

Presence and Alienation in Interpersonal Communication: A Postprint Based on Reflections on the Concept of the “Metaverse”

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Abstract

The year 2021 has been termed the inaugural year of the “metaverse,” a concept that rapidly emerged as a focal point in contemporary discourse on digital technology. As virtual interaction appropriates and occupies the temporal and spatial dimensions traditionally reserved for real-world interaction, the boundary between virtual and physical worlds becomes increasingly blurred, thereby rendering face-to-face presence in interpersonal communication unattainable and fostering progressive alienation between self and others. Grounded in the metaverse concept, it becomes imperative to reconsider the significance and value of “presence” in human interaction. The fundamental distinction between virtual and real-world interaction resides in the estrangement of individuals from both self and others; consequently, resolving the crisis of self-identity and transcending the predicaments of interpersonal communication remains a pressing challenge for metaverse-based virtual interaction.

Full Text

Preamble

Presence and Alienation in Interpersonal Communication: A Reflection on the Concept of the “Metaverse”

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Abstract: The year 2021 marked the inaugural year of the “Metaverse,” a concept that rapidly became a focal point in discussions about digital technology. As virtual interaction seizes and occupies the time and space of real-world communication, the boundaries between the virtual and physical worlds dissolve, rendering face-to-face presence in interpersonal communication unattain-

able and fostering growing alienation between self and others. This paper re-examines the meaning and value of “presence” in interpersonal communication through the lens of the Metaverse concept. The most significant difference between virtual and real interaction lies in the estrangement of individuals from both themselves and others. How to overcome the crisis of self-identity and transcend the dilemmas of interpersonal communication remains an urgent issue for Metaverse-based virtual interaction to address.

Keywords: Metaverse; spiritual communication; self-identity; interpersonal communication

Following Facebook’s rebranding as “Meta,” the Metaverse concept has swiftly captured widespread social attention, emerging as a new direction for internet development and a catalyst for the information economy. According to Wikipedia, the Metaverse is “a 3D virtual space characterized by convergent and physically persistent features, based on the future internet, with linked perception and shared attributes, achieved through virtually enhanced physical reality.” This virtual space incorporates achievements from the information revolution (5G/6G), the internet revolution (web3.0), the artificial intelligence revolution, and VR, AR, MR technologies—particularly game engines and other virtual reality technological revolutions—demonstrating to humanity the possibility of constructing a holographic digital world parallel to the traditional physical world.

Although the Metaverse is a newly popularized concept, it essentially represents an upgrade of AR, VR, and related technologies. What distinguishes it from these technological concepts is that the Metaverse opens a new space for humanity, entering a higher stage of “virtuality” that encompasses human interaction. This form of interpersonal communication will constitute a new deeply immersive virtual interaction space that further uses digital means to weaken the sense of spatial isolation in the physical world, making virtual interaction an important form and content of human communication.

1. The Dissolution of Boundaries: Antecedents of Presence and Alienation

1.1 The Contest Over Time Between Virtual and Real Interaction

In a short film showcased at Meta’s official launch event demonstrating how people interact in the Metaverse, interpersonal virtual communication appears full of enthusiasm and interaction. However, this seemingly intimate form of communication occupies most of people’s social time, making face-to-face presence in real-world interaction increasingly difficult and leading to a growing state of alienation between self and others. Currently, the internet has already substantially occupied people’s daily time, with most interpersonal communication shifting online and mobile phones replacing face-to-face presence. Methods

such as “online classes” have even relocated school scenarios to the internet. In the future, as people continuously divert real-world time to the Metaverse’s virtual time, this will inevitably lead to a state of competition over time between real and virtual interaction, ultimately severing people’s connection with the physical world entirely.

1.2 The Erosion of Space in Real Interaction by Virtual Communication

“The essence of space lies in its social nature.” The connection between space and society is extremely close. As a virtual interaction space, the Metaverse influences people’s original understanding of real interaction space, and when space changes, the original social structure becomes unattainable. While the Metaverse can certainly use technological simulation to create a virtual interaction space with a similar social structure, when such a space is truly realized, the necessity of physical space disappears. Simultaneously, the Metaverse also transforms social relationships. Real interaction spaces have social relationships based on geographical proximity, whereas virtual interaction spaces are highly fluid without any restrictions. The internet has turned the world into a “global village,” and the Metaverse will further connect the entire world. The openness of virtual interaction space can attract more people, making it more equal and inclusive than real interaction space, which is gradually being abandoned.

As the Metaverse continues to erode people’s real interaction space, it inevitably causes confusion about spatial perception. The loss of individual orientation and private domain will leave people feeling disoriented. In real interaction, people have spatial relationships—for instance, neighbors on the same floor become more familiar, and people develop closeness based on geographical location. When these former spatial relationships are overturned, how individuals should define their position in virtual interaction space and conduct interactions remains unknown. Moreover, like the internet, the Metaverse will dissolve the boundaries between private and public spheres. Habermas once proposed the concept of the public sphere—a space where people, as citizens with the basic conditions for democratic politics, can freely discuss public affairs and participate in political activities outside political power. As individuals’ public spheres continuously expand, they will ultimately erode the private sphere. For contemporary people still adapting to the internet’s virtual interaction space, the Metaverse will undoubtedly increase this interaction anxiety, thereby exerting an immeasurable continuous impact on the human spiritual world.

2. Face-to-Face Presence: The Meaning and Value of Interpersonal Communication

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels proposed communication theory, wherein communication is a comprehensive category reflecting the relational nature of human activity, including both material-mediated interpersonal relation-

ships and language-mediated spiritual communication between people. Spiritual communication is first and foremost human communication; interpersonal interaction is the starting point and endpoint of social relationships. In real-world interpersonal relationships, both parties are present with body and identity—that is, with subjectivity. “Presence” and “absence” are fundamental concepts in philosophical ontology. “So-called ‘presence’ means the body itself is at the scene where events occur and proceed.” The meaning and value of interpersonal communication lie in people’ s ability to be face-to-face present.

2.1 Bodily Presence

From the earliest times when spoken language served as the communication medium, interpersonal communication involved both sender and receiver sharing the same time and space. After the emergence of print media, the sender’ s body gradually “exited,” becoming a state where the sender’ s body was absent while the receiver’ s body was present. Subsequent virtual communication further evolved into a situation where both sender and receiver bodies were absent. Whether the body is present actually has a significant impact on communication effectiveness. The meaning and value of interpersonal communication lie first in directness. In face-to-face interaction, people can gain the simplest and most direct understanding of their conversation partner without any intermediary—simply by observing their speech rate and expressions, they can quickly grasp a person’ s character. As a form of real interaction with bodily presence, this authentic communication reduces social distance between people. Under the premise of sincere and equal communication, people can often build bridges of trust between each other merely through eye contact.

The presence of both bodies refers to the physical presence of both parties, including not only the self but also the other. The presence of the other is indispensable to interpersonal communication and helps enhance communication abilities. When the interaction partner has a physical presence, people’ s expressive abilities unconsciously improve. To display all their advantages before the other, every interpersonal interaction essentially becomes a form of self-improvement. In contrast, virtual communication is much more relaxed—awkward moments can be easily resolved with a WeChat emoji, whereas real interaction requires high emotional intelligence and skillful language use to navigate situations, undoubtedly demanding more sophisticated communication techniques.

Only when both parties’ bodies are present can “scene” construction be facilitated. For example, in a community activity center, interpersonal communication needs to be realized through organized activities, and offline activities provide stronger engagement than online activities, which struggle to achieve the same effect. This is precisely because without bodily presence in interpersonal communication, activities lack real scenes and naturally become “castles in the air” that cannot evoke shared feelings. Professor Terry Nichols Clark of the University of Chicago proposed scene theory, arguing that the pursuit of

scenes and lifestyles influences people' s residential choices and urban development. Interpersonal communication not only constructs one “scene”after another but also, through bodily presence, fixes interpersonal connections among neighbors and within communities, thereby stabilizing urban populations and, in the longer term, promoting urban development.

2.2 Identity Presence

Identity presence is also one of the meanings and values of interpersonal communication. In real interaction, through direct observation of appearance and body language and reception of information about age, occupation, and status, people can learn the identity of their interaction partner while simultaneously transmitting their own identity information through various means. To better construct their identity in others' eyes, individuals continuously make efforts to improve themselves, thereby obtaining others' recognition of their self-identity.

In real interaction, individual identity is difficult to fake because it is easily detected. However, in virtual interaction, individuals can often realize their “ideal image” –using others' photos as avatars, searching for golden sentences to express their own thoughts...As individuals' virtual interaction gradually expands in scope, their needs also expand from requiring others' recognition to seeking group recognition. For instance, in virtual communities, members' interactions carry a “camouflaged” nature; after constructing perfect images, they obtain identity recognition within the group and gradually lose themselves in virtual interaction.

Interpersonal communication inevitably requires considering the identities of all present parties. The complexity of social relationships makes people weary, and they discover they can temporarily escape this situation in virtual interaction. Consequently, people increasingly believe that virtual interaction holds higher value than real interaction, but this short-term illusion is accompanied by long-term unease. The positive relational bonds of “sincerity” and “trust” in real interaction constitute the enduring meaning and value of interpersonal communication.

3. Alienation Between Self and Others: Differences Between Virtual and Real Interaction

Zuckerberg believes that “the feeling of presence is absolutely the defining quality of the metaverse. You really feel like you' re there with other people.” However, this so-called “being together” certainly cannot replace “being together” in the real world. The greatest difference between virtual and real interaction lies in people' s alienation from both themselves and others. The immersive experience in virtual interaction creates an “invisible” barrier that deepens the dilemmas of interpersonal communication, while individual identity reconstruction subtly influences people' s understanding and recognition of themselves.

3.1 Individual Identity Reconstruction: The Crisis of Self-Identity

In grasping human spiritual communication, Marx noted: “Man not only affirms himself through thought, but through all his senses in the objective world.” In the virtual world, VR glasses only realize human vision, though users can manipulate virtual objects with controllers. Meta recently released pneumatic haptic gloves to compensate for the lack of touch. In the future, Metaverse products may also simulate taste and smell...People might employ various high-tech means to make the “body” present, satisfying the foundation of interpersonal communication with all human senses and enabling spiritual existence to be realized in the virtual world. However, the presence of subject identity requires self-identity. The reconstruction of individual identity in virtual interaction and the resulting crisis of self-identity lead to people’ s alienation from themselves.

Identity theory posits that “human social behavior manifests as role selection, during which the self is concretized as identity salience.” Human needs are self-oriented, representing individual needs that differ from social needs and possess self-consciousness. Marx believed that higher-level spiritual communication requires people to transform their needs for existence and development into needs for self-affirmation in the objective world—that is, self-identity. Self-identity is the prerequisite and foundation of interpersonal communication; only after self-identity is satisfied can good interaction relationships begin to develop.

After entering the Metaverse, everyone will have a virtual identity, much like the protagonist Wade Watts in the film *Ready Player One* uses the virtual identity “Parzival” in the game world “Oasis,” with an appearance that can be self-designed. Hidden behind this designed “perfect” virtual identity, people can accomplish in the Metaverse what they dare not do in reality. In the real world, they must consider social contexts and offer appropriate platitudes, whereas in the Metaverse they can be themselves. This desirable experience can only be obtained in virtual interaction. However, the continuous switching between virtual and real identities and the constant alternation of identities lead to ruptures between self and society, and the blurring of self-identity deepens people’ s interaction anxiety.

Once, humans generated meaning through interaction. However, as virtual interaction fills people’ s lives, their sense of self-worth continuously diminishes, leaving only a feeling of emptiness. In the future, virtual interaction in the Metaverse may further intensify people’ s uncertainty about the meaning and value of their own existence, potentially bringing about deep involution in human communication. In the Metaverse, people are more likely to develop stronger needs for and dependence on “virtual interaction,” consequently neglecting the importance of real interaction. This requires reflection. Humans are essentially limited temporal and spatial beings, and the Metaverse is likely to bring human physical bodies and digital avatars into a contradictory state. Currently, the creation and development of the Metaverse remain in their infancy. As a parallel space to the future real world, its commercial value can certainly be imagined

to the fullest, but people must maintain scrutiny and vigilance regarding its potential communication traps.

3.2 The “Invisible” Barrier: The Dilemma of Interpersonal Communication

The internet once created a “digital divide” that “further exacerbated social differentiation, leading to negative effects such as individualization and blurred social cognition.” Unlike real interaction, virtual interaction in the Metaverse adds another “invisible” barrier. The Metaverse can break through traditional interaction limitations, expand the scope of interpersonal communication, and extend real interaction into virtual space. However, its ultimate immersive experience may cause individuals to confuse reality with virtuality, deepening their sense of alienation from the real world and generating lasting negative psychological impacts [9]. When users immerse themselves in Metaverse virtual interaction, the integration of bodily experience and the virtual scene before their eyes easily confuses actual sensations with technologically created illusions. It is precisely this virtuality that creates an “invisible” barrier, replacing the real personality displayed in interpersonal communication with the virtual personality shaped in virtual interaction, and thus alienation between self and others emerges.

The various social relationships that individuals connect in real interaction cannot be extended to virtual interaction because, during prolonged immersive experiences, individuals seal off their true selves while shaping virtual personalities. The lack of soul-to-soul exchange between people will, over time, greatly distort and weaken social relationships. On September 8, 2021, officials from the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the National Press and Publication Administration interviewed gaming companies and platforms including Tencent and NetEase. Tencent’s electronic games such as *Honor of Kings* are extremely harmful to adolescents. As “electronic opium,” such games are addictive, causing adolescents’ bodies to secrete “dopamine” during pleasurable moments, providing great satisfaction in terms of freedom and autonomy, identity belonging, and personal capability—three dimensions that adolescents may find difficult to easily obtain in real interaction. In the virtual world, adolescents who lack encouragement and are less extroverted are more likely to immerse themselves, hiding behind virtual personalities to obtain a sense of achievement and belonging unavailable in real interaction. At a time when the problem of youth “internet addiction” remains unresolved, there are grounds to remain vigilant about potential “virtual death” that the Metaverse may trigger in the future.

Moreover, most virtual interaction is “fast-food” style communication. During video calls, participants may be located anywhere globally. While in-depth conversations certainly exist, such exchanges ultimately lack physical substance. When individuals have already obtained sufficient satisfaction through virtual interaction, they no longer need to seek others’ recognition in real life. Conse-

quently, people continuously make new friends in the virtual world, but have few friends with real-world connections in their actual lives. This form of interaction, lacking co-presence and authenticity, gradually builds a high wall between self and others, leading individuals to become indifferent to their social relationships and cooling emotional exchanges with those around them. On the surface, the Metaverse connects everyone globally; in reality, people's genuine social circles are gradually shrinking and weakening. Each person exists within an "invisible" barrier, and the isolation from others accelerates the collapse of the self.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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