THE SELF, THE OTHER AND THE AVATAR: ANALYSING COMMUNICATION AND IDENTITIES IN METAVERSE

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the correlation of constructs of the self, identity formation, and interpersonal communication in the context of technology mediated communication in the emerging space of metaverse. It considers the site of this interaction as a liminal space where the individual undergoes process of individuation through re-calibrating function of the body, reimagining the self, and interacting with other users. This article examines how the virtual and the physical spaces engage in a dialogue to inform and shape each other thereby engendering a phantasmagoria of fleeting images that encode a contested version of reality. By using observational and analytical methods to examine few metaverse platforms as case studies and by applying select theories of communication, this study seeks to probe into the process of interactions and identity formations in a liminal space and interrogate whether the present negotiations of the self in the virtual space of metaverse can substantially alter future understandings of interpersonal communication and individuation.

Keywords: Metaverse, Identity, Interaction, Communication, Self, Individuation

1. The Self, the Social, the Digital

From Descartes's epistemological proclamation of "I think, therefore, I am" to Heidegger's "ontological difference", the notion of self has informed major phenomenological discourses concerning individual and the social. Carl G. Jung argued that "The self is relatedness…the self appears in your deeds and deeds always mean relationship" (Jung 1935–39, p. 73 cited in Schmidt, 2017). This suggests that the self is constructed in relation to something or the "other". This relational aspect of the self makes it a dynamic construct that is reconfigured with a shift in the external environment in relation to which it is inscribed. Thus, the mutable and fluid self is produced and reproduced through a system of communication that facilitates its interaction and relation with the context within which the 'self' is located. Contemporary socio-cultural discourses probing into such relations and interactions have scrutinised the notions of individuation and individualisation. Moving beyond the Jungian notion of self-realization or individuation, 'individualisation' foregrounds "the structural change of the relation between individual and the society resulting in the individual taking precedence over society or social communities." (Rasborg, 2017, p. 2). In this sense, individualisation subverts the conventional assumptions of identity as a fixed and monolithic construct and introduces a newer concept of identity where the individual is expected to perform certain set tasks that are contained in the image of the identity. Thus simplistically put, the individual has to act out his identity in the process of individualization" (Roy and Putatunda, 2022).

This nuanced nature of individualisation forged by the communication between the individual and the contextual is further problematised by shifting terrains of the idea of space, especially with technology informing and reforming hitherto known sociocultural spaces thereby challenging not only a static concept of space but also reconceptualising the nature of the relationship between the self and that space. This 'new' space is virtual, one that exists simultaneously with the real and generates

interactions between multiple spaces, realities and selves thereby problematising and challenging definitive assumptions of those constructs. In this sense, metaverse, which 'simulates' the real, also ironically questions and unsettles the real. From a fantastical origin in the sci-fi books and films, metaverse has been actualised through a combination of hardware and software technologies to generate a computer mediated environment. Despite being located in the virtual, by virtue of carrying traces of the space that it simulates, and through blurring the binaries of the virtual and the real, metaverse thus becomes symptomatic of a liminal space for interpersonal communication and individuation that erodes "boundaries between the self and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self" (Turkle 10).

This article aims to probe into the process of interactions and identity formations in a liminal space and interrogate whether the present negotiations of the self in the virtual space of metaverse can substantially alter future understandings of interpersonal communication and individuation. Through a study of select metaverse platforms, this article attempts to illustrate the changing dynamics of self, identity and communication in the wake of new media, and argues that while revolutionising the tenets of communication by breaking the boundaries of physical reality, metaverse creates a liminal space that reconfigures the construct of the self, process of identity formation and social interaction while engaging in a dialogue with the lived physical spaces as well.

2. Narratives of New media

With changes in the form and nature of the media propelled by technological advancements, interpersonal communication mediated by the new media became increasingly decentralized and multi-modal. This decentralization was accentuated with the advent of the internet that marked a shift from the traditional monologic or one-to-many communication flow to the dialogic or many-to-many communication flow. This was known as Web 1.0 or "read only web" that represented the earliest form of the internet that consisted of static pages and content that was produced by a small number of people for a large group of audience. Gradually, Web 1.0 was superseded by Web 2.0 which is a lot more participatory in nature, contains dynamic content and is produced by a large group of users. The latest reiteration of the web is known as Web 3.0 which is also known as the semantic web and sees more decentralized production and consumption of content. With less or absolutely no centralized production of the contents, it is evident that this will engender such spaces which, as envisioned by Berners-Lee, will be characterized by a bottom-up design, and for these spaces, "no permission is needed from a central authority to post anything … there is no central controlling node, and so no single point of failure … and no "kill switch". Therefore, by producing blended spaces and challenging the construct of the reality, and by decentralizing the control and consumption of content, these developments will reconfigure and reinvent the process of interpersonal communication in its myriad forms thereby creating amorphous and liminal spaces. A 2021 report published by Wunderman Thompson, a New York based marketing agency, observes,

> "[a]longside the rise of fully virtual venues and spaces, extended reality (XR) is transforming physical spaces for a new category of blended events, built equally around digital and physical elements. Liminal spaces—blended virtual and physical experiences—are already successfully revolutionizing the culture and art scenes. In future, expect to see similar blurred reality activations in retail spaces, brand hubs and business centers" (Wunderman Thompson, Into the Metaverse, 2021).

This "blurred reality" engendered by liminality foregrounds the notion of an in-between space as was envisaged by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* (1909). As metaverse signifies a space which can not be defined by the binaries of physical and virtual, it offers possibilities of interpretation as a liminal zone, a liminal space.

3. Mapping the Metaverse

The word metaverse first appeared in Neal Stephenson's 1992 science fiction novel titled *Snow Crash* which resembled a massively multiplayer online game (MMO) constituting digital avatars controlled by human users. With Mark Zuckerberg changing the name of Facebook to Meta in the year 2021, the term has once again become a subject of debates,

discussions and deliberations. Stylianos Mystakidis argues (2022), "The word Metaverse is a closed compound word with two components: Meta (Greek prefix meaning post, after or beyond) and universe. In other words, the Metaverse is a post-reality universe, a perpetual and persistent multiuser environment merging physical reality with digital virtuality" (p. 486) Although the notion of metaverse is still being conceptualized, some defining characteristics have been identified.

In "The Metaverse: Web 3.0 Virtual Cloud Economies" (2021), David Grider comments that "Metaverse is an archipelago of interconnected and experiential 3D virtual worlds encompassing digital and physical worlds, permanent, allowing real time socialization of people to create a user-based internet economy" (p. 2). For Duan et al, metaverse constitutes "technological infrastructure, user experience, digital twinning, content creation interface intersecting with virtual worlds consisting of digital content, economy, artificial intelligence" (p. 155). Two *continua* can be identified through which the metaverse will likely unfold. These two *continua* are a) augmentation to simulation, and b) intimate or identity focused to external or world focused. These two can be further developed into four types: augmented reality, lifelogging, mirror worlds, and virtual worlds. Again, the term eXtended reality (XR) is used to refer to the phenomenon of combining the physical and the virtual. XR is an all encompassing term that includes augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and mixed reality (MR). However, it should be kept in mind that since metaverse is primarily a concept that is futuristic, "current debates about the Metaverse remain muddled because—at least thus far—the Metaverse is only a theory. It is an intangible idea, not a touchable product" (Ball 35). Therefore, discussions and debates surrounding the metaverse often fall back on intensive reading of sci-fi films like *The Matrix* (1999), its sequels, *Avatar* (2009), *eXistenZ* (1999), *TRON: Legacy* (2010), *Her* (2013), *Free Guy* (2021) and so on.

Conceived of as a fully immersive and interactive space for communication, metaverse simulates the physical world of the user and attempts to bridge the gap between the real and the virtual through technological innovations. Communication in the metaverse is constructed by integrating the already established real time communication media such as voice and video calls with more immersive forms of interaction such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) aiming at a cross-platform communication. This transformation in the mode and nature of communication reconfigures the implications of presence and role of the body in the context of communication. This, on one hand, displaces the presence of the 'body' as a necessary factor for communication, while on the other, it extends the function of the body by utilizing different sensory perceptions.

While elaborating on media extension theory in *Understanding Media: the Extension of Man* (1964), Marshall McLuhan suggests that media effectively acts as an "extension of man" and that in doing so, it modifies the consciousness to set up "a new equilibrium among all of the senses and faculties leading, as we say, to a "new outlook" --new attitudes and preferences in many areas" (1964, p. 141). In this way, the media, instead of negating the human body, integrates itself with the body to facilitate communication. Likewise, Fleischmann and Strauss countered the theory that "man is losing his body to technology", and argued that "the interactive media are supporting the multisensory mechanisms of the body and are thus extending man's space for play and action" (cited in Hansen, 2006, p. 2-3). Hansen also referred to Krugger's conception of interactivity and draws attention to its emphasis on the "privilege accorded [to] embodied (human) agenda" and asserts that

> Differences notwithstanding, the point of all of his environments is to facilitate new kinds of world-construction and intersubjective communication. If these environments do still serve as interfaces to the computer, they do not do so, as do all technicist conceptions of the "Human–Computer Interface" (including the mouse and the graphical user interface), by instrumentalizing—and thus reducing—embodied enaction; here, rather, it is the technology that remains instrumentalized and human action that gets privileged. (Hansen, 2006, p. 31)

Thus the simultaneous presence/absence of the body in the communication process engenders a liminal space, one which is both virtual as well as embodied, intangible and concrete.

4. The Self, the Other and the Avatar

Whereas liminality in the metaverse creates 'extended reality', its multifaceted nature also provides the scope to invent new identities and experience 'new' realities. Anonymity, coupled with perceived freedom of expression, provides the users the opportunity to explore and perform different aspects of their identity through creation and customization of their digital avatars. This emerging participatory space provides the individuals a broader scope for experimentation. The creation of a digital avatar, for example, involves freedom to choose different types of physical appearance, gender, race, clothing and also username or name. In this case, the users can choose alter egos or can opt for entirely new sets of attributes of appearance and personality. Further, this is also influenced by the behavior, speech and interactions of the digital avatar. However, this apparent autonomy in refashioning the self has further implications. While discussing the construction of identity in the virtual world, Sherry Turkle, in the book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of Internet* (1995), raises some pertinent questions:

> The internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the construction and reconstructions of self that characterise postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create. What kind of personae do we make? What relations do these have to what we have traditionally thought of as the "whole" person? Are they experienced as an expanded self or as separate from the self? (Turkle, 1995, p.180)

It can be argued in this regard that, in the "extended reality" of the metaverse, these questions become even more pertinent as the immersive experience facilitated by the metaverse that integrates, or at least creates the illusion of integrating physical with the virtual, can lead to fragmentation of the self. One of the key debates about the construction of the self in the metaverse is about the implications of creation of multiple identities which may be liberating as well as lead to alienation from the self. In *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Tom Boellstroff observes, "avatars make virtual worlds real, not actual: they are a position from which the self encounters the virtual" (Boellstroff, 2015, p. 129). The "avatarization of the self" (Boellstroff, 2015, p. 219) makes the self a "multiple, distributed system" (Turkle, 1995, p. 15).

One of the key concerns of the human-digital relationship in the site of metaverse is the agency of the self and the question of autonomy and free-will in the process of construction of the self. The freedom to construct the 'self' in the metaverse can lend autonomy to escape and evade the constraints of reality. Danah Boyd elucidates this idea while examining how virtual reality plays the dual role of a liberating and limiting agency for teenagers in *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teen*s (2014) as she remarks, "[m]any of the privacy strategies that teens implement are intended to counter the power dynamic that emerges when parents and other adults feel as though they have the right to watch and listen" (Boyd, 2014, p, 70). The question of agency hence is problematised and the duality of freedom and surveillance/ control identified; as has been explored by Julian Dibbel in her work *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (1998). Metaverse can also be imagined as a virtual 'heterotopia' where an individual exists simultaneously in both metaverse and physical reality, thereby challenging the binary oppositions that structure conventional ideas of space, time and identity . Metaverse, while being "extended reality", also exists as "another place" creating a loop of simulation, an iteration of time and place. In this sense, both metaverse and the real spaces produce their own versions of identities of the individual which are illusory to each other. In "The Transformation of the Understanding of Self in the Metaverse Reality as a Heterotopia Place" (2022),

S. AVCI argues:

> The fact that the space comes before the subject and that it exists, shapes the field of action and discourse of the individual existing in the space. Therefore, the behavioral forms and discourse practices that emerge in the space are primarily determined by the

> space itself. This situation is important in terms of making sense of what is happening in the Metaverse world. In this sense, the spatial characteristics of the Metaverse world as a heterotopic space also directly affect the relationship practices produced in these areas. (AVCI, 2022, p. 202-203)

The avatarization of the self in metaverse functions as the nodal point for observing relationships of the self and the other, the self and the avatar within a broader pattern of production-consumption framework. One important feature of the metaverse is that it redefines the producer-consumer relationship. In a monograph titled *Marching Toward the Metaverse: Strategic Communication Through the New Media*, Timothy C. Cunningham predicts, "[t]omorrow's strategic communicator will himself/herself serve as a prosumer in the metaverse; someone who produces, consumes, scrutinizes, navigates, mediates, and participates in the media-informational conversation among and between humans and objects *in* [emphasis in the original] the Internet" (Cunningham, 2010, p.49). While exploring the notion of "creationist capitalism" Tom Boellstroff explains, "at the core of creationist capitalism is the idea of the self as creator. Production is reinterpreted as creation" (Boellstroff, 2015, p. 209). Metaverse is also believed to be a space for inclusivity. According to a survey conducted by the *Dare!* magazine in the year 2022, "[n]early two-thirds of Prosumers…consider metaverses more inclusive of race, gender, and other identities than real-life spaces." (Nice, 2022)

5. Case Studies

Although the idea of metaverse is still a developing discourse, evolving both conceptually and technologically, some tools, softwares and web platforms have already brought the theoretical ideas concerning possibilities of the metaverse into practice. This section thus scrutinizes contexts where the tenets of metaverse are unfolding in an attempt to explore the validity of the argument established in the earlier sections of this article.

Case Study 1- *Second Life*: *Second Life* is an online game that was released in the year 2003 and is considered to be one of the early forms of metaverse. In the game, as is also evident in Figure 1.0, users populate a virtual world mediated by digital avatars through which they can interact with each other through different forms of media. Users can create their own content like buildings, communities and other objects which can be either shared or traded for virtual or real money. The social and economic transactions, enabled and mediated by this online game, foster the construction of parallel and alternate realities. Users, by interacting socially and transacting in the virtual space, create not only alternate realities for themselves but also mediate possibilities of new forms of mobilities, identities and cross-cultural communications.

Figure 1.0

Case Study 2 - *AltspaceVR*: Similar to the *Second Life*, *AltspaceVR* too is an online gaming platform that facilitates interactions and socialisations in the virtual world that can be accessed with VR headset and/or desktop app. Launched in 2015, it was acquired by Microsoft in 2017. Creating an immersive and interactive experience for its users, this platform besides allowing users to create and customize their virtual avatars and facilitating social interaction through group and mass communication, provides a fully realized virtual world which remains persistent and parallel to the users' reality. This feature of persistence of the virtual world permits users to resume their course in the game from the exact point at which they had stopped before logging out. A similar gaming context (named Free City) formed the narrative of Shawn Levy's *Free Guy* (2021) where the users, much like the users of *AltSpaceVR* communicated with other users through voice and text messages, participated in virtual events, and shared community spaces. This element of similarity further problematizes the already complex interaction between the real and the virtual. Director Levy while commenting on the negotiation of the real and the virtual both by cinema and the gaming

metaverse, albeit in different ways, noted, "[t]that's what movies used to be- a place where you could be in an experience virtually with strangers and share something escapist and fulfilling. Gaming has evolved into that."

Besides being a gaming platform, *AltSpaceVR* has been used in a range of educational contexts as virtual classrooms and team building spaces by virtue of its provision of interactive and immersive features. It also proliferated a virtual mode of economic transaction system based on a currency named 'AltSpaceVR Tokens' that could be used and spent by users to purchase virtual items, thereby iterating the models of interaction and communication existing in the user's world. However, despite such possibilities, as per the latest news, Microsoft will be closing this platform down from March 10, 2023 owing to the mass-scale layoffs in the company in the post-Covid context. This decision foregrounds the interconnected nature of the 'human' world and the metaverse where realities of one plane informs the other.

Case Study 3- *Decentraland*: Released in the year 2020, *Decentraland* is a 3D virtual world built on blockchain technology that allows its users to own virtual lands, objects and experience. As it is made with blockchain technology, the virtual objects are traded through NFTs (non-fungible tokens). In decentralizing the operation of the digital platform, usage of blockchain technology, accommodating user generated content, integrating the virtual interaction with the real, Decentraland embodies the major features of the metaverse.

Case Study 4 - *Roblox*: *Roblox* was launched in 2006 and has since been one of the most popular metaverse gaming platforms. Users can create their own games, virtual products with the help of Roblox studio. As it provides support across multiple devices, the integration of virtual with the physical space can happen almost seamlessly. Similar to other platforms, users in this platform too can interact with other users, play forming groups and participate in virtual events. Akin to 'AltSpaceVR Tokens', Roblox's virtual currency, Robux, by allowing users to trade, simulates and iterates real-life economic scenarios. It also creates opportunities for users to monetise their creations in the virtual world.

Case Study 5 - *Metahero*: *Metahero*, which appeared in 2021, is another gaming platform that combines crypto and 3D scanning technology to create an immersive experience for the users who can scan their body using the scanner thus getting realistic avatars for themselves, thereby blurring the boundaries between the virtual and the real. *Metahero* also uses blockchain technology that decentralizes its operation by supporting user-generated content.

6. Findings and Analysis:

A study of the above-mentioned instances of metaverse indicates that these interactive and immersive platforms are simulating the users' reality, thereby problematising the binaries of real and virtual. Although the phenomena of metaverse is fairly recent and is undergoing developments, some common features facilitating cross-contextual, cross-cultural communication have already taken shape across all the metaverse sites. At present, most of these platforms exist in the form of online games and chat platforms; although by functioning on the ethos of a connection and communication between the real and the virtual worlds, metaverse is rapidly evolving and bridging the gap between the user's world and the one forged by AI language. It can therefore be argued that metaverse, with its multisensory mode of communication, is destabilizing the monolithic and binarised understanding of the real and the virtual, the human and the digital by becoming a site of intersection of these worlds and ideas, becoming a 'rich' communication medium between the realities of the user and realities of the user's avatar.

In the 1986 essay "Organizational Information Requirements, Media Richness and Structural Design", Richard L. Daft and Robert H. Lengel elaborates the Media Richness Theory (MRT) which posits that the engagement quotient of the media and its richness are in a proportional relationship. According to them, "[r]ich media facilitate equivocality reduction by enabling managers to overcome different frames of reference and by providing the capacity to process complex, subjective messages…Media of low richness process fewer cues and restrict feedback, and are less appropriate for resolving equivocal issues" (Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H., 1986, p. 560). Hence, metaverse, owing to its interactive and immersive nature, generates a

high level of media richness that creates more engaging forms of communication.

Another key observation pertaining to the study of these platforms has been the role of metaverse as a space for individuals where they can both connect as well as dissociate from their real self thereby engendering a unique process of individuation and identity formation. By analyzing the metaverse through the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) of communication, it can be argued that an individual can have multiple motives for crafting and enacting their selves in the metaverse. Primarily users may seek to escape the monotony or surveillance of real life by venturing into the metaverse. Then they may attempt to fulfill their desires to either mimic or reconfigure their real world in the digital world through a ritualistic customisation of their digital avatars and virtual social interactions with other users. Apart from these two motives, users are also driven by their creative urges to either reconstruct their identities, create something within the metaverse that would carry the residues of their realities, like the system of trade and economy. Thus, an understanding of the purpose and motive behind the users' consumption of the metaverse media can be studied as an extension as well as a break from the users' lived realities, personalities and identities.

Analysing and evaluating the metaverse as a site, a medium that provides the scope for social interactions in a technology mediated environment reveals the implications of the social space produced by the metaverse. In *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications* (1976), John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie introduced the Social Presence Theory which scrutinises interpersonal communication in a virtual space. As metaverse transcends the physical barriers to provide an immersive experience, it forges a social connection that can not be achieved in other forms of digital communication. Additionally, metaverse also creates a sense of personal yet disembodied presence which fosters a sense of liminality that is integral for understanding the tenets of communication in this media.

As this study has attempted to argue, a shift from the traditional to the new forms of media has not only challenged the constructs of reality, but has simultaneously produced multimodal, decentralized, liminal spaces that have reconfigured interpersonal communication

7. Conclusion:

This article, through a study of select instances of metaverse functional at present, attempted to study the negotiation of identity formation, individuation and interaction between the self and the space within the metaverse. It scrutinized the refashioned role of the 'body' in the reconstituted dynamics of communication in the metaverse to argue that through dissolution of the virtual and the physical, metaverse redefines the notion of reality thereby engendering a liminal space that acts as the site where the process of identity formation is carried out through reimagining the self.

The study employed observational and analytical methods to argue that the notions of self, identity and communication are constantly configured, reconstituted and reimagined in the liminal space of interaction between the user and the media. In the process of the research, the theoretical frameworks of Media Richness Theory, Uses and Gratification Theory, and Social Presence Theory were utilised in order to analyse the subterranean forces that construct, deconstruct and reconstruct notions of individuality through interactions between the self and the metaverse as well as understand the future implications of such interactions.

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