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Application of Goffman's Theory of Dramaturgy and Baudrillard's Concepts of Simulacrum and Simulation in the Metaverse

Jia Wang[1,a,*]

[1]*Master alumna of Business School of HKUST, The founder of The Filman Group, Beijing, China*
a. Jessicaw578@163.com
**corresponding author*

Abstract: This study investigates social interaction within the Metaverse from the perspective of Goffman's dramaturgical theory and Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. The Metaverse, as a deeply immersive virtual 3-D world, presents extensive opportunities for sociological analysis of the presentation of self, identity construction, and the creation of "hyperreality" within the contemporary digital world. This study employs the virtual ethnographic methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviewing within four Metaverse contexts including massive multiplayer online role-playing games, immersive social media, Metaverse conferences, and digital human live broadcasts. Results show that participant activities are clustered into three main themes, namely the replication of the self and self-idealization, the extension of the self, and identity masking/unmasking. Through employing dramaturgical theory and the theory of hyperreality, the analysis of these three themes illuminates a deeper understanding of how Metaverse social interactions both replicate and diverge from sociological understandings of the self, identity, and "reality".

Keywords: dramaturgical theory, hyperreality, identity, Metaverse, virtual ethnography, virtual reality

1. Introduction

The Metaverse is the realization of what McLuhan termed "the final phase of the extensions of man-the technological simulation of consciousness" [1]. Beginning as a concept that first appeared in the fictional novel titled Snow Crash by Stephenson, the full realization of the Metaverse is in the offing [2]. In October 2021, Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that the company was rebranding into Meta Platforms, Inc. [3]. Key to this rebranding was the company's long-term commitment to virtual reality (VR) as well as the realization of the Metaverse [3]. The idea of the Metaverse has been further advanced through immersive virtual worlds such as Second Life, which began in 2003. Essentially, leading tech companies are engaged in a race towards the creation of a hyperreal Metaverse, which will an immersive virtual reality that perfectly mirrors the real world, if not becoming "realer." The Metaverse, therefore, can be defined as an "immersive, multi-media, multi-persona" virtual 3-D world whereby participants adopt alter egos and make real-time interactions with others [4]. While it can mimic the real world, it may also appear as a fantasy world.

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The extant literature on virtual realities focuses on diverse aspects including communicative potential, social potential, risks, and therapeutic potentials, among others. Scholars within this field can be divided into two key positions, namely immersionists and augmentationists. For the immersionists, virtual realities such as the Metaverse are entirely new worlds equipped with their own social, economic, and psychological features that are to a significant extent different from the real world and adhere to their distinct processes [5]. On the other hand, the augmentationists posit that the virtual world is inherently an extension of the real world. For them, the aspect of the "virtual" is simply added to real life, and, as a result, the social, economic, and psychological processes of the virtual world are essentially the same as those of the real world [5]. Therefore, they expect that people exhibit behaviors or present themselves in the same manner in the virtual world as they do in real-world scenarios. In short, both the immersionists and the augmentationists tend to agree that there are some commonalities as well as differences between virtual worlds and the real world, starting from the two extreme ends of a continuum.

To gain an in-depth understanding of the sociology of the Metaverse, it is essential to develop a rigorous theoretical perspective with which to approach it. Goffman's dramaturgical theory [6], in combination with Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality [7], provides a viable theoretical basis for the sociological understanding of the Metaverse. Specifically, Goffman explains the basis for the differences in participant activity and identity formation in the Metaverse by establishing how aspects of self-presentation and impression management structure how Metaverse participants create personal identities and interact with each other [6]. Baudrillard's concepts of the simulacra and simulation, as the foundation of his theory of hyperreality, can enhance the understanding of the Metaverse as either an extension or an alternative world for the participants [7]. This paper employs the virtual ethnographic method put forward by Hine to explore how participant experiences in the Metaverse can be understood through the approaches offered by these foundational theorists [8].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Dramaturgy and the Presentation of Self

Goffman's dramaturgical theory offers useful sociological insights into the Metaverse as an extended stage in which participant activity is represented by alter egos such as avatars [6]. This theory presents a metaphorical approach for explaining how individuals present idealized versions of themselves, depicting life as a stage for diverse human performances that are received by audiences [6]. Through the process of "impression management," individuals can selectively present important aspects of their identities. Essentially, Goffman argues that every act of performance amounts to a presentation of the self, which is aimed at creating specific impressions of the self in the minds of other individuals [6].

As noted by Hogan, Goffman's theory assumes that the activity of individuals occurs within specific bounded settings [9]. According to Goffman, these specific settings can be categorized as "front stage", where settings in which individuals attempt to present idealized versions of themselves based on a specific role, or "backstage", where settings where their idealized performance is contradicted [6]. In other words, the backstage denotes the setting where the individual's performance contradicts the norms or values that guide their front-stage performance. Essential to this concept is Goffman's idea of the "two-way street" (p. 114), where the process of identity management involves both presentation and reception as complementary processes [6], exhibiting how individual identity is intrinsically linked to society [10]. The individual is constantly reminded of the fact that the audience is always making independent evaluations of the performance. This awareness is a manifestation of the relationship between the individual's sense of identity and the society within which their performances are staged.

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There are also instances whereby fronts tend to collide, which Goffman explores through instances of someone answering the telephone in public or when private conversations are loud enough to be heard by third parties [6]. Such instances tend to elicit backstage and frontstage collisions leading to the actor giving off aspects of their identity that they would otherwise not have given off [11]. The concepts drawn from Goffman's theory of dramaturgy, can, therefore, be adopted when seeking to understand how the self-presentation activities of the participants in the Metaverse amount to impression management and whether they are perceivable as frontstage of backstage activities.

2.2. Simulacra, Simulation, and the Hyperreal

The Metaverse arguably creates a context where simulations of reality appear as more "real" than reality itself, which Baudrillard terms "hyperreality," or the "generation by models of a real without origin" [7]. Drawing from poststructuralist theory, metaphysics, and Saussure's theory of general linguistics, Baudrillard considers how the significations and symbolisms inherent within media and culture create an understanding of shared experience [7]. While the simulacra are copies portraying things that did not have an original or no longer have an original, simulations depict the imitations of the processes of the real world over time [7]. According to Baudrillard, contemporary society has entirely substituted all reality and meaning with signs and symbols [12]. Rather than mediating reality, these simulacra obscure the fact that reality is irrelevant in understanding human experiences [7].

The Metaverse, as a creation of an alternative world through media, is intimately related to Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra" necessary for the creation of hyperreality. Hyperreality, as a facilitator of life in a simulacrum, is a "loss of the real" [7]. Similarly, McLuhan argues that contemporary electronic technology alters all existing patterns of social interaction not through its content but through its structure, forcing individuals to reconsider previously taken for granted ideas and institutions [3]. Therefore, as the Metaverse becomes increasingly mainstream, it is necessary to understand the tendency toward hyperreality. Based on Baudrillard's discussions, the Metaverse can be seen as a hyperreal world where there is no clear boundary between reality and fiction [7]. As noted by Aas, hyperreality makes it possible for the co-mingling of reality in the physical world with virtual reality as well as the integration of human and artificial intelligence (AI) [5].

Baudrillard conceives of consumerism, which relies heavily on sign exchange value, as a major contributor to the development of hyperreality [7]. For instance, certain fashion brands act as signs that represent attributes of wealth or fashionableness. Therefore, hyperreality tricks the consciousness into dissociating from real emotional engagements and instead adopting artificial simulations [13]. For many participants in the virtual world, satisfaction is derived from simulating or imitating the transient simulacra or reality as opposed to interacting with an "authentic" reality [14]. This perspective enhances sociological explorations of how the Metaverse is an extension of Goffman's stage [14], while Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality presents a paradigm shift in the effort to explain current sociological conditions within the Metaverse [7].

2.3. Online Selves and Alter Egos/Virtual Personas

Virtual environments present participants with the chance to perform different identities to others. The physical detachment of virtual reality provides a distance between the performer and the audience that allows them to both conceal and embellish [15]. This aspect of impression management coincides with what Goffman considers reflecting character "splitting" in the process of interaction (p. 117) [6]. As noted by Bullingham and Vasconcelos , the division of the self occurs in both virtual and "real" interactions [15]. Thus, the virtual self can be seen as a part of a wider identity that is joined to the self in the real world. However, De Kosnik argues that this splitting enhances the creation of a new virtual identity that is entirely detached from the self in real-life [16]. Regardless of the approach

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adopted in perceiving the self, the building of virtual identities facilitates the adoption of a virtual persona [15,16]. Therefore, De Kosnik suggests that the term "real world" should be used cautiously or entirely replaced with "non-virtual", considering that the identities that individuals create in virtual environments may be as real as offline identities [16]. People may not perceive the identities they create in virtual spaces as being far from reality.

A different perspective by Baker introduces the concept of a "blended identity" (p. 7) [17]. According to this perspective, the non-virtual self informs the development of a new, virtual self, which then re-informs the non-virtual self through interactions in the virtual environment. This approach is complimented by Goffman's idea of the "face", in which a person is expected to "keep face" through maintaining the initial impression, or "mask", that they gave their audience [6]. In consideration of Baker's blended identity in the context of Goffman's mask, virtual reality can be seen as nothing but a mask that an individual wears based on the context of their interaction, creating a particular virtual impression that may carry through to future interaction [6,17].

The avatar and the digital human can be viewed as masks that individuals use in representing the virtual self and demonstrating their interests [18]. Nevelsteen found that avatar customization was considered more important by users of certain Metaverse platforms than it was to users of less immersive platforms, revealing that Metaverse users place greater emphasis on self-presentation [18]. According to Ducheneaut et al. many participants in the virtual world prefer avatars that a more enhanced appearance when compared to non-virtual settings [19]. In this way, the Metaverse environment is a stage and the non-virtual environment is a backstage [19]. Metaverse participants invest heavily in getting the costume that would attract the strongest admiration from their audiences, pointing to the significant influence of transformed social interaction on avatars and digital humans. As such, with the emergence of avatars, users can emphasize or minimize different aspects of the self, including their appearances or behavior [20]. Participants become creators and editors with the power to design their self-representations, choosing what they perform or hide [20].

Having different virtual personas means that an individual can break the self into various parts that cater to the perceptions of specific audiences, revealing only that which is deemed relevant to the audience [21]. The alternative avatar ("alt") is a manifestation of this attribute of the virtual self. Having various avatars implies that the core aspects of the user's identity are spread across various selves, with different goals [21]. However, Ducheneaut et al. challenged this ability to distribute aspects of one's identity, arguing that despite having different alts, most participants identified a specific primary representative avatar [19]. While Goffman's focus was not on avatars, this discussion closely relates to Goffman'sclaim that actors adopt multiple roles in their everyday performances [6].

In exploring how virtual personas are represented in the Metaverse, Boellstorff observes that Second Life participants tend to return to their usual real identities as soon as their role-playing is over [22]. Irrespective of their individual intentions, participants in virtual environments adopt slightly different behaviors when interacting in the virtual world as opposed to the non-virtual, concealing certain aspects of the personality while overemphasizing others [22]. Understood in the context of Goffman, actors use props but end up marginalizing them, still carrying on with the performance on the stage even though it is an "unconscious performance" [6]. The user still brings the non-virtual self into the interactions with the virtual environment in the process of impression management. By employing the conceptualizations of self-representation and hyperreality, this paper seeks to explore how these theoretical approaches from Goffman and others bring insight to the Metaverse's virtual reality [6].

3. Methodology

The present study employs the methodology of virtual ethnography to explore the presentations of the self in virtual platforms and analyze the meaning attributed to them by participants from the

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theoretical perspectives of Goffman and Baudrillard [6,7]. Virtual ethnography can provide an enriched sense of the meaning of both the media and the cultures that enable it [8]. Within the context of the present study, this method allows for deeper examination of how participants in the virtual world understand the capacities of the technology and what significance they attribute these capacities, particularly in terms of self-presentation, identity management, and perceptions of authenticity or authority. The approach is also important when seeking to understand how the virtual environment of the Metaverse impacts the organization of social relations in time and space and their relation to "real life" or non-virtual environments [8]. Whether the Metaverse is experienced in a way that radically differs from the "real world," or there is a boundary between them can also be examined by adopting the virtual ethnographic approach.

In line with virtual ethnographic methodologies, this study collects data via participant observation, whereby the researcher takes part in understanding, identifying, recording, and making sense of participant behavior. The present study has collected data from four Metaverse scenarios, namely massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), immersive social media, Metaverse conferences, and digital human live broadcasts. Five participants were interviewed within each context. Participant selection followed the random sampling technique whereby the researcher randomly identified participants on Second Life, sent them a friend request, and built rapport through live chat. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect insights from each participant after obtaining informed consent, with specific questions formulated for each of the four contexts. Each interview lasted around fifteen minutes. This interview method is useful for this context, as the researcher may attach questions whenever appropriate and participants can contribute in a manner that meets their preferences [8]. Data was analyzed according to the thematic analysis approach, which manually defines, provides insights, and finds meaningful patterns in collective experiences following the steps of familiarization, coding, theme identification, review of themes, defining and naming of themes, and report writing [23].

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of the present study indicate that the Metaverse activities of research participants revolved around the replication of the self or identity replication and self-idealization, the extension of the self across the virtual and the non-virtual environments, and masking/unmasking. Goffman's dramaturgical theory and Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality offer intriguing insights into these results.

4.1. Identity Replication and Self-Idealization

Respondents from each of the four contexts revealed that they enjoyed the Metaverse as it enabled them to recreate their own offline identities using avatars, replicating aspects of the offline self in their virtual identities. Four of the respondents within the MMORPG context, for instance, indicated that they preferred role-playing games as compared to multi-player online battle games since the former offered greater allowances for offline identity replication in the virtual world, which enabled sense of a deeper integration with their gaming role. Three respondents indicated that these role-playing games were more capable of enhancing a presentation of a virtual self that better reflects their offline lives. Additionally, all respondents revealed that in the virtual game world, as in the non-virtual world, their activities are dictated by "self-evident" norms and values that ensure discipline.

Identity replication refers to the process of reproducing non-virtual identities within virtual identities [4]. Self-representation and impression management are among the central aspects that guide the process of identity creation in both virtual and non-virtual spaces [24]. In the virtual world, self-representation is a central aspect of character and avatar creation. According to Goffman's

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process of impression management, individuals seek to represent themselves in idealized forms that will positively impact how they are perceived by others [6]. In line with this perspective, Ducheneaut et al. argue that few participants in the virtual world of the Metaverse are interested in reproducing their physical attributes into their online identities as represented by their avatars. For other virtual worlds, this tendency was even reported to be even lower [19]. Therefore, the present study's finding that most participants in the Metaverse seek to replicate their non-virtual personas when presenting themselves online is in divergence with established research.

Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality also plays out remarkably in the perceptions of the virtual as an alternative reality for the participants. For instance, one of the respondents stated:

I will have emotional connections with the characters in the game because nowadays, more games have presented deep philosophical purposes and revealed the mind of humanities in the real world. My interaction with NPCs in the game can also be recognized as interaction with my friends in the real world (sometimes).

This perception of the nature of virtual interactions coincides with Baudrillard's perception of how hyperreality creates experiences that are more intense and satisfying than "real" ones. The experiences that participants have in the virtual world are more satisfying as compared to the banal and often uninspiring experiences of their everyday lives. The hyperreality of the Metaverse has emerged as more "real" than reality, creating users' tendency to prefer it to real-life experiences [7].

The concept of the hyperreal also accounts to a great extent for the tendency by participants in the Metaverse to prefer highly realistic ways of identity representation as opposed to the use of digital avatars [25]. Participants in virtual worlds can strive to acquire the symbols that represent themselves in a certain manner that corresponds to their idealized identities and experiences, in line with Baudrillard's conception of hyperreality's connection to consumerism [12]. For instance, three respondents admitted that with the further development of the Metaverse through AI and interactive technologies, they would be willing to substitute their social relationships with avatars and game characters. This sentiment closely aligns with Baudrillard's argument that simulations disrupt the binaries between reality and illusion [7].

Self-idealization is a core aspect of the participants' identity management and presentation of the self in the virtual world. For instance, all respondents stated that they would pay close attention to the text as well as the photographs they would upload. Four of them also stated that they would be concerned with the number of likes that they would get after posting something on social media. These tendencies of the participants in the Metaverse indicate that these individuals tend to perform roles that positively enhance how they are perceived by their intended audiences [26]. In most instances, these performances reflect their idealized selves as opposed to their non-virtual offline selves.

4.2. The Extension of the Self

The second theme emerging from this study is the extension of the self across virtual and non-virtual environments. The virtual world of the Metaverse is viewed as an extension of human consciousness within the real world and an externalized "sensorium of the bodies" [2,27]. Virtual identities are perceived as extensions of human consciousness, capable of achieving what cannot be achieved non-virtually. The Metaverse is perceived as a place of limitless individual possibility. As one Metaverse conference participant stated, the avatar allows balance between talent and appearance. In the Metaverse conference context, the use of avatars offered the participants a more exciting experience compared to the non-virtual meetings. Since real identities were known by other participants, identity extensions were formed to overcome challenges to full participation rather than to achieve self-idealization. The actor performs before the audience fully aware that the audience may judge their presentation either as authentic or fake [6]. In this context, the avatar emerges as an important

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extension of the self that allows the individual to participate without being limited by individual weaknesses [24].

A similar extension of the self is depicted in the scenario involving the digital human live broadcast. In this instance, the participants make broadcasts by animating digital humans with real voiceovers. The digital human is often perceived to be an extension of the human and a form of "symbiosis" whereby a front-stage performance reveals important aspects of the performer's identity that the performer wishes the audience to perceive. In this sense, the voice-over recording can be perceived as a backstage activity through which the front stage activities are designed [6]. The performance of the user through voiceover emerges as a critical aspect of the front-stage performance through which the audience makes its judgment. Since the actor is enabled by the medium to conceal any information about themselves, they can stage a performance based on what perceptions they intend to cultivate in the minds of the audiences.

4.3. Masking/ Unmasking in Identity Management

The findings of the study reveal that some Metaverse participants take advantage of the platform's potential for anonymity as a way of adopting different social roles. Within the digital human live broadcast context, all respondents stated that the ability to alter the appearance of the digital human ensured that they could adopt varying identities that make the experiences more exciting. When asked if they would reveal to the audience the "backstage" activities, all respondents stated that they hoped that the audience would pay more attention to the front stage. This implies that the participants utilize the potential of their platforms for anonymity and even assume an entirely different identity from the real world.

According to Bullingham and Vaconcelos, users tend to behave in stereotypical ways as they present new identities, unaware of the emerging dynamics of the new virtual reality [15]. Through the performance of stereotypes, the participant comes to believe they understand their new identity genuinely entails [15]. Therefore, stereotypes that characterize non-virtual social activity have substantial influence on virtual interactions. For example, while Second Life users are presented with a diverse choice of avatars, in most cases they opt for avatars that conform to certain beauty stereotypes [5]. Users who may not conform to Western physical ideals overwhelming opt to create avatars that do [5,15]. In accordance with Goffman's concept of impression management, some users of the Metaverse may adopt idealized identities that they consider more acceptable, whether it be in terms of race, weight, or other factors [6].

Some Metaverse participants make use of the masking/unmasking affordances of the platform to "give" their audience desired content and presentations of self while also working to not "give off" information that may reveal their real identities, in accordance with Goffman's ideas [6]. For example, content creators in the virtual world whose content is deemed politically sensitive practice extensive self-censorship to not reveal their offline identities. Respondents expressed this concern by stating that they often edit the content they post as a way of ensuring they do not give information that may expose them. Users strive to portray an acceptable persona, interjecting their real identities to "give" their audiences authenticity while being careful not to "give off" anything personal. Hence, in staging their performances, some Metaverse participants are forced to mask their offline identities.

5. Conclusion

The current study has explored participant social role play in the context of the Metaverse by considering how Goffman's dramaturgical theory and Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality can enhance an understanding of virtual social interaction [6,7]. The study employs virtual ethnography to establish the various aspects, meanings, and significances of social interactions within the

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Metaverse such as the presentation of the self, identity management, and performance. Through the study of four Metaverse contexts, namely MMORPGs, immersive social media, Metaverse conferencing, and digital human life broadcasts, three broad themes of participant activities were identified, namely the replication of the self or identity replication and self-idealization, the extension of the self, and identity masking/unmasking. In conformity with Goffman's dramaturgical theory, participants tend to replicate their offline identities in virtual environments by creating avatars that capture their attributes while others tend to create virtual identities that differ from their offline identities as a form of impression management, both working to achieve personas that illicit positive audience impressions. Virtual identities are also depicted as extensions of the human self in that complement the real person through the attachment of attributes that are more socially favorable or capable of enhancing the performer's ability to overcome the limitations of the non-virtual self. The findings of the study also reveal that participants employ masks that allow them to give only the impressions that would make them acceptable while withholding anything that may expose their identities. Hence, Goffman and Baudrillard's ideas are critical when seeking to have a sociological understanding of the Metaverse and provide a valuable theoretical foundation for further exploration.

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