Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa
Vol 14, No 1, (2025) 123-128
ISSN 2301-5942 (print) | 2580-2380 (online)
https://dx.doi.org/10.24114/gr.v14i1. 65711

Available online : https://jurnal.unimed.ac.id/2012/index.php/gorga

The Impact of Simulacra in Life Simulation Games "Second Life" on Generation Z's Self-Confidence

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***How to cite*:** Ramadhini, D. A. & Ratri, D. (2025). The Impact of Simualcra in Life Simulation Games "Second Life" on Generation Z's Self Confidence. *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, *14* (1), 123-128. https://dx.doi.org/10.24114/gr.v14i1.65711

Article History : *Received: May 15, 2024. Revised: June 2, 2025. Accepted: June 30, 2025*

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary digital landscape, virtual environments have transcended their initial role as mere entertainment platforms into pivotal arenas for identity formation and self-expression. Notably, among Generation Z, digital natives raised in the midst of rapidly evolving technology, platforms such as Second Life provide immersive opportunities for the construction and live experience of digital avatars. These avatars often embody idealized versions of individuals, embodying characteristics or confidence that may be challenging to achieve in real-world interactions. This study delves into the impact of self-representation through avatars on self-confidence among Generation Z players. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach, in-depth online interviews were conducted with five selected respondents. The analysis was guided by Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra. The findings suggest that avatars initially serve as reflections of players' identities but subsequently evolve into autonomous digital selves that shape behavior and perception. For many participants, engaging with their avatars fostered increased self-confidence and a sense of social ease within the virtual environment. However, the study also uncovered instances of emotional dissonance and psychological distance experienced by players who felt more authentic as their avatars compared to their real-life selves. These outcomes align with the third order of simulacra, hyperreality, where representation becomes a new reality. This research underscores the profound influence of virtual platforms on self-perception and emphasizes the necessity for a comprehensive interdisciplinary exploration of digital identity, particularly as younger generations continue to blur the boundaries between physical and virtual selfhood.

KEYWORDS

Simulacra, Second Life, Self Confidence, Avatar, Generation Z.

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, the line between the physical and virtual worlds is becoming increasingly blurred. Technological advancements have enabled individuals to craft and embody personal identities within digital spaces that closely mimic real life. One such example is life simulation games, which allow players to design their characters, build entire environments, and live out virtual experiences based on their own desires (Turkle, 1995, 2011).

Second Life, in particular, stands out as a pioneering platform in this domain. Launched as an open-ended simulation game, it empowers users to create digital personas, engage in complex social interactions, and participate in a virtually constructed society. For Generation Z, digital natives who have grown up immersed in online ecosystems. Second Life serves as more than a recreational activity. It becomes a critical venue for identity exploration and personal expression. The avatars they craft often represent idealized versions of themselves, embodying qualities, appearances, or

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confidence levels that may be difficult to attain in real-world contexts.

Figure 1. Second Life's Avatar
(Source: secondlife.com)

The process of digital self-construction through avatars is increasingly being recognized as an important cultural and psychological phenomenon. Putri & Siahaan (2021) highlight how online platforms have emerged as essential arenas for shaping visual identity, especially in ways that resonate with socially accepted norms. Similarly, Rahmawati & Aprilianti (2019) observe that adolescents often rely on social media and virtual identities to negotiate and express aspects of the self that are otherwise constrained by societal expectations or offline environments. This behavior is echoed in games like Second Life, where the avatar acts as both a visual symbol and a performative tool, one that players use to experiment with identity in a space that feels safer, freer, and more validating.

Digital identity through avatars is not merely symbolic but also performative. As noted by Bloustien & Wood (2013), avatars provide a means to express parts of the self that might be suppressed or hidden in everyday life. In many cases, players report feeling more authentic and liberated within their virtual identity than in their offline reality. This raises a critical question: how does living through digital representation impact self-perception and confidence?

Subekti (2021) supports this perspective by suggesting that the emergence of digital identity is a form of social adaptation, particularly for younger generations responding to increasingly complex cultural environments shaped by media saturation and networked communication. These identities are not just playful inventions; they are strategic and emotional responses to the limitations and pressures of real-world self-presentation.

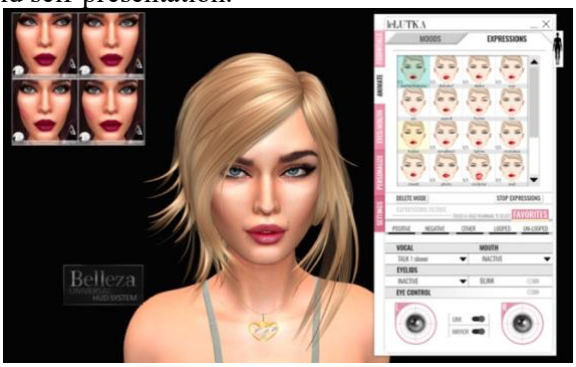

Figure 2. Second Life
(Source: secondlife.com)

To frame this phenomenon, this study adopts (Baudrillard, 1994, 2016) theory of simulacra. According to Baudrillard, in postmodern culture, representation can evolve to the point where it becomes "more real" than reality itself. He defines three stages of simulation: the first order, where representation reflects reality; the second, where it distorts reality; and the third, hyperreality—where the representation no longer refers to any real source and instead constructs its own version of reality. Within the context of avatars, these three stages can be seen in how players craft their digital selves: initially imitating their real appearance, then idealizing it, and finally living through a version they feel emotionally connected to.

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Figure 3. Example of Simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994, 2016)
(Source: Self-Representation in Digital Media: A Symbolic Study Among Adolescents Siregar & Piliang (2022)

Avatars in Second Life are not just graphical models or player-controlled entities, they can evolve into psychologically resonant versions of the self. They often become trusted proxies that offer players a sense of agency, social fluency, and even emotional refuge. Research by Zhang & Fung (2014) affirms that users who construct idealized avatars frequently experience elevated levels of self-confidence and social ease. However, these benefits come with potential drawbacks. Boellstorff (2008) cautions against the risks of over-identification with virtual personas, including feelings of alienation and confusion when the gap between digital and physical identity becomes too wide to reconcile.

Given this context, the present study aims to examine how digital self-representation through avatars in Second Life influences self-confidence among Generation Z players, with Baudrillard's concept of simulacra serving as the core analytical framework.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore how players' experiences in using avatars within *Second Life* influence their self-confidence. The theoretical foundation of the analysis is grounded in the concept of simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994, 2016), which serves as the central lens for understanding the interplay between virtual reality and personal identity.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with selected *Second Life* users. From the total pool of responses, five were chosen for further qualitative analysis, based on the following criteria:

1) Belonging to Generation Z (ages 18–25)
2) Active involvement in the game *Second Life*
3) Ability to articulate the connection between their avatar and their self-confidence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and interpretation derived from a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with five selected participants. Four key themes emerged from this study:

1. Avatars as Ideal Selves

Most respondents described their avatars as enhanced versions of themselves, taller, more attractive, and more confident. These avatars served as a way to express sides of themselves they felt unable to show in the real world.

"My avatar is basically the perfect version of myself. Taller, neater, and way more stylish. A version I can't really show in real life." – Respondent A

This finding suggests that avatars are not just superficial elements of the game but are deeply personal tools for self-expression. Avatar design becomes a visual manifestation of aspirations or identities that may feel unattainable in real life due to physical or social limitations.

This is not unique to local contexts. Revna (2023), a Second Life player interviewed by the blog New World Notes, shared:

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"My inspiration to my avatar was to not stray too far from my own resemblance. After all, she is me! I changed her eye color because I've always wanted different colored eyes than brown. That about sums it up."

These insights are further supported by Goffman (1959) dramaturgical theory, which emphasizes the distinction between "front stage" and "back stage" personas in social life. In virtual spaces, avatars become the front stage, a curated identity that users control to reflect their best or most aspirational selves. They serve as strategic tools for self-presentation, designed to navigate social expectations or personal ideals.

Pratama (2020) also noted that virtual environments allow younger generations to express themselves more freely and imaginatively. In this sense, avatars are no longer mere visual symbols they are vehicles for personal actualization, enabling individuals to explore dimensions of identity constrained by real-world cultural, social, or psychological barriers.

This phenomenon reflects what (Baudrillard, 1994, 2016) identifies as the second order of simulacra, where digital representations no longer mirror reality but instead construct an idealized self that the user comes to embrace more than the factual one.

Figure 4. Jocely Adeline Revna (2023) dan Avatarnya
(Source: New World Notes)

2. Virtual Increased Confidence in Virtual Worlds

The virtual world of games like *Second Life* offers a safe space where players can express themselves without fear or social pressure. Several participants reported feeling more liberated and confident when engaging in this digital environment.

Respondent C, for instance, shared:

"In real life, I tend to be shy. But in Second Life, I can chat, play, and even perform. I feel freer and braver."

Similarly, Respondent D noted, *"I usually avoid public appearances, especially in front of crowds. But when I'm dancing or performing in Second Life, I feel more courageous."*

These observations align with the *Proteus Effect* (Yee & Bailenson, 2007), a phenomenon where the appearance and attributes of an avatar can influence the user's behavior and self-perception. A confident or attractive avatar does not only represent the self externally but also encourages internal shifts in attitude and behavior. In this context, avatars are not just expressive tools but active agents in shaping psychological experience.

When viewed through the lens of simulacra theory, this suggests that digital representations begin to function as autonomous psychological realities. The virtual world becomes an extension or

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even a replacement, of lived reality, deeply impacting users' sense of identity.

3. Tension Between Virtual and Real-World Identity

Despite the emotional benefits of virtual engagement, several respondents also experienced inner conflict. Some felt emotionally distanced from their real-life selves, even disappointed upon returning to reality.

Respondent D, shared:

"When you spend too much time in the game, it gets hard to detach. You realize everything feels easier there than in real life, and that's frustrating." – Respondent D

And, Respondent E, said:

"I prefer my avatar to my real-life self—it's just better in every way." – Respondent E

These reflections hint at the potential long-term psychological risks of over-identifying with a virtual persona, including emotional detachment and blurred boundaries between self and simulation.

4. The Three Orders of Simulacra

This study's findings can be mapped onto (Baudrillard, 1994, 2016) theory of simulacra, which describes how representations evolve from imitations of reality to independent realities of their own.

(Turkle, 1995, 2011) similarly argues that while digital engagement may simulate closeness, it can also foster isolation and emotional disconnection.

- First Order: Representation as Mirror

At the initial stage, avatars function as direct imitations of their creators. The digital identity remains closely tied to physical reality. Some respondents mentioned that they tried to make their avatars look as similar to themselves as possible:

"My avatar looks just like me—same skin tone, same hair, same style."

At this point, players still view their avatars as reflections rather than separate identities.

- Second Order: Distortion of Reality

In this stage, avatars begin to diverge from reality. Players modify body shape, clothing style, and even speech to portray a more idealized version of themselves. The digital image no longer merely imitates but starts to revise and enhance reality. These changes bring a sense of satisfaction and foster new levels of self-confidence.

- Third Order: Hyperreality

At the final stage, the avatar takes on a primary identity. Players feel more like their true selves when inhabiting their avatars than when presenting themselves in real life. The virtual world becomes more emotionally vivid than the physical one. As Respondent C stated:

"My avatar feels more like me than I do."

This illustrates the notion of *hyperreality*, in which representation replaces reality as the main source of meaning and experience. For some players, especially those dealing with social pressure or dissatisfaction with themselves, the virtual space becomes a sanctuary where a more accepted and likable identity can be constructed

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that the virtual environment of *Second Life* allows Generation Z players to construct idealized representations of themselves through digital avatars. These identities go beyond simple imitation, evolving into more confident, expressive, and socially accepted versions of the self. In many cases, avatars serve as safe spaces for individuals to express aspects of their personality that remain hidden in the physical world, playing a vital role in building or restoring self-confidence.

However, the findings also highlight a tension between digital and physical identity. Players who become overly attached to their virtual selves risk experiencing a sense of disconnection from their real-world identity. Some even face identity crises when the virtual world begins to feel more authentic than their everyday reality. This shift aligns with Baudrillard's theory of *hyperreality* (Baudrillard, 1994, 2016), where representations cease to reflect reality and instead become reality for the individual.

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The broader implication of this study is that virtual worlds should not be viewed merely as spaces for entertainment, but as arenas where meaningful identity formation occurs. *Second Life*, in this context, functions not only as a game but also as a psychological space that shapes how users see and understand themselves. Game designers, educators, and mental health professionals must therefore pay closer attention to how digital representations influence players' emotional and social well-being. What was once considered a form of escapism is now deeply embedded in the psychological and social fabric of daily life, especially among younger generations.

Future research can expand this discussion by examining similar phenomena on other popular platforms such as VRChat, Roblox, or Zepeto. Additionally, further studies could explore other dimensions of digital identity, including gender, race, or social class. In doing so, the discourse on digital selfhood will not only grow globally but also become more contextually relevant within local cultural and social frameworks.

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