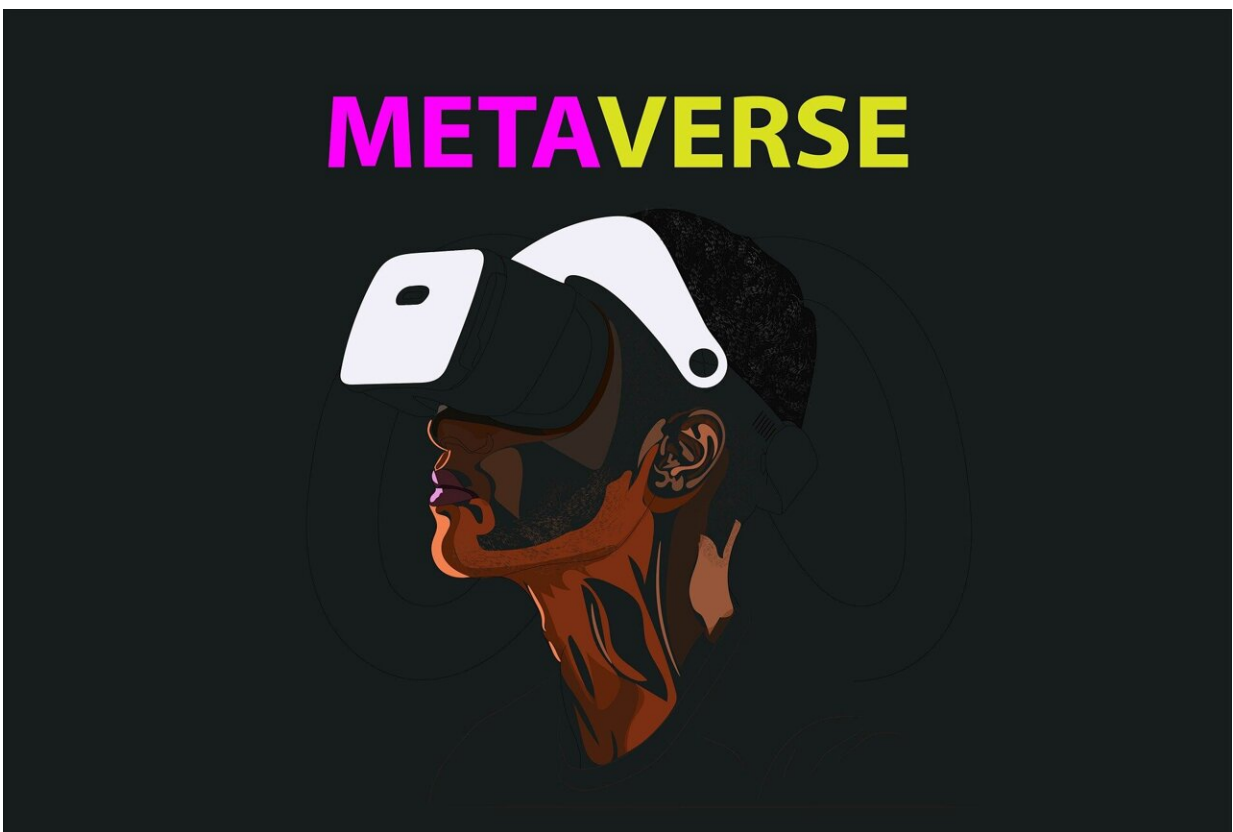


# Sexual assault in the metaverse is part of a bigger problem that technology alone won't solve

July 22 2022, by Trang Le

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

As Meta (formerly Facebook) expands access to its virtual reality (VR) platform, disturbing accounts of women being sexually assaulted and

harassed in its metaverse are also racking up.

From a vice-president of research for another metaverse company who claims she was groped by a group of male avatars within 60 seconds of joining, to a recent researcher of a global non-profit organization who joined the VR platform to study users' behavior, only to be sexually assaulted within an hour by another user while others watched, Facebook's metaverse has been dubbed as "another cesspool of toxic content."

While there's no single metaverse, the metaverse developed by Facebook refers to two main VR applications. One is Horizon Worlds, a social-networking app that enables users to interact with others in unique digital rooms. The second is Horizon Venues, dedicated to hosting virtual live-streaming events. Both Horizon Worlds and Horizon Venues can be accessed through Oculus VR headsets (acquired by Meta back in 2014).

## **Centering the immersive, haptic elements misses the point**

Discussions to date have focused on how immersive, haptic technologies (that is, relating to or based on the [sense of touch](#)) make the experiences of sexual assault in the metaverse intense and traumatizing because they feel like physical experiences.

Of course, immersive, haptic technologies can make the experiences more daunting. The [panoramic view](#), audio and even touch simulation provided by the VR headsets and handheld controls create a multisensory experience, blurring the separation between the virtual and the physical.

But we don't need [immersive technologies](#) for harassment to feel "real" and to have "real" consequences.

For example, [many women](#) who have been subjected to online verbal [abuse](#) (not in VR environments) have talked about their experiences as being "real," and the labor they performed to convince others that these experiences have both material and psychological impacts.

Centering the discussion on how sexual assault in the metaverse resembles the physical experiences (and therefore should be taken seriously) perpetuates a form of digital dualist thinking that reinforces notions of online and offline as separate and opposing.

This could inadvertently erase the harm caused by other forms of online abuse that don't involve immersive, haptic elements. This could extend the already long history of physical abuse being considered more harmful and worthier of more attention than emotional and verbal abuse.

## **Conceptualizing violence in the metaverse**

It's important to recognize the continuous nature of various forms of abuse. Differently put, these forms of [violence](#) aren't distinct nor separate, but are interconnected. They also influence and produce one another.

Feminist work on the continuum of sexual violence—for example, the work of Liz Kelly, Karen Boyle and many others—is helpful here. The continuum thinking recognizes that there are intersections between different kinds of violence against women, and suggests that we should make sense of individual incidents in relation to a continuum of related experiences that ranges from sexual remarks to touching to assault and rape.

In other words, individual acts of violence are embedded within existing patriarchal power structures that condone male sexual aggression; therefore, they traverse spaces.

This isn't to say these events are the same, nor is it to say that they have the same consequences for victims. Rather, there are connections and continuities between different forms of violence happening in different spaces, be it online or offline, virtual or physical.

I'm aware that by adopting the language of "online" and "offline," "virtual" and "physical" here, I'm somehow reinscribing the very dualist thinking that I'm trying to avoid.

I don't have a way out of this paradox. But my point is that we should keep the continuum of sexual violence in mind when discussing sexual assault in the metaverse.

That is, we should recognize the interconnected nature of various forms of abuse and not single out sexual assault in VR environments as more harmful (than, for example, other forms of online verbal abuse) only because it involves the immersive or haptic elements that somehow mimic "real" or "physical" experiences.

## **Technological solutions alone will not solve the problem**

There has been a call for Meta and other tech companies involved in the development of [metaverse](#) applications to figure out how to deal with [sexual assault](#) on their platforms. Surely, certain forms of moderation and systems to restrict abuse are needed, but technological solutions alone are insufficient, and at times problematic.

For example, in response to these incidents, Meta has suggested the use of a tool called "Safe Zone," a safety feature built into its Horizon Worlds. Activating the "Safe Zone" feature means imposing a virtual boundary that prevents avatars from coming within a set distance of each

other, allegedly making it easier for people to avoid unwanted interactions.

The "Safe Zone" feature is troubling, as it seems to invoke the "property" metaphors that construct women's bodies as inner spaces that are violable and trespassable. This is similar to discourses that hold women responsible for communicating (non)consent, position women as the gatekeepers of sex, which ultimately work to sustain the rape culture.

We need to make sure our discussion considers the structural and systemic conditions that lead to sexual violence, rather than exclusively focusing on technological fixes.

Provided by Monash University

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