

Conference Paper

Metaverse: Devolution of Social Connection

Stream: Online Network and Social Change

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Abstract

Metaverse - though often considered a buzzword, is an actuality of the future.

Metaverse is a three-dimensional virtual environment based on the fundamentals of social media. It generates an immersive experience for its users by means of headsets, and gloves. This immersion to a virtual reality opens up a plethora of opportunities in social connection, health, business, and education sectors. Though, when critically examining its primary purpose, that is social connection; its negatives outweigh its positives.

In essence, social connection is relationships one has, or forges with other individuals. Many factors contribute towards the downgrading of the users experience in socially connecting with other users. These factors are - reduced privacy and security, escapism, and an ill-thought out social interaction.

All these factors will affect the users in extreme ways. The reduction of privacy and security leaves the user vulnerable to hackers, scammers, and advertisers. Cyber bullying in such an environment will be graphic. The 'escaping' to metaverse from complications in physical reality - an unhealthy coping mechanism, will gradually become addictive, and aggravate the situation in physical reality. Social interactions between users will be plenty, and devoid of any meaning. Moreover, the possibility of a social change can be anticipated due to the inherent addictive nature of the metaverse.

It is observable from the above statements the dangers of metaverse in regards to social connection. This research paper discusses the impacts of said factors in detail; explaining how metaverse will be the devolution of social connection.

Key words: Metaverse, Social connection, Devolution, Social change

Introduction

Thesis

Metaverse - a platform built for the purpose of social connection, is the devolution of it. A virtual world is a gateway to endless possibilities of social connection, though it comes at a cost of reduced security, a decline in mental and physical health, meaningless interaction, and an ill-thought-out social change.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to understand the discovery-oriented question of - "how metaverse - a platform built for social connection, is the devolution of it?"

Argument

Metaverse is a three-dimensional digital platform based on the fundamentals of social media, that can be accessed by individuals from anywhere anytime. It is in essence an alternate reality (Verdict, 2022). This alternate virtual reality is stirring up excitement within all the users, whether they are marketers, or young adults thrilled at the prospects of a reality they can shape (Dutilleux & Chang, 2022).

As stated above, that the metaverse is based on the fundamentals of social media, one can say it is the evolved version of it. This further illustrates that all the positives of social media along with its negatives have evolved into it. To describe it in basic terms, the users of this metaverse will experience the augmented good of social media, along with its augmented bad, and its augmented ugly (Verdict, 2022).

At the surface level, it is (in regards to social media interaction in the metaverse) augmented 'good' is the technological development of immersive social connection. Though, when examining it further, many flaws (brought on by various contributing factors) come to light that may negatively impact the experience of its potential users with respect to social connection.

The inbuilt addiction (escapism) to social media can be considered a main 'augmented ugly' of the metaverse (Sternlicht & Sternlicht, 2022); stating that the users will spend an excessive amount of time being immersed in the metaverse. This indicates a gradual shift, or a blur between realities regarding social connection, anticipating a possible social change.

Contributing Factors

Privacy and security

Metaverse is a platform not only for social connection but also a platform for information. And that information is often encapsulated in layers of misinformation used to manipulate users (B. Rosenberg, 2022).

Immersion is a three-dimensional sensory experience in the virtual world, where users can feel their physical presence in it (Casey et al., 2021). Virtual reality headsets allow users to be completely immersed in the metaverse. However, these headsets also grant easy tracking ability to advertisers, hackers, and scammers. Users are tracked by their gaze, pupils, heart rate, gestures, and verbal and non-verbal inputs (J. Cummings & Shore, 2022). They can monitor any user on the platform in real-time, and gauge what interests them to tailor an advertisement, hack, or scam, which will make the user easily susceptible to their attacks (B. Rosenberg, 2022).

Apart from metaverse being invasive it also spreads misinformation. A form of misinformation is fraudulence called deep-fake. Deep-fake is an amalgam of 'deep learning' and 'fake'. It employs advanced machine learning to transfigure into legitimate sources' audio, or visual appearance and creates a fake version of it (Mac Ghlionn, 2021).

A local instance of deep-fake involved a bank in UAE (United Arab Emirates) that was robbed because a couple of cyber-criminals were able to successfully deceive the bank manager by impersonating their director (Brewster, 2022).

Another instance of deep fake used to delude individuals into creating bias and a divide was of the Ukrainian President ordering his army to lower their weapons. It was proven to be false and taken down from social media platforms immediately (Wakefield, 2022).

Deep-fake - misinformation, was used as a tactic to weaponize social media and users' trust in the source, to gain the advantage of the situation, on both occasions. Imagine an all-immersive platform like metaverse - with its advanced machine learning, creating photo-realistic deep-fakes can be easily accomplished (Mac Ghlionn, 2021).

From the above complications, it is understandable how metaverse can exploit their user's trust, and damage their experience of socially connecting with other users.

Social interaction

Social media has proven to be addictive due to its many aspects; the prevalent ones are the reward based system - likes, and the need for social comparison (Montag et al., 2019).

Users who can identify themselves as neurotic, apathetic, or unacknowledged are prone to be addicted to social media (Wezift, 2022). And an all immersive platform like the metaverse can affect these users drastically in terms of addiction (Sternlicht & Sternlicht, 2022). Continuous use will negatively impact the user's psyche (attention deficit disorder, anxiety) (Dutilleux & Chang, 2022) and mental perception due to the superficial nature of conversations. These occur due to the metaverse being populated by adolescents who prefer texting; this can mean conversations are short and quick. The conversation topics will be vast, varied, and devoid of meaning; the users are more likely to don a false persona; and the conversations will occur between many users at once (the Guardian, 2022). Hence, the social connection formed with the other users will disintegrate into being progressively artificial and unauthentic.

Since Users will use avatars (photo-realistic or animated - customized) generated in this virtual space to interact, they will not be able to differentiate whether the conversation taking place is real, or if it is with an auto generated avatar. This auto avatar is generated by the metaverse algorithm to spy on users, and gain their information for marketing purposes (B. Rosenberg, 2022).

Though virtual platforms may seem to be a shelter from reality, more often than not just the simple act of *being* can make the users vulnerable to cyber bullying. Most users drifting to the metaverse are the ones who are insecure or feel a lack of acknowledgement in the physical reality (Wezift, 2022). And if the metaverse also fails in delivering a safe experience, then its impact on the users' psyche will be fatal due to the inherent realism of the cyber bullying (Hinduja, 2022).

Based on the above literature reviews, this further proves that social connection in the metaverse has the capability to compromise the user's mental faculties, as they will be constantly taken advantage of in various situations (as mentioned). This might leave them questioning whether any interaction they had with individuals (other users) was real, or held any meaning.

Escapism

Escapism - an unstoppable fix to an immovable mental, and physical illness.

Any interaction, whether it be work related or social, is taking place virtually; which means the users will face limited to no mobility. The physical consequences of an extended period of immobility are atrophy (muscle weakness), weakness in joints, and obesity (Nursing Times, 2009). Physical health conditions such as those will pose a challenge to their daily lives and thus will encourage users to further spend their time in the metaverse.

Young adults, aged 18 to 25 (Hr.mit.edu., 2022) can easily succumb to the immersiveness of the metaverse. In this particular stage of adolescence, their brain has not reached emotional maturity, meaning their emotional expressions are displayed in physical bursts of energy. Hence, any negative experience in their life can result in them taking immediate action, which can have an immediate consequence (Dutilleux & Chang, 2022).

Metaverse provides a platform for new sensations, where they can release their tension in a simulated surrounding or a game where conversations and any social connection are occurring in a very immersive environment (Verdict, 2022). This amplifies the dopamine (happy hormones) for a short period of time in their brain, making the metaverse a place to 'escape' to every negative experience in the physical reality (Dutilleux & Chang, 2022).

This self indulgent escapism is induced by the harshness, and immediate consequences of being oneself in the physical reality (Dutilleux & Chang, 2022). The virtual reality in comparison seems more inhabitable. As this escapism becomes a habit, it will cause much damage to the users by introducing a deluge of possibilities. As the options increase, the user will lose sight of reality in a world of short-term pleasures. The platform for social connection will end up triggering social anxiety, and depression (Perl, 2022). This, in turn, will endanger the users' interpersonal skills, and will eventually lead to social isolation, and self-isolation (Han et al., 2022).

This pattern of behaviour will result in the paradigm shift of technology seen as a means of entertainment and social connection, to technology seen as a means of escapism (Han et al., 2022).

Social change

Social change is a change in individuals' relationships with the environment around them that affects society. To elaborate - Social change is the change in beliefs, attitudes, communication, and the general lifestyle of individuals that alters the former structure of society (Shah, 2022).

The addiction (and escapism) factor of the metaverse will result in users devoting a copious amount of time to the alternate reality (Sternlicht & Sternlicht, 2022). This signifies a gradual shift of individual's, socially connecting in a three dimensional reality, to a three dimensional virtual environment. This shift, or a blur between realities (due to addiction and immersion) regarding social connection, can be observed as a change in individuals communication style, and a change in their attitude towards other means of communication.

Based on the literature review and study done so far, the below statement can be made suggesting social change.

A change in communication style - conversations will be taking place in an immersive virtual environment (with avatars - photo-realistic or otherwise). And a change in the attitude - other means of communication will seem less advanced in comparison; and social connections between individuals, face to face will reduce, as they will gradually become dependent on metaverse to form connections (Achmad, 2021). These collated express the possibility of an ill-thought-out social change.

A change in lifestyle and communication can be observed that is altering the current structure of society. Society's communication structure is shifting from connecting face-to-face, or through social media, to connecting (mostly) through metaverse, and gradually spending more time immersed in it. The main contenders to this statement are addiction and/ or escapism as discussed above, and throughout (Sternlicht & Sternlicht, 2022).

The contributing factors of the metaverse that can be seen as leading to the devolution of social connection, includes addiction, and escapism. The baneful effects of these on the users of the metaverse are evidence, that the possible trajectory of social change in terms of social connection, is heading in a negative direction.

Conclusion

Metaverse, an immersive platform built for the purpose of social connection, is the devolution of it.

Privacy and security, social interaction, and escapism are the contributing factors that result in the downgrading of social connection between individuals in the metaverse. These factors have baneful effects on the users of the metaverse. These effects are not limited to amplifying existing mental illnesses, but creating new ones, and aggravating existing physical illnesses.

Social connection in the metaverse is associated with a barrage of illnesses. These mental and physical illnesses arise from the contributing factors and form a cycle of cause and effect in regards to addiction, and escapism.

Mental illness and physical illness may cause addiction, and/ or escapism. And addiction and/or escapism will further its negative effect on the user, resulting in aggravated/ or more mental illnesses, and an aggravated physical illness.

The arrival of the metaverse will bring with it a gradual change in lifestyle and communication methods. The all immersive platform will blur the lines between reality, and the virtual environment in regard to social connection. This shift in the social structure anticipates a social change. Though, after analyzing the baneful effects of metaverse on social connection, this social change has the possibility of heading in a negative direction.

Social connection is an integral part of human nature, and metaverse claims to be built for that purpose. However, from the current standpoint, the future prospects of metaverse seem to be devolving in terms of social connection. Unfortunately, consumers' quality of experience is always considered in retrospect of most technological evolution.

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