

Love in the Virtual Age: Public Sentiments on Dating in the Metaverse

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Abstract

This study examines public perceptions of dating in the metaverse, focusing on emotional connection, authenticity, and societal acceptance. Drawing on an affordance perspective and Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory, the study explores how perceived action possibilities of metaverse platforms and evaluations of relative advantage, compatibility, and complexity shape early sensemaking around virtual dating. Using textual and sentiment analysis, we analyzed 260 user-generated comments from Reddit and YouTube to capture how both users and non-users assess metaverse dating at a pre-adoption stage. Findings reveal predominantly negative sentiment, driven by concerns about authenticity, social isolation, and the absence of embodied intimacy. However, a minority of commenters highlight positive affordances, including reduced social anxiety, shared virtual activities, and opportunities for connection in long-distance relationships. By situating public discourse within the persuasion stage of diffusion, this study contributes to research on digital dating by demonstrating how evaluations of platform affordances and relational norms influence the anticipated adoption of emerging intimate technologies.

Keywords: Metaverse dating, digital relationships, Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations, sentiment analysis, textual analysis

Introduction

“Love is blind” is a timeless adage that captures the essence of romantic interactions, and as modern dating increasingly shifts into digital spaces, dating within the metaverse marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of romantic relationships. The metaverse is a digital immersive environment that combines physical and virtual realities allowing users to simulate real-world interactions, blurring the line between digital affection and physical intimacy (Lovich, 2022). The COVID-19 outbreak notably increased the use of dating sites with data showing a 70% increase in users every year (Lodha, 2022). Online dating revenue amounted to \$3.08 billion in 2018, a 50 percent increase over the past five years (Low et al., 2022). In the Philippines, the usage of dating websites surged by 71% over the past decade, highlighting a global shift towards digital matchmaking (Low et al., 2022). While some embrace it as a revolutionary step in digital romance, others remain skeptical about its authenticity and potential consequences on real-world relationships.

In the present study, metaverse dating is conceptualized as an extension of online dating rather than a separate or competing phenomenon. Online dating has evolved alongside developments in internet and digital technologies, moving from web-based platforms to mobile applications and, more recently, to immersive environments that incorporate augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). Within this context, metaverse dating represents the latest phase in the evolution of online dating, emerging at the intersection of dating applications and immersive virtual environments. As Weking et al. (2023) note, metaverse-enabled platforms combine advanced technologies with social and relational affordances, enabling users to interact within shared virtual spaces. Applied to romantic contexts, this convergence has given rise to what scholars describe as metaverse dating, where individuals navigate virtual realms to seek romantic connections (Chakraborty et al., 2023).

Industry developments further support this conceptualization. Contemporary dating platforms are increasingly experimenting with AR and VR features to enhance user experience and redefine romantic experiences (Fletcher, 2025). For example, Tinder has publicly expressed interest in “blurring the boundaries between offline and online worlds,” introducing interactive features such as Swipe Night and internally discussing a potential “Tinderverse” (Reuters, 2021). These developments illustrate how metaverse dating is being integrated into existing online dating infrastructures rather than operating as a distinct domain.

This study examines how users perceive the emotional depth, long-term potential, and challenges of dating in the metaverse, situating its analysis within Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovations theory to explore adoption patterns and societal acceptance of virtual relationships. Despite the increasing interest in metaverse dating, there remains a limited understanding of the motivations that drive individuals to engage in virtual relationships within this space. This study aims to explore how people perceive relationship formation in the metaverse and examine the concerns and misconceptions held by non-users about dating in this virtual environment. This work

contributes to research on interpersonal relations and emerging technologies.

Furthermore, there is limited research on the attributes of metaverse dating platforms and the experiences of users within the context of metaverse dating (Chakraborty et al., 2023). However, it is imperative to explore the public perception of dating in the metaverse as that lays the foundation for the overall user experience, influencing everything from interaction dynamics to the emotional depth of relationships formed within this space. Hence, our work fills in these knowledge gaps and will allow us to better understand the factors that influence people to date in the metaverse. Accordingly, our study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do social media users, including both users and non-users of virtual dating platforms, perceive the impact of virtual environments on emotional connection and romantic fulfillment?

RQ2: What concerns or misconceptions do non-users have about dating in the metaverse?

These research questions are designed to capture evaluative judgments characteristic of the persuasion stage of diffusion, where potential adopters and observers assess whether an emerging technology aligns with existing relational norms, values, and expectations.

Given the early stage of development and limited mainstream adoption of metaverse dating, this study is intentionally exploratory in nature. Rather than seeking to predict adoption outcomes or measure sustained use, the analysis examines public discourse as a site of early sensemaking, where users and non-users articulate expectations, concerns, and imagined relational consequences of dating in virtual environments. Such exploratory inquiry is particularly valuable for emerging technologies, as public evaluations formed at pre-adoption stages can shape future diffusion trajectories, platform design priorities, and normative understandings of appropriate use. By identifying dominant themes in how metaverse dating is discussed and evaluated, this study offers a conceptual foundation to guide subsequent research, including longitudinal analyses of adoption over time, user-centered studies of relational experiences, and design-focused investigations into how platform affordances influence intimacy, authenticity, and trust.

The History of Online Dating

The history of online dating is marked by significant transformations in social interaction, technology, and cultural norms. Online dating services first appeared as simple matching websites at the end of the 20th century that used rudimentary algorithms to match people of similar interests or of similar backgrounds. The invention of the Internet expanded the possibility of reaching a wider audience and thus allowed people to find a potential partner outside of the limited confines of their geographic locations. This change was facilitated by computer-mediated communication development, which redefined how people presented and related to each

other in the dating domain (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Peng, 2020). As online dating evolved, the interface and user experience became increasingly sophisticated. Many of the earlier sites adopted what could be described as a sort of "shopping" model, whereby a client would access a list of possible partners who had been sorted through certain descriptive features such as height, weight, income, and others (Frost et al., 2006). The introduction of more nuanced algorithms and user-driven profile creation allowed for greater authenticity in self-presentation, although this raised concerns about misrepresentation and trust (Gibbs et al., 2010; Norcie et al., 2013).

Online dating further evolved with the use of mobile applications in the 2010s. Some of the earliest and most popular location-based dating apps were developed primarily for LGBTQ+ audiences (Pamanian, 2022). For example, Grindr brands itself as a social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people (Wu & Trottier, 2022). Within a decade, online dating had grown into a business worth nearly US\$ 2 billion annually, having evolved from a service used by a minority to a tool widely adopted by millions of individuals in modern societies (Bonilla-Zorita, et al., 2021). During this movement, for example, the Tinder app managed to simplify the process of finding matches through the process of swiping left and right thus enhancing the era of immediacy and easy hookups (Finkel et al., 2012). As location-based services, dating apps operate through smartphone global positioning systems (GPS), enabling users to connect with others in close geographic proximity while also affording both synchronous and asynchronous communication (Wu & Trottier, 2022). This evolution has been accompanied by a growing body of research examining the implications of online dating on social norms, intimacy, and sexual behavior. For instance, studies have highlighted how online dating can both disrupt and reproduce existing social hierarchies, particularly concerning race and gender (Lonescu et al., 2021; Qian, 2021). Moreover, the intersection of online dating with social media has created new dynamics in how individuals engage with potential suitors, often blurring the lines between casual interactions and serious partnerships (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Mateizer & Avram, 2022).

The cultural landscape surrounding dating has shifted significantly, with increasing acceptance of diverse relationship formats, including casual dating and non-traditional partnerships. The metaverse aligns with these evolving norms, providing a space where individuals can engage in various types of relationships without the stigma that may accompany traditional dating (Tandon et al., 2022). Gen Z's openness to exploring different relationship dynamics makes the metaverse an appealing option for those seeking connections that reflect their values and preferences.

Current Trends in Online Dating

Online dating has transformed from a stigmatized practice into a widely accepted avenue for forming romantic connections (Toma, 2015). Ward (2016) suggests that seeing dating apps as fun has the potential of allowing users to avoid the stigma about finding love online. Dating platforms

provide access to potential partners, but engagement with these technologies reflects broader social and psychological dynamics.

Self-presentation plays a crucial role, with users crafting idealized profiles through staged photographs and curated images (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023). This emphasis on visual self-presentation suggests that dating apps function not only as matchmaking platforms but also as digital spaces where individuals negotiate their self-worth and desirability. The careful curation of online personas demonstrates how dating platforms facilitate both connection and performance, shaping modern dating behaviors in complex ways.

Despite the normalization of online dating, skepticism persists regarding the long-term stability of relationships initiated online (Aaron et al., 2016). Many individuals still prioritize in-person interactions before committing to marriage, reflecting concerns about the depth of digital relationships (Duguay et al., 2024). However, trust and digital proficiency remain critical factors in determining engagement with online dating (Chan, 2017). Dating apps also shape romantic interactions by catering to diverse user motivations, from casual encounters to serious relationships (Castro & Barrada, 2020). This transversality underscores the growing role of digital spaces in contemporary romance, where technology is no longer just a tool for meeting people but a part of modern courtship dynamics.

As online dating continues to evolve, it remains clear that digital platforms are not just facilitating connections but actively shaping how people engage with romance, self-presentation, and commitment.

Dating in the Metaverse

The metaverse is an expansive and evolving concept that represents a convergence of digital environments, technologies, and social interactions. It is often described as a collective virtual space that allows users to engage with each other through immersive technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and augmented reality (AR) (Ahuja et al., 2023; Chai et al., 2023; Mystakidis, 2022). The metaverse can be viewed as a digital interconnected ecosystem that combines various platforms for educational use, socialization, commerce, and gaming (Aung et al., 2024; Farooq et al., 2023; Malik & Rana, 2024). The metaverse is also gaining popularity as a site for romantic encounters. Dating in the metaverse represents a shift from traditional dating paradigms to more immersive and interactive experiences. The integration of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies allows users to experience romantic connections close to real-life interactions, fostering a sense of connection irrespective of long distances (French, 2024; Hoorn et al., 2018). For instance, research has demonstrated that virtual dating settings can replicate emotions and social signals effectively. This allows individuals to establish connections that could be perceived as identical to those formed with human partners (Hoorn et al., 2018).

Research into metaverse dating has incorporated various theoretical models to explore user behavior. Chakraborty et al. (2023) applied the

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to examine the cognitive and emotional factors shaping users' attitudes toward dating in the metaverse. Their findings revealed that attraction and connection are more significant than the accuracy of information when forming attitudes toward metaverse dating. Additionally, interaction quality, avatar customization, and entertainment value were identified as key factors influencing dating intentions (Chakraborty et al., 2023).

Research has further demonstrated how avatar design and non-verbal communication enhance the perceived authenticity of virtual dating profiles, shaping users' interpretations of textual and visual elements. Non-verbal cues in virtual environments play a critical role in establishing interpersonal connections. Maloney et al. (2020) found that offline non-verbal behaviors such as gaze, facial expressions, gestures, and proximity are naturally replicated in social VR to indicate attention and connection. Participants in this study perceived non-verbal communication in social VR as a positive feature, facilitating immersive interactions similar to face-to-face communication and serving as a natural means of engaging with strangers.

These findings are supported by Freeman and Acena (2021), who highlighted social VR's ability to foster romantic relationships by creating a sense of realism and natural interaction. Participants in their study developed friendships and romantic connections in social VR due to motivations such as the natural emergence of relationships, the ability to meet people beyond geographic limitations, and the opportunity to maintain existing relationships (Freeman & Acena, 2021). Social VR environments also allow users to engage in perspective-taking by gaining experiences outside their own through avatar embodiment, which can deepen interpersonal understanding as well as reduce stereotypes (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016).

Social presence significantly influences perceptions of dating within the metaverse. As described by Lyu et al. (2023), the metaverse offers a platform for user interaction via avatars, promoting a sense of immersion and social engagement that surpasses physical constraints. This immersive characteristic can strengthen connections and feelings of intimacy, which are essential in dating contexts. Additionally, Cao et al. (2022) emphasize the impact of embodied presence within the metaverse, proposing that individuals' interaction and imagination with their avatars may enhance their readiness to engage in social activities, including dating. This suggests that the virtual representation of users may improve their dating experiences by supporting more genuine interactions. Additionally, Behm-Morawitz (2013) found that higher levels of self-presence were associated with greater satisfaction in online relationships, suggesting that emotional bonds formed in immersive virtual environments can extend beyond the online context and contribute positively to users' offline well-being. Nonetheless, metaverse dating raises persistent concerns about authenticity, privacy, and embodied intimacy.

Challenges of Dating in the Metaverse

Dating in the metaverse is still in its infancy, hence there is a lot of skepticism and fear around it. One of the primary challenges in dating within the metaverse is the heightened fear and anxiety associated with social interactions. People feel a high level of social anxiety in virtual environments, almost as high as in real life. For example, Kampmann et al. (2018) point out that virtual environments can closely recreate social interactions for individuals with social anxiety disorder which can exacerbate their anxiety. This fear is aggravated by the anonymity and potential for deception in these virtual platforms (Baba & Misra, 2023). The immersive nature of the metaverse may amplify these fears, as users navigate complex social dynamics that are often less predictable than in face-to-face interactions.

The metaverse also introduces some unique emotional challenges that can impact dating experience. The notion of “virtual cohabitation” (Wang, 2019) highlights motivations such as escapism and emotional gratification that drive individuals to engage in virtual relationships (Wang, 2019). However, such motivations can bring about unrealistic expectations and emotional reliance, the fear that surfaces in the transition from virtual interaction to real life. The immersive experiences offered by the metaverse can also lead to maladaptive behaviors, as individuals may struggle to establish genuine connections outside the virtual realm. This issue is further complicated as users seek the ideal version of their partners based on curated virtual persona which can lead to major disappointment and difficulty in finding a partner in the non-virtual world (Kye et al., 2021). Another fear of dating in the metaverse is the increased risk of security and privacy breaches. Users might worry that their private data could be exposed or misused, which could result in identity theft or harassment (Kumar et al., 2023). According to research, users may be discouraged from fully participating in metaverse dating if there are insufficient security measures in virtual environments because they may believe the risks outweigh the rewards (Gupta et al., 2023). Also, as avatars can be customized in the metaverse, questions concerning deceit and authenticity may arise. Mistrust and skepticism in virtual dating situations can result from users' fears that others are not being authentic (Jin, 2024). People who are able to curate their online persona may feel under pressure to exaggerate their qualities in order to attract partners, which can lead to inflated expectations and a culture of deception. The difference between virtual and real identities can cause users to become disappointed and disillusioned when they finally meet in person (Ahsani et al., 2023).

Taken together, the literature points to persistent uncertainty about whether metaverse dating can support emotional connection and relational authenticity, as well as how non-users anticipate its risks and social consequences. The research questions are informed by Diffusion of Innovations theory by treating public discourse as part of the persuasion stage, where potential adopters and observers evaluate an innovation's relational benefits, perceived risks, and anticipated social consequences. Specifically, the analysis examines how metaverse dating is framed in

relation to Rogers' (2003) innovation attributes (e.g., relative advantage, compatibility, and perceived complexity). Rather than measuring adoption directly, the study focuses on the evaluative judgments through which commenters assess whether metaverse dating aligns with expectations of intimacy, authenticity, and social connection, discursive processes that can shape diffusion trajectories over time. In doing so, the study captures the discursive processes that precede adoption and shape the trajectory of diffusion over time.

Theoretical Framework

To link metaverse platform design to public sentiment and dating outcomes, we first draw on an affordance perspective and then use Diffusion of Innovations to interpret how these perceived action possibilities shape adoption or rejection. Over the past decade, affordance, a concept rooted in ecological psychology, has become a central term in Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) for explaining what technologies enable users to do (Blin, 2016). Originating in James Gibson's work (1979), affordances refer to the action possibilities that an environment offers to an actor, emerging from the relationship between environmental features and an individual's capabilities and goals rather than from objects alone. Gibson conceptualized affordances as the action possibilities that environments offer to actors, emerging from the relationship between environmental features and an individual's capabilities and goals rather than from objects alone (Gibson, 1979). These affordances may enable or constrain action and can have both beneficial and harmful implications. Central to affordance theory is the interdependence of perception and action: individuals perceive and interpret these possibilities as they engage with their surroundings. Importantly, affordances exist independently of whether they are immediately perceived, even though users' awareness and interpretations of them may vary across contexts (Gibson, 1979; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2012).

Affordance theory provides a useful lens for examining user goals by linking technological features with users' capabilities and intentions. By clarifying how specific features enable or constrain action, affordances help explain why users choose to engage with particular technologies. Identifying relevant affordances therefore allows researchers to better understand the motivations driving technology use. In turn, insight into these motivations supports the broader goal of implementing and applying VR and AR technologies more effectively and meaningfully (Steffen et al., 2019). Steffen et al. (2019) identify four generalized affordances of virtualization that are especially relevant to dating in the metaverse: diminishing negative aspects of physical reality (e.g., reducing physical risk or social anxiety), enhancing positive aspects of interaction (e.g., increased engagement, creativity, or social presence), recreating existing dating practices in more convenient or accessible forms, and creating relational experiences that are not possible in physical reality (e.g., avatar-based identity experimentation or shared fantastical environments). Importantly, the desirability of these affordances is shaped by key modifiers, including the importance of sensory vividness and physical context. In the context of romantic relationships, public skepticism toward metaverse dating often

reflects concerns that virtual environments fail to afford embodied intimacy, authenticity, or shared physical presence, elements many users view as central to meaningful dating outcomes. By conceptualizing metaverse dating through an affordance lens, this study explains why public sentiment is polarized and why adoption is uneven: individuals differ in how they prioritize, interpret, and evaluate the relational affordances that metaverse platforms offer. In the context of metaverse dating, affordances such as avatar customization, shared virtual environments, spatialized interaction, and reduced physical risk shape how users imagine intimacy, authenticity, and relational effort, even among those who have not directly used these platforms.

Conceptually, affordances help specify what the metaverse enables (and what it makes salient), while Diffusion of Innovations clarifies how publics evaluate those perceived possibilities when deciding whether the innovation is acceptable, legitimate, or desirable. In this study, public sentiment reflects judgments about whether metaverse dating affordances offer meaningful relational advantages, align with social norms, and can be navigated without undue risk.

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations (DoI) theory offers a conceptual framework for comprehending how users' perceptions of dating in the metaverse transform over time. This theory clarifies the processes by which innovations, including virtual dating platforms, are embraced and integrated into societal behaviors (van Rijnsoever et al., 2009).

As outlined by Rogers and Williams (1983), the decision to adopt an innovation is based on five principal perceptions concerning the attributes of the innovation: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. While other elements such as organizational and innovator characteristics (Kwon, 1987) have been proposed as factors affecting technology adoption, the essential influence of these perceived attributes in shaping the adoption decision has been acknowledged in numerous studies (Davis, 1989; Moore & Benbasat, 1991; Saga & Zmud, 1993). The term "relative advantage" describes how much an innovation is thought to be superior to the concept it replaces. Users may believe that virtual dating has many advantages over traditional dating techniques in the context of metaverse dating, including the capacity to participate in immersive experiences that replicate real-life interactions and greater accessibility to possible partners (Bibri, 2022). Studies reveal that people are more inclined to embrace technology that they think will improve their dating experiences, like stronger emotional bonds and fewer geographical restrictions (Mahmoud, 2024). As Chakraborty et al. (2023) show, users' evaluations of interaction quality and avatar customization shape their dating intentions, suggesting that differing expectations of a dating experience may affect acceptance of metaverse dating platforms. The likelihood of users interacting with these platforms increases if the metaverse conforms to their social and cultural norms. Research applying diffusion theory across cultural contexts indicates that adoption is shaped by locally situated values and perceptions (Sasaki, 2018), suggesting that metaverse platforms would need to accommodate a broad spectrum of

user values in order to succeed. “Complexity” refers to the perceived difficulty of using an innovation. In the context of metaverse dating, if users find the technology difficult to navigate or understand, they may be less likely to adopt it. This complexity can stem from the technical requirements of engaging in virtual environments, such as the need for specific hardware or software (Gor, 2015). Moreover, social influences and personal characteristics are just two examples of the variables that can moderate the interaction between these perceived qualities and user experiences. Social norms and peer pressure, for instance, have a big impact on how users view the relative benefits and suitability of metaverse dating, which could help or hurt adoption (Pragha et al., 2025). Personal qualities like receptivity to new experiences may also affect how people view the difficulty of using metaverse dating platforms (Elbayoumy & Ding, 2023). It's also critical to consider how communication channels influence how people view dating in the metaverse. Rogers makes a distinction between interpersonal channels, which offer individualized communication, and mass media channels, which offer generalized information (Rancati & D'Agata, 2022). Since interpersonal channels provide individualized information that speaks to each user's unique experiences and preferences, they may be more successful in promoting favorable attitudes toward metaverse dating in the dating context. This implies that user awareness and acceptance of metaverse dating platforms could be increased by employing efficient marketing techniques that make use of both kinds of channels.

Although Diffusion of Innovations (DoI) theory is often applied to explain adoption outcomes over time, Rogers (2003) emphasizes that diffusion begins well before adoption decisions are made. Early stages of diffusion are characterized by knowledge acquisition, persuasion, and evaluative sensemaking, during which individuals and publics form judgments about an innovation's desirability, risks, and social implications. These pre-adoption evaluations play a critical role in shaping whether and how adoption unfolds, particularly for emerging technologies whose use remains uncertain or contested. In this study, public discourse surrounding dating in the metaverse is conceptualized as part of this early diffusion phase, wherein individuals, many of whom are non-users, assess the perceived advantages, compatibility, and consequences of metaverse dating prior to adoption.

In this study, public discourse surrounding dating in the metaverse is conceptualized as part of this early diffusion phase, wherein individuals assess the perceived advantages, compatibility, and consequences of metaverse dating prior to adoption.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

We analyze Reddit and YouTube discourse as a site of early-stage persuasion and evaluative sensemaking, focusing on how commenters articulate perceived relative advantage, compatibility, and concerns about complexity. This study employs textual analysis to examine user-generated comments on Reddit and YouTube related to dating in the metaverse.

Textual analysis, as a qualitative research methodology, allows for an in-depth exploration of textual content to uncover underlying meanings as they emerge in the analysis (Chenail, 2011). This method is particularly useful for understanding how messages and representations are constructed, communicated, and interpreted within digital discourse. Rather than seeking a single, definitive meaning, textual analysis acknowledges the plurality of interpretations shaped by cultural and social contexts (McKee, 2003). McKee (2003) emphasizes context as a critical element in interpretation. The meaning of a text is shaped by the broader intertextual landscape in which it is situated; meaning that the same text may yield different interpretations when analyzed in different contexts. Thus, this study considers how users engage with metaverse dating through their comments on Reddit and YouTube, taking into account the platform-specific discourses, community norms, and sociocultural factors that influence interpretations. Within this textual-analytic framing, thematic analysis serves as the procedural means of identifying and organizing patterns of meaning across the corpus. Textual analysis supplies the interpretive commitments — attention to context, intertextuality, and the plurality of readings a text sustains — while thematic coding provides the systematic procedure through which those readings are derived and documented.

Furthermore, sentiment analysis is incorporated into this study to assess the emotional tone of user-generated comments on Reddit and YouTube regarding metaverse dating. This approach allows for the identification of patterns in sentiment (such as positive, negative, or neutral attitudes) toward virtual dating experiences. Sentiment analysis complements textual analysis by offering a structured means to quantify emotional responses, helping to illuminate broader trends in user perceptions. The comments were then analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), in order to identify recurring patterns of meaning within the corpus; thematic analysis is used here to operationalize the textual-analytic approach outlined above. By integrating sentiment and textual analysis, this study provides a more detailed understanding of how metaverse dating is received and discussed within online communities. Because large-scale adoption of metaverse dating has not yet occurred, the analysis focuses on public discourse as a site of anticipatory sensemaking, where individuals articulate expectations, concerns, and imagined outcomes that influence future adoption trajectories.

Data Collection

The data for this study consists of user comments extracted from Reddit threads and YouTube comment sections discussing dating in the metaverse. The selection process involved identifying posts and videos that discuss perceptions of dating within virtual spaces. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that the selected comments were relevant to the research objectives, focusing on discussions that reflect perceptions and engagement with metaverse dating.

A total of 260 comments were analyzed for this study, with 132 extracted

from four Reddit discussion threads and 128 from two YouTube videos. In addition to Reddit discussions, YouTube videos were selected based on their relevance to metaverse dating. Two videos, titled “What the Metaverse Means for Your Love Life” (Hussey, 2021) with 91 comments and “Flirt-ual Reality: How People Are Dating in the Metaverse” (NBC News, 2022) with 37 comments, were analyzed for user engagement and commentary on virtual dating experiences. Comments on these videos provided additional perspectives on how individuals perceive intimacy and romantic relationships in virtual environments. Although Reddit and YouTube content is publicly accessible, measures were taken to anonymize user data by avoiding direct attribution of usernames.

Reddit discussion threads were selected based on their relevance to metaverse dating, particularly those that posed questions or facilitated discussions on the topic. Some of the prompts analyzed included inquiries from users seeking firsthand accounts of metaverse relationships, such as a freelance writer looking to interview couples who met in the metaverse. Threads were screened to exclude posts that were off-topic, unrelated, or focused on other virtual worlds such as Second Life. From these threads, 132 comments were extracted. Similarly, YouTube videos were selected based on relevance to metaverse dating and user engagement. Comments were screened for topical relevance and only comments directly related to the topic were included in the analysis.

Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovations theory is well suited to metaverse dating because it allows examination of early perceptions of, and engagement with, a nascent technological phenomenon. In practice, however, many user responses were unrelated or only partially relevant to the research questions.

Although the novelty of metaverse dating aligns with Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovations theory, as it allows an examination of early perceptions and engagement with a nascent technological phenomenon, metaverse dating, by analyzing how users react to it early on, many user responses were unrelated or only partially relevant.

To ensure data quality, both authors independently screened the comments, removed off-topic material, and edited selected comments for clarity while maintaining the original meaning. Comments were then coded individually by each author, after which codes were compared and verified collaboratively. Discussions were conducted to clarify code definitions and ensure that codes accurately reflected the emerging themes. This iterative process facilitated a rigorous thematic analysis and ensured that only meaningful, relevant content contributed to the findings.

Results

Data Preprocessing

The extracted Reddit and YouTube comments underwent a standard data cleaning and preprocessing procedure. First, comments were reviewed to remove duplicates, off-topic posts, spam, emoji and comments lacking substantive content. Next, data were formatted and saved in Microsoft

Word to ensure the focus solely on the textual content of the comments.

Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis involves detecting subjectivity in text and extracting and classifying sentiments and emotions (Zhang & Liu, 2017). In this study, Sentiment analysis was conducted using free sentiment analysis software available on the website “text2data.com”.

The process involved cleaning and organizing the data into a Word document before being input into the software for sentiment classification. The sentiment analysis revealed an overly negative perception of dating in the metaverse. The data indicated a strong leaning toward skepticism, fear, and general dislike of the concept. Below is a breakdown of sentiment distribution:

1. Negative Sentiment (Majority, 65-70%) The dominant sentiment expressed skepticism, fear, and rejection of metaverse dating. Many respondents argued that the metaverse lacks authenticity, fosters social isolation, and does not provide meaningful relationships. Some respondents denied the legitimacy of the metaverse, stating, “There is no metaverse.” Others viewed metaverse dating as a threat to traditional social interactions: “People should do it the old way... people are becoming anti-social.” Furthermore, there were concerns about deception in virtual dating: “Flawed people don't want to date flawed people IRL, so now we can pretend date online where flaws are masked.”

2. Neutral/Analytical Sentiment (15-20%) Some responses approached the topic from a logical perspective, assessing potential advantages and disadvantages without strong emotional reactions. Examples include: “The metaverse doesn't exist yet, but if it did, it could enable better connections than dating apps.”

3. Positive Sentiment (Minority, 10-15%) A smaller subset of comments highlighted the potential benefits of metaverse dating, particularly for individuals with social anxiety, long-distance relationships, and those already engaged in virtual communities. Examples include, “The metaverse actually makes you more social, not less.”, “I'm socially anxious in real life, but VR dating helped me gain confidence.”, “People have met and married in virtual worlds like Second Life for years.”

The findings from the sentiment analysis indicate that perceptions of metaverse dating are largely negative, with concerns about authenticity, social isolation, and technological overreach dominating discourse. However, a smaller percentage of respondents acknowledged potential benefits, particularly for socially anxious individuals and long-distance relationships.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It provides both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) approaches to coding, allowing for the exploration of both explicit

and implicit meanings within participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) guide for conducting thematic analysis, data was first read through and then re-read by both researchers to actively seek meanings and patterns.

After this initial review, initial codes were created independently and then re-examined by both researchers to check for discrepancies and establish agreement. Through an iterative process of coding, reviewing, and refining, codes were organized into potential themes. Some initial codes were dropped, while others were refined and merged. Examples of initial codes include: No Metaverse, Positive, Negative, Real-Life Connection, and Humor. Afterward, the themes were further refined and defined to ensure consistency and clarify what aspect of the data each theme represented.

Through a thematic analysis of various comments, several dominant themes emerge, including the rejection of the metaverse concept, concerns about authenticity and deception, skepticism about its impact on human relationships, potential for social connection, and use of humor. These themes are unpacked below.

Rejection of the Metaverse

One of the most dominant themes in the dataset is the rejection of the metaverse as a viable or even existing space. In relation to skepticism about its existence, comments from users showed that they did not believe in the existence of metaverse, nor did they find it to be a realistic concept. One person stated, "Technically the metaverse doesn't exist, so no one is dating in the metaverse."

Furthermore, many respondents believe the metaverse is still theoretical and argue that media and corporate interests inflate their presence. The skepticism suggests that many see the metaverse as a commercialized repackaging of existing virtual spaces.

Concerns About Authenticity and Deception

Closely tied to the rejection of the metaverse is the concern over authenticity and deception. Many respondents express apprehension about how virtual interactions mask true identities, increasing the potential for catfishing and dishonest self-presentation as evidenced by comments like "As if getting scammed in the real world was not enough, now we can get scammed by a hot chick in a virtual world." The skepticism surrounding authenticity in metaverse dating suggests an overarching concern about the erosion of truth in digital interactions and the potential consequences for interpersonal relationships.

The Impact of Metaverse on Relationships

Skepticism about the metaverse's impact on human relationships is another prevailing theme. Many respondents expressed concerns that metaverse dating could erode real-life social skills, leading to greater societal disconnection. A recurring sentiment among respondents was the metaverse's inability to replicate physical chemistry, which they considered essential to romantic relationships. One participant stated, "I hate the idea

of... this... people need real human contact, you need to actually meet to see if you have chemistry and no computer can emulate it for you.” This sentiment was further reinforced by another participant who stated, “I wouldn’t be interested in dating anyone or meeting for more than a cup of coffee until I knew what they smell like. And moved, and all the rest of it. How could something as sensual as being with another person be reduced to avatars?” These responses emphasize the irreplaceable nature of in-person dating experiences, highlighting sensory and emotional aspects that virtual environments cannot replicate. Consistent with Steffen et al. (2019), negative sentiment toward metaverse dating frequently reflects a perceived misalignment between the affordances of virtual environments and the importance of sensory vividness and physical context in romantic relationships.

Respondents also expressed a preference for real-world dating and voiced concerns about the potential repercussions of virtual dating on real-life interactions. Some participants were particularly critical of the idea, advocating traditional dating methods. Example comments include, “Here’s an idea: Date in real life. Go outside.” Another warned, “We will completely STOP paying attention to the REAL people around us.” These responses illustrate fears that metaverse dating may contribute to an increase in social isolation and emotional detachment.

One respondent suggested a spiritual approach to finding a partner rather than relying on metaverse dating. One participant emphasized faith in divine intervention, stating, “Pray to God and trust Him. That’s what I did, and He brought me my fiancé... Pray to God and He will hear you.”

Respondents voiced concerns about the negative effects of metaverse dating on social detachment and isolation. They expressed apprehension that engaging in relationships within the metaverse could further exacerbate social withdrawal, particularly given the already pervasive impact of excessive screen time. These responses reveal participants’ perception of the metaverse as a contributor to increased emotional detachment and their reluctance to engage with it. Given that social media apps are already perceived as draining by many respondents, metaverse dating was viewed as an even more undesirable option.

Potential for Social Connection

Despite widespread skepticism, some individuals highlight the metaverse’s potential for fostering social connections. Respondents who recognize positive aspects of virtual dating argue that virtual spaces provide a new medium for individuals who struggle with in-person interactions. “It’s actually better for some people than traditional online dating because you get to interact more naturally through shared activities.” Supporters of metaverse dating highlight its accessibility for individuals who face difficulties with in-person interactions, suggesting that VR spaces could function as confidence-building environments and alternative spaces for those who struggle with forming connections in real life. One participant stated, “I’m socially anxious in real life, can’t approach or talk to men well. However, with virtual reality and talking to strangers more and more, I’ve

actually become more confident."

Some respondents shared personal experiences of forming relationships in virtual reality, with one stating, "I actually met my ex-boyfriend in VR! It just happened. You play together, have fun without pressure, and get to know each other."

Advocates argue that virtual dating provides unique opportunities to connect, particularly for those seeking alternative socialization methods. Some participants emphasized the role of the metaverse in long-distance relationships, with one stating,

Honestly, it's more like this: say you have a long-distance relationship, instead of having it be through a phone, it's convenient because it's cheaper than having to find a flight or drive long distances to see the person, just as the reporter stated.

Participants also emphasized the longevity of virtual relationships, with one noting, "The metaverse has been around for at least 16 years. Many people have dated and met via it and gone on to have successful real-life relationships." Others stressed the authenticity of metaverse relationships, as one participant explained, "You're not dating a virtual non-existent person though. You're dating another human being."

Humor as a Coping Mechanism

Humor emerged as a significant thematic response, functioning as both a coping mechanism and a method of critique. Many comments mock the concept of metaverse dating, employing sarcasm and exaggerated analogies to highlight its perceived absurdity. One respondent commented, "So I can be single in the metaverse too? Really need that in life." Another joked, "Man, here I am wasting two hours every day at the gym for years and years when I could have just built a buff-ass avatar in 2023 in 10 minutes and called it a day."

Humor is used both as a way to process discomfort with the metaverse and as a means of dismissing the concept outright. These comments reflect a broader skepticism about virtual dating, with humor serving as a way for participants to critique and distance themselves from the idea.

Discussion

With the introduction of any new technology, there is always some form of resistance. In our analysis, multiple themes emerge that reflect a range of evaluative stances consistent with an early stage of diffusion, ranging from staunch rejection and skepticism to a cautious interest among a minority of respondents. From a diffusion perspective, the findings suggest that dating in the metaverse remains situated in an early and contested stage of innovation diffusion. Public discourse reflects ongoing persuasion and negotiation rather than normalization, with users and non-users alike weighing perceived affordances against concerns related to authenticity, embodiment, and social withdrawal. These discursive evaluations are consequential, as

negative framing at early stages of diffusion can slow or redirect adoption trajectories, while selective enthusiasm may encourage niche or segmented uptake rather than widespread diffusion. Thus, the study highlights how public sentiment functions as a temporal force in diffusion processes, shaping not only whether adoption occurs, but the form it ultimately takes.

In response to RQ1, commenters overwhelmingly perceived virtual environments as diminishing rather than enabling emotional connection, with the absence of embodied and sensory cues cited most often. In response to RQ2, the concerns voiced most frequently by non-users clustered around authenticity and deception, social isolation, and the displacement of in-person courtship.

The findings of this study reflect the intricacy of dating in the metaverse and show a variety of perspectives that express both pessimism and hope for the future of online romance. The main concerns of dating in the metaverse that emerge from thematic analysis include social isolation, decline of in-person intimacy, and authenticity. However, a small percentage of users acknowledge that the metaverse offers a chance to help people connect, especially those who are separated by social or geographic boundaries. These varying viewpoints are consistent with larger patterns in online dating, where technology is viewed as both a means of connection and as an impediment to deep connections. Among the most noteworthy themes to come out of the analysis is the categorical denial of the metaverse as a legitimate venue for romantic interaction. As a result of their general mistrust of new technologies that have the potential to revolutionize social interactions, many respondents reject the metaverse as a marketing-driven concept. This is consistent with previous studies on online dating, which indicate that even though digital platforms have become widely used, their capacity to create real connections is still being questioned (Aaron et al., 2016).

The fear that metaverse dating will exacerbate social isolation and dwindling human interaction is a major worry among participants. This viewpoint is consistent with previous discussions regarding the impact of online dating services, where users voice apprehension that virtual communication could supplant more traditional means of establishing relationships (Sharabi & Timmermans, 2021). Avatars' anonymity also prompts questions about dishonesty, with some speculating that catfishing might become even more common in the metaverse. These concerns align with earlier research that emphasizes the significance of self-presentation techniques in online dating settings, where people meticulously craft their online personas to seem more appealing (see Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023).

Concerns regarding the inability of virtual interactions to replicate intimacy in real life are further fueled by skepticism regarding the technological replacement of romance. Numerous respondents argued that virtual environments are unable to replicate sensory experiences like touch and scent, which are essential to romantic attraction. Online dating is effective at establishing connections but, lacking in-person interaction, frequently

fails to sustain long-term relationships (see Aaron et al., 2016). Some participants also see metaverse dating as part of a broader dystopian trajectory, drawing comparisons to science fiction tales that warn against an excessive dependence on virtual experiences. Like previous concerns about the potential impact of online dating on traditional courtship customs, this fear is a reflection of long-standing societal concerns about technology replacing fundamental human experiences (Chan, 2017).

Prior work suggests that avatar-based interaction in immersive virtual environments can reduce social barriers and foster inclusion by allowing users to experiment with identity and embodiment in ways not always possible offline (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016; Freeman & Maloney, 2021). However, for individuals with social anxiety, studies suggest that while these digital platforms provide users with convenience and reduce interpersonal pressures, they may inadvertently discourage the active practice of essential social skills. Venter (2019) for instance, emphasizes that although virtual communication can help people develop social skills like replying to messages and participating in group dynamics online, relying too much on these platforms can keep people from practicing and acquiring more sophisticated social skills that are essential for interactions in the real world (Venter, 2019). Some participants do contend that metaverse dating is just an extension of current virtual interactions rather than a radical break from conventional dating practices, viewing it as a logical progression of online dating. This viewpoint is in line with research showing how flexible online dating services are, as they have consistently changed to include new technological features (Duguay et al., 2024).

The humor and mockery concerning metaverse dating also provide insight into how emerging technologies are initially received. The use of humor as a coping mechanism or means of expressing skepticism is not uncommon in the adoption of new digital trends. This pattern is evident in the history of online dating, where early users often downplayed their engagement with dating apps due to lingering social stigma (Ward, 2016). However, as dating apps became normalized, perceptions shifted, suggesting that attitudes toward metaverse dating may also evolve over time.

Traditionalist and religious perspectives on dating emphasize the sociocultural aspects of online romance even more. Metaverse dating raises ethical questions for some respondents, who see it as a departure from interpersonal relationships. This supports more general criticisms of online dating, according to which some people prefer in-person contacts as the basis for deep connections (Aaron et al., 2016). These ideas are still prevalent, which implies that even though online dating is becoming more popular, it won't likely completely replace conventional courtship customs, especially for people who place a high value on religious or cultural norms.

Conclusion

The discourse surrounding metaverse dating remains polarized, reflecting broader societal struggles to accept technological advancements that may impact traditional societal norms. While some individuals regard the

metaverse as a natural evolution of digital romance, others view it as a danger to authentic human connection. Our findings revealed strong resistance to metaverse dating, with concerns about authenticity, isolation, and the loss of real-world intimacy. Many respondents indicated a strong preference for conventional social interactions, viewing metaverse dating as a continuation of online deceit and a detachment from the real world. Moreover, humor emerged as an important thematic response, serving as both a critique and a coping mechanism. Many respondents employed sarcasm and exaggerated analogies to dismiss the concept of metaverse dating, using humor to highlight its perceived absurdity. This reaction indicated an underlying resistance to technological shifts in social interactions, particularly in the realm of romantic relationships. The proponents of metaverse dating argued that virtual spaces offer chances for self-assurance, organic interactions through common interests, and deep connections that cut across geographic borders. These viewpoints imply that although the metaverse might not completely replace conventional dating, it might be a useful substitute for people who find it difficult to communicate face-to-face. However, the main public perception reflected deep anxieties about technology replacing real-life experiences. As virtual spaces continue to develop, ongoing research will be necessary to assess their long-term impact on interpersonal relationships and social behavior. By examining public discourse at a pre-adoption stage, this study extends Diffusion of Innovations theory by demonstrating how affective and moral evaluations of relational technologies emerge before use becomes widespread, underscoring the importance of early sensemaking in shaping the diffusion of intimate technologies.

This study is not without limitations. The opinion on dating in the metaverse is based on comments drawn from four Reddit threads and two Youtube videos; and selecting different threads or videos might yield different results. Thus, the findings are not generalizable. The study primarily analyzes user-generated content from Reddit and YouTube, which may not fully represent diverse perspectives on metaverse dating and so future studies should look at other social media platforms like Twitter, TikTok and Facebook. The study's reliance on pre-existing online discussions rather than in-person interviews or surveys limits its capacity to delve further into people's reasons, experiences, and changing viewpoints on metaverse dating. Furthermore, the study was carried out at a particular moment in time, and as virtual reality interactions become more complex and commonplace, attitudes toward metaverse dating may change as the technology changes.

Future research should examine how these perceptions evolve as metaverse technology becomes more common. Future research should also explore how virtual dating affordances can be incorporated into traditional dating interactions which may include analyzing how virtual features can enhance romantic connections for people in real-life relationships and facilitate long-distance relationships. The findings of our work may inspire further exploration on related subjects like the psychological foundations of digital attraction, the effects of avatar representation on user identity, and the long-term consequences of

metaverse interactions on relationship satisfaction. Crucially, this study can lay the groundwork for future advancements in online dating-related ethics and privacy, thereby enhancing scholarly discourse on technology and interpersonal relationships.

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