

## **Behind the Avatar: Investigating Self-Disclosure in Digitally Embodied Communication**

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Date: As of now  
Type: Bachelor's Thesis  
Language: German or English

### **Motivation:**

In digital interactions, self-disclosure—the act of revealing personal information—is essential for building social bonds, fostering empathy, and enabling authentic communication. However, in virtual environments, especially those involving anonymity or distance, individuals may struggle to engage in meaningful self-disclosure due to lack of nonverbal cues or concerns over judgment. Avatars, as customizable visual representations of users, offer a unique mechanism for shaping identity expression and perceived safety in virtual contexts. Understanding how avatars influence the willingness and depth of self-disclosure is crucial for designing inclusive and emotionally resonant digital platforms, from virtual therapy to online learning and social VR.

### **Goal:**

This thesis explores how human-controlled avatars affect users' willingness to engage in self-disclosure during virtual interactions. It seeks to identify which avatar characteristics, such as visual anonymity, anthropomorphism, and customization, promote or hinder self-disclosure across different contexts (e.g., one-on-one vs. group settings, casual vs. structured tasks). Drawing from relevant theories, the thesis will examine the role avatars play in mediating social risk and trust during personal information exchange. By focusing on human-operated avatars (rather than AI agents), this research aims to uncover design principles that support emotionally open and psychologically safe virtual environments.

### **References and Related Literature:**

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