

# Avatars and Nicknames in Adolescent Chat Spaces

Lois Ann Scheidt

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## Introduction

Synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments have opened new channels for adolescents to explore their personhood. In this medium they engage in written conversation under a nickname, a participant selected name used to disguise their real identity. Adolescents meet and talk about their lives, their personal problems, their activities, or nothing in particular. In this way CMC mirrors real life face-to-face (FtF) dialogue. Many of its CMC's unique qualities revolve around the fact that it is an austere mode of communication. There are no changes in voice, no facial expressions, no body language, no (or very little) visual spatial environment as a context of meaning. (Suler 1997) Additional visual representation may be made by using an avatar<sup>1</sup> to create a graphical representation of a physical “body” in chat space. Thereby creating a thicker medium using facets of written, oral, and visual languages to communication with others.

HTML chat spaces, which support GMUKS (graphical multi-user conversations) (Suler 1999), allow written, oral, and visual communication in the familiar frames-based HTML format used by many commercial and personal websites. GMUKS create a unique graphical social environment, rather than being purely text-based as Donath, Karahalios, Viégas (1999) discuss in their review of the design of graphical interfaces. Multimedia characteristics add a visual dimension that allows users to create the illusion of movement, space, and individuality. Avatars allow users to express their personalities through pictures using standard jpg/gif format or through animated gif files

Upon entering the chat space, the participant is entreated to select a nickname, referred to in chat spaces as a “nic”. This nickname then becomes the participant’s identifier when talking to others or when others talk to them. Nicknames can be very fluid, and are easily and quickly changed to meet the participant’s needs or desires. However Bechar-Israeli (1995), found that nicknames become highly personal markers and that if forced to change from a favored identity, participants maintain strong ties to their earlier selections. (pg. 5)

Avatars add additional visual clues, though Walther (1999) postulates they are more analogues to the clues a user receives from the chat nickname than to actual visual cues

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<sup>1</sup> A Sanskrit word that roughly translates to “God’s appearance on Earth.” (pg. xv) (Damer 1998)

received during a FtF exchange. In text-based communication, users selectively present themselves, concentrating on purposeful message construction and eliminating involuntary nonverbal clues from interaction. This interplay can magnify their sense of the similarity and desirability of others, while they become more friendly and attractive to other users. (Walther 1999)

In today's media-saturated world, identities are no longer built solely within the close-knit communities of family, neighborhood, school, and work. Media and on-line environments are part of our world today and therefore play an important role in the formulations of our identities or constructions of self. (Grodin and Lindlof 1996) Young people, in the midst of discovery and their own self-development, populate adolescent chat spaces.

Adolescents approach the development of self, setting forth stages through which the self differentiates and becomes connected to themselves and others throughout their lifetimes. Gender is one variable with which adolescent's must develop a personal performance. "From early childhood, individuals learn to signal their gender identity in accord with gender stereotypes. They learn to perform 'masculinity' or 'femininity'." (Danet 1998) Adolescence has been identified by all approaches as a time of heightened activity for most in the loss and creation of new balances.

Given technological limitations, users and designers' first impulse is to create versions of physical bodies that conform to a predictably narrow band of stereotypes. Given that any assertion of a virtual self is itself a rhetorical act, this tendency to create avatars that serve as stereotypical shorthand is indicative of a host of attitudes underlying our interaction with computers. (Kolko 1999)

This paper explores the ways, in which adolescents represent themselves through avatars and nicknames, and how gender is presented through their avatar and nickname choices in adolescent chat spaces. Research on adolescents in this medium is severely lacking. If we are to understand how the Internet shapes their lives, and have sufficient background to foretell what their impact on the World Wide Web (WWW) is likely to be, it is essential that we seek an understanding of how adolescents utilize the personal communication opportunities available to them on the WWW. This study aims to begin to fill this research void.

## **Background**

Communication in Internet communication in chat spaces allows participants to communicate in the relative safety of anonymity. Walther (2001) has noted that CMC participants, bereft of nonverbal cues, may engage in "selective self-promotion." (pg. 4) "It is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical. Life is lived through bodies." (pg. 113) (Stone 1991)

Without visual clues and societal norms gender becomes more malleable in CMC. (Bruckman 1993) Danet (1998) states that participants "typed nick is their mask."

Though malleable, gender does not disappear; Reid (1991) argues that users construct gender through nicknames they choose. Although it is possible to change one's nickname at any time, and repeatedly within a single chat space session, Bechar-Israeli, (1995) found that participants generally choose their nick carefully and then use it consistently over long periods of time.

The richest form of identity expression, and self-promotion, can be achieved with avatars, visual representations of a participant's chosen online identity. (Kim 2000) McIlvenny (2001) states "Avatars are clearly (ac)cultured and socialized: virtual embodiment and materiality is socially constructed, just as it is in 'meat space'." Kolko (1999) states that "on-line identity develops a kind of mediated electronic body that resulted in certain inconsistencies between the virtual and physical self." (pg. 177) In the real world we have limited control over how we look, however when the participant selects an avatar as a visual representation, they make a decision to present themselves with an artifact over which they have significant control they can also change the avatar at will.

Three levels reveal gender in CMC chat spaces - nicknames, avatars, and discourse. This becomes a hierarchy in that nickname selection is a default requirement of the computer interface for access to the chat space. Once logged into a chat space the participants can "lurk<sup>2</sup>," watch the conversation without adding their own remarks, thereby limiting additional gender related information. Finally if the participants choose to use an avatar to represent themselves that pictorial image is entered into the system at the same time as the nickname. Again the participant could "lurk," or "spam<sup>3</sup>" with only their nickname/avatar combination, thereby limiting gender information to the nickname or nickname/avatar combination.

Gender may also be obscured, further separating the real body and the online representation. (Stone 1991) CMC is less revealing of personal information than FtF communication, and some user names and/or avatars are gender-neutral. Female participants can choose to present themselves in ways so as to minimize discrimination and harassment by adopting a gender-neutral nickname. (Bruckman 1993)

Jacobson (1999) showed that in text-based virtual communities people develop image of one another. These impressions are based not only on cues provided, but also on the conceptual categories and cognitive models people use in interpreting those cues. We sit in front of a computer terminal not only as conscious beings but also as carnal beings. Our vision is not abstracted from our bodies or from our other sensory modes of perception that allow us to access the world. (Sobchack 1988)

In addition analyzing even the most gender-stereotyped of avatars requires deciding, which bodily representation is the result of cultural conceptions and which is the result of technological limitations. How physical bodies can be represented in electronic spaces, ultimately reveals how gendered bodies come to affect gendered voices. (Kolko 1999)

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<sup>2</sup> "Refuse to communicate." (pg. 2) (Marvin 1995)

<sup>3</sup> Excess and/or repetitive posting of communication. (pg. 2) (Marvin 1995)

Many authors have referenced the developing gender exploration of adolescents, as a time of separation, autonomy, and exploration. (Marcia 1993) Tanner (1990) argues, “because boys and girls grow up in what are essentially different cultures...talk between women and men is cross-cultural communication.” (pg. 18) For men, conversation is for “holding center stage” and maintaining that attention. (pg 77) Morahan-Martin (1998) and Tapscott (1998) discuss that girls want to explore relationships, whereas boys search for self-identity through differentiating themselves from others. “Nowhere are these two orientations toward relationships more obvious than in cyber play” and chat spaces. (pg. 168) (Tapscott 1998) Rushkoff’s (1996) postulates that “screenager,” the child born into a culture mediated by television and the computer will interact with their world. This point of view would necessitate a change in how adolescents view and utilize gender and gender-stereotypes.

Nicknames and avatars are used as stand-ins for the participant in their process of self-promotion, as signs. The metaphor of standing-in for is the basis of the observation that signs are used to infer something not directly perceptible, or not directly obvious, from something that simply is. Therein lies the point of sign use, representational conceptions of signs, construing their perceptibility as a replacement or representative of that which is not directly perceptible: The expression stands for that which is meant. (Keller 1998) Semiotics occurs whenever we stand back from our ways of understanding and communication, and ask how these ways of understanding and communication arise, what form they take, and why. Semiotics is above all an intellectual curiosity about the ways we represent our world to each other and ourselves. (Sless 1986)

## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

The adolescent chat space used for this study is part of a chat site consisting of 181 chatrooms, twenty-four of which are designated for General Chat and populated by adolescents. Each room has a capacity of 30 participants. The total General Chat participation regularly exceeds 200 participants. One General Chat room was selected for this study based on the consistent use of avatars, and the regularity of 10 or more participants around the clock.

The space in question is utilized 24-hours a day, therefore data was collected by dividing the day into four time blocks. Data was collected in one-hour increments, two hours was collected in each time block as both direct feed and source code. Individual avatars were collected and saved for analysis.

Since this research is based solely on adolescents in a single chat space, it only accounts for one of many types of the online space in which adolescents participate, and conclusions about the construction of adolescents as chat space participants relate strictly to this particular site. Samples were taken between February 26, 2001 and March 4, 2001.

Data was cleaned to remove avatars and nicknames for persons over 18 i.e., Hot M(35). Site Moderators were also removed, as they must be 21 to hold that position.

Final data consisted of 119 unique avatars, and 396 unique nicknames.

## **Avatars**

Content analysis was the primary method used to evaluate the avatars. Semiotic analysis was incorporated to the extent possible. The coding scheme was developed during an earlier pilot study. Coding categories were non-exclusive, so a single avatar may be coding in multiple categories.

<b>Avatars</b>
<b>Advertising logos</b>
<b>Baggy clothes</b>
<b>Combination</b>
<b>Coy Gaze</b>
<b>Exaggerated Secondary Sexual Characteristics</b>
<b>Eyes covered</b>
<b>Revealing Clothing</b>
<b>Sexually Suggestive</b>
<b>Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group</b>

## **Nicknames**

Content analysis was used to evaluate the nicknames. The 14 category coding scheme framework as used in, Bechar-Israeli, H.(1995). Again coding was non-exclusive.

<b>Bechar-Israeli Coding Scheme</b>
<b>Age related</b>
<b>Famous people/groups</b>
<b>Flora &amp; fauna</b>
<b>Inanimate objects</b>
<b>Literature, fairy tales, characters from films, plays, television</b>
<b>Meta comment on the anonymity of the medium</b>
<b>Onomatopoeia</b>
<b>Place names</b>
<b>Provocative</b>
<b>Relationships to others</b>
<b>Self character traits</b>
<b>Sex-related</b>
<b>Technology related</b>
<b>Typography</b>

6 additional categories were added.

<b>Additional Categories</b>
<b>Actual name/Nickname (diminutive)</b>
<b>Ethereal</b>
<b>Multiple chatters</b>
<b>Popular sayings</b>
<b>Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group</b>
<b>Social/status comments</b>

A single rater was used for this project, though ad hoc input was solicited in some situations.

## **Results**

### **Avatars**

The 58 female avatars (table 2) were represented in all coding categories with the exception of “eyes covered”. A coy gaze (Example 1) was present in 69.24% of the female avatars. 55.17% were rated as sexually suggestive (Example 2). 41.38% were wearing revealing clothing. Exaggerated secondary sexual characteristics, oversized breasts, were present in 39.66% of the female avatars (Example 4). Combination avatars - those that use a variety of elements including text, graphics, etc., to produce a unique avatar – were used by 31.03% (Example 5). Baggy clothing primarily pants, and often in combination with revealing tops, were present in 29.31% of the avatars (Example 6). 12.07% were wearing advertising logos (Example 6). Finally 6.9% of the avatars reviewed were tagged as belonging to a “gang” or group (Example 7).

The 36 male avatars were represented in all coding categories. Baggy clothing, pants and shirts, were present in 83.33% of the male avatars (Example 9). The eyes of the males were covered in 66.67% of the avatars, most often by hats or sunglasses (Example 10). 33.33% of the males clothing shows advertising logos (Example 11). Exaggerated secondary sexual characteristics (Example 12), chest and arm muscles, were seen in 30.56%. Combination avatars (Example 13) were used by 19.44%. Revealing clothing was seen in 15.89%, all cases were shirtless male doll avatars (Example 14). 5.56% of the male avatars show coy gaze (Example 15). Sexually suggestive (Example 16) and those tagged as belong to a “gang” or group accounted for 2.78% each of the male avatars (Example 13).

Three avatars displayed both females and males and were represented in all coding categories. The category breakdown for this group is a mix of the coding seen in the two previous categories. However the group more closely mirrors the male only category. 100% of the avatars show baggy clothing. 66.67% each were combination avatars, show covered eyes, revealing clothing, were sexually suggestive, show coy gaze, and

exaggerated secondary sexual characteristics. Advertising logos, and those tagged as belong to a “gang” or group accounted for 33.33% each of the female & male avatars.

Two avatars of unknown gender (Example 17) display human characters whose gender is not obvious from their physical characteristics or dress. These avatars were represented in two of the coding categories and each is an exclusive coding, baggy clothing and eyes covered.

Four avatars were non-human characters, including a bunch of cherries and a gnome. These avatars were represented in none of the coding categories.

The 16 graphical avatars (Example 17) were those that show purely textual and graphical elements. These avatars were represented in two coding categories. 56.25% were combination avatars utilizing combinations of graphics, often publicly available, and text to create a unique avatar. 25% were tagged as belong to a “gang” or group (Example 18).

## **Nicknames**

The 150 nicknames of female participants were represented in 17 categories. Those not represented were: meta comment on the anonymity of the medium, place names, and tagged as belonging to a “gang” or group. 95% use an actual name/nickname/diminutive (example 20). 51.33% utilized typography and special character sets to stylize their nicknames (example 21). Self character traits represent 28.67% (example 22). 14.67% include an age related component (example 23). Sex-related comments were present in 14.67% (example 24). 10.00% were provocative comments, not sexually provocative (example 25). The category literature, fairy tales, characters from film, plays, and television account for 8.67% of the female nicknames (example 26). Social/Status comments also account for 8.67% of the nicknames (example 27). 5.33% were flora and fauna nicknames (example 28). 5.33% were also stating their relationships to other (example 29). Inanimate objects constitute 2.67% (example 30). Famous people & groups were seen in 2.00% (example 31). Five categories represent 1.33% of the categories. These include, ethereal (example 32), multiple chatters (example 33), onomatopoeia (example 34), popular sayings (example 35), and technology related (example 36).

The 112 male nicknames were represented in categories except onomatopoeia. 63.39% utilize actual name/nickname/diminutive (example 37). Self character traits were seen in 25.00% (example 38). 19.64% utilized typography and special characters in their nickname choice (example 39). 11.61% were sex-related (example 40). Famous people/groups contribute 9.82% (example 41). 8.04% were tagged as belonging to a “gang” or group (example 42). Age related nicknames appear in 5.36% (example 43). The category literature, fairy tales, characters from film, plays, and television account for 5.36% (example 44). 4.46% were provocative (example 45). Three categories account for 3.57% each. These include, place names (example 46), relationships to others (example 45), and technology related (example 47). Inanimate objects were found in

2.68%, (example 45). Both flora & fauna (example 48), and meta comment on the anonymity of the medium constitute (example 49) 1.79% each. Four categories constitute 0.89% each: ethereal, multiple chatters, popular sayings, and social/status comments.

The 134 of the nicknames of unknown gender were represented in 17 of the 20 categories. Three coding categories were not represented in this grouping, popular sayings, relationship to others, and technology related. 35.07% show self character traits in their nicknames (example 50). Typography and special characters were present in 29.85% of the nicknames. 14.93% show provocative comments. Sex-related nicknames were present in 11.19% (example 51). The category literature, fairy tales, characters from film, plays, and television account for 8.96%. Two categories account for 5.97% each, flora & fauna, and social/status comments. Three categories show 5.22% each, inanimate objects, ethereal, and tagged as belonging to a “gang” or group. 4.48% utilize famous people/group names. Three categories account for 3.73% each, name/nickname/diminutive, age related, and meta-comment on the anonymity of the medium. 2.99% of the nicknames were onomatopoeia. 2.24% were place names. Finally 0.75% indicated multiple chatters utilizing a single nickname.

## Qualitative Results

### Avatars

**Table 1**

<b>Avatars</b>	
<b>Female</b>	58
<b>Males</b>	36
<b>With Both Female and Male</b>	3
<b>Unknown Gender</b>	2
<b>Non-Human</b>	4
<b>Graphical</b>	16

**Table 2**

<b>Female n = 58</b>		
<b>Avatars</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>Coy Gaze</b>	39	67.24%
<b>Sexually Suggestive</b>	32	55.17%
<b>Revealing Clothing</b>	24	41.38%
<b>Exaggerated Secondary Sexual Characteristics</b>	23	39.66%
<b>Combination</b>	18	31.03%

<b>Baggy clothes</b>	17	29.31%
<b>Advertising logos</b>	7	12.07%
<b>Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group</b>	4	6.90%
<b>Eyes covered</b>	0	0.00%

**Table 3**

<b>Male</b> n = 36		
<b>Avatars</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>Baggy clothes</b>	30	83.33%
<b>Eyes covered</b>	24	66.67%
<b>Advertising logos</b>	12	33.33%
<b>Exaggerated Secondary Sexual Characteristics</b>	11	30.56%
<b>Combination</b>	7	19.44%
<b>Revealing Clothing</b>	5	13.89%
<b>Coy Gaze</b>	2	5.56%
<b>Sexually Suggestive</b>	1	2.78%
<b>Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group</b>	1	2.78%

**Table 4**

<b>Female &amp; Male</b> n = 3		
<b>Avatars</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>Baggy clothes</b>	3	100.00%
<b>Combination</b>	2	66.67%
<b>Eyes covered</b>	2	66.67%
<b>Revealing Clothing</b>	2	66.67%

<b>Sexually Suggestive</b>	2	66.67%
<b>Coy Gaze</b>	2	66.67%
<b>Exaggerated Secondary Sexual Characteristics</b>	2	67.00%
<b>Advertising logos</b>	1	33.33%
<b>Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group</b>	1	33.33%

**Table 5**

<b>Unknown Gender</b> n = 2		
<b>Avatars</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>Baggy clothes</b>	1	50.00%
<b>Eyes Covered</b>	1	50.00%
<b>Advertising logos</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Combination</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Coy Gaze</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Exaggerated Secondary Sexual Characteristics</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Revealing Clothing</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Sexually Suggestive</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group</b>	0	0.00%

**Table 6**

<b>Non-Human</b> n = 4		
<b>Avatars</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>Advertising logos</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Baggy clothes</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Combination</b>	0	0.00%

<b>Coy Gaze</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Exaggerated Secondary Sexual Characteristics</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Eyes covered</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Revealing Clothing</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Sexually Suggestive</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group</b>	0	0.00%

**Table 7**

<b>Graphical</b> n = 16		
<b>Avatars</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>Combination</b>	9	56.25%
<b>Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group</b>	4	25.00%
<b>Advertising logos</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Baggy clothes</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Coy Gaze</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Exaggerated Secondary Sexual Characteristics</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Eyes Covered</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Revealing Clothing</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Sexually Suggestive</b>	0	0.00%

**Nicknames**

**Table 8**

<b>Nicknames</b>	
<b>Female</b>	150
<b>Male</b>	112

Unknown Gender	134
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**Table 9**

<b>Female</b> n =150		
<b>Nicknames</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>Actual name/Nickname (diminutive)</b>	95	63.33%
<b>Typography</b>	77	51.33%
<b>Self character traits</b>	43	28.67%
<b>Age related</b>	22	14.67%
<b>Sex-related</b>	22	14.67%
<b>Provocative</b>	15	10.00%
<b>Literature, fairy tales, characters from films, plays, television</b>	13	8.67%
<b>Social/status comments</b>	13	8.67%
<b>Flora &amp; fauna</b>	8	5.33%
<b>Relationships to others</b>	8	5.33%
<b>Inanimate objects</b>	4	2.67%
<b>Famous people/groups</b>	3	2.00%
<b>Ethereal</b>	2	1.33%
<b>Multiple chatters</b>	2	1.33%
<b>Onomatopoeia</b>	2	1.33%
<b>Popular sayings</b>	2	1.33%
<b>Technology related</b>	2	1.33%
<b>Meta comment on the anonymity of the medium</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Place names</b>	0	0.00%
<b>Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group</b>	0	0.00%

**Table 10**

<b>Male</b> n = 112		
<b>Nicknames</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Percentages</b>

<b>Actual name/Nickname (diminutive)</b>	71	63.39%
<b>Self character traits</b>	28	25.00%
<b>Typography</b>	22	19.64%
<b>Sex-related</b>	13	11.61%
<b>Famous people/groups</b>	11	9.82%
<b>Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group</b>	9	8.04%
<b>Age related</b>	6	5.36%
<b>Literature, fairy tales, characters from films, plays, television</b>	6	5.36%
<b>Provocative</b>	5	4.46%
<b>Place names</b>	4	3.57%
<b>Relationships to others</b>	4	3.57%
<b>Technology related</b>	4	3.57%
<b>Inanimate objects</b>	3	2.68%
<b>Flora &amp; fauna</b>	2	1.79%
<b>Meta comment on the anonymity of the medium</b>	2	1.79%
<b>Ethereal</b>	1	0.89%
<b>Multiple chatters</b>	1	0.89%
<b>Popular sayings</b>	1	0.89%
<b>Social/status comments</b>	1	0.89%
<b>Onomatopoeia</b>	0	0.00%

**Table 11**

<b>Unknown Gender</b>		
n = 134		
<b>Nicknames</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>Self character traits</b>	47	35.07%
<b>Typography</b>	40	29.85%
<b>Provocative</b>	20	14.93%
<b>Sex-related</b>	15	11.19%

Literature, fairy tales, characters from films, plays, television	12	8.96%
Flora & fauna	8	5.97%
Social/status comments	8	5.97%
Inanimate objects	7	5.22%
Ethereal	7	5.22%
Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group	7	5.22%
Famous people/groups	6	4.48%
Name/Nickname (diminutive)	5	3.73%
Age related	5	3.73%
Meta comment on the anonymity of the medium	5	3.73%
Onomatopoeia	4	2.99%
Place names	3	2.24%
Multiple chatters	1	0.75%
Popular sayings	0	0.00%
Relationships to others	0	0.00%
Technology related	0	0.00%

## Examples



Coy Gaze (Female)

Example 1



Sexually Suggestive (Female)

Example 2



Revealing Clothing (Female)

Example 3



Exaggerated Secondary Sexual Characteristics (Female)

Example 4



Combination (Female)

Example 5



Baggy Clothing (Female)

Example 6



Advertising logos (Female)

Example 7



Tagged as belonging to a "gang" or group (Female)

Example 8



Baggy Clothing (Male)

Example 9



Eyes Obscured (Male)

Example 10



Advertising logos (Male)

Example 11



Exaggerated Secondary Sexual Characteristics

(Male)

Example 12

Tae Tae



REALITY IS AN ILLUSION CAUSED  
BY A LACK OF ALCOHOL

Combination & Tagged as belonging to a “gang” or

group (Male)

Example 13



Revealing Clothing (Male)

Example 14



Coy Gaze (Male)

Example 15



Sexually Suggestive (Male)

Example 16



Unknown Gender

Example 17



Combination (Unknown Gender)

Example 18



Tagged as belonging to a “gang” or group (Unknown Gender)

Example 19

Example	Nickname
20	Kristine
21	*~DeNeLLe~*
22	Ashley ~Pure Sugar~
23	Devil_babygrl_17
24	READY TO SCREW 2 HOT CHICKS
25	*^Prettie Mandy^^ *~Jason's Angel~* æAn Angel To Sum But A Bitch To Othersæ<
26	*~juliet~*(14F)

27	~Buffy~ *Single and looking* *Beauty Runs Within*
28	KITTEN.....SOFT,CUDDLY,PLAYFUL,WITHCLAWS
29	Tracey14/Step-DaddysGirl
30	*aShLeIgh* ....DiScOmBoBuLaTeD.... -I Had to Fall to Lose it All- ^In the End it Doesn't Even Matter^ a.k.a .....:Lil Green Bong:.....
31	~*Twiztid kLown girL*~
32	~§~Prin(c)ess °f the Night~§~
33	MandyandChristina
34	Lzzy
35	~*Spoiled Brat*~(F)
36	Sugar & Spice (ICQ)
37	RON
38	SoUrBoY420
39	jøë jøë Death be not prompt Thou so have called me mighty and dreadful Thou art not so Quote of Children of Bodom
40	HooTer Lover
41	No limit soldier
42	Snowboarder Boy Creator of the Hard Core Snowboarders
43	HOT GUY 16
44	MAKAVELI ***kandi's man 4life*****LEADER OF THA MURDERERS*****CO-LEADA OF THA GANGSTA BOYZ***
45	JaKoB *The Voice In Your Head* *The Super Seeexay Pieemp* *Burnin Buddies With Sle And Jack* *Weapon Of Choice Platinum Lighter With DoCkTa JaKoB Writin On It In Dimonds And A Can Of Gas* *Down With The Klowns 4 Life* *Body Gaurd Of Sle and Wizz* *I walk with a lieemp cuz i'm da greatest Pieemp* *Pieemps in the front freeks in the back push em all into the cadalacs
46	jim alone in dorm

47	matt (webcam)
48	k_dog
49	(M)e
50	~Hype~ ~CO-LEADA OF THE 2 RIPPED 4 U CREW~ I HAD TO FALL TO LOSE TO IT ALL
51	~spicy~

## Discussion & Conclusions

The Bechar-Israeli (1995) coding format was not best suited to this data set. The low numbers identified show that the adolescents were selecting nicknames from different realms or with different motivations than the mostly adult IRC participants from whom the coding scheme was developed. A future challenge will be to develop a scheme that more closely mirrors this participant group.

In reviewing both the avatar and nickname categories several overarching interpretations present themselves. Umiker-Sebeok (1996) in her semiotic analysis of magazine advertising describes ritualized subordination as the female's pictured adopt posture which indicate submission to control of others. Adolescent females avatars show this characteristic in coy gazes, sexually suggestiveness, adopting revealing clothing styles, idealized bodies (Exaggerated Secondary Sexual Characteristics), and utilizing sex-related nicknames.

Ware & Stuck (1985) in their content analysis of computer magazines advertisements found that many stereotypical portrayals were found. Men appear more often than women; women were relegated to roles as clerical worker or sex object. The current study shows that sex object identification has continued through avatar and nickname selection.

Adolescent females also advertise their true selves by utilizing nicknames that advertise their age, actual name/nickname/diminutive, self character traits, and showing their originality by utilizing innovative typography in their nicknames.

Umiker-Sebeok (1996) also found that "psychological withdrawal from the social context (males stay attuned and ready for potential threats to their control of the situation while females' attention drifts away)." (pg. 3) One common way to signify withdrawal is to cover the face. In this study male participants showed this characteristic more than females, distancing and obscuring the self through covered eyes, and baggy clothing.

While the adolescent male must "disconnect, must separate himself, must assert his right to be distinct," they also strive to create in group connects as shown through the use of logos on clothing. (pg.81) (Archer 1993)

Finally adolescent males strive to be known for their true selves in the same way as adolescent females. They advertise their true selves by using their actual name/nickname/diminutive, self character traits, and showing their originality by utilizing innovative typography in their nicknames.

Previous writes including Bruckman (1993), have discussed that participants who adopt nicknames that do not disclose their gender are often female. In this study it had been expected that the participants who adopted personas of unknown gender would mirror the categories used by identified female participants. It was interesting that this expectation was not born out. Participants in this study mirrored the advertising of the true self, using both self character traits and typography innovatively. The participants in this group do take the anonymity of their status to utilize provocative nicknames to challenge and agitate the chat space.

### **Implications**

The primary implication of this study is that adolescents vary from established research findings based in adults in chat spaces. Research on adolescents in CMC spaces has been limited, Thomas (2000) she found through her ethnographic study of children (8 – 15), in the Palace 3D environment, that are “learning to converse with new semiotic systems, some of which directly relate to computer programming cues, other are signs of their own invention, both of which combine to create a new form of text which requires correct interpretation for inclusively in the cyber world of children.” (pg. 13) Part of this new semiotic system is bound within and around their developing sense of gender for themselves, and their expectations of others. Further research is needed to establish how contact with other adolescents through computer-mediated environments impacts and is impacted by their personal explorations.

### **Suggestions for future research**

First it appears that nickname selections of adolescents in internet based chat spaces vary from those of adults in IRC spaces. A coding scheme that more accurately reflects these participants must be developed.

Of the 119 avatars reviewed for this study only three avatars represented non-white persons. Two show groups of adolescent males, dressed in hip-hop style and pointing guns at the viewer. The third is a photo of a famous Hispanic actress who is scantily clad and shown in a suggestive pose. Additional research is needed to evaluate the representation of race in adolescent chat spaces.

Additional gender research is suggested by this study. A full semiotic analysis of the nickname, avatar, HTML formatting, etc as a single unit of analysis may show additional insight into adolescent behavior in CMC spaces.

The addition of discourse analysis and interviews, and/or ethnographic research to this study would allow the researcher to evaluate the participants intended messages and the messages received by avatar and nickname selections.

Finally this study raises research questions relating to the creators of the avatars and those that maintain the publicly available avatar libraries from which most of the avatars in this study were selected: What are their genders, how do they make design decisions, what messages do they perceive are sent by their designs.

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