

AVATARS IN DIGITAL CULTURE: A PRISMA SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND RESEARCH AGENDA

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Agradecimento à orgão de fomento:

This work was supported by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES) and the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Administração (PROPAD) at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE).

Introdução

Digital transformation has dematerialized both goods and identities, positioning avatars as symbolic expressions of subjectivity within virtual environments (Belk, 2013). Avatars mediate social relationships, learning processes, and consumption practices across immersive digital ecosystems, shaping an online society that mirrors the physical one. These interactions unfold within technocultural contexts that reconfigure social bonds beyond physical constraints, where technology both shapes and is shaped by culture and human desire (Kozinets, 2023).

Problema de Pesquisa e Objetivo

Despite the growing academic interest in avatars, the field remains marked by conceptual fragmentation and thematic dispersion, hindering theoretical consolidation (Miao et al., 2021). The lack of a systematic mapping calls for a critical review that integrates diverse approaches and recent developments. This article aims to map key themes and emerging topics between 2014 and 2024, identify patterns and disruptions in the literature, and propose a future research agenda focused on consumption, digital identity, ethics, and the metaverse.

Fundamentação Teórica

Once a religious symbol, the avatar has become a central figure in digital technoculture, representing the fusion of user identity and technology (Woods, 2021). Within virtual environments, it expresses subjectivities, social practices, and symbolic consumption. Games and social media amplify this presence, enabling digital experiences marked by immaterial possessions and self-performativity (Belk, 2013). The avatar is no longer limited to three-dimensional characters; it also embodies a virtual presence, acting as a cultural agent that both reflects human experiences in digital contexts.

Discussão

Studies on avatars have evolved from an instrumental use toward identity-based, cultural, and economic approaches. This review mapped eight core themes: information technology, identity, personalization, social challenges, education, gaming, immersive realities, and the metaverse. Avatars have become embedded within technocultural and commercial ecosystems, expanding both their symbolic and functional roles (Soliman et al., 2024). Based on the gaps identified, the proposed research agenda encourages exploration of agency, consumption, and ethical dilemmas in emerging digital contexts.

Conclusão

The concept of the avatar has progressed from a functional tool to a symbolic mediator of identity, consumption, and individual agency within immersive digital ecosystems. Its properties are inherently multidisciplinary, depending on the context of use, which complicates attempts at a fixed definition. Rather than seeking a rigid conceptualization, it is essential to acknowledge the avatar as an evolving form of digital embodiment, closely tied to the development of human subjectivity and technological culture.

Contribuição / Impacto

This study offers three key academic contributions: it demonstrates the interdisciplinary expansion in avatar research; it highlights the desubstantialization of virtual identity, interweaving symbolic consumption and technoculture; and it identifies conceptual gaps that hinder a consolidated theoretical understanding, offering a foundation for future studies. From a managerial perspective, avatars represent strategic tools for engagement, inclusion, and identity-building, making the management of digital presence increasingly critical in brand-user interactions across immersive experiences.

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