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AVATAR AS A SELF-REPRESENTATION: ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE ONLINE GAME ROBLOX

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital technology and online game platforms such as Roblox has intensified scholarly attention to how users construct and express digital identity through avatar customization. This study aims to analyze avatars as forms of self-representation among active Roblox users in virtual environments. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through an online Google Forms survey consisting of open-ended questions about users' experiences in creating and modifying avatars. The data were analyzed using a descriptive thematic approach to identify recurring patterns of meaning. The findings show that avatars are understood through four main dimensions: similarity to the real self, representation of the ideal self, symbolic expression of identity, and behavioral transformation. Avatars not only reflect users' actual self-perceptions but also function as media for projecting idealized identities through selected visual symbols. In addition, avatar characteristics may influence users' self-confidence and behavior during virtual interactions. The study concludes that avatars in Roblox serve as spaces for negotiating digital identity within virtual environments. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of the psychosocial role of online game platforms in the identity development of young digital users and highlight the importance of designing virtual spaces that support healthy, authentic, and inclusive self-expression.

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Keywords: Avatar Customization; Digital Identity; Roblox; Self-Representation; Virtual Environment

INTRODUCTION

Digital self-identity develops as a result of online social interactions that influence how individuals understand and evaluate themselves (Valkenburg et al., 2006; Walther, 2011). The development of digital technology and social media has changed the way individuals interact, build relationships, and shape self-identity (boyd, 2014; Turkle, 2011). Whereas identity was previously largely formed through face-to-face interactions, the digital space has now become a new social arena where individuals display, manage, and even reconstruct themselves (Goffman, 1959; Papacharissi, 2011)

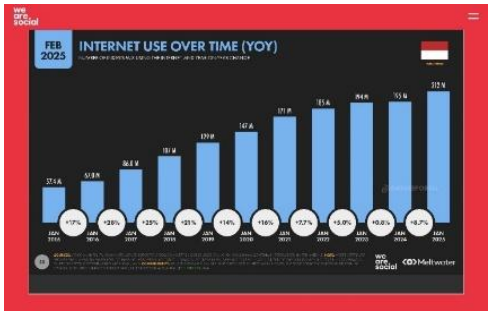


Figure 1. Internet Use Over Time in Indonesia (Year-on-Year), February 2025.

As shown in Figure 1, internet penetration in Indonesia has grown consistently over the past two decades, reaching 212 million users in February 2025 a year-on-year increase of +1.4%. This sustained growth underscores the expanding digital landscape within which platforms such as Roblox operate, and contextualizes the increasing relevance of studying digital identity formation among Indonesian users. (Meltwater, 2025)

The report from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2024) shows that more than 75% of Indonesian teenagers are connected to the internet and actively use digital platforms. One digital space that is interesting to examine is online gaming platforms like Roblox. As a user-generated content-based gaming platform, Roblox not only provides gaming activities but also a social space where users interact, collaborate, and build virtual communities. The avatar customization feature in Roblox allows players to choose body shapes, clothing, accessories, and even character expressions. Meanwhile, Hussain & Griffiths state that avatars in online games allow players to express self-identity, emotions, and ideal

characters that may differ from real life, making the virtual world a space for digital identity formation. (Hussain & Griffiths, 2018)

From a national survey conducted by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJI, 2025), as many as 28.17% of internet users in Indonesia are known to play online games. If this figure is projected from the total of 229.4 million national internet users, the number of online game players is estimated to reach around 64.6 million people. Of all these internet users, approximately 2.07% or around 1.33 million people are recorded to play Roblox. Although the percentage is relatively smaller compared to other popular games, the absolute number of Roblox users remains significant in the context of Indonesia's digital population (APJI, 2025). These findings indicate that online gaming platforms can be understood as a broad digital social space that is relevant to be studied in the context of users' psychosocial development.

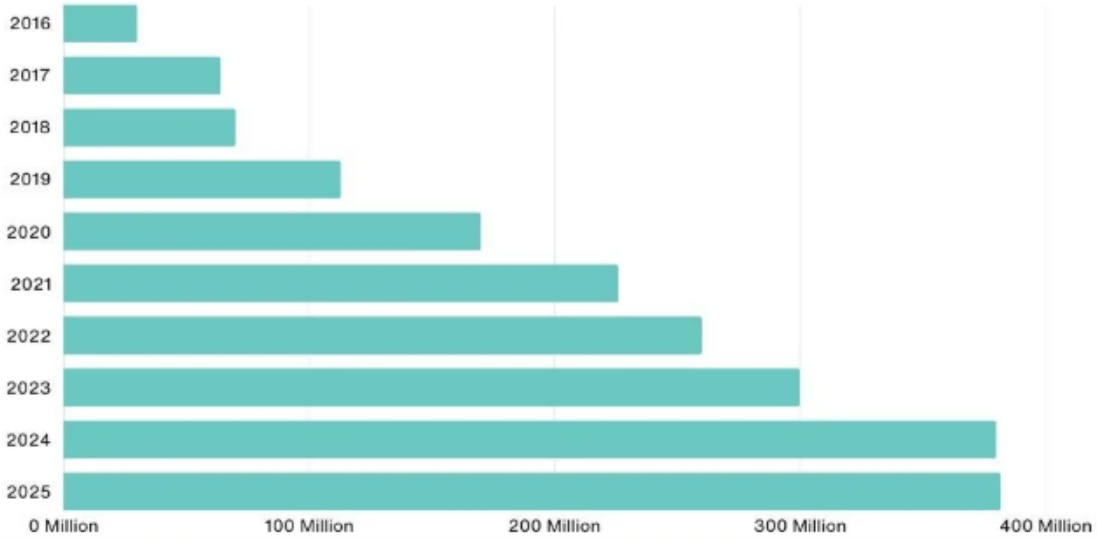


Figure 2. Global Monthly Active Users of Roblox from 2016 to 2025 (in Millions).

Figure 2 presents the growth of Roblox monthly active users from 2016 to 2025. The platform has experienced a consistent and steep increase, reaching approximately 380 million monthly active users globally in 2025, more than tenfold its 2016 baseline. (Demandsage, 2025) This trajectory reflects Roblox's emergence not merely as a game, but as a large-scale digital social environment relevant to the study of identity formation. It continues to maintain a core user base from Generation Alpha (under 13 years old), the fastest growth occurs in the age group of 13 and above, the Asia-Pacific region, and male users. (Corporation Roblox, 2025)

The researcher argues that avatars in online gaming platforms, particularly Roblox, are not merely aesthetic elements of the game, but rather representations of the self that are

meaningful psychologically and socially. In the context of online games, avatars function as visual and symbolic representations of the player (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). Avatar personalization allows individuals to express preferences, values, and certain characteristics that are considered to represent themselves (Messinger et al., 2009). This process aligns with Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation, which explains that individuals consciously manage their appearance to create a certain impression in front of others, which in virtual environments is mediated through the design and customization of avatars. (Goffman, 1959)

Several prior studies have explored the relationship between avatars and self-identity in digital contexts. Yee and Bailenson (2007) introduced the concept of the Proteus Effect, which explains how the visual characteristics of avatars can influence user behavior in virtual environments. Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) demonstrated that online environments allow individuals to express their true self, which may be difficult to reveal in face-to-face interactions. Higgins (1987), in Self-Discrepancy Theory, explained the differences between the actual self and the ideal self, while Belk (2013) proposed the concept of the extended self in the digital realm. Although various studies have examined digital identity in general, research specifically analyzing avatars as self-representations on the Roblox platform among Indonesian users remains very limited. This gap serves as the primary motivation for this study.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the Roblox platform as a digital social space that has not been widely explored in the context of identity psychology in Indonesia. This study integrates four main theoretical frameworks: (1) Identity Theory by Stryker and Burke (2000), which views identity as the meaning individuals attach to themselves based on social roles; (2) the concept of the Proteus Effect by Yee and Bailenson (2007) regarding behavior transformation through avatars; (3) Self-Discrepancy Theory by Higgins (1987) on the actual self vs. the ideal self; and (4) the concept of the Extended Self by Belk (2013), which regards digital objects as extensions of the self.

This study focuses on the analysis of avatars as representations of the self in virtual environments, specifically on the Roblox platform, with the aim of identifying the key aspects that shape the meaning of avatars for their users. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify the extent to which avatars reflect the user's real self; (2) analyze the role of avatars as projections of the ideal self; (3) understand the expression of symbolic identity through the

visual elements of avatars; and (4) examine the potential behavioral transformations induced by avatar characteristics in virtual interactions.

METHODS

This research uses a mixed methods approach with an exploratory design that integrates literature review and preliminary survey. The descriptive qualitative component is the main approach to describe aspects of avatars as self-representation among active Roblox users.

A literature review was conducted to build a theoretical foundation and develop the research framework. A preliminary survey was designed to explore respondents' subjective experiences in depth without limiting answer choices, in line with phenomenological principles in qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

Technique The participants in this study are active users of the Roblox platform. Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling, with the main criterion being that respondents have created and/or modified avatars on Roblox. The survey was distributed via a Google Form link shared by the researcher. Respondents in this study were identified using initial codes (IN, DD, SZ, S) to maintain privacy and anonymity.

Data were collected through an online survey using Google Forms, which contained several open-ended questions related to respondents' experiences in creating and modifying avatars. The main questions in the survey include:

- "What do you like most about creating or customizing an avatar?"
- "Have you ever created an avatar that is different from your real-world self? Why?"
- "In your opinion, does your avatar represent your current self or the self you dream to be?"
- Describe the appearance of your current Roblox avatar."
- "Do you feel more confident when being your avatar? Why?"

The survey was conducted on March 2, 2025.

Descriptive thematic analysis was applied across four stages: (1) reading all respondents' answers thoroughly; (2) initial coding of relevant statements; (3) grouping codes into meaning categories; and (4) formulating main themes representing avatar aspects as self-

expression, identity exploration, and real-self resemblance. Direct quotes from respondents are presented as authentic representations of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS

Based on data analysis through a brief survey via a Google Form link distributed by the researcher involving several respondents, this study produced several main themes that represent avatars as self-representations in depicting self-identity in the digital world for Roblox online game players. This research uses the theory of Stryker and Burke (2000), where in the study of social psychology, self-identity is a part of the self-concept that reflects how individuals understand, define, and interpret themselves in a social context. From the perspective of Identity Theory, identity is the meaning attached by individuals to themselves based on the social roles they have. In the digital context, social roles expand to include content creators, gamers, influencers, digital activists, and anonymous users. This concept stems from the view that the self is reflective, meaning it is capable of seeing and categorizing itself within a particular social context (Stryker & Burke, 2000)

On the other hand, the theory put forward by Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson (2007) serves as the main foundation for understanding avatars and self-representation in the digital world for users of the online game application Roblox. An avatar is an individual's visual representation in a digital environment, particularly in online games, virtual reality, and the metaverse. An avatar is not just an image, but a symbol of identity that carries psychological meaning (Yee, N., & Bailenson, 2007) Based on this, there are four aspects that describe digital identity and avatar as self-representation, namely Similarity to real self, Ideal self representation, Symbolic identity expression, and Behavioral transformation.

Table 1 below presents a systematic grouping of direct respondent quotes organized by avatar aspect, survey question, respondent code, quoted statement, and its identified psychological meaning. This table synthesizes the core qualitative evidence supporting the four main themes. Figures 1 illustrate the distribution of avatar aspects identified in the data and the conceptual relationship between avatar use and self-representation dimensions.

Table 1. Grouping of Respondent Quotes by Avatar Aspect as Self-Representation for Roblox Users

Aspect	Survey Question	Code	Respondent Quote	Identified Meaning
Similarity to Real Self	"What do you like most about creating or changing an avatar?"	IN	"saya bisa menuangkan kreativitas saya"	Avatar as a medium for personal creative expression
		DD	"saya bisa ganti karakter yang sesuka saya"	Freedom to display personal preferences
Ideal Self Representation	"Have you ever created an avatar that is different from your real self? Why?"	DD	"gapernah mirip rl (real life)"	Avatar does not represent the actual self
		SZ	"iya, karena aku pengen ngeliat versi lain dari diri ku"	Alternative self-exploration
	"In your opinion, does your avatar represent your current self or the self you dream of?"	SZ	"diri yang aku impikan"	Ideal self-projection
		S	"diri yang aku impikan"	Aspirational representation
Symbolic Identity Expression	"Describe what your Roblox avatar looks like now."	IN	"karakter cewe yang dibuat jadi lebih lucu aja"	Symbol of the self-image one wants to display (cute)
		DD	"Avatar R15, karna bentuknya keren dan aku suka"	Symbol of visual identity considered cool
Behavioral Transformation	"Do you feel more confident as your avatar? Why?"	SZ	"org lebih banyak tertarik sama ava aku... banyak yang deketin"	Increased self-confidence due to social responses
		S	"iya, karena aku beli ava tersebut jadi pastinya lebih percaya diri"	Investing in an avatar boosts self-confidence

Table 1 presents direct evidence from survey respondents, organized into four thematic categories. Each row links a specific survey question to a respondent's verbatim quote and its interpreted psychological meaning. The table demonstrates how avatar customization behavior corresponds to established psychological constructs of self-identity, ranging from authentic self-expression to aspirational self-projection and behavioral transformation.

Data In the analysis process, one pattern was found that needs to be noted: there were respondents (DD) who stated that their avatar never resembled them in real life ("never looks like rl"), yet on the other hand also revealed that the avatar was chosen for aesthetic reasons ("the shape is cool"). This pattern indicates that for some users, the relationship between avatar and self-identity is not always linear; an avatar can fully become a space for constructing a new identity separate from the actual self, while still reflecting personal aesthetic preferences. This

finding is relevant as negative or anomalous data that enriches the understanding of the complexity of digital self-representation.

DISCUSSION

The research results show that avatars in Roblox function as more than just game characters, where avatars are a complex space for self-representation. Four identified themes are actual self-similarity, ideal self-representation, symbolic identity expression, and behavioral transformation, which illustrate that users actively and consciously use avatars to express, explore, and even shape their self-identity in digital spaces.

Similarity to real self

The concept of similarity to the real self refers to the extent to which the identity displayed by an individual in digital spaces reflects their true self in the real world. Conceptually, this idea is supported by John A. Bargh, Katelyn Y. McKenna, and Grainne M. Fitzsimons in their article "Can You See the Real Me? Activation and Expression of the True Self on the Internet" (Bargh et al., 2002). They explain that online environments allow individuals to express their true self, which is an aspect of the self that may be difficult to reveal in face-to-face interactions. Thus, digital identity is not necessarily separate from offline identity, but can be an authentic representation of the actual self.

This is reflected in the survey results on the question, "What do you like most about creating or changing an avatar?" Respondent (IN) stated that through the avatar they can "*menuangkan kreativitas saya*" (express my creativity), while respondent (DD) mentioned that they can *"ganti karakter yang sesuka saya*" (change characters as I like), from Google Form Survey (March 2, 2025). The quote shows that avatars in Roblox are understood as a space for self-expression that allows individuals to display interests and creativity that are indeed a part of themselves.

This view can also be associated with Sherry Turkle's (1995) thinking which states that digital spaces open opportunities for identity exploration. However, in the context of these findings, this exploration does not entirely lead to a radically different identity, but rather remains connected to the personal characteristics possessed in the real world. (Turkle, 1995)

Ideal Self Representation

The aspect of ideal self-representation is supported by E. Tory Higgins' Self-Discrepancy theory (1987), which explains the difference between the actual self and the ideal

self (the self one hopes or desires to be). In the digital context, individuals tend to present a version of themselves that is closer to the ideal self. (Higgins, 1987)

This is reflected in the question, "Have you ever created an avatar that is different from your real self? Why?" Respondent (DD) mentioned, "*gapernah mirip rl*" (never looked like RL (real life)), while respondent (SZ) stated, "*iya, karena aku pengen ngeliat versi lain dari diri ku*" (yes, because I want to see another version of myself). This statement indicates a tendency to build a self-representation that is not entirely the same as the actual condition. This finding is reinforced by the answer to the question, "In your opinion, does your avatar better represent your current self or your ideal self?" Respondents (SZ) and (S) both stated that their avatars better represent "the self I aspire to be." Thus, avatars function as a projection of the ideal self, not a false identity, but rather an image of the self they wish to achieve or develop. In the context of Roblox players, this representation becomes a symbolic means to explore the possibilities of being more confident, attractive, or in line with personal aspirations.

Symbolic identity expression

This concept is supported by Russell W. Belk (2013) through the idea of the Extended Self in the Digital World. Belk states that digital objects, including avatars and their visual attributes, can become an extension of the self (extended self). The visual symbols chosen by individuals represent personal values, preferences, and aspirations. (Belk, 2013) In a survey question, "Describe what your Roblox avatar looks like now," respondent (IN) stated that she created a female character that "*dibuat jadi lebih lucu aja*" (was just made cuter), while respondent (DD) mentioned, "*Avatar R15, karna bentuknya keren dan aku suka*" (R15 Avatar, because its shape is cool and I like it). These statements show that the choice of body shape, visual style, and avatar characteristics is not a random decision, but a reflection of aesthetic preferences and the symbolic identity one wants to display. Thus, avatars function as a medium of symbolic expression that helps others understand the self-image, values, and aspirations one wants to communicate.

Behavioral transformation

This aspect is supported by the Proteus Effect concept from Nick Yee and Jeremy N. Bailenson (2007), which explains that avatar characteristics can influence user behavior in virtual environments (Bailenson, 2007). Individuals tend to adjust their behavior according to the visual character they use. This is reflected in the question, "Do you feel more confident

when you are your avatar? Why?" Respondent (SZ) stated, "*yaa karna org lebih banyak tertarik sama ava aku kalau main dan banyak juga yang deketin*" (Yes, because more people are interested in my avatar when playing and many also approach me), while respondent (S) mentioned, "*iya, karena aku beli ava tersebut jadi pastinya lebih percaya diri*" (Yes, because I bought that avatar so of course I feel more confident). These answers indicate that the visual attributes of an avatar can enhance self-perception and confidence in virtual interactions. In some cases, this increase in self-confidence has the potential to affect how individuals behave, so that the digital identity is not only displayed but also shapes the user's psychological experience.

Literature Comparison

These findings are in line with various theories that underpin the research.First, Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation is confirmed: users consciously manage the appearance of their avatars to create a certain impression. Second, Higgins' Self-Discrepancy Theory (1987) is relevant in explaining respondents' tendency to build avatars that resemble their ideal self rather than their actual self. Third, the concept of the Proteus Effect (Yee & Bailenson, 2007) is evidenced by reports of increased user confidence when interacting with avatars considered attractive or ideal. Fourth, Belk's (2013) concept of the Extended Self supports the finding that visual elements of avatars such as style, shape, and accessories are treated as extensions of the user's identity. These findings also align with the view of Bargh et al. (2002) that online environments allow true self-expression, as well as Turkle's (1995) view that digital spaces provide opportunities for diverse identity exploration.

Implications of Findings

Practically, these findings carry implications for game platform developers, educators, and parents. Roblox and similar platforms should recognize that avatar customization features carry significant psychological weight, especially for adolescents in active identity formation stages. (Erikson, 1968) Inclusive, diverse, and body-positive customization options can support healthy identity development. For educators and psychologists, this research underscores the need for digital literacy frameworks that address virtual self-identity. The finding that avatars function as behavioral modulators enhancing confidence and social, engagement suggests that thoughtfully designed virtual identity spaces could be leveraged for positive psychosocial interventions.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. The limited number of respondents and the purposive sampling technique caused the findings to not be widely generalizable. In addition, the use of survey methods with open-ended questions via Google Form resulted in relatively brief data, so exploring deeper meanings through in-depth interviews or participant observation could enrich the findings.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that avatars in Roblox do not merely function as game characters, but as a medium for complex self-representation in virtual spaces. Based on a thematic analysis of respondents' responses, four main aspects were found that shape the meaning of avatars as self-representation: (1) resemblance to the real self, where avatars are understood as a space for expressing creativity and personal preferences that reflect the true self; (2) ideal self-representation, where avatars function as projections of the desired self, not as false identities; (3) symbolic identity expression, where visual elements of avatars become symbols of values and self-images intended to be communicated; and (4) behavioral transformation, where avatar characteristics influence users' psychological experiences, particularly in enhancing self-confidence when interacting in digital spaces.

This research contributes to the development of understanding of digital identity in the context of social psychology and developmental psychology. Theoretically, this study reinforces the relevance of Identity Theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000), the Proteus Effect (Yee & Bailenson, 2007), Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), and the concept of Extended Self (Belk, 2013) in the context of online gaming platforms, particularly Roblox, which has not been widely studied in Indonesia. Empirically, this research provides qualitative evidence that virtual spaces play a significant role in the process of forming and strengthening self-identity in the digital era.

Research Based on the findings and existing limitations, future research is recommended to: (1) use a larger and more diverse sample, covering various age groups and socio-cultural backgrounds; (2) apply more in-depth data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews or participant observation within the Roblox platform; (3) examine the longitudinal aspects of digital identity formation, namely how identities constructed through avatars develop over time; and (4) compare patterns of self-representation through avatars

between different age groups, considering that Roblox has a wide user base ranging from children to young adults.

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