

ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, avatars (lifelike characters created by technology) have become part of e-commerce websites. They served to transmit greetings and information on the products and services of a company. This research examined the influence of the intensity of the avatar smile in on-line service encounters. A model was developed using 'primitive emotional contagion' and 'feelings-as-information' theories for the 'avatar smile' which was the focus of this study, based on which hypotheses were generated.

Avatar's smiling expressions may not only generate a perceived social presence, but also lead to an immersive experience for customers during online service encounters. In their online interaction, customers can mimic the smiling expression of an avatar, which in turn could affect the customer's emotions based on the 'primitive emotional contagion' theory. In addition, social presence and immersion may also influence customers' emotions, which in turn may influence customers' perceived service performance, consistent with the theory of feelings-as-information.

The 'posttest-only control group' experimental design was followed. The experiment was conducted to understand whether social phenomena within human-human interaction can be replicated to human-avatar interaction as well. A total of 438 subjects were exposed to different intensities of avatar smile, while being asked to complete a task on a fictitious website. The outcome of the experiment showed that the smile of an avatar was positively associated with both social presence and immersion. However, contrary to expectations, the

smile of avatar did not influence the smile of customer, thereby providing no support for the mimicry effect of primitive emotional contagion theory.

Further, the avatar's smile influenced customer's emotions as per the 'emotions-as-social-information' theory, which in turn, influenced the 'service performance', which supported feelings-as-information theory. The findings of this study show that a smiling avatar can be a viable option for websites to instill a sense of social presence and immersion, and evoke positive emotions in customer as well.

Keywords: Avatar, Smile, Customer emotions, Mimicry, Social presence, Immersion, Service performance, Primitive emotional contagion theory, Feelings as information theory, Emotions as social information.