Emotional Bond between the Creator and the Avatar: Changes in Behavioral Intentions to Engage in Alcohol-Related Traffic Risk Behaviors

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Alcohol-impaired driving by college students is public concern and alcohol-related traffic injuries and deaths have persistently increased over the years. The present study examines the joint impact of relationship with one’s avatar and negative consequences to the avatar on changing behavioral intentions (CBI) in terms of driving while intoxicated. One hundred eleven participants volunteered to participate in several experimental conditions where the degree of choice of avatar features and the degree of active control of the avatar were manipulated in Second Life, an immersive 3D avatar-based virtual environment. Participants who were allowed to customize their avatar viewed their avatar more similar and emotionally close to themselves and more physically attractive than those who were assigned a basic avatar. Participants in the choice and control condition were more likely to change BI positively when they identified their avatar as similar to themselves and viewed their avatar as more attractive. In the choice-only condition, the higher degree of similarity judgment about the avatar was positively associated with CBI. In the control-only condition, participants’ lower level of alcohol drinking and previous negative experience with alcohol-related automobile accidents led to CBI. After observing the car accident due to an intoxicated driver, in the choice and control condition, participants’ higher alcohol consumption and negative driving experience while intoxicated were positively associated with the degree of relationship with their avatar, and influenced participants’ willingness to change BI positively. Participants who were allowed to control their avatar were more likely to attribute the responsibility of the car crash to themselves than those who observed someone else’s avatar playing. Participants who felt distressed about the car crash also blamed their
avatar and themselves for the accident. Implications for the use of virtual reality games in promoting healthy behaviors are discussed in detail.