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THE ACCELERATION OF INTIMACY. REPRESENTATIONS OF LOVE, SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS IN VIRTUAL REALITY

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Abstract. The text examines the representations of relationships, intimacy and love in virtual reality, based on a thematic analysis of a corpus of keyword-selected *YouTube* videos. The interest in this topic is driven by its status as a new phenomenon that challenges the very boundaries of our cultural understanding. These boundaries are situated at the nexus of real and virtual, identity and belonging, trust and infidelity. Given that virtual reality is not yet a mainstream phenomenon, the analysis is made at the level of representations rather than practices. In general, the data highlight specific forms of reimagining the body and its agency in online environments.

Keywords: virtual reality; love; intimacy; body; avatar

Introduction

Virtual worlds may be defined as artificial environments that are created on the Internet with the intention of emulating real-life environments and situations. Such platforms enable users to interact through the use of avatars, which are two- or three-dimensional representations of themselves within the virtual space. Online communication can occur in any physical location (typically via a handheld computing device), at any time, and through various rituals analogous to interactions in the real world (e.g., sharing experiences or exchanging virtual objects). It encompasses gestures, facial expressions, and speech, and the relationships and interconnections created between individual users are stored in constantly updated databases. Virtual objects can be manipulated, resulting in a permanent change in the virtual space. To illustrate, if one were to throw a tomato at a wall, the stain would remain.

Although it lacks a physical existence, the virtual world exerts a powerful influence on the senses, creating a compelling impression of reality for the individual. The virtual is not to be understood as a mere construct detached from reality; rather, it is an inherent aspect of the latter, which is not limited to the

material and concrete. In many instances, the virtual represents the “real” preceding the actualization process.

In light of the distinctive characteristics of the contemporary era, including the prevailing media environment, scholars are endeavoring to comprehend the unprecedented digitalization of everyday practices. Rather than seeing this phenomenon as a break with the past, they are trying to understand it as a profound intensification of principles already in place, coupled with the accelerated pace at which this radicalisation is taking place (Rosa 2015 [2005]). German sociologist and political scientist Hartmut Rosa presents evidence indicating that the historical image of an epoch and the temporal life perspectives of its subjects are significantly influenced by the speed of social and cultural change produced by society. As modernity unfolds, the pace of change is accelerating. This phenomenon can be most accurately conceptualized as “social acceleration” (ibid., p. 28).

Virtual worlds are not a novel phenomenon in the digital realm; rather, they have been a relatively limited experience within the context of fan-based internet communities of gamers. Until recently considered avant-garde, virtual worlds are potentially on the cusp of becoming popular culture. They are an integral part of the social and cultural changes associated with such social acceleration.

The inaugural significant application of the metaverse principle is the online game *Second Life*, which was created in 2003. *Second Life* is a game that permits users to embody virtual characters within a world that is collectively created by its inhabitants. However, a project of *Facebook*, which as of recently (2022) is called *Meta*, aims to introduce the virtual world into the everyday life of the mass consumer.

It raises the broader question of whether there is a discrepancy between the acceleration of the media environment and the parallel slowdown of the world's leading social institutions (Rosa 2015 [2005]). In particular, there is a sense that any “revolutionary” change on the Internet is an attempt by technical “progress” to anticipate (and often disregard) discussions that would be more appropriately conducted by slower institutions, shaped by generations of inherited traditions and practices.

Avatars for daily communication

One of the key elements of the *Metaverse's* advertising campaign for mass use are the new enhanced avatars, which represent the images through which an individual presents and functions in virtual space. The term “avatar” has its origins in Sanskrit, where it refers to a sacred incarnation or embodiment that came to earth to save the worlds from cosmic disorder. Since the late nineteenth century, however, its usage has been extended to encompass any form that an object or given personality assumes in succession¹. The term “avatar” was first used in a gaming context in 1979 in the electronic game *Avatar* and subsequently in 1985 in the computer

role-playing game *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*. It is widely acknowledged that Neal Stephenson popularised the concept in 1992 with his cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*, in which he describes a simulation of the human form within the *Metaverse*.

The primary attribute of the forthcoming avatars is their flexibility, which enables the same avatar to traverse disparate digital platforms. This affords the avatar the status of a digital identity within the virtual universe, regardless of the virtual environment in which the user operates. Therefore, the avatar represents the user as a singular entity across all virtual domains.

Consequently, in a series of statements released at the conclusion of 2021, Mark Zuckerberg, the Chief Executive Officer of *Meta*, revealed that the recently developed avatars would be incorporated into numerous *Meta* platforms, including, but not limited to, Facebook, Messenger, and Instagram. This integration would facilitate users' ability to incorporate the new avatars into their routine communication.

In this way, the complete manifestation of the subject in the *Meta Universe* will be achieved. All actions will be recorded as digital memory/history on the digital identity in the virtual reality, including those related to gaming, financial transactions, social connections, romantic relationships, and other activities. The development of avatars with increasing levels of realism is not coincidental. They will be capable of replicating a person's body movements in physical space, facial expressions, and other characteristics. However, it is also anticipated that avatars with hearing aids and those in wheelchairs will be introduced.

The steps along the path of technical promises to create a single avatar for mass use are part of the attempts to get as close to reality as possible, avoiding the possibilities of digital identity forgery. However, this also means reducing the possibilities to a single, rather than multiple, “reincarnations” of the digital persona.

Love as “soul-to-soul” interaction

Specifically within the context of intimacy, the potential for a digital avatar is directly correlated with the etymological roots of the concept and the capacity for a literal reincarnation into a new physical form, conception influenced by Eastern philosophical and religious perspectives on the body and the self.

The arguments presented by the respondents in the ethnographic documentary *We Met in Virtual Reality* (2022, director and screenwriter: Joe Hunting) are particularly noteworthy in this regard. They posit that virtual reality facilitates genuine interpersonal connection, enabling “soul-to-soul” interaction and fostering a safer environment where individuals can be authentic and avoid emotional distress. The film presents an interview with the avatars of two couples in love who met in the *Metaverse*. The main factor that unlocks the dating process for both couples is their interest in virtual worlds, their astonishment at the technical possibilities they offer, and the purely physical positioning of their avatars in the same virtual space, related to their hobby (which also predetermines their destiny to converse). The

findings they make about their personal experiences of romantic relationships in virtual reality have to do with the redistribution of the burden of first impressions, with breaking down the natural barriers that people have when they meet someone sexier and more beautiful than themselves, with a less distracting communication, freer from the traditional additives (body judgement, shame or other psychological barriers).

Research interest in digitised intimate practices has recently turned to non-traditional sites of digital intimate socialisation beyond popular dating sites, such as chat forums, computer games and virtual reality worlds. Very much in line with the demand for the new as a value in itself, the emergence of virtual reality is part of a trend towards the proliferation of such more non-traditional spaces for a variety of communication practices, including the most intimate ones. The representations in an initial stage of the introduction of this virtual reality are extremely interesting to analyse, precisely in view of the fact that they are an attempt to define more clearly what is “different” in this specific digital intimacy.

Representations of intimacy in Metaverse

The analysis presented here is based on a total of 240 YouTube videos generated in 2023 by searching (first time search) for six key phrases (written in English, which is the universal language for representing technological innovation in a global context): “love in the metaverse”, “love in virtual reality”, “intimacy in the metaverse”, “intimacy in virtual reality”, “dating in the metaverse”, “dating in virtual reality”. In order to highlight units of recurring common themes and the relationships between them, I use a thematic analysis of content created on YouTube (as a major platform for information, especially for young people, see e.g. Popova 2015). In addition, a review of the official websites of the top seven virtual reality dating applications according to Internet giant *Google's* 2023 ranking is included, namely *Flirtual*, *Nevermet*, *Vrchat*, *Vtime XR*, *Meta Horizon Worlds*, *Rec Room*, *Planet Theta*.

It is proposed that the social imaginary of virtual worlds and the representations that constitute it at this nascent stage of its development are less a set of multiple individual imaginaries and practices emerging “from below” than corporate, advertising and ideologically framed messages set “from above” for users to culturally orient themselves in a new and alternative to their physical environment.

Thematic analysis of discourses from selected *YouTube* videos enabled us to: 1) draw different boundaries through which love and intimacy in virtual reality were justified (as advantages compared to traditional forms of dating and romantic relationships; compared to online dating sites; compared to other virtual reality intimacy platforms); 2) identify diverse repertoires of expressions of love and intimacy, as well as forms of transgression, against which the experience of intimacy in virtual reality stands out and legitimizes the necessity of its existence; 3) identify

various actors (including online bots) and social hierarchies in the virtual reality industry.

Overall, in the empirical corpus examined here, we observed a mostly positive representation of the topic. This is reflected in the following distribution of the videos: 56.4% positive/promotional; 23.8% informative/moderate; and 19.8% negative/critical, which clearly indicates the potential of these generated YouTube units to convey positive stances.

The videos revealed a high degree of overlap between the creators of utopian visions and representatives of technology companies offering products and services in this field. These individuals employ personal biographical narratives in which the motivation for developing a virtual reality product is directly linked to the need to overcome specific obstacles in their own intimate lives.

In second place are videos of influencers (YouTubers) discussing various virtual reality services and products, but their role is mainly promotional. In an era of widespread product placement of global services such as virtual reality dating applications, they play the role of intermediaries between brands and social media audiences. Regardless, at this early stage in the discussion about the massification of virtual reality, it is evident whether influencers are gaining symbolic and monetary capital online by promoting virtual reality products and services, or by gaining their own followers through the accumulation of humorous and satirical content about these new and interesting phenomena.

Almost invisible in the videos is the presence of academics or social commentators discussing the issue of love and intimacy in virtual reality.

Speakers in the videos almost always use the future tense without any conditionality (predicting that virtual reality will be used by the masses in 5-10 years). The idea of “inevitability” can be pointed out as a key element in their discourse. It is constructed through an accumulation of words such as “evolution”, “progress”, “development”, “coronavirus pandemic”.

In most of the videos, this thematic category is deployed according to the following three visions of intimacy in virtual reality: 1. as a natural consequence of the coronavirus crisis, which has become a key factor in the awareness of the dangers of loneliness; 2. as an inevitable step in the historical and evolutionary perspective of the development of technology in general and of the Web 3 in particular; 3. as an answer to the need for constant technical updating of existing dating applications that no longer meet the needs of modern people.

The second thematic category can be defined as “responding to social deficits”. It refers to previous dating applications' failure to adequately address today's global communication needs. According to the videos, these communication needs are essentially twofold. The first has to do with a more complete experience of the long-distance connections needed by today's hyper-mobile people. The other, on the contrary, has to do with hyper-isolated people and their loneliness.

It includes both people who are isolated, such as those in the Covid crisis, and people from marginalized groups who wish for fully digital connections that never happen in reality. In both cases, the metaverse is seen as a “new medium” to solve problems of distance, isolation, misunderstanding and non-acceptance.

The popularity of the virtual reality dating platform *Nevermet* is largely attributable to such representations. It is often called the *Tinder* of the metaverse, referring to the most famous online dating app. The very name of the application, *Nevermet*, implies that users have never met and that the primary purpose is not to actually meet. In this sense, it challenges the classic notion of the “reality” of a relationship, which prevails even in online dating applications, where the end goal is still to meet in person, and online meetings are seen as an alternative means to achieve this end goal.

Here, on the contrary, a purely digital relationship is sought between virtual lovers. In practical terms, this means that users are required not to exchange personal photos, but to be represented only by their avatars (in various forms - humanoids, plants, animals, monsters, etc.). All the photos used in the application (including those used to create memories for the virtual biography, the online romantic relationship, the favorite experiences) are only photos of the avatar. It is only the voice that gives the sense of a particular human reality. Sociologically, users can only be identified by their preferences. They have to indicate which gender and age group they are interested in, without reference to traditional demographic markers, not even where they live (only a virtual address is displayed).

Otherwise, like *Tinder*, the platform works on the principle of “accept” or “reject” until a “match” is made.

An alternative, “beyond the body”, represents another recurring thematic category within the videos. The sense of new possibilities through this new form of virtual communication is described in the videos by words such as “spiritual”, “raw”, “authentic”, “alternative”, “beyond”. Questions about the afterlife, other worlds, parallel realities, fantasy projections are included in this category. Virtual reality is even defined as a place where each user can create a world that is a reflection of their own archetypes, their own iconographies, a kind of “mind space”.

One of the few serious debates in the videos analyzed relates specifically to the danger of a utilitarian approach to life that aims to increase happiness and reduce pain, a problem that is usually expressed in terms of the existential difference between what people actually do and what they have a virtual experience of doing. Some of the videos offer a similar virtual “girlfriend experience” in a “girlfriend simulator”, and the scenario is all alike – the user sees a woman, beautiful and kind, sitting on a bench, looking him in the eye, laughing, walking beside him, changing next to him, etc. – The setting and the image of the girl change, but the aim is to make him feel virtually the pleasure of “experiencing” a meeting in which he is appreciated.

Another thematic category concerns the possibility of “reinventing personal identity.” Here, the accumulation of words such as “constraints” and “trap” reflects the need to completely transcend all geographical, but also biological and social boundaries. More generally, it mirrors the users' desire to be more “themselves”. This includes breaking out of the “constraints” of their sexual identity or their lack of social etiquette (e.g. there is a virtual reality app that teaches good communication etiquette, based on comments and feedback from women – what kind of physical intimacy is considered appropriate or not, how to communicate digitally, how to distance one's body/avatar from the other, etc.). Even social inequalities seem easier to overcome because consumers are promised cheaper opportunities for romance: the costs of consuming products and services associated with traditional dating, such as restaurants, theatre tickets, bouquets of flowers and nice clothes, are significantly reduced in virtual reality.

One of the most repeated keywords by all social actors in the virtual reality intimacy market is “security”. By this they mean, first and foremost, “authenticity guarantees”, linked to forms of verification of fake profiles, but also new ways of combating sexual harassment and sexual violence, especially against women, as well as prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Virtual reality sex is presented as healing, a form of safe fantasy gratification, but also as a way to overcome phobias, low self-esteem, etc. through simulation and haptic costumes. In some of the videos analyzed, the psychological effects of the transition from “watching the screen” to “participating in the scene” are also discussed. According to the positive interpretations of such a transition, people will not only watch extreme sex scenes, but also “participate” in intimate games before and after them, i.e. the period of virtual intimacy will be extended – it will last on average about 30 minutes and, unlike the online consumption of erotic or pornographic films, the process of ignoring certain parts of the multimedia content will be significantly reduced. In this context, the industry is actively developing ways for partners to experience sexual pleasure in private virtual rooms, where each user can stimulate the other by touching his or her own body.

Virtual reality is presented not only as a panacea for safety in everyday sexual relations, but also as a permanent solution to the problems of sex workers. So much so that David Levy, in his book *Love and Sex with Robots* (Levy 2008), argues that sex between humans and robots will become routine by 2050. His arguments are telling: sex robots will reduce prostitution – there are plenty of sexual relationships without empathy, so why not with robots?

Few videos analyze such ideas through the prism of fundamental ethical issues (e.g. male/female identity, the nature of digital infidelity, etc.). Here, one of the discussions raises a rather extreme question: since the robot/artificial intelligence is the product of several minds, is sex with a robot/artificial intelligence group sex? A similar philosophical question is whether users will extend their sexual

preferences to non-human images, i.e. will forms of sexual pathology such as zoophilia gradually become normalized?

Simultaneously, further challenges emerge in the context of everyday life. For instance, it may be asked whether engaging in virtual sexual intercourse with an artificial intelligence (AI) or with an avatar and a genuine individual operating behind the scenes could constitute an infidelity in regards to a serious partner without facing consequences. Furthermore, the question arises as to how one might morally categorise the desire for a virtual lover who will never leave, betray or die. Experiences of an “ideal” partner, what might be termed a “mirror partner,” are offered by platforms such as *AI Friend and Companion (iFriend)* or the digital sexual contact app *Virtual Mate*. Both options are based on relationships with an artificial intelligence.

According to David Le Breton, cybersexuality, or sexuality in the absence of the other's body, which existed before the advent of virtual reality but has developed exclusively through it, seems to be rooted in the fact that today the full force of fantasy collides with the human condition (Le Breton 2006).

Cybersexuality also opens up another crucial issue, that of virtual violence. It is interpreted primarily in terms of the dangerous mixing of speech and action that is inevitable in any computer-mediated world (Huff, Johnson, Miller 2004), and the diminished sense of control, fear and responsibility of the participants. An ethnographic study of the BBC regarding virtual reality² indicates that each user self-reports their age without any form of verification. This lack of verification is a prerequisite for children and young people to end up not only in innocent meeting places such as virtual McDonald's restaurants, but also in strip clubs, for example. The researchers conclude that the online virtual reality platform VRChat, where users interact as avatars, appears to be more akin to an adult playground than a suitable environment for children. The primary objective of safety recommendations from scholars is to educate parents on the necessity of monitoring the applications their children utilize when engaging with virtual reality technology. One such recommendation is to oversee the use of applications that facilitate real-time mobile phone, smartphone, or laptop connectivity, thereby enabling parents to observe their child's experience in real-time.

The concept of “security” is not only sought on a physical level, but also on an emotional level. *Planet Theta*, a virtual reality dating application, offers users a greater degree of control and a reduced level of risk compared to traditional dating websites, particularly in the context of initial romantic encounters. The initial “coffee dates” are limited to a five-minute duration, after which the communication partners are automatically separated (on a purely technical basis). Subsequent contact is permitted only if both parties express a desire to do so. The objective is to enable individuals seeking an intimate relationship to invest less time and energy than in a traditional first physical encounter, which typically lasts at least an hour, even if they have lost interest from the outset.

Another thematic category in the videos is related to the word “investment” and includes stories about digital entrepreneurship, start-up businesses, profitable sales, etc. Platform developers often stress how little money they invest in marketing the product, as users themselves are expected to become “creators” in virtual reality. Profiting from a market for 3D virtual prop objects, for example, is presented as a form of economic aid for developing countries, where most of the potential creators in question come from. The decentralized aspect of the metaverse, which would provide an alternative to the monopolies in the social media market and allow for more independent projects, is constantly emphasized. Concurrently, despite contradicting previous assertions, the videos discuss a “combination of experiences” or the principal objective of these platforms, which is to consolidate the meeting, gaming, and entertainment industries. This approach is believed to offer the most substantial financial benefits. There are even applications that combine dating and matchmaking with specific financial investments, i.e. directly linking the search for love with profit opportunities (see, for example, the *TruYou* platform).

In the context of such a “combination of experiences”, the advertising messages offer previously unavailable leisure opportunities and thus “new rituals” in encounters. Instead of being bored watching the same sitcom, lovers can visit Paris virtually; instead of playing cards, they can play video games together; have more traditional but virtualized experiences such as going to the cinema, playing golf, going to a bar, or experimenting with skydiving or spacewalking. In the *Mingout* application, meetings are held during virtual concerts and artistic performances, as well as in a virtual space created by each individual user. The application functions by enabling users to initially select the types of activities they would like to engage in upon first meeting. Following this, users are paired with individuals who may prove enjoyable partners for the aforementioned activities. If both parties express interest due to their shared enjoyment of the activities, a “match” is formed. It is often at this point that the potential for shared consumption practices is established, which frequently marks the beginning of intimacy.

Virtual rituals aim to provide an alternative to all traditional experiences. For example, they allow a virtual marriage – with ceremony, guests, etc. In mid-2022, the first legal wedding took place in the *Decentraland* metaverse, with over 2000 virtual guests. To secure the legal basis for their union, the newlyweds contacted a law firm located in the physical territory where the ceremony was held. At the same time, in the parallel virtual universe, the law firm provides a virtual terrain for the event, which it owns in *Decentraland*. As there is no legal framework in the metauniverse, the lawyers use the virtual identity and digital assets of the newlyweds (certified by a blockchain) to create and sign a meta-marriage contract in the form of an irreplaceable token (a unique record in a blockchain).

The first users from India to get married in the Meta Universe were 24 years old, and the idea for the virtual wedding came after the death of the bride's father:

to surprise his future wife, the fiancé decided to arrange for the presence of the deceased father's avatar.

It bears repeating that the videos analyzed are largely comprised of advertising messages and representations of virtual reality, rather than concrete user experiences. The few participant observation videos in the corpus are predominantly related to negative personal experiences of YouTube influencers, which are presented through the use of humor or satire. Based on this type of videos, several observations of the participants themselves stand out:

a) it is difficult to determine the gender of the people present in the virtual reality, and the conversation usually has to start with sentences like “Are you a woman?”, “Is there a woman in the room?”, etc.;

b) most of the avatars are already in an intimate relationship in real life, they are rather young people looking for fun;

c) the age of the participants on virtual reality dating platforms cannot be determined, the only orientation for the users seems to be the real voice of the person behind the avatar;

(d) there is a very quick transition to sexual, vulgar or obscene conversations;

(e) most users admit to being underage;

(f) there is a general feeling that only men are behind most avatars;

(g) there are still significant technical problems, with frequent disconnections and termination of already challenging contacts between avatars.

The negative evaluation is applicable to both forms of romantic and intimate virtual reality experiences, namely those involving an avatar that represents a real person and those involving an avatar that represents an artificial intelligence. In practice, the sharing of personal experiences serves to discredit dominant positive representations of virtual relationships, yet it remains marginal enough to reveal underlying social pledge.

Conclusion

Virtual reality expands the scope of online relationships, no longer focusing only on first dates, but offering options for a complete relationship experience, including a fully digital connection.

These potential options are presented as a means of countering the loss of real communication between human beings. An analysis of the representations of love and intimacy in virtual reality suggests that they have introduced a novel understanding of the body.

The thematic categories highlighted, such as “responding to social deficits” related to physical and social limitations, “beyond the body” as an alternative to previous forms of communication, the promise of the possibility of “reinventing personal identity”, the provision of intimate “security” (physical, emotional and sexual) and the options for “investment” (in the attributes of the personal avatar

and in a combination of experiences and hobbies), refer specifically to the physical. Paradoxically, rather than transcending it, virtual reality introduces it into a new type of agency. This can be traced on three levels.

The first level of analysis focuses on the physical body. The discrepancy between the efforts of virtual realms to emulate the visual, auditory, and tactile experiences of reality as closely as possible while transcending the limitations of the body in communication gives rise to the actualization of a duality within the physical body. This duality is evidenced by a division between the body's external characteristics, inherent spatial limitations and social and cultural belonging, on the one hand, and the body's sensory experiences, on the other. In virtual reality, the representation of intimacy entails the overcoming of the body as a social and cultural entity, while the sensory body is prioritized. This can be observed in the novel model of purely digital relationships and in the distinctive form of cyber sexuality that virtual reality provides for its users.

The second level of analysis concerns representations of the human persona, encompassing the spiritual, the soul, and the corporeal. Virtual reality enables the modification of one's physical form, allowing the transformation into a person of the opposite sex, an animal, or a plant, among other possibilities. Nevertheless, such transformation is not interpreted as an alteration of one's fundamental self. In the context of intimacy, this concept is exemplified by the notion of engaging in more "authentic" intimate soul-to-soul communication through the use of avatars, which serve to supplant bodily predeterminations with individual bodily phantasms.

The third level of analysis is concerned with the concept of memory and the notion of a potential "reboot". In its utopian representations, virtual reality posits the erasure or overcoming of accumulated biographical memories as a means of providing a new beginning. In the context of intimate relationships, the potential of internet users to erase previous experiences, encounters and failures is considered. This is seen as a way of overcoming social deficiencies that can be traced back through social media. It is also seen as a way of experiencing a kind of "reincarnation" (one time only, as previously shown) in a new space and with a new body.

The analysis of the highlighted thematic categories has revealed the value orientations for action that the creators themselves set in order to portray virtual reality of love and intimacy as "better". The metaverse project, with the goal of mass consumption, is supported by a metanarrative that suggests technological advancement will overcome human limitations, whether physical, social or communicative. Consequently, the process of overcoming these limitations is itself eroticized. At this nascent stage of development, virtual worlds are designed to provide a digital simulation of all forms of real-world intimate experience. However, the fact that these experiences are simulated makes them marketable as being easier and, above all, safer (in terms of the body and feelings alike).

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NOTES

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