouping

them into broad customer segments. To successfully anticipate each customer's needs, businesses need to analyze detailed data to gain deep insights into their preferences and behaviors.

According to Subramanyan (2014), hyper-personalization plays a crucial role in enhancing customer experience and service by offering specialized services using big data. Zaino (2018) suggested that customers receive highly personalized product choices through digital clientele, leading to positive interactions and increased chances of making a purchase. The adoption of hyper-personalization has transformed the business approach of many retailers, who now provide tailored solutions based on customer data, as highlighted by Shukla & Nigam (2018).

This suggests that leveraging individual avatars to create highly personalized advertisements can foster a deeper connection with brands, leading to positive interactions that drive engagement and boost conversion rates.

2.2. Conversational Web

The "Conversational Web" within hyper-personalization involves ongoing interactions between users and websites that mimic conversations. This dynamic exchange helps both parties understand each other better and communicate effectively (Vavliakis et al., 2018). To achieve hyper-personalization, websites need to engage in these conversations to tailor messages, offers, interfaces, and recommendations to suit everyone's preferences.

This process requires listening to and understanding the needs of each user. In a conversational web environment, websites and users continuously interact through actions like clicks, scrolling, purchases, and time spent on pages. Websites respond to users by providing personalized recommendations, offers, and notifications, initiating a cycle of communication where users react, and the conversation continues (Vavliakis et al., 2018).

This indicates that brands can develop strategies to create content that engages users' avatars, sparking interactions and conversations that drive engagement metrics.

2.3. Web Personalization

Web personalization utilizes technologies to deliver tailored content to individuals at the right time and in the right format. The main goal is to offer customized services and maximize business opportunities. It is predicted that companies will increasingly invest in personalization technologies in the future (Kim et al., 2001; Ledford, 2002; Rust and Lemon, 2001) (Ho, et al., 2014). Despite the recent buzz around web personalization, its effectiveness remains uncertain.

Supporters argue that personalization agents have transformed the web into a personalized communication platform. By offering personalized content, products, and services, web personalization helps reduce aimless browsing (Light and Maybury, 2002) and enhances business-to-consumer interactions (Ardissono et al., 2002). Additionally, tailoring web content enables companies to provide value to customers and drive profitable growth (Allen et al., 1998; Peppers and Rogers, 1997). Reports suggest that e-commerce sites implementing personalization technology have experienced annual revenue boosts of up to 52% (Parkes, 2001) (Ho, et al., 2014).

This research aims to investigate the effectiveness of implementing personalized content with user avatars to drive better and seamless communication, thereby enhancing business-to-consumer interactions (Ardissono et al., 2002).

2.4. Ad Manipulation and Personalization

While all advertising manipulation involves some level of personalization, synthetic manipulation can achieve hyper personalization by tailoring content in real time to each individual customer using data from social media, retail sensors, or loyalty programs (Campbell et al., 2020; Kietzmann et al., 2020; Schelenz, Segal, and Gal, 2020). This advanced form of personalization can create ads featuring models matching the customer's characteristics and preferences, potentially even showing garments on the customer's body instead of on a model, akin to the futuristic ads in the movie "Minority Report" (2002).

Although personalized ads can enhance attitudes and purchase intentions (Aguirre et al., 2015; Mukherjee, Smith, and Turri, 2018; Tong, Luo, and Xu, 2020), the heightened personalization level may raise concerns about customer surveillance and the use of personal data (Plangger and Watson, 2015; Turow, McGuigan, and Maris, 2015). Consumer reactions to this surveillance depend on their attitudes and the transparency of data collection, potentially triggering privacy concerns or feelings of vulnerability (Aguirre et al., 2015; Hill and Sharma, 2020; Martin, Borah, and Palmatier,

2017). Understanding these implications is crucial to leverage the benefits of personalized advertising while avoiding potential drawbacks (Campbell 2022).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to assess the acceptability of utilizing users' avatars in personalized advertisements, as well as to examine potential engagement levels and individuals' sentiments towards this practice.

3. Experiential Value

In the past, the value that encourages people to use things has been linked to practical, conditional, social, emotional, and knowledge-related benefits (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991). Nowadays, retailers are shifting towards providing memorable experiences rather than just selling products, turning stores into interactive spaces like theaters (Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001). Value is seen as something personal and subjective, shaped by customers' experiences and perceptions rather than just the usefulness of a product (Lee & Overby, 2004). Experiential value is how customers perceive the efficiency, excellence, aesthetics, and enjoyment in their interactions with a service (Wu & Liang, 2009). While real experiences may fade, the value of those experiences remains significant (Schroeder, 2012). Consumption experiences play a crucial role in how customers make decisions (Holbrook, 2000).

Therefore, by personalizing the shopping experience and enhancing it with avatars, retailers can create a lasting and memorable experience for consumers. This approach adds a unique and interactive element to the shopping process, making it more engaging and tailored to individual preferences. As a result, customers are more likely to form strong connections with the brand and remember the experience long after it has ended.

3.1. Hypotheses

- H1

Introducing personalized avatars in advertisements will establish a deeper connection with users, resulting in increased engagement levels and improved conversion rates.

- H2

Users who have a strong identification with their avatars will exhibit higher engagement with avatar ads compared to those who do not have a strong identification with their avatars.

- H3

Users who interact with avatar advertisements are more likely to remember the brand and its messaging compared to generic ads.

- H4

The hypothesis suggests that individuals in the United States may view personalized avatar ads as creepy and exhibit dislike, whereas users in Nigeria are expected to find personalized avatar ads interesting and actively engage with them.

3.2. Research questions.

How does the inclusion of personalized avatars in advertisements impact the establishment of connections with users and influence their levels of attention and interest?

How does the level of user identification and connection with their avatar impact their engagement with avatar ads?

Are there particular demographics (such as age, gender, or socio-economic status) that are more likely to accept or reject advertisements with personalized avatars, and what factors contribute to this?

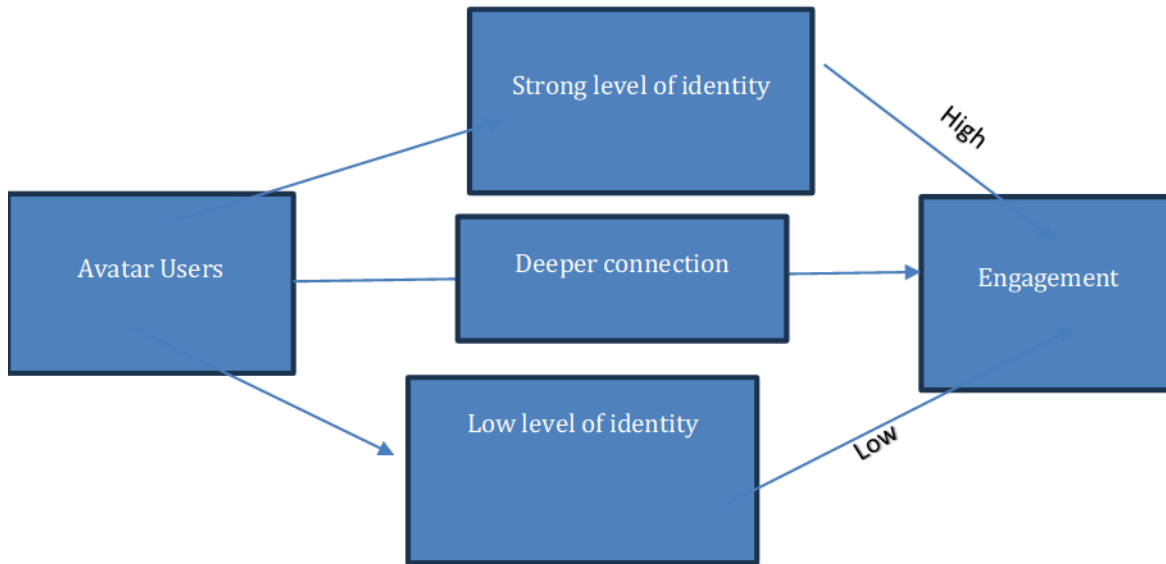


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

To comprehensively investigate the potential engagement of personalized avatars in Facebook advertisements, we will employ a two-section research approach. The first section will involve an experimental design conducted in a lab. This section will include the presentation of creatives featuring personalized avatars of users, followed by a questionnaire to gather data on their perception, acceptance, recall, and product interest in the avatar ads developed during the experiment.

The second section will consist of an online survey. The survey format will include a mix of multiple-choice questions, binary (yes/no) inquiries, and a series of Likert scale questions utilizing a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This section aims to further understand, users identification with their avatars, the acceptability and engagement rates of avatar ads among a broader demographic and cultural context.

4.2. Participant

The research project consists of two main sections. The first section involves recruiting 50 students at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign to participate in an experiment in a lab setting, followed by filling out a questionnaire. To engage college students in the experiment, approvals will be sought from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to address ethical considerations. Collaboration with the College of Media and faculty members will facilitate the recruitment process, ensuring participants are active on social media, have avatars, and are willing to share them before the experiment.

The second section comprises an online survey targeting 100 users from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and another 100 users from the University of Lagos, Nigeria. Participants in both sections must have avatars. As part of the recruitment process for the experiment, participants will be required to share their personal avatar, which will be used to create a personalized ad for each participant. Upon completion, participants in the United States will receive Amazon gift cards, while participants in Nigeria will receive airtime/data rewards.

Ethical considerations will be addressed, and permissions will be obtained from the respective institutions to safeguard participant rights and privacy. Consent will be obtained from all participants before proceeding, with the consent form included in the questionnaire. The research purpose and procedures will be explained in the lab, and consent will be obtained before the experiment commences.

4.3. Procedure:

Participants will be invited to the research lab, where they will be briefed on the study's objectives and provide consent as per IRB guidelines. The experimental process will involve exposing participants to various personalized avatar ads. Subsequently, participants will complete an online questionnaire, using a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 to 5) to rate their brand recall, engagement level, and product interest.

The second part of the research will utilize an online questionnaire on the Qualtrics platform for data collection. This section will be divided into two parts. The first part will gather demographic and location information (race, ethnicity, age, gender, education level, country) and assess participants' social media usage and avatar ownership through yes/no questions.

The second part of the questionnaire will use a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 to 5) to evaluate participants' interest in personalized avatar ads. These questions aim to gauge participants' perceptions and interest in avatar personalized ads:

- *How interested are you in personalized avatar ads?*
- *Do you find personalized avatar ads engaging?*
- *Would you be more likely to recall a brand featured in a personalized avatar ad?*
- *Do personalized avatar ads increase your interest in the advertised products?*
- *How positively do you perceive personalized avatar ads?*

4.4. Variables

This study will examine several dependent variables, including participants' attitudes and perceptions towards personalized avatar ads, engagement rates, brand recall, and brand interest intention following exposure to advertisements featuring personalized avatars. These variables are crucial for understanding participants' levels of interest and engagement with personalized avatar advertisements.

The independent variables will encompass participants' avatar identity and connection level, social media activity, and geographical region. These variables will provide insights into individual avatar usage, engagement on social media platforms, and potential regional influences on participants' engagement levels with personalized avatar ads.

4.5. Measurement

In this research study, we will utilize a combination of surveys and statistical analysis to measure variables and test hypotheses. Surveys will be conducted using Qualtrics to assess participants' attitudes, perceptions, and brand recall through Likert scale questions and open-ended responses. The collected data will then be analyzed using SPSS, allowing us to delve into participants' attitudes, perceptions, and brand recall. This analysis will include techniques such as ANOVA, enabling us to evaluate differences in engagement rates or brand interest intention among participant groups. Through these tools, our aim is to gain comprehensive insights into the impact of personalized avatar ads and other factors on participant attitudes, engagement, and brand recall across various demographics and regions.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to evaluate how personalized avatar advertisements influence user engagement, brand recall, and conversion rates on Facebook, focusing on participants from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the University of Lagos. By examining the impact of user-avatar identification and regional differences, the research seeks to provide insights into the effectiveness of personalized ads in enhancing connection and interaction with diverse audiences.

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