

This month's issue of Spotlight was written by our undergraduate placement student, Caroline Jeston.
(cj312@bath.ac.uk)

Bristol Social Marketing Centre

Spotlight on Social Marketing #26: The Proteus Effect: how avatars influence our behaviour

When engaging with the online world we often use digital avatars to represent our self, or most often our ideal selfⁱ. Whilst it may seem obvious that as the creators of our avatars we are influencing them, our relationship with our avatars isn't that simple. In fact, avatars have been shown to influence *us* and *our* behaviours, both on and offline. This is known as the Proteus Effect, named after the Greek sea god who had the power to change his formⁱⁱ.

The Proteus Effect in-game and online

The Proteus Effect has been demonstrated in studies where avatars used in-game are rated by participants as "more" or "less" attractive. The study found that participants given the "more" attractive avatars were more intimate in what they revealed about themselvesⁱⁱ. Similar results have also been demonstrated in relation to height – notably that people who used taller and more attractive avatars were on average at a higher level in the game. This shows that these aesthetic differences in avatar must have affected in-game behaviour in order for the player to achieve these higher levelsⁱⁱⁱ. The Proteus Effect also plays a role in gender stereotyping, as is obvious with players who 'gender-bend'. For example, in games such as World of Warcraft, healing other players is thought to be 'feminine', while participating in Player vs. Player activities is thought to be 'masculine'. A longitudinal study into these behaviours, and players, showed that in-game gender was more of a predictor of subsequent in-game behaviour than real-life gender^{iv}.

The Proteus Effect has often been attributed to deindividuation and self-perception theory^{ii,iv,v,vi}. Self-perception theory states that we often view ourselves as we expect others to, and thus conform to the norms that are expected of us. Because of the anonymity of online games, people draw these identity cues from the avatars they use, instead of their real-life selves^{vi}. Pena, Hancock & Merola^{vii} demonstrated another theory – priming, or behavioural assimilation. They did this in two studies, involving either coloured cloaks (black or white), or different clothing (clothing resembling outfits worn by doctors, or by members of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)^{vii}. They found that black cloaks and KKK outfits predictably increase the aggressiveness demonstrated by the players in the different experiments. This was due to the avatars *priming* the suppression of positive thoughts, such as group cohesion or affiliation^{viii}. This effect is known as behavioural assimilation - a result of priming. We can be primed by a variety of things, leading to a change in thought, and therefore a change in behaviour^{viii}.

The Proteus Effect – in real life

While the Proteus Effect can have negative outcomes on behaviour, such as perpetuating gender stereotypes and objectification of women via sexually explicit avatars^{ix,x}, it can also be used to influence behaviour positively. People who are fully immersed in the games they play are more likely



