MIRROR, MIRROR, WHO AM I?
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF AND CHARACTERS IN COSPLAY & GAME AVATAR ROLE-PLAYING

LAU Hiu Tung Aki & Professor AU Wing Tung Winton

The Department of Psychology, the Chinese University of Hong Kong

Introduction

- In Role-playing, participants embody fictional characters that encompass both their actual and ideal selves (Identification & Self-enhancement) (Ko & Park, 2021; Rosenberg & Letamendi, 2013)

- Larger actual self-character discrepancy within the low esteem & low personality traits (e.g., low conscientiousness) groups
  - Self-Discrepancy Theory (SDT) (Higgins, 1987): humans are naturally prone to reduce the actual-ideal self discrepancy due to emotional discomfort
    - Low esteem/low traits groups possess lower actual self views and compensate shortcomings through fictional characters (Bessiere et al., 2007; Dunn & Guadagno, 2012)
  - The disproportionate attribution of positive and negative traits by low-esteem individuals (Dengah & Snodgrass, 2020)
    - Characters → more positive traits (e.g., higher on Big Five traits); Self → more negative (e.g., higher on dark traits)

- Cosplay vs. Game Avatar Role-playing
  - Similar psychological processes but different modalities of role-playing (realistic vs. virtual) & different purposes (enjoyment/love for character vs. optimization of game experience)
    - different degrees of immersion & identification might influence self-character discrepancy

Hypotheses & Questions

H1: Low-esteem/low-trait groups will rate their characters:
  - (a) Higher on Big Five traits than their actual self.
  - (b) Lower on Dark Triad traits than their actual self.

H2: High-esteem/high-trait groups will NOT show significant differences between actual self and character on both:
  - (a) Big Five traits
  - (b) Dark Traits

RQ1: How do self-esteem level and traits level influence the ideal self-character relationship?

RQ2: How the self-character relationship might vary depending on different role-playing modalities (cosplay vs. avatar)

Method

Participants (N=246): Self-identified cosplayers (n=145) & RPG avatar users (n=101), aged 18-23 (63.8%), recruited through Instagram, mainly from Hong Kong (n=151) and Mainland China (n=88)
- Measures: 1) Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSE); 2) Big Five Inventory-10; 3) Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (DTDD)
  - Low Esteem (RSE<40); High Esteem (RSE>=40); Low vs. High Personality traits (split by the median of each Big Five personality dimensions
- Participants rated their a) actual self, b) ideal self, and c) characters most frequently role-played in the past 12 months on 1) Big Five traits and 2) dark traits on a 7-point Likert Scale

Statistical Analysis: Mixed Model Analysis of Variance (3x2x2) & Follow-up simple effect analysis, SPSS 27.010
- Within-subjects Variable: Rating Target (actual self, ideal self, the character)
- Between-subjects Variables: Esteem Level (High/Low) & Target Group (Cosplay vs. Avatar); Personality Trait Level (High/Low) & Target Group (Cosplay vs. Avatar)
- The (two-way/three-way) interaction effects were mainly interpreted

Ko, D. W., & Park, J. (2021). I am you, you are me: Game character congruence with the ideal self. Internet Research, 31(2), 613–634. https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-01-2020-0032
Rosenberg, R. S., & Letamendi, A. M. (2013). Expressions of fandom: Findings from a psychological survey of cosplay and costume wear. Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media, 5(9), 11.
Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. Psychological Review, 94(3), 319–340. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.94.3.319
Bessière, K., Seay, A. F., & Kiesler, S. (2007). The ideal elf: Identity exploration in World of Warcraft. Cyberpsychology & Behavior, 10(4), 530–535. https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2007.9994
Dunn, R. A., & Guadagno, R. E. (2012). My avatar and me—Gender and personality predictors of avatar-self discrepancy. Computers in Human Behavior, 28(1), 97–106. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.08.015

Results & Discussion

H1 (a) & H2 (a)
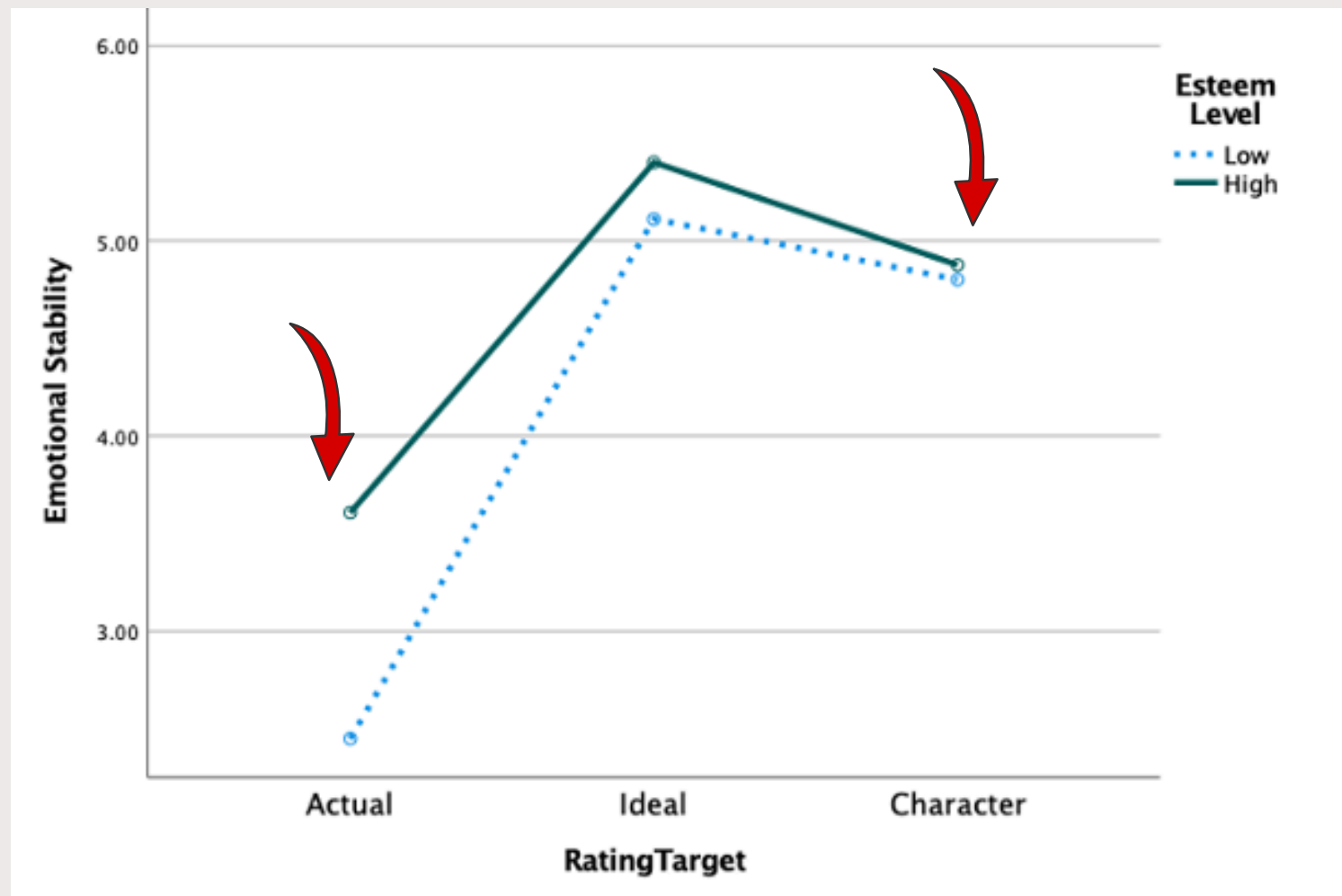
There were significant [Rating Target x Esteem Level] and [Rating Target x Trait Level] interaction effects in Big Five traits, such that H1 (a) was supported:
- Low esteem group: characters > actual self (extraversion, conscientiousness, and emotional stability)
- Low Trait group: characters > actual self (all 5 dimensions)

H2 (a) rejected by the significant actual self-character discrepancies within the high esteem/trait group:
- High esteem group: characters > actual self (conscientiousness & emotional stability, both $p<.001$)
- High trait group: characters > actual self (conscientiousness & emotional stability, both $p<.001$); characters < actual self (openness, $p<.001$ & agreeableness $p=.017$)

Example

Significant interaction on Emotional Stability: $F(1.98, 437.54) = 12.46$, $p < .001$.
- Low-esteem group: rated their characters ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.41$) more emotionally stable than their actual self ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.15$), $p < .001$.
- High-esteem group: also rated their character's stability ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.33$) higher than that of their actual self ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.25$), $p < .001$.

- Both low/high groups exhibited significant actual self-character discrepancies but the gap was larger within the low groups
  - SDT: participants are inclined to move toward the ideal self
    - This tendency is NOT exclusively for those with low esteem/disadvantageous traits
    - the larger gap within the low groups indicates compensation mechanism

H1 (b) & H2 (b)

There were significant [Rating Target x Esteem Level] and [Rating Target x Trait Level] interaction effects on Dark Traits, such that H1 (b) & H2 (b) was supported:
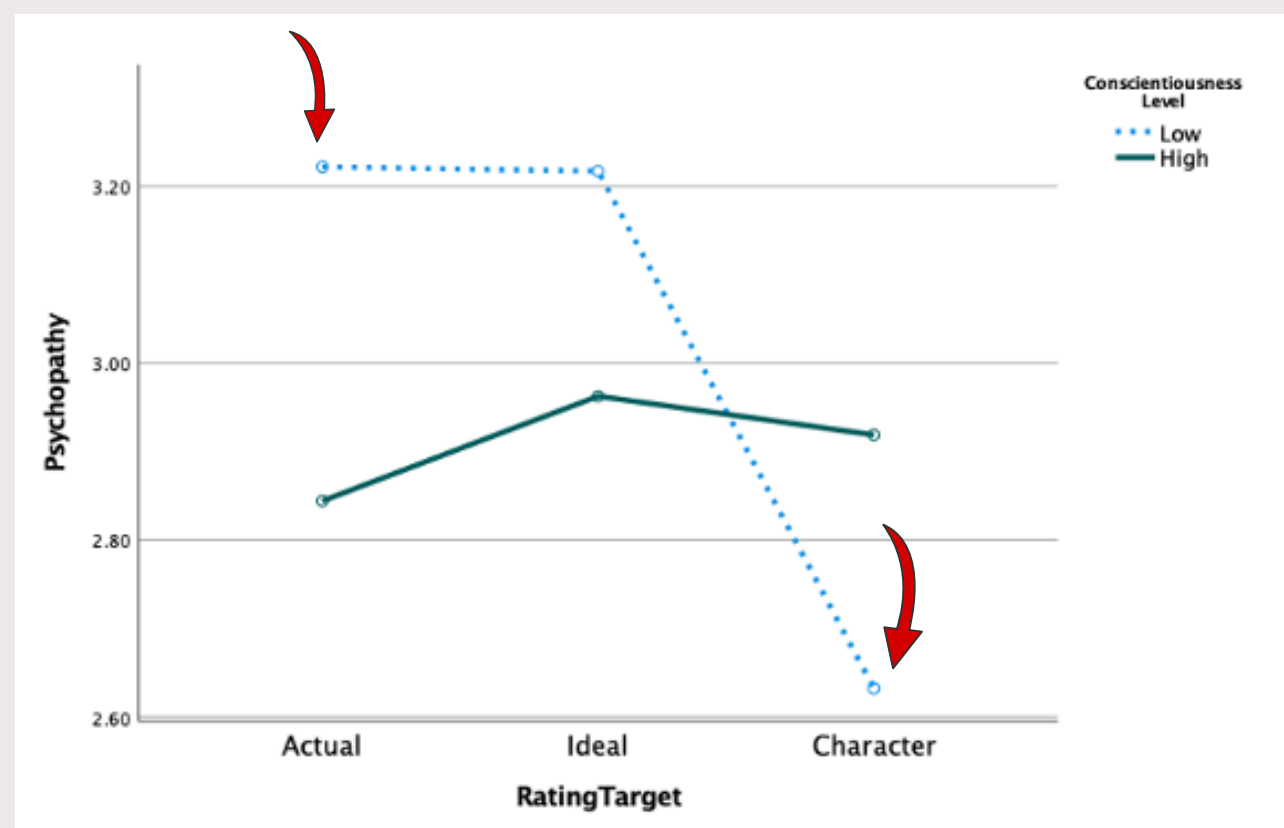- Low esteem & low trait group: characters < actual self (Machiavellianism & Psychopathy)
  - The low groups attributed more negative and undesirable traits to themselves but considered their characters morally superior
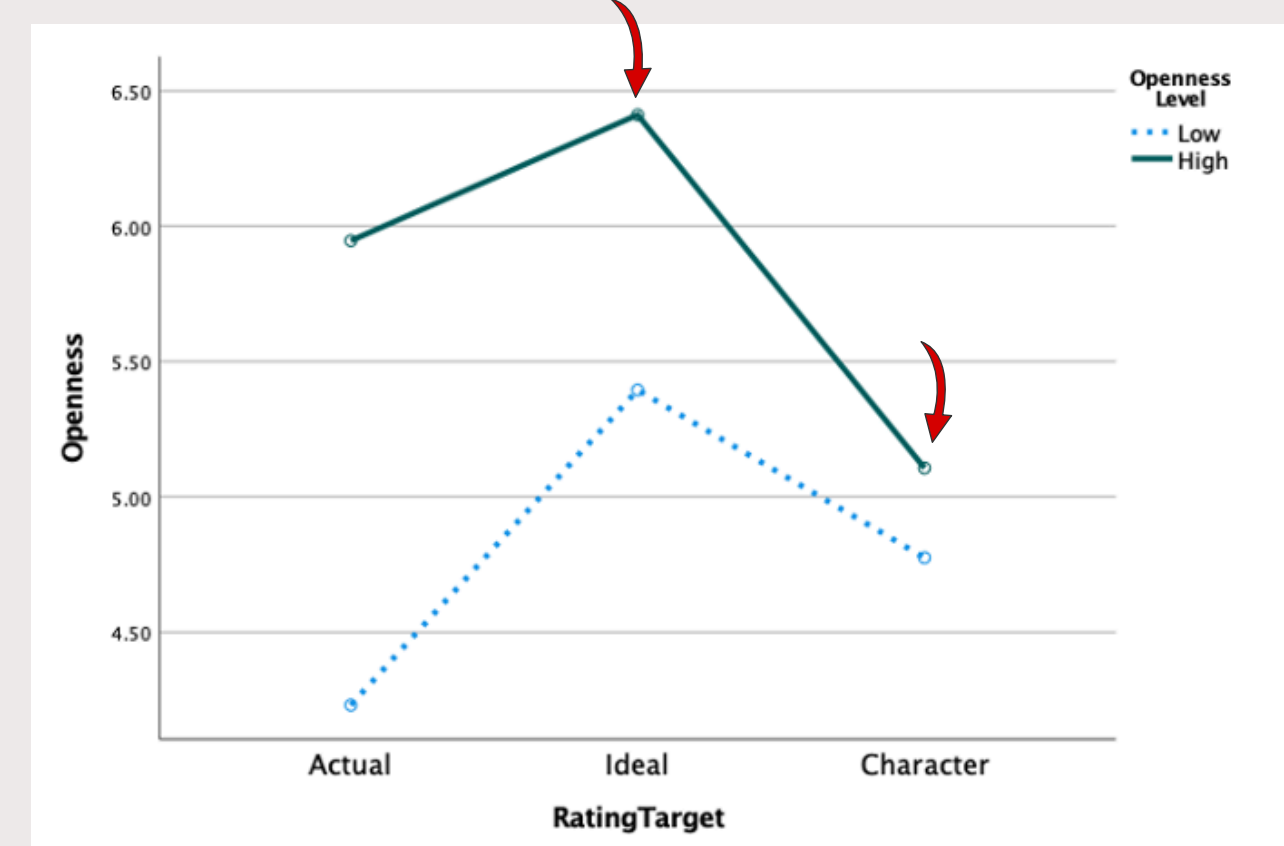
Example

Significant interaction on Psychopathy: $F(1.79, 349.81) = 6.52$, $p = .002$
- Low conscientiousness group rated their character ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.24$) LESS Psychopathic than their actual self ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.10$)

RQ01

- Both high and low groups: character < ideal self (emotional stability & openness)
  - Despite identification with the character, the fictional persona is still somewhat different from one's ideal self in reality

- The low groups: character < ideal self (Machiavellianism & Psychopathy)
  - The low groups attributed more negative traits to themselves but fewer to their characters

Example: [Rating target x Openness Level]
- $F(1.45, 270.97) = 26.746$, $p < .001$
- Both groups: character < ideal self

RQ2

- Cosplayers with low conscientiousness: character > actual self (Mactual self $= 2.41$, $SD = 0.54$; Mcharacter $= 5.57$, $SD = 1.32$; $MD = 3.16$; $p < .001$).
  - Conscientiousness is an intrinsically crucial trait for cosplayers. By role-playing highly conscientious characters, cosplayers might experience self-improvement on this self-relevant trait
  - Overall, cosplayers and avatar users might share similar psychological processes as no significant target group differences were found