Avatars Engage Generation Z

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In this paper, we examine Generation Z, the generation currently attending high school and college, our target market at the University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center. We introduce the concepts of the hero's journey (demonstrating it as a metaphor for studying abroad) and avatars (demonstrating their wide use in marketing). Then we present the various ways in which an avatar-based integrated marketing campaign was created to appeal directly to Generation Z— from print to murals to sidewalk decals to social media to video—and to encourage members of that generation to study abroad through the University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center.

Keywords: Generation Z, avatars, marketing

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Generation Z, the current high school and college generation, has a short attention span and a strong preference for imagery. To appeal to this generation and encourage them to study abroad, in 2017 the University of Minnesota Learning Abroad introduced an integrated marketing campaign featuring avatars. For the first year, the campaign featured Alex, a gender-neutral student; the following year, 11 more avatars—diverse in gender, race, major, and interests—joined the group. From 2017–2020, the avatars appeared in print materials (viewbooks, planners, stickers, posters, and flyers); social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter); sidewalk decals and murals; webpages and newsletters; animated videos; and augmented reality. The avatar campaign won innovation awards in 2018 and 2019 and continues to represent, elevate, and differentiate the Learning Abroad Center brand.

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z is a generation born from 1995 to the mid-2000s. They are digital natives and multitaskers who have a short attention span—around 8 seconds—and give up quickly if they can't find the content they need.

They highly prefer images over text, which is no surprise, since images are extremely important in today's world: Our brains process images 60,000 times faster than text. Text is 80% more likely to be read when paired with colorful visuals, and visual content is 40 times more likely to be shared on social media.

Given the prevalence of generic stock photos, there is a growing trend toward bespoke, handcrafted visuals and illustrations. Inspired by this bespoke illustration trend, we created our digital avatars, the focus of this paper, to appeal to Generation Z.

An avatar is, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary, "an embodiment (of a concept or philosophy) in a person" or "an electronic image that represents and is manipulated by a computer user in a virtual space."

The first avatar was Alex. They have a block M on their shirt to display the University of Minnesota brand, and they were meant to be the "everystudent"—representing every student at the University of Minnesota. When the students, staff, and faculty see Alex, we want them to instantly recall the Learning Abroad Center. Alex is colorful and engaging, with oversized features, similar to a video game character. From our research, we found Generation Z embraces gender fluidity, so Alex was created as a gender-neutral student with "they/them" pronouns to speak to and reflect our current students. In our focus groups, students accepted Alex with interest.

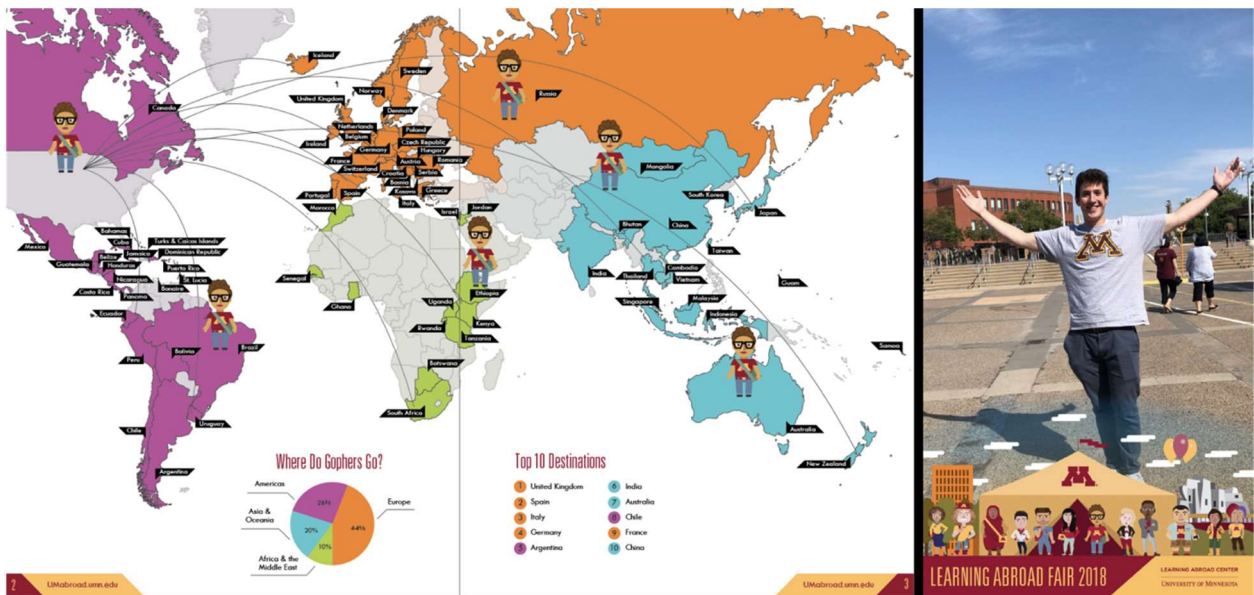**FIGURE 1**
UofM GOPHER GUIDE
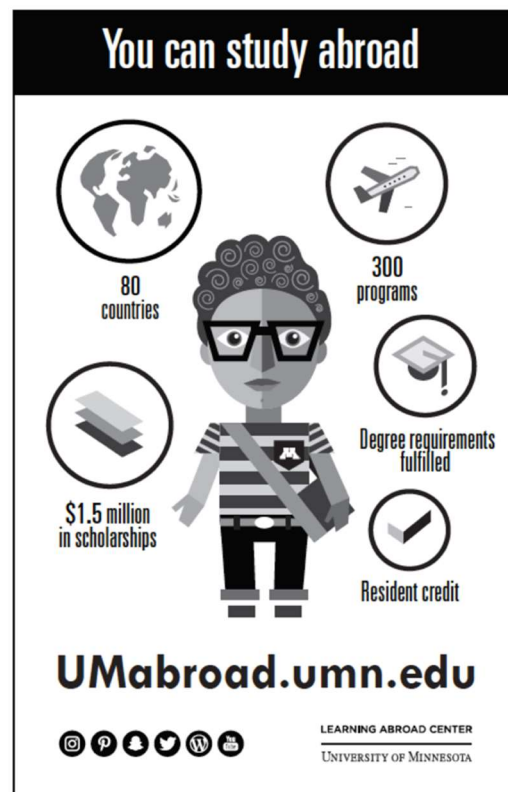
INNOVATIVE, INTEGRATED CAMPAIGN

Our goal was to reach many students in various ways through an innovative, integrated marketing campaign that included print materials (viewbooks, planners, stickers, posters, and flyers); social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter); sidewalk decals and murals; webpages and newsletters; animated videos; and augmented reality.

Gopher Guide

The very first place Alex appeared was the 2017 Gopher Guide (Figure 1), the official planner and reference guide for the University of Minnesota. Since all first-year students receive a free copy of the Gopher Guide, and more than 14,000 guides are printed and distributed each year, we opted for this way to broadly introduce our campaign to the Generation Z student audience.

FIGURE 2
LEARNING ABROAD CENTER VIEWBOOK

Viewbook and Social Media

Next, Alex the Avatar appeared in the 2017–18 Learning Abroad Center viewbook (Figure 2), a 16-page print catalog distributed to students around campus to introduce them to our office and the concept of studying abroad. In the viewbook, Alex first appeared to travel around the world on a map as students would studying abroad in those locations.

Near the back of the viewbook, they were learning about studying abroad, as well as visiting us in the Learning Abroad Center. Alex also appeared twice in an insert that was placed inside our viewbook. The avatar also represented our office on stickers, posters, and flyers promoting studying abroad to students.

Then, Alex transitioned to social media. They appeared as our "Bitmoji," a personal emoji you create to represent yourself, as well as on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, in static and animated images. For our Learning Abroad Fair, we created a Snapchat avatar geofilter, a special overlay that can only be accessed in certain locations. When students attending our fair used our geofilter while posting in the Snapchat app, their friends saw the geofilter as part of the posts, thus spreading the word and advertising our event.

FIGURE 3
THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Another other concept we implemented as part of our avatar campaign was the hero's journey (Figure 3), a circular narrative commonly used in storytelling. Since it closely resembles the type of experience that students studying abroad undergo, it was appropriate for our avatar campaign. The students—represented by Alex—begin in the reality of their hometown. Finding out about study abroad opportunities through one of our marketing materials is a call to action in which they decide to leave the ordinary world and embark on an adventure. They seek council by attending an info session to discuss their study abroad options with an adviser, then prepare for the journey ahead. Once abroad, like any hero they face a challenge—namely culture shock and difficulties adjusting to the novel environment. This is the time of trial—the learning experience—during which the hero must overcome obstacles to emerge victorious. Finally, the hero returns home forever changed.

Our online version of the hero's journey is a webpage resource for students. It outlines the steps in their future journey while linking to the corresponding services provided by our office.

FIGURE 4
LEARNING ABROAD CENTER AVATARS
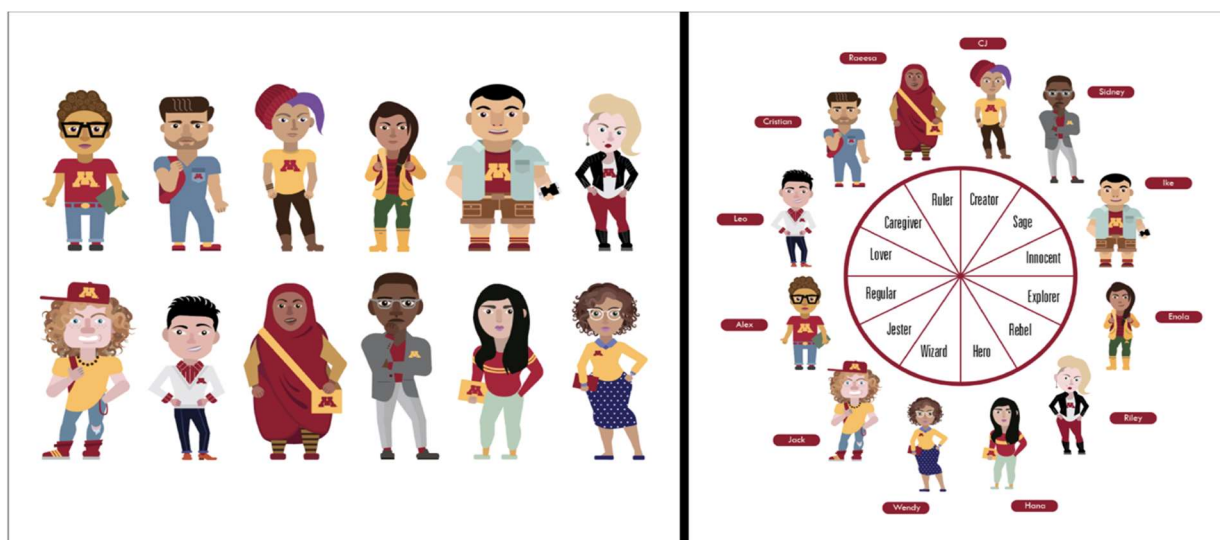
Archetypal Avatars

When Alex had been around about a year, they were due for an evolution. While initially Alex was the one-size-fits-all everystudent, we transitioned them into a cohort by creating 11 additional avatars. Alex and Friends, the new group of 12 (Figure 4), was a group of avatars based on archetypes.

An archetype, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "the original pattern or model of which all things of the same type are representations or copies" or "a perfect example." Archetypes are used extensively by companies to keep their messaging congruent. For instance, Nike uses the Hero archetype, Lego envisions itself as the creator archetype, and Harley-Davidson embodies the Rebel archetype. Each archetype represents the values and sets of behaviors that the particular company's audience finds appealing.

We selected Carl Jung's archetypes as a model for creating relatable avatars that would resonate with students. Each one was named and assigned a distinct set of characteristics, from race to gender to major to interests. They became (Figure 4, clockwise from top): Raeesa the Ruler, CJ the Creator, Sidney the Sage, Ike the Innocent, Enola the Explorer, Riley the Rebel, Hana the Hero, Wendy the Wizard, Jack the Jester, Alex the Regular, Leo the Lover, and Cristian the Caregiver.

We vetted drafts of each avatar through the University of Minnesota's Disability Resource Center (DRC), Gender and Sexuality Center for Queer and Trans Life, Multicultural Center for Academic Excellence, and Women's Center. The feedback was supportive and positive, and the final versions of the avatars incorporate their suggestions. It is our hope that most students at the University of Minnesota find an avatar who resonates with them.

FIGURE 5
AVATAR WENDY AND HER MOBILITY SCOOTER
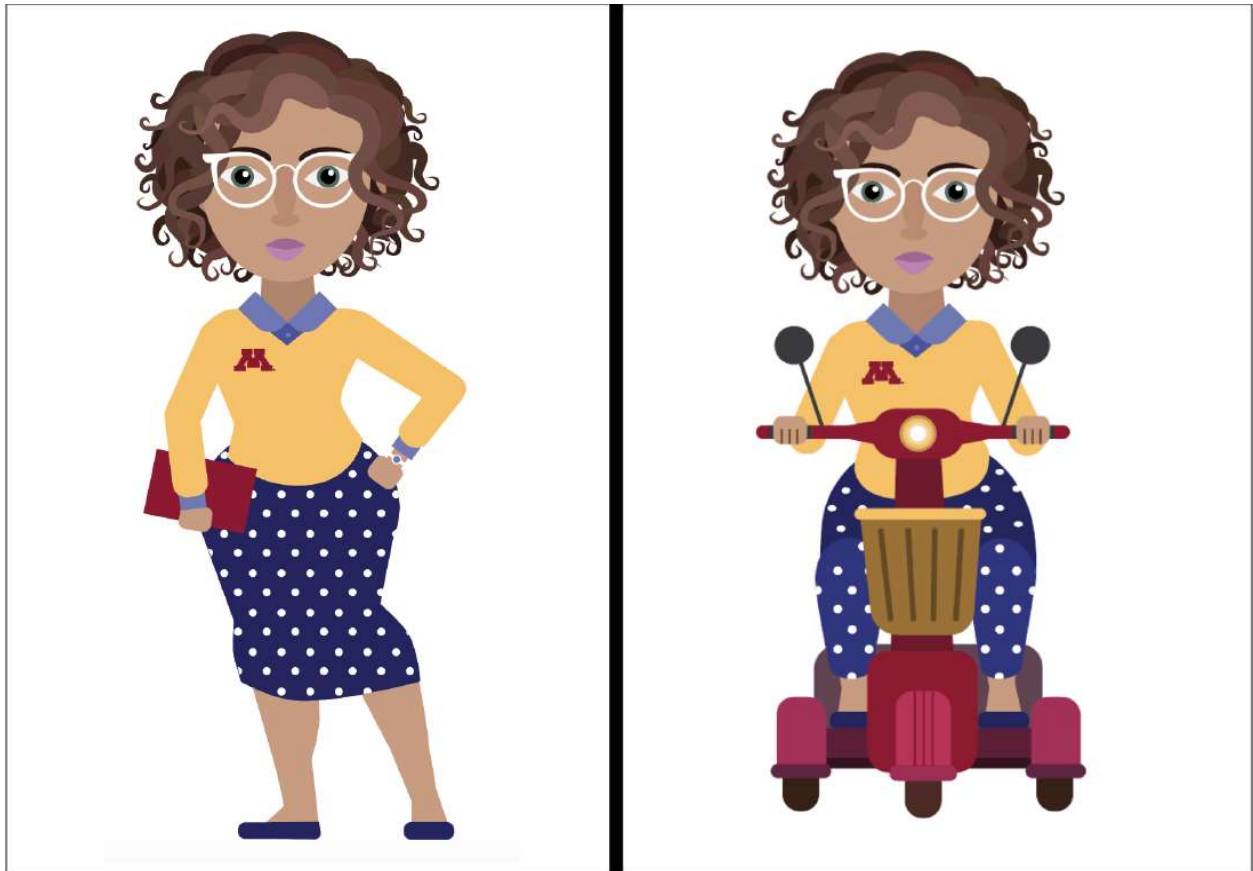
Incorporating students with a disability was one of the suggestions we received from the DRC. As such, Jack is registered through the DRC because of his non-apparent disability, depression. Also, in some cases, Wendy appears on a mobility scooter when her multiple sclerosis requires it (Figure 5). In our avatar videos, Jack inquires how his depression may affect his studying abroad, while Wendy discusses studying abroad in Australia and using accommodations to ensure traveling and getting to class was accessible.

FIGURE 6
SIDEWALK DECALS AROUND CAMPUS

Murals and Sidewalk Decals

Another place Alex has appeared is the Washington Avenue Bridge, a pedestrian bridge that connects the East Bank and West Bank of the University of Minnesota. During the university's Paint the Bridge event each year, we featured Alex the Avatar in our mural. The flat design comes across nicely in this medium, differentiates our office from the other panels on the bridge, and promotes studying abroad.

We also created adhesive sidewalk decals utilizing Alex (Figure 6). Strategically placed around campus (e.g., near building entrances where first-year students attend introductory language classes, on high-traffic sidewalks, near first-year advisers' offices), they directed student traffic to our office.

FIGURE 7
INTERACTIVE INSERT AND ANIMATED VIDEOS

Advanced Digital Innovation

Given that our Generation Z audience is at the forefront of digital trends, we have gone to great lengths to adopt the latest trends into our campaign. In 2017, we began experimenting with augmented reality, creating an interactive insert for our viewbooks that students could scan with their phones (Figure 7). It superimposed interactive content over the printed piece, allowing students to watch a video starring Alex, navigate to our website, and view our building in 3D.

We used the software Adobe Character Animator and Adobe Animate to create animated videos featuring the avatars, voiced by Learning Abroad Center staff. In the videos, the avatars discuss aspects of study abroad, including program selection, program application, financing, internships, and safety. We feature the videos on our YouTube channel and in our monthly Go Global newsletter sent to students interested in studying abroad.

Award-Winning Campaign

In May 2018, the avatar campaign was recognized as a finalist in the GoAbroad Innovation Award in the category of Innovation in Marketing and Digital Media; the following year, in May 2019, our campaign was awarded first place.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Over the last three years, Alex and the other avatars have been a hallmark of not only the Learning Abroad Center's marketing campaign, but also the Learning Abroad Center itself. Alex has acted as an office mascot, appearing everywhere from print to murals to sidewalk decals to social media to video. Together, the 12 diverse avatars represent the University of Minnesota student body; appeal to Generation Z's preference for unique, engaging imagery; and contribute to a strong, lasting campaign that reinforces the Learning Abroad Center brand.