

Me, Myself and My Avatar: Meditations on Virtual Subjectivity

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Abstract

In this dissertation, the possible impacts of the virtual experiences (projected to become available in the future) on subjectivity are theorized and explored. I begin by outlining the development of the technologies related to the Internet, from *static* web to the anticipated introduction of *virtual* web, providing a brief description of the technological tools that have already emerged and are in the process of being developed. Through analyses from diverse perspectives, including critical, psychoanalytic, and existential-phenomenological traditions, the goal is to provide an overview of the existing knowledge of the impacts of the *static* and *dynamic* web on the user subjectivity as well as to consider the differences in approaches to the question of subjectivity within the online worlds. Drawing on this knowledge, I explore the potential impacts on subjectivity that the introduction and use of *virtual* web, and the metaverse in particular, will have. The new technologies bring many opportunities and can enhance users' experiences in diverse ways, which I discuss along with some of the anticipated problematic influences on subjectivity as a result of relying on the new technologies. The theorization of the variety of possibilities of the future development of the *virtual* web technologies and their impacts on subjectivities is aided by the introduction of the concept of meta-subjectivity.

Keywords: subjectivity, *virtual* web, metaverse, virtual world, neoliberalism, Foucauldian, psychoanalysis, existentialism, phenomenology

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Introduction

Whenever large events that can have the potential to change our lives happen, we inevitably ask ourselves “How will it impact me?”. Usually, this question comes to our mind if this event is not placed in a specific region or context that is outside of our usual concerns. For example, if there is an earthquake in Morocco that kills 3,000 people, we will probably not ask that question. However, if there is a pandemic (like Covid), a war (like in Ukraine), global inflation, climate change, or any event similar in scale, it is more likely that we will wonder how it will impact us. This question is, of course, more prominent in more personal events, like finding a new job, dating a new person, getting a mortgage, or losing a loved one, etc.

The underlying idea in the “How will it impact me?” question is that we are indeed subject to change. We can imagine ourselves as being different from who we are now. The question is whether the mere capacity to imagine a different being implies a more fluid subjectivity in which we are already not exactly who we think we are. Let’s say I am 38 years old, sitting in a graduate class with other students mostly in their mid-twenties. I can look at them and wonder what if this – younger age – would have been my situation. Then, I continue my reflections by exploring the hypothetical scenarios: “What would happen if I had the money to immigrate in my early twenties instead of mid-thirties?” or “What would happen if I was born in Canada instead of Iran?”. These are, of course, unalterable facts of my life that, by definition, I cannot change. However, this does not mean that I cannot imagine a different scenario and a different potential me as a result of those scenarios taking place. Similarly, the imaginations I indulge in could just as well be future-oriented. For instance, sitting in the same class, I can look at the professor and think that this could be me in a few years down the road. The same way, when I saw a documentary about Canada 15 years ago, I thought to myself that I could live there,

which was one of the steppingstones in my journey to Canada – imagining the possibility that it can be my reality in the future. Thus, in a sense, the capacity to imagine yourself in a different situation already creates a potential for a different subjectivity – one that integrates and imagines adapting to the future potential. It may very well be that we are already a different being the moment we start imagining, especially if that imagination is taken as a potentiality rather than a mere pipedream.

The online world, with its technological powers of blurring the line between imagination and reality, gives the question of “How will it impact me?” a new dimension. Our online presence already is becoming more and more prominent every day (Hine, 2015). We read, buy, date, interact, socialize, work, play, learn, teach, produce, and consume online. With such a strong presence, the next consideration concerns how we present ourselves online. What will happen to us if we live more and more in the virtual space? What happens if we connect not only to people but also to “things” in a neuro-digital way? How will it change our human existence? What will happen to our subjectivity through embodiment in the virtual space? Would a meta-subjectivity emerge? In order to address these questions, there needs to be a clear delineation between virtual identity and virtual subjectivity, as both of these concepts are important in this work. Although there is some overlap between the two, there is a meaningful difference as well. Specifically, when I refer to virtual identity, I refer to the user’s online self-representation – this is the component of the online presence that is explicit and easily understood by other users (i.e., username, photos, posting history can all be considered as representations, to some degree, of the user’s virtual identity). By contrast, when I refer to virtual subjectivity, I am concerned with how the user experiences their self in the online world. In other words, virtual subjectivity refers to

the implicit experiences, such as emotional responses to the online interactions, perceptions of one's agency, and internalization of the norms present within the platforms the user navigates.

Putting a psychological, philosophical, or critical lens to analyze the impact of the virtual space on our subjectivity often implies that these different perspectives enter into the equation following the changes in subjectivity elicited by the technological innovations (Causey et al., 2015). In other words, the assumption is that the technology comes first and then we analyze its implications through different perspectives. We rarely take into consideration that these technologies are often informed by psychology and philosophy (de Vos, 2020). Is it not the case that Facebook, Google, X, etc. are listening to us? Are they not tracking our searches, links, and clicks to learn who we are and what we are? Are they not the modern-day psychoanalysts trying to detect our desires? And maybe later sell those personalized desires and imaginations back to us?

In this dissertation, I look into addressing some of the questions that arise in connection with our subjectivities when new technologies, in this case the metaverse, are introduced into our lives. There are important critical psychological and broadly psychoanalytic conceptualizations of technological impacts on subjectivities (e.g., Schraube, 2024; Turkle, 2011) that I draw on, but from which I also diverge in my work. The existing conceptualizations tend to be developed in relation to the already existing technologies and attempt to evaluate their impacts on individuals as well as consider broader social implications. On the one hand, my position is in agreement with accounts that consider that, once the technology is introduced, it is futile to try to stop people from using it. Instead, the emphasis should be on harnessing the benefits while paying attention to the drawbacks and trying to circumvent them. On the other hand, there are two important distinctions guiding my work. First, my goal is to theorize a number of the potential

future impacts of the new potential technological development (the metaverse) prior to its implementation as I believe that such considerations are needed in order to imagine what kind of technologies we (as a society) would like to have in our lives and how some of the potential harms, from a psychological perspective, of these technologies can be averted. Thus, my work is, in part, pre-emptive – trying to envision potential problems and ways to act on these problems prior to the introduction of the new technologies, including the potentiality of impacting the companies working on developing the metaverse worlds. Second, one of the major issues with existing technologies is that, despite their ability to connect people, in fact, they often lead to greater isolation and loneliness (Puri & Sharma, 2016). The nature of the metaverse, on the other hand, might indeed offer a much greater approximation of the real-life experiences of communication, thus making it a unique experience and rendering it necessary to examine from a new set of perspectives.

By drawing on the historical development of the online world and the users' presence in it from *static* web to the current *dynamic* web, I attempt to present some of the potential “horizons of expectation” – the boundaries within which we (again, as a society) envision some of the aims for our future that can be attained through practical means, such as by changing certain attitudes or behaviours in the present in order to achieve the set aims (Toulmin, 1990). Thus, our horizons of expectation of the metaverse can shape how this technology is developed and introduced, thereby also shaping the possibilities of the meta-subjectivities that may emerge for some of the users of the metaverse. The inherent flexibility of upcoming technology therefore means that this dissertation cannot provide a final theory of meta-subjectivity. Rather, in this work I focus on doing meditations, in the Cartesian sense (Descartes, 1641/2022), to articulate possible ways of thinking, feeling and being that may emerge for those who do develop the

meta-subjectivity as a result of exposure to the metaverse. From this perspective, ‘meditations’ refer not to spiritual or religious experiences but to a disciplined mode of philosophical inquiry. The aim is to engage in a methodical process of reflection in order to investigate a topic. Thus, meditations, as used in this dissertation, serve as an intellectual exercise that allows examining the chosen area of inquiry using different frameworks, rather than committing to one specific system of thought on the subject. As a result, the proposed meditations can serve as the starting point for considering the role of the metaverse from individual and social perspectives as well as provide an outline as to what benefits we can strive for and what potential problems we should be aiming to prevent from occurring in the first place.

Metaverse

The concept of metaverse refers to a shared, virtual space that is created by the convergence of multiple virtual worlds (Mystakidis, 2022). The term was coined by the science fiction author Neal Stephenson in his 1992 novel *Snow Crash*, in which he described a virtual reality world that was accessible via the internet (Zyda, 2023). Metaverse combines the Greek words ‘meta’ (transcending) and ‘verse’ (universe), thus referring to the idea of surpassing our current way of being in the world (Wang et al., 2023). In practice, metaverse is projected to be one of the components of the upcoming *virtual* web, presenting a virtual world that will run simultaneously with the real world. In essence, it should become another mode of living, with its own social structures, living spaces and interactions.

The concept of metaverse is not a straightforward concept to define. In part, this can be attributed to its origins within the world of science fiction writing rather than within an academic or technological development setting (Buchholz et al., 2022). The main issue, however, is that while there are multiple projects in development, none of the metaverses of the current

generation have been launched as of the writing of this dissertation. Nonetheless, Buchholz et al. (2022) propose the following criteria as necessary parts of the virtual worlds to be considered a metaverse:

1. A Metaverse is a combination of virtual worlds and augmented real worlds. They are not closed systems but linked with each other and with reality.
 2. A Metaverse is a social medium in which people can interact, communicate, collaborate, but also trade and own property.
 3. A Metaverse is persistent and long-lasting but can also include temporally limited sessions.
 4. A Metaverse is an integrated system that entails and utilizes XR- and other technologies. This requires utilized components to be as open and interoperable as possible, ideally using open standards.
 5. In addition to getting immersed in virtual worlds (VR) and augmented real worlds (AR/MR), capturing the state of the user and the real environment are key actions for Metaverse applications.
 6. Metaverse-participation is multi-modal and can be accomplished with varying intensities and representations, such as embodiment through avatars. Participants can seamlessly change the form and intensity of their participation.
 7. A Metaverse is tightly coupled with reality. Information, actions, and interactions can be exchanged between both worlds, real and digital, and can influence each other. Using digital twins allows for cooperative interactions with things in the real and virtual world.
- (pp. 316-317)

Currently, the giants of social media have already started to work on their versions of *virtual* web platforms suitable for metaverses. The company Meta Platforms (formerly known as Facebook), for example, announced its ambitious project called the Metaverse¹. In fact, there are multiple metaverses in development now, with some of the more promising ones being developed by Microsoft, Nvidia, Roblox, Epic Games, Unity Technologies, Apple, Alphabet, Niantic, and Tencent (Law, 2024). The upcoming metaverse platforms draw significant attention and contribute to the revival of discussions about metaverses. These discussions include increased interest in the academic literature as well (Wang et al., 2023). As far as we know, in this virtual world, users will be able to customize their own avatars and participate in activities and events, such as concerts or sporting events, or simply socialize with friends (Dimoulas & Veglis, 2023). Metaverse will also include tools for creating and sharing content, such as virtual rooms and objects. It is not yet clear when Metaverse will be released or what specific features it will include, but the company has stated that it plans to make the Metaverse accessible via virtual reality (VR) headsets as well as traditional computing devices (Dimoulas & Veglis, 2023). Meta's CEO Mark Zuckerberg has expressed a vision for the Metaverse to become a central hub for social interaction and communication, similar to the role that physical public spaces, like parks and squares, currently serve in the real world (Zyda, 2023). It is a further convergence of our physical and digital lives. It's about shared virtual experiences. In some ways, our digital lifestyles are catching up with our physical lives. It's also about breaking free from two dimensions into a fully three-dimensional (3D) environment.

¹ To avoid confusion, when discussing the concept in general, as is the aim of this dissertation, I do not capitalize the term 'metaverse' and, when applicable, use it in the plural form. I use capitalization to refer exclusively to the Meta Platforms' project.

At this point, the potentialities of metaverses are mostly explored through gaming (e.g., *Decentraland*). The gaming experiences are currently enhanced through increasingly realistic graphics and the availability of virtual reality (VR) headsets that provide the immersive experience to the users. At the same time, these experiences are far from what the metaverses promise in the future. For instance, there are some arguments even about integrating the virtual reality of the metaverses with the physical world (Visconti, 2022). Metaverses will also enable users to experience things impossible in the real world, such as transcending the normal spatio-temporal experiences (Wang et al., 2023). For instance, with comprehensive mapping of the real world (already seen in some games in *dynamic web*, including *Forza Horizon* and *Watch Dogs* series) and with metaverses' capacity to instantly travel through different spaces, users will be able to visit a variety of places in the world from the comfort of their own homes.

From a more practical standpoint, cryptocurrencies will have a major role in metaverses, facilitating the financial aspects (Mystakidis, 2022). Having an integrated economic system will provide more opportunities for the experiences to come closer to real world situations. The virtual identities can become for some the way to earn a living, just as creating channels on YouTube or Instagram are primary sources of income for some *dynamic web* users. In fact, there are some projections indicating that metaverses' economies might become intertwined with the real-world economies (Wang et al., 2023).

However, in addition to the general challenges in the development of *virtual web*, metaverses will also require the Internet networks to improve, such as 5G and 6G (Wang et al., 2023). The network requirements will be more salient for the metaverses as Internet latency will interfere with the immersive experiences, especially when communicating or otherwise engaging with users in real-time. From the perspective of user experiences that are reliable and fast, it is

possible that quantum communications will enable the existence and spread of metaverses, which could potentially enhance the security in addition to the blockchain technology that will be used in *virtual* web (Kwon et al., 2022). Other issues that will need to be resolved before there are fully operational metaverses include further development of interactive technologies and, to support these new technologies, it is likely that computing powers, including cloud computing, will also need to be increased (Duong et al., 2023). Aside from the practical implications of the metaverses, there are also less tangible, but no less important concerns. Although *virtual* web technologies promise greater security and privacy, there is no way to know if and when the cybercrimes will catch up with these technologies, posing some uncertainties regarding personal information. All of these obstacles indicate that, as the technologies are still being developed, it can serve as an opportunity to theorize the different potentials the metaverses might bring, including the benefits and the new issues that will have to be addressed.

For instance, and most importantly for the questions explored in this dissertation, there are existing problems with internet and gaming use, identified under the umbrella of Cyber-Syndrome, and including significant health risks, such as Internet addiction (Ning et al., 2018; Shi et al., 2023). Cyber-Syndrome is generally characterized by excessive use of the Internet (Wang et al., 2023). This issue can be exacerbated, at least for some users, with the advent of more immersive experiences, especially considering the hyper-reality that may be achieved in metaverses. The interactive components, coupled with avatars (which can be enhanced versions of oneself (Messinger et al., 2019)) and different flow of time (akin to the experiences of players in the casinos (Noseworthy & Finlay, 2009)) may be enticing and, in some cases, addictive. Aside from outright addiction, which can interfere with one's life just like any other addiction would, spending too much time immersed in the metaverses may have other health

consequences, such as more sedentary lifestyle, which is already a growing problem for people of all ages (Griffiths, 2010). Investing a lot of time in the metaverses means less time spent in the real world. This can lead to lack of social interactions outside of the metaverses and the consequent sense of social isolation and loneliness, especially exacerbating these issues among adolescents with Internet use problems (Puri & Sharma, 2016). It is also unclear how participation in these upcoming virtual worlds will impact those with pre-existing mental health issues and wellbeing concerns. Although these problems are hypothetical at the moment as it is unclear how many people would be afflicted once the metaverses will be launched, they are important to consider. At the very least, it can be assumed that issues related to excessive Internet use will not decrease with further development of *virtual* web technologies in general and metaverses specifically. Some authors in this field (e.g., Wang et al., 2023) recognize the need to study the potential negative consequences and to develop user guidance documents as well as state regulations prior to the full-scale introduction of the new technologies.

Outline of Chapters

I start by briefly discussing the history of the internet as a technological development. Thus, in chapter 1, I look at the technical differences between *static* and *dynamic* web and the upcoming *virtual* web, which will be needed for the implementation of the metaverses. Specifically, in the context of *virtual* web, I provide an overview of the virtual worlds and augmented reality (Ryan, 2010). Next, I examine the existing literature about the emergence of online subjectivity (see, Biyani, 2014; Brasier, 2017; Briel, 2012; Cooper Clark, 2021; Cover, 2016; Kehrwald, 2010; Li et al., 2017; Lieven, 2020; Shane, 2014; Smutny & Janoscik, 2019; Wankel & Malleck, 2010). Internet, even in its early *static* web stage, attracted the scholars' attention and raised curiosities about personal identity in online context (Marzi, 2018). At the

next stage, the concept of avatar emerged, which is one of the key concepts in the virtual spaces and is expected to be particularly important in the context of the metaverses (Krebs & Frankel, 2021). Specifically, I am interested in the different possible implications of the avatar for identity (Cover, 2023).

Chapter 2 looks at the virtual subjectivity from the perspective of critical traditions (drawing on social constructionism as well as poststructuralist approaches), focusing on critique of neoliberal influences and using a Foucauldian lens. The critical traditions, with their focus on the sociohistorical context (Teo, 2015), allow for the tracing of the impacts of the internet development on the subjectivities, from *static* web to today. Then, I compare the decentralization of ownership of data in *virtual* web with deregulation of the trading barriers in neoliberalism (Marwick, 2010). I also discuss neoliberal subjectivity and self-commodification in the context of the virtual space (Schawbel, 2009). I argue that the inherent characteristics embedded in social media, and especially in the virtual worlds, have given self-commodification and self-branding a new dimension: what were once relatively resource-intensive practices of self-advertising (e.g., paying for a bill board sign or website construction) have been transformed into routine, low-threshold, and continuous forms of self-presentation online. Next, I discuss Foucauldian ideas of self-monitoring and disciplinary measures in the context of social media and question its application to the virtual worlds, especially as they apply to meta-subjectivity (Contreras, 2013). Finally, I discuss some potentialities of resistance and change that the *virtual* web can enable.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the psychoanalytic perspectives on virtual subjectivity. Our virtual presence has rapidly impacted and redefined all aspects of our lives including interests, habits, values, morals, and politics (Balick, 2018). This transformation has created new forms of the ‘other’ that are unprecedented in our history (Malater, 2007). These new ‘others’, in turn, can

have profound impacts on the way we define our identity. It can change the persona or the mask we are wearing to hide behind (Gabbard, 2001). The introduction of avatars and virtual worlds has given the alter ego a new level as well. Thus, psychoanalysis, as a field interested in our inner lives and unconscious desires and fears, has a lot to contribute to the theorizing of meta-subjectivity.

In chapter 4, I look at virtual subjectivity from the perspective of existential-phenomenological traditions. First, I discuss whether the metaverse can be considered a place and, if so, what kind of place it is. Then, drawing on the notion of ‘project’ taken from Sartre (1956) and Heidegger’s (2008) existential philosophy, I consider how virtual subjectivity defines the existential project as the project of making a new ‘being’ in the virtual space (Vella & Gualeni, 2019). I develop an argument that the mechanisms inherent in the virtual space have self-determining and self-redefining features that lead to the development of virtual subjectivity and, specifically, meta-subjectivity. Further, I use various traditions in phenomenology to look at virtual subjectivity to see what the difference between virtual and non-virtual beings is, especially from the perspective of embodiment (du Toit, 2020). Thus, constitution of personhood in the virtual space is the main focus of this chapter, showing both emancipatory and delimiting characteristics of virtuality from the existential-phenomenological point of view (Malpas, 2009) and theorizing the implications for meta-subjectivity.

Finally, in chapter 5, I examine in more detail the possible outcomes of *virtual* web by furthering my analysis of the concept of meta-subjectivity – a distinct form of subjectivity that may emerge as a result of exposure to and participation in the metaverses. By retracing the main ideas that arise in relation to the different theoretical and philosophical psychological perspectives examined in the dissertation, I provide some overarching consideration for the

emergence and development of meta-subjectivity as well as discuss why such theorizing is important. Further, I consider the broader implications from the perspective of theoretical psychology and its role in gaining a better understanding of the upcoming technologies by taking into consideration the possible future implications for individuals and their subjectivities.

Personal Reflection

This dissertation is situated within a theoretical horizon shaped by a number of theoretical traditions that each offer distinct accounts of subjectivity. Rather than attempting to synthesize these traditions into a unified theoretical approach, I treat the perspectives derived from these traditions as interlocutors in an ongoing dialogue concerning the possibilities of emerging subjectivities in the metaverse. Drawing on Gadamer's (1960/2004) hermeneutics, I consider this dialogue as a form of interpretative engagement in which understanding arises through the fusion of horizons. In other words, as meta-subjectivity is not a rigid concept, but rather a potentiality, it is a horizon that is not yet fully formed, but that can be explored through other horizons, enabled by different theoretical traditions. It should be noted that my engagement with these traditions is not an effort to transcend my interpretative position but to acknowledge it as a condition of possibility for thought. My analysis is informed by a set of pre-understandings – cautious optimism combined with some skepticism toward the promises of technological progress, sensitivity to the dynamics of neoliberal subject formation, and an orientation toward the unconscious and the embodied as the necessary components for considering the development of a potential new form of subjectivity. These pre-understandings shape how I approach the idea of meta-subjectivity in this work. In Gadamer's (1960/2004) terms, these are my prejudices. Thus, the conceptualization of meta-subjectivity presented is not constructed from a neutral or

exterior standpoint, but from within a traditioned horizon that continues to evolve as it encounters the new challenges presented by considering future potentialities.

I would also like to highlight that the concept of meta-subjectivity, as developed here, remains open-ended and speculative. It is not presented as a fixed or finalized category but as a horizon of possibility. That is, this work does not aim for totalizing conceptualization. My goal is to begin a dialogical unfolding of meaning where multiple interpretative frameworks are considered. Thus, this dissertation proceeds not through a linear development of the concept, but through a hermeneutic openness to the ways in which different traditions illuminate, and at times obscure, the conditions under which a meta-subjectivity may arise.

Chapter 1: Brief History of the Internet

Prior to discussing virtual subjectivity, I present a brief history of the evolution of the Internet and the different generations of technology that redefined our digital presence. The ever-increasing presence in the virtual world is accompanied by the advances in technology that has provided us with tools to express ourselves through writing, images, videos, sounds, etc. With the evolution of Web technology, our digital presence has evolved too. The Internet, the way we know and use it, is almost 30 years old now (Segaller, 1998). It has gone through different stages, identified here as *static* web, *dynamic* web and the upcoming *virtual* web, and, at each stage, new possibilities for online engagement were added.

However, it should be noted that the stages do not necessarily have clear-cut dates. They have been overlapping and many sites would be difficult to classify as either *static* or *dynamic* web. In fact, there have been proposals to include intermediary categorizations for the sites that fall in-between the stages (Pileggi et al., 2012; Reddick & Norris, 2013). At the same time, many sites do easily fall within the categorization of *static* and *dynamic* web. Thus, these categories carry a meaningful separation within the technological, structural and sociological realms (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). Moreover, the development of *dynamic* web does not mean that *static* web ceased existing. In fact, most online users still visit *static* web sites today (Fuchs et al., 2010). Although some websites have transformed their operations with the development of *dynamic* web, many continued working within the *static* web framework. For example, Craigslist – a well-known and used classified advertisements site – remains decidedly *static* web in terms of the user experience on the website (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). However, given the dynamic nature of the Internet, *dynamic* web technologies are widely available now and the existing *static* web sites can be transformed into *dynamic* web, through the addition of new

features, for instance, should their owners decide to do so. Similarly, the development of *virtual* web will not signal an end to *static* or *dynamic* web. At least, not immediately.

Early Days of the Internet

The Internet's origins can be traced back to the 1960's with the development of Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), a research project funded by the Department of Defense (DoD) in the United States (Packard, 2023). This project was rumored to have emerged to create a decentralized communication network capable of withstanding nuclear attacks (Brendon, 2001). The Internet Society, however, maintains that the aim was to increase access to computers (which were large and rare) for researchers who did not have geographic ability to access them (Rajaraman, 2022a). ARPANET worked through telephone lines to transmit information, successfully connecting four nodes by December 5, 1969 (Rajaraman, 2022a). Much of the work was dedicated to expanding the ARPANET network, granting full access to those connected by the end of 1972 (O'Neill, 1995). At the same time, the DoD funding the project was interested in explicit military applications, giving rise to the Packet Radio Network (PRNET) and Satellite Network (SATNET). All of these networks were developed and launched fairly quickly, on the heels of success with ARPANET. By 1973, consequently, the discussion turned towards interconnecting these networks, a complicated task not least driven by the need to be able to access emails sent via different programs (Brendon, 2001). In 1974, the first version of Transmission Control Program (TCP) was introduced (Rajaraman, 2022a). Although a first step, this version required further improvements. By 1977, at the third version of TCP, it was decided to divide TCP into two parts – TCP and Internet Protocol (IP), known as the TCP/IP v3 (Rajaraman, 2022a). This was the stage at which individual IP addresses were introduced, enabling the connection of up to four billion devices

into the network. The TCP/IP was further improved with version 4 in 1980, which was standardized for use as the Internet protocol by 1983 (Alani, 2014).

Other networks were already operational at the time. Most notably, some university collaborations were being enhanced through the new technology. One such university network was Michigan Education and Research Information Triad (MERIT). It started operating in 1973, allowing for basic information sharing between universities, such as through email and file transfer (Rajaraman, 2022b). Seeing success, this network was expanded to include more institutions. A little further down the road, in 1981, the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the US agreed to fund a CSNET (Computer Science Network), which would be connected to the ARPANET (Comer, 1983). The connected CSNET became self-supporting in 1986, with a membership of 165 universities from the US, Europe and Asia (Rajaraman, 2022b). Finally, Because It's Time Network (BITNET) was established by the universities not connected to ARPANET, MERIT, or CSNET. BITNET, organized by the City University of New York (CUNY) and Yale University in 1981. It grew rapidly, evidenced by nearly two-fold increases in size every half a year (Gurbaxani, 1990). In 1989, the TCP/IP technology was used to connect BITNET with CSNET (LaQuey, 1990).

Finally, in 1985, NSF also funded the building of five supercomputers across different universities in the US (Rajaraman, 2022b). Given the availability of TCP/IP protocol, the supercomputers were interconnected through the NSFNET in 1986 (Severance, 2014). At the same time, personal computers were becoming available and were equipped with the TCP/IP software, enabling the connection to NSFNET through Local Area Networks (LAN) with Ethernet protocol (Sobolewski, 2003). Consequently, by the end of 1986, there were about 10,000 individual users capable of connecting to the network (Rajaraman, 2022b). In 1988, with

the development of T1 backbone, which increased the speed of connectivity and sharing, NSFNET allowed international users (universities) to connect to the network as well, making it global (Strawn, 2021). In 1990, as most US universities were already connected to NSFNET, ARPANET closed its network (Fidler & Currie, 2015).

Two additional systems were introduced that made the Internet easily accessible worldwide. First, the Domain Name System simplified the process of accessing websites by assigning unique dotted-decimal format IP addresses to users (Pope et al., 2012). Domain names were also important for commercial users. The introduction of the original eight generic Top Level Domain Names (e.g., .com or .edu) in 1984 simplified access for the Internet users to company websites (Gerrand, 2006). Second, the full importance of domain names for the functioning of the Internet became evident with the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1989 as it provided a standardized way to access and organize information on the Internet (Berners-Lee, 1982). At the same time, as PCs were becoming more widespread, the demand for Internet services was also increasing. Several Internet Service Providers operating as private companies were providing such services (Lacroix et al., 1994). However, a number of connection networks were still operating simultaneously, including NSFNET and MERIT. With several generational developments of backbones, allowing for increasing numbers of users to be connected, the need for greater interconnectedness was becoming logistically available. In 1995, NSFNET was closed and the Internet, as we know it today, became operational (Strawn, 2021).

Static Web

The experiences of the user at different stages of development started from *static* web (sometimes referred to as Web 1.0), which is often called the “Read-Only” era (Lewis et al., 2024; Sherman, 2003). Here, the user is limited to searching for information and reading it

through static pages. The *static* web stage roughly lasted through the 1990's until the early 2000's, when *dynamic* web was introduced and the two site structures started co-existing (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). In *static* web, websites offer users the information, acting mostly as online brochures for companies and stores, especially in the early days. Later, more websites were created to offer the same kind of information that one would find at a public library, searching through books and articles (Sherman, 2003). The capability of searching online was the main technological marvel that fascinated millions around the world (Rajaraman, 2022a). In a matter of seconds, you could search and find the information that you would otherwise spend hours finding in the real world. However, there was no interaction between the user and the web. In fact, the only way to communicate was to contact the site administrator, who may not be immediately obvious and might require some effort in searching (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). The administrator then decided when and how to respond, if at all. When there are too many requests sent, the response may have been significantly delayed, or the requests can be dropped altogether. In *static* web sites, users did not have profiles. They typically did not have to log in to access any information or other site capacities. The webpages in *static* web tended to be fairly static, simply displaying the information to the user, but the absence of login information and profiles on which users share their personal data made *static* web more secure and private than the majority of *dynamic* web sites (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008).

Further, the site structure in *static* web, as it existed prior to the *dynamic* web stage, resembled that of a bowtie with a central core as well as pages that could reach the central core and pages that could be reached from the central core (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). At the individual level, *static* web sites tended to use a hierarchical structure. Here, the home page of the site typically contained internal link-outs to other site pages, which were sometimes

searchable or contained cross-links. For commercial use, *static* web can be still beneficial today, as it allows for content to be updated only by the owner of the site, at the time that the owner deems appropriate. As the primary purpose of *static* web is typically to provide information, anything that is considered outside of the scope of the site will be linked out to other sources. Thus, in *static* web, there is typically limited effort to keep a user for longer on the webpage. The length of the stay is not one of the metrics used in *static* web, but rather the number of visits – the website traffic, which sites compete for by trying to provide the more appealing (e.g., in-depth or unique) content (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). The user's role was entirely comprised of using the search engines and reading the results yielded by the search. The web designers and content creators, using mostly Handheld Device Markup Language (HDML) codes, were the only ones who had control over the data, while the readers or users were just clicking on hyperlinks to go from one page to another (Rajaraman, 2022b). In other words, the control was centralized in the hands of a few people and entities.

Dynamic Web

Dynamic web (also referred to as Web 2.0) was a significant shift in the technology of the Internet and has seen an accompanying drastic increase in online traffic (Singh et al., 2011). Starting from the early 2000's, dynamic websites began appearing, the main feature of which was interactivity (Han, 2011). Aside from the more dynamic nature, *dynamic* web sites can also feature such distinct components as relying on social engagement and promotion of content creation. These qualities of the *dynamic* web sites can lead to them being seen as in a “permanent beta” state, whereby there is no finished product (Neff & Stark, 2004). This is especially evident with *dynamic* web sites that are being continuously updated with new technological components allowing users to use new features, such as Facebook. In general, the social networking sites can

be considered typical examples of *dynamic* web, not least because their structure, by definition, treats the user as a first-class object, meaning that a user has all the abilities other entities have (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008).

Thus, in *dynamic* web, the users are no longer just merely searching for content. *Dynamic* web can be easily a two-way interaction, with any user having the option to be a content creator as well as a content consumer (Donelan et al., 2010). In fact, many aids, such as applications and guides, are available for a regular user to create content with ease (Sassano et al., 2010). In *dynamic* web, the content also tends to be much more diverse than in *static* web, including such components as texts, videos and ratings. These components can be added by users while others continue using the site, which is distinct from *static* web, where the site may be temporarily unavailable to the users while some information or features are being updated (Leff & Rayfield, 2009). Thus, in a sense, *dynamic* web allows for a more democratic use of the Internet as all users have options that are available to only a few in *static* web. Moreover, content creation by users means *dynamic* web sites are frequently changing. These changes may be minor (e.g., adding a comment) compared to informational updates in *static* web, yet these small changes create a sense of shared space, rather than reading someone else's work. However, this flexibility of the shared space also can mean less reliable sources are used for content creation (Sassano et al., 2010). For example, the messages posted are not always easily traceable (e.g., fake accounts can be used) and their content may not be linked to resources used in the process of the message creation or the resource linked may be of questionable origin.

Another distinctive feature of *dynamic* web includes personalization of the user experience. For example, the homepage of some *dynamic* web sites looks different depending on who logs in (Bohley, 2010). Again, this is very prominent in social networking platforms, such

as Instagram. This personalization is in large part possible due to the gatekeeping functions of the *dynamic* web sites, with many allowing users access only if they log into the system (e.g., Ketterl et al., 2009). At the same time, the distinctive logins allow for creation and modification of profile pages, as well as regulation of who can have access to these pages. The personalization of accounts can provide a number of benefits to the user, such as expressing their unique personalities and making the homepage of an account ‘homey’, i.e., your own, and, as such, comforting (Bruns, 2013).

Another popular feature of *dynamic* web is the possibility of creating connections between users, with options of creating distinct ‘inner circles’ where the user exclusively decides whether to engage with others and in what format (Arola, 2010). The social component is prominent in many popular or aspiring to be popular *dynamic* web sites. In fact, the social aspect is embedded within the functionality of many of the *dynamic* web sites, making them of limited use if the user is unwilling to create a profile and ‘befriend’ others on the site (Arola, 2010). Although at later stages of *static* web, as well as currently, some sites do offer a social component feature, the distinction is in the importance of the feature for the functionality of the site, rather than merely its absence or presence. The *dynamic* web features, such as logins and gatekeeping, thus allow users to control, at least to some extent, their privacy online (Caviglione & Coccoli, 2011).

One important distinction of *dynamic* web sites is trying to keep the user engaged on the site as long as possible, something referred to as ‘stickiness’ (Zhang, 2011). The stickiness, enhanced by diverse site features as well as creation of groups with which one is able to communicate without leaving the site through internal messaging systems, is fundamental for the site revenue. Thus, *dynamic* web sites frequently promote using features internal to the site. The

users of *dynamic* web sites are not limited to finding information from the pages they visit. In fact, the social networking sites tend not to provide any centralized information at all, relying on the users to generate and engage with the content they bring to the site (Balaji & Murthy, 2019). The popularity of the website, as evidenced by the number of visits and length of stay on the website, also increases its chances of securing more diverse advertising contracts (Fuchs, 2011).

At the same time, the websites also collect data from their users, i.e., their likes, interests, pages they visit, how much time they have spent on that page, etc. (Han, 2011). This leads to the users not only getting the information they want, but also seeing targeted advertisements. Centralised platforms, like YouTube, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, use the collected data to make the user experience more convenient (Albert & Tullis, 2022). However, the data collected on user interests are also used for other purposes, such as machine learning. The data sharing by users and collection by *dynamic* web sites leads to some significant issues with privacy and security, making it another distinction from *static* web user experiences (Cannings et al., 2008). There have been some concerns regarding user ability to understand the privacy policies produced by *dynamic* web sites, especially for the younger users, not in the least due to the language (e.g., official and dry) and length of the policies created (Kelly et al., 2017). As a result, many *dynamic* web users do not have a comprehensive understanding of their privacy, but do consider it to be an important factor when deciding to use a social networking site (Tan et al., 2012).

Virtual Web

As I write this text, *virtual* web (also referred to as Web 3.0) is under development, with some aspects already being implemented. According to the information we have, semantic understanding and data interoperability are integral to the functioning of *virtual* web, which will

lead to decentralization of the content control (Ragnedda & Destefanis, 2020). Decentralization essentially promises greater user control over their own data, information and the consequent increase in ability to monetize the content created (Sisodia, 2023). *Virtual* web will rely on blockchain technology (or distributed ledger technology, as it is sometimes referred to).

Blockchain allows for information to be stored on multiple computers across the globe, ensuring proper decentralization as no large, centralized entities, such as Google, for instance, gain access to the information stored (Zarrin et al., 2021). This technology is a secure way of keeping track of user information. Furthermore, some of the currently existing blockchains are open, allowing for the information stored to be available publicly, which can increase transparency in the transactions made (e.g., Sunny et al., 2020; Yiannas, 2018). These and other properties and capabilities of blockchains have the potential to help small organizations and individual users to regain control over their information. In addition, *virtual* web has a potential for increased accessibility due to greater ease of coding, enabling people with ideas but limited experience with coding to enable their ideas (Murray et al., 2023). The key features of *virtual* web will include instruments enabling exchange (e.g., nonfungible tokens (NFTs) and cryptocurrency), decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) enabling decentralization, and metaverses (Murray et al., 2023).

NFTs are considered to be one of the fundamental tools for the functioning of *virtual* web (Momtaz, 2022). To put it in simple words, non-fungible in virtual space means something unique, something that does not have a replica. Therefore, any creative combination of elements by users in the virtual space can be considered non-fungible. Such combinations can be assets to buy and sell. Anything created in the digital world, including a drawing, a piece of music, or even a tweet or a comment becomes a commodity. That is how the founder of Twitter can sell

one of his earliest tweets for just under \$3,000,000 (Pinto-Gutiérrez et al., 2022). Therefore, *virtual web*, outside of its other facets, will also become a large market for digital goods created by each individual user. Another benefit of NFTs, enabled by blockchain technology, is the elimination of third parties (e.g., financial institutions) to confirm the legitimacy of the NFTs (Murray et al., 2023). It is projected that NFTs will also have other uses in *virtual web*. For instance, they could be used as an equivalent to membership cards to grant access and delineate the privileges associated with different membership levels (e.g., having access to certain company records).

In contrast, cryptocurrencies, which will also play an integral role in *virtual web*, are fungible virtual tokens. Many of the better-known cryptocurrencies (e.g., Ether used by Ethereum blockchain) are native tokens, meaning they are used for operating within the specified blockchain protocols, without necessarily having any use external to this blockchain (Tasca, 2019). For blockchain protocols that gain popularity, the native tokens become akin to national currencies, being accepted as payment for virtual goods (Tasca, 2019). For the most part, however, if a user would like to participate in multiple blockchain protocols, they need to purchase the cryptocurrency associated with the blockchain protocols they are interested in. In practice, it is hoped that blockchain technology will lead to decentralized finance in *virtual web*, whereby anyone will be able to create a currency, should they want to, and freely exchange with other users or organizations (Chen, 2018). These developments, however, are still undergoing and will require increased ease of operations between different blockchain protocols (an issue not dissimilar to the one faced by the Internet in the early days, when different networks were not interoperable).

Finally, DAOs rely on another element of blockchains – smart contracts. Smart contracts are programs designed to react to outlined conditions (Zheng et al., 2020). That is, if certain conditions written into the program are met, the program runs automatically, without human involvement. Thus, transactions through DAOs can be more secure and transparent by, for example, eliminating human error or intentional misuse of power (Singh & Kim, 2019). DAOs can also help individuals remain anonymous, which can make them more attractive for users who would like to participate in certain activities without being tied to them, such as organizing or raising funds online (Murray et al., 2023). Of course, such anonymity is a double-edged sword, allowing legitimate and illicit activities equally – an issue that will have to be addressed.

Although all of the current *virtual* web technologies have already seen some practical applications, they are still in development. Thus, these applications frequently run on the backbone of *dynamic* web technologies, with very few independent options available (Liu et al., 2021). As *virtual* web continues developing, improvements to the current state are expected and new technologies might also arise. Some of the issues include the comparatively poor graphical content on *virtual* web, with some *dynamic* web options looking much better (Mystakidis, 2022). In part, this is due to the longer investment into development of *dynamic* web, both in terms of financing projects and raising generations of specialists. In contrast, fewer people specialize in developing *virtual* web projects (Liu et al., 2021). Thus, for the time being, there is no question that *dynamic* web will remain leading for users for a while, not least because *virtual* web does not offer competitive alternatives yet to many of the popular Internet applications, such as social media and email (Nabben, 2023).

The scalability of existing, as well as future, *virtual* web applications will depend on making the user experience not just similar to *dynamic* web but providing an incentive to try the

new technologies. It needs to provide a sizeable edge to the current platforms in use. For example, *virtual* web is projected not to rely on collecting user data, which may be enticing for many users aware of the online privacy issues (Guo et al., 2023). Access to various applications can also be easier in *virtual* web by eliminating the need for user logins, relying instead on identifying the user through other means, such as wallet based on blockchain technologies (Petcu et al., 2023). Another edge could be the ease of limiting or removing access to one's data in specific applications. Further, *virtual* web technologies must become cheaper for regular users (Murray et al., 2023).

Development of Online Subjectivity

Perhaps, some of us still can remember hearing the sound of the dial-up modem, trying to connect to a low-speed dial-up connection, which would bring us to search engines, like Yahoo or AltaVista, which resembled a portal to the future. With every hour that the users spent behind these machines, the notion of online subjectivity was also being developed. Even this early form of internet attracted scholars to study the impact of internet on the identity. Sherry Turkle's (1995) *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet* is a good example that takes a psychoanalytic approach to studying personhood in the online setting. A little later, from a cognitive science point of view, Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) proposed that cognition and mind are not located exclusively in the head and emphasized the role of environmental processes along with neural and bodily processes. They argued that subjectivity and consciousness extend across our machines (Clark & Chalmers, 1998). This idea echoes Donna Haraway's (1991) influential conceptualization of technoscientific subjectivity, according to which the cyborg – a hybrid of organism and machine – represents transgressed boundaries and intense fusions of the nature/culture split.

With *dynamic* web, the users have an opportunity to create a whole new digital self. In 2003, Second Life, an online multimedia platform that allowed people to create an avatar for themselves and have a second life in an online virtual world, was launched (Malaby, 2009). The users could explore the world (known as the 'grid'), meet other residents, socialize, participate in both individual and group activities, build, create, shop, and trade virtual property and services with one another. Second Life and similar ideas became more and more popular, generating scholarly interest as well. Tom Boellstorff (2015), whose book *Coming of age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human* was the result of his field work for two years on this platform, studied users' behaviours and interactions from an anthropological point of view. He applied the same traditional methodology used in anthropology for real world studies. His work was among the first scholarly works to show the changes in identity as a result of the users' online experiences. Second Life was an early example of a metaverse.

Three years after Second Life, Facebook and Twitter were launched in 2006 and changed the internet forever (Parks, 2017). At first, users used these platforms mostly to share ideas through written posts. The post-structuralist concept of 'death of the author' was aptly used to study the implications for subjectivity when one engages with these forms of social media (Smutny & Janoscik, 2019). With technological advancements, users were able to share images, videos and sounds which appealed to many users from younger generations. Instagram and TikTok soon turned into the main social networks in which teens were socializing (Steinhauer, 2022). At the same time, the fascination with social media raised concerns amongst parents and educators. Dana Boyd (2014) was one of the many scholars who studied these phenomena. She argued that despite all the fearmongering, teens use these platforms to engage and create their identity.

Thus, there are multiple perspectives on the way subjectivity is changing as a result of online interactions. These perspectives are drawing on diverse theoretical models and they change with the changing technologies. *Dynamic* web created an environment in which we share our thoughts, feelings, fears and desires, images, and memories. This is something akin to a virtual free association. Thus, the relationship between psychology and the Internet can be seen as intertwined, with one impacting the other in an endless spiral. On the other hand, the virtual space is a space in which signs, symbols and avatars are realized and compose our reality. Are these signs and symbols mediations of reality or hiding the reality? Is it possible for us living in the Internet Era saturated with signs and symbols to have an understanding of our lives and experiences without getting through the filters of meanings through these signs? What happens to those meanings in the process that Baudrillard calls “precession of simulacra” (Durham & Kellner, 2015)? These are some of the questions that are considered in this dissertation, with main emphasis on subjectivity, from the development of the Internet and with projections into the future potentialities.

Methodology

In order to analyze the different possible implications for subjectivity, I draw on the perspectives of the theoretical and philosophical traditions that have particularly strong focus on subjectivity. Further, my goal is to take into account the thinking, feeling, and being and embodiment as they relate to our subjectivities. Thus, I concentrate on critical traditions, psychoanalysis, and existential-phenomenological traditions. With critical perspectives, I examine more closely the potential social, political, economic, and cultural influences on the relationship between technological developments and subjectivity. I concentrate mostly on critiques of neoliberalism from diverse perspectives (e.g., Giroux, 2015; O’Doherty et al., 2019;

Schraube, 2009; Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2006) and on Foucauldian perspectives (e.g., Selinger & Rhee, 2021). Next, with the psychoanalytical framework, I look at the felt experiences of engaging with technologies and their possible consequences for subjectivity (e.g., Goodman & Clemente, 2023). Finally, through the existential-phenomenological approach, I focus on the likely mind-body changes elicited by the use of new technologies and explore the corresponding possible impacts on subjectivity. Specifically, the existential framework allows to theorize the different ways of being prompted by the development of new technologies (e.g., Gualeni & Vella, 2020), while the phenomenological perspective focuses on the specifics of human experiences and their interpretations from the point of view of the person involved in the experiencing (e.g., du Toit, 2020). Further, to inform the theorization, I rely on historical and contemporary scholarly work (e.g., Boellstorff, 2015; Turkle, 1995) that looks into the relationship between technological developments of *static* and *dynamic* webs and subjectivity, which allows me to theorize the changes that we may anticipate with the development of *virtual* web.

Even though the topic of online or virtual subjectivities is not new, in this dissertation, I aim to theorize the possible subjectivities (Teo, 2022) that might arise from interactions with technologies that are currently under development. The primary focus of this work is the *virtual* web technologies. As part of the theorizing process exploring the potential implications of the introduction of new technologies for subjectivities, a new concept – meta-subjectivity – is developed (Teo, 2022). Meta-subjectivity describes the differentiated state our subjectivities may enter as a result of engaging with *virtual* web technologies. The term meta-subjectivity is developed in reference to the metaverse. Meta-subjectivity, as developed in this dissertation, serves as a tool for understanding the potential new emerging subjectivity. As technologies are

developing, our interactions with them create a number of possibilities for altering our subjectivities. Thus, theorization and development of new concepts are needed to explore the possible impacts.

Chapter 2: Critical Traditions

Critiques of Neoliberal Virtual Subjectivity

Capitalism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity

Frankfurt School's critical theory offers systematic approaches to analyzing and critiquing capitalism, with the critique of instrumental reason arguably being the most fundamental contribution (Dahms, 2011). Although grounded in culturalist critique, it is not oblivious to the political economic structures permeating capitalist societies. From the perspective of the Frankfurt School, the modern capitalist societies are postliberal, with Horkheimer (1973) in particular referring to the 'authoritarian state' of previously liberal societies. Thus, the instrumental reason as a concept is offered as a fundamental critique of western societies, grounded in the idea that capitalism inevitably leads to subjugation of the natural world and, at the same time, is using humans rather than serving them. Horkheimer (1961/2012) develops the concept of 'instrumental reason' to denote what he sees as a fundamental shift in the way thinking is engaged in in contemporary society, whereby:

...it is not only the business but the essential work of reason to find means for the goals one adopts at any given time. And it is considered superstitious to think that goals once achieved are not in turn to become means to some new goals. (p. iii)

The instrumentalization of reason thus denoted its transformed nature, whereby a reasoning person is one who is calculating how to pursue set goals, does not reflect on the goals once achieved or on matters outside of the purview of the set goals. Rather, whenever one goal is achieved, the next goal is set and the reasoning is purposefully engaged to decipher the means needed to attain the new goal.

As Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/2002) put it, market economy becomes a “prevailing form of reason” (p. 70) in capitalism. Within the instrumental reasoning, then, a successful individual is understood to be such based on the material attainments in comparison to others, legitimating consumption and competition as the two most prominent driving forces in capitalism. Capitalism promotes the idea that what is good for the economy is good for people. Thus, consumption becomes a virtue, as the insatiability of desires for products is what drives the economy. However, the logic behind consumption is that everything is expendable and can be easily replaced by a new thing. Instrumental reasoning extends ‘everything’ beyond the sphere of mere objects to include individual human beings, who “become mere material” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002, p. 68). Thus, the thinking about the self and others turns into thinking in terms of things, commodities. As for any commodity, the self becomes viewed in terms of strengths and problems that have to be managed in order to increase the selling price. Here again, consumption is upheld as it can serve as a solution to any problems one might potentially have. For instance, any source of dissatisfaction with the self may be alleviated by choosing one of the countless products specifically designed to address the unique issues one has.

Instrumental reason as the dominant form of reasoning in capitalist societies, making all other forms of rationality subservient, is further problematized by Habermas, who argued for the need for communicative reasoning instead (Bernstein, 2018). While instrumental reason is oriented toward success and efficiency in manipulating the external world, communicative reason is oriented toward understanding and consensus-building in human interactions (Habermas, 2018). For Habermas, a healthy society that aims to remain democratic should balance these two forms of reason, ensuring that instrumental rationality does not overshadow or suppress communicative rationality. Further, in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas

(1987) argues that the overemphasis on instrumental reason within a capitalist society leads to the colonization of the lifeworld. The lifeworld is the realm of everyday social interactions, cultural practices, and personal relations. When instrumental rationality dominates, it encroaches upon this lifeworld, reducing human relationships and social institutions to mere functional systems, governed by efficiency and control (with the ultimate goal of accumulating money and, by extension, power) rather than mutual understanding and democratic deliberation. Thus, instrumental reason in Habermas' work is seen as a tool that becomes dangerous as a result of overreliance on it. There is a need for critical engagement with instrumental reason, whereby it can be integrated with communicative rationality to create a more just and democratic society.

Extending upon the instrumental reason as it is applied in capitalist societies, neoliberal reason is its contemporary version, characterized by “restructuring of subjectivity and self-consciousness” via displacing ethical normativity with instrumental understandings of political reasoning (Bernstein, 2018, p. 15). Within neoliberal ideology, competition is not just encouraged but is seen as the natural and desirable way of arranging economic and social relations. This competition-centric worldview, thus, holds the value of anything should be judged according to the comparison on the corresponding market, determining winners and losers based on their economic performance. Further, the idea of competition is extended to include normalization of its outcomes, creating a clear dichotomy between winners and losers (Benson & Sonu, 2021; Skilling, 2021). In this framework, winners are to be celebrated and rewarded, while losers are to be marginalized. The lower economic value becomes accepted as a natural consequence of the failure to compete successfully. This normalization of inequality is a significant aspect of neoliberal reason. It justifies social and economic disparities by framing them as the inevitable result of competition (Skilling, 2021). As a result, neoliberalism fosters an

environment where inequality is seen as an acceptable and expected outcome, rather than a problem to be addressed. Further, by fostering this environment neoliberal reason perpetuates a worldview where market logic and economic value become the guiding principles, relegating ethical and moral considerations to the sidelines. This shift has significant implications for social justice and equity, exerting significant influence on the way individuals understand their roles within the neoliberal system. It promotes a meritocratic ideal where success and failure are solely attributed to individual effort, which is supposed to be reflected in the market performance, while ignoring the structural factors that create the conditions for and contribute to inequality (de Botton, 2004).

One of the earlier, and perhaps the earliest, signaling of the potential problems in identity development and individual subjectivities associated with capitalism and relentless consumption came from Erich Fromm (1900-1980). Fromm's (1941/2013) ideas, inspired by Freud, Marx and the Frankfurt School, have led him to the description of the 'social character' in 1941:

In studying the psychological reactions of a social group we deal with the character structure of the members of the group, that is, of individual persons; we are interested, however, not in the peculiarities by which these persons differ from each other, but in that part of their character structure that is common to most members of the group. We can call this character the social character. (pp. 417-418)

The social character in Fromm's work was further described in terms of different types or orientations. The marketing orientation is of particular interest as it is a "character orientation which is rooted in the experience of oneself as a commodity" (Fromm, 1947/2003, p. 50). Thus, inherent in the capitalist economic structure is the tendency towards commercializing everything,

including one's own self. It follows that, when capitalism takes the neoliberal turn, the tendency towards commodification of oneself will be increased.

Neoliberalism, as a concept, has been critiqued for being too dispersed, applied as a general negative stance towards various phenomena connected to the extensively free markets (e.g., Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009; Dunn, 2017; Venugopal, 2015). However, it does capture a notable trend within capitalism, rendering the distinction between capitalism per se and the specific neoliberal form significant. Thus, when referring to neoliberalism, I refer to it as a form of capitalism, depicting the economic structure that emphasizes market relations, calls for minimization of state involvement in terms of regulations, and focuses on individual responsibility (Springer et al., 2016; Thorsen, 2010). For this work, the shift of the burdens onto individuals in various domains is of particular importance as it makes certain characteristics become valued more highly than others, certain values become more prominent than others. For example, Ong (2006) describes this shift in prioritization of marketable characteristics and values as a form of technology of subjectivity whereby market principles influence the norms and standards of a society, encouraging individuals to follow the market logic, such as valuing competitiveness and efficiency, as undisputed virtues that should be strived for. These characteristics and values, therefore, can be seen as stemming from the neoliberal organization of economic life, which permeates other spheres of life. The neoliberal self is then, by definition, an entrepreneurial self, where the 'I' is no longer separable from one's business identity (Teo, 2018). This shift in individual subjectivity is shaped by the market economy, in which one must be adaptable to the fast-pace of the changing market – you need to stay 'relevant' or perish.

Static Web: Internet Use and Neoliberal Subjectivity

At the same time that *static* web was becoming established within our daily lives, the impact of neoliberalism on subjectivities was beginning to be explored as well. However, this relationship has not yet been examined from the perspective of the neoliberalism-Internet-subjectivity nexus. Rather, there are multiple academic works looking separately at the theorized and empirically studied impacts of Internet use on individuals and the impacts of the neoliberal market logic, giving rise to the ideas of self-branding and self-commodification.

On the topic of Internet impacts on individuals, the focus was not directly on subjectivities, but rather on psychological well-being and social relationships, with some finding positive impacts (e.g., Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Deibert, 2000; Katz & Aspden, 1997), while others – negative ones (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Davis, 2001). The positive views highlighted, for example, the promise of the Internet to connect people to share information (improving academic work, for instance), to foster social relationships (e.g., easier access to people with common interests) and to increase ability for various networks to organize (e.g., citizen movements). On the other side, however, the critics of increased use of the Internet highlighted the negative outcomes, centering specifically on the outcomes for individual well-being. Alongside the counterargument of potential increase in loneliness and social isolation to the suggested improvement in communications (Kraut et al., 1998), by early 2000's there is a substantial body of works dedicated to such issues as Internet addiction (e.g., Chou et al., 2005; Griffiths, 2000; Young, 1999) and Pathological Internet Use (e.g., Davis, 2001; Everhard, 2000; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000), as well as examining specific mental health outcomes, such as depression (e.g., Miller, 2019; Sanders et al., 2000; Ybarra et al., 2005).

Similarly, by the late 1990's the idea of personal branding emerged (Shepherd, 2005), and, by early 2000's, self-branding became a prominent topic, with early gurus (e.g., Tom Peters, Catherine Kaputa) and books on the subject (e.g., Edward Golden's 1988 book *Self-marketing: A handbook* or Robyn Ryan's 2005 book *Soaring on your strengths: Discover, use, and brand your best self for career success*) promising workable strategies for developing a successful personal brand. Tom Peters is specifically well-known for his essay on the subject – *The brand called you* – published in 1997 and considered to be the first manifesto for self-branding (Lair et al., 2005). At these early stages, self-branding was a movement in which one need not necessarily work on further development of skills or personal characteristics. Rather, self-branding indicates that one needs to learn how to package and present themselves in the best light possible in order to capture attention. Self-branding is mostly discussed in terms of increasing employability – both as a method of finding a new job and to move up the ranks when one has already entered a field (Lair et al., 2005).

At the same time, personal branding can be seen as an example of self-commodification, as it encourages one to view themselves as a product to be marketed rather than a person (Davis, 2003). Relatedly, personal branding relies on the cultural and social context that places high value on individualization – neoliberalism. It is this individual, devoid of relational ties to others, that can be neatly packaged and sold. And if one fails to package and sell effectively – it's their own fault. This imperative to become self-sufficient and rely only on oneself is presented as a form of freedom, too, making self-branding a desired way to present oneself. Further, while encouraging finding novel ways to attract attention, the attributes required for a successful sell to a potential employer require this uniqueness to be artificial. After all, individuals are compelled to selectively present only those aspects of themselves that are deemed desirable or valuable to a

potential prospective employer, while suppressing traits, experiences, or dispositions that might undermine market appeal. As a result, even when the attributes presented are not fictitious, they are strategically selected and instrumentalized. Artificiality is therefore not a distortion of personal branding but its constitutive condition as the self must be rendered legible to the market and this legibility requires simplification, coherence and strategic optimization.

It should be noted that, given the absence of widespread social media platforms, online presence grants comparatively limited opportunities for self-advertisements, making website creation the primary advised methodology for self-promotion online, thus rendering personal branding online at the time to be rather static. In a sense, the websites served more as digital resumes rather than as advertisements per se. Without the potential for fast and easy networking, offered by *dynamic* web, the online presence was a one-way communication, with limited ability for the website creator to evaluate how well their branding process is going. Furthermore, as search engines were fairly limited as well, the likelihood of the website being discovered was low. Thus, the online advertising in *static* web has played a rather small role.

Dynamic Web: Internet and the Roots of Neoliberal Virtual Subjectivity

With *dynamic* web, the rise of social media and the way in which it has permeated society lead to multiple changes. In continuity with the rise of Internet use, concerns for mental health situation continued strengthening (Kardaras, 2022; Srivastava et al., 2019), especially for children and youth (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Nagata, 2020; Weigle & Shafi, 2024) and the neoliberal practices of self-commodification and self-branding got a renewed impetus online (Hu, 2021; van Nuenen, 2016). Both issues were exacerbated with the widespread availability of social media. The drastic change in the mode of online presence in *dynamic* web meant increased connectivity and inevitably lead to changes in social and cultural norms and pressures. While

none of the changes that followed were pre-determined, they nevertheless were guided by neoliberal reason and, therefore, have led to the exacerbation of many of the neoliberal tendencies. Thus, the perceived benefits of connectivity and self-commodifying presentation online are often significantly overshadowed by the challenges they bring.

Social Media: Introduction. In terms of social media emergence, Facebook was the first platform, introduced in 2004 (Brügger, 2015). At the time, the roll-out was gradual, arriving at different US colleges throughout 2004-2006. Braghieri et al. (2022) made use of this step-by-step spread. Through a quasi-experimental design, they examined the relationship between the introduction of Facebook in colleges and the results from the National College Health Assessment surveys (data available for years between 2000 and 2008), which were distributed across the US colleges and included questions about mental health. Braghieri et al. (2022) found that the introduction of Facebook was associated with negative outcomes for mental health in general, most significantly pronounced with depression and anxiety. Further, the length of exposure to Facebook was also measured and revealed similar results: the more extended exposure (e.g., three semesters vs one semester) was associated with more negative mental health outcomes. For instance, the authors evaluation indicated that:

being exposed to Facebook for five semesters increases the probability that a student is diagnosed with depression by around 32 percent, the probability that a student is in therapy for depression by around 50 percent, and the probability that a student is on antidepressants by around 33 percent (Braghieri et al., 2022, p. 3682)

These results suggest that social media use, from its inception, has been associated with negative mental health outcomes. As the social media platforms proliferate and their features change, the impacts may be further aggravated (Kardaras, 2022). In terms of mechanisms

through which social media may lead to such negative outcomes, Braghieri et al. (2022) indicate that their evidence mostly points to the unfavourable social comparison. In fact, negative impacts mediated through social comparisons online have been found in multiple areas, such as negative mood and depression symptoms (Fardouly et al., 2015; Lup et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2020), negative impacts on self-esteem (Midgley et al., 2021; Servidio et al., 2024; Vogel et al., 2014), and increased sense of loneliness (Dibb & Foster, 2021; Yang, 2016).

As important as social comparison is, there are other mechanisms at play as well. In neoliberal capitalism, the emphasis on regulation of feelings and affections becomes aggravated (Gill & Kanai, 2018). For example, people are more and more advised to project positivity, with psychology deeply implicated in this positive thinking movement embedded within the neoliberal “happiness industry” (Davies, 2015). And if one is not inclined to experience, or to at least project, the anticipated emotions, one needs to work on personal transformation to achieve the desired outcome. Consequently, in essence, neoliberalism promotes the idea of deficiency of the self. This deficiency is meant to explain all the difficulties one encounters in life. After all, if you just look at social media, you see all the positivity spread by the successful people online, a trend especially targeting women and girls with lifestyle and beauty advice to improve their lives (Duffy & Pooley, 2019). One of the explicit ways in which self-deficiency is to be solved is through psychological work on the self: increasing one’s confidence and raising the self-esteem – the two interrelated concepts again frequently targeting women online (Gill & Kanai, 2018), as the answer to the systemic structures in a society driven by neoliberalism is, of course, personal transformation.

Social Media, Self-Commodification and Self-Branding. The concept of self-commodification, although developed separately, can be seen as an extension of Fromm’s

marketing orientation, especially when considering its application in the online world. The digital self-presentation is very prominent in the discussions of self-commodification (see, Duffy & Kang, 2020; Duguay, 2017; Giroux, 2015; Hearn, 2008; Ibrahim, 2018; Khamis et al, 2017; Madureira, 2018; Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Olausson, 2018; Papacharissi, 2012; Raun, 2018; Senft, 2008). The possibility of making oneself into a commodity online elicits treating oneself as such, by promoting such activities as self-branding (Marwick, 2010). Self-branding can be approached from two angles. First, it is a mindset that looks at the self as an object that can be sold to potential consumers (Marwick, 2010). Second, it is a series of strategies and techniques to increase the value of oneself as a commodity (Khamis et al., 2017). The virtual subjectivity embracing self-branding puts the self in the open market, in which improving the quality and desirability of your commodity is a goal. One of the methods purporting to help with achieving this goal is self-improvement literature or motivational speeches, by reading or listening to which one is supposed to learn how to increase the value of the self as an asset (Khamis et al., 2017).

Although self-improvement strategies used for self-branding claim that moving in the direction of promoting the self is a strategy for success as well as a way to achieve personal fulfillment (Duffy & Pooley, 2019), I argue that the individual online self-branding can potentially create tremendous anxiety in a market where literally everyone can be a competitor. The constant need to present a polished and marketable version of oneself can lead to heightened pressure and stress, as individuals strive to stand out in the online world that is occupied by many and continues growing. Availability heuristics have become so accessible that all you have to do is hold your phone and your social media account will suggest you to follow hundreds and thousands of people who “made it” in this competitive market. Whether it is the number of followers or likes or shares, there is a very specific measure to compare yourself against the

others. This relentless competition can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome, for example, where individuals may feel they are never quite good enough compared to the seemingly perfect lives and achievements of others (Myers, 2021). Moreover, the focus on self-promotion can lead to abandonment of interests and passions that are not commodifiable or presentable online, as the drive to appeal to a broad audience might prompt avoiding genuine self-expression if one believes that it will hinder their brand. In this hyper-competitive environment, the lines between personal and professional life can blur, making it difficult to find a balance and maintain mental well-being. Consequently, while self-branding strategies promise success and fulfillment, they often come at the cost of increased anxiety and a potentially detrimental impact on one's overall quality of life.

The competition can be quite steep – and getting steeper – as the self-brand is centred on the performed identity, devoid of need for any accomplishments in the real life but focusing on remaining competitive in the market (Whitmer, 2019). The only accomplishment that, in the end, matters when one engages in self-branding is the success with which one can sell this brand. This coincides with the notable erosion of the notion of expertise, whereby academic and professional expertise is devalued (Reed & Reed, 2023). One no longer needs credentials to convince, just enough followers who are willing to watch, repost, and otherwise support the online content.

One of the prime ways in which the self-brand is to become popular is through authenticity coupled with consistency (Whitmer, 2019). However, these two principles frequently come into conflict with one another, leading to creating an online subjectivity which simulates authenticity. First of all, the authenticity is supposed to be built around the “true” self that one discovers, usually through the self-improvement literature or seminars (van Nuenen, 2016). This “true” self that one is looking for, of course, must provide an opportunity for

commodification – a characteristic that can be packaged and sold. Although the online market for various identities is quite diverse, one should be aware of their ability to capitalize on aspects of their identity in order for the “true” self to generate profit in the end.

The next step involves learning how to present the uncovered authentic self to the audiences to attract attention, for the purposes of which transparency is presented as necessary (Zabel, 2023). Thus, one is supposed to be authentic by presenting their identity in a transparent manner, while at the same time taking into account the potential audience and its interests. Certainly, presenting all the complexities in one’s life and subjectivity would not be feasible online. Thus, there is a careful calculation of which traits and personality aspects are to be released for the audience’s viewing. These actions are meant to not only attract viewers, however, but also to generate profit opportunities through jobs or sponsorships, for example. Thus, the online subjectivity presented should be able to generate money and happiness, with the latter if not directly addressed then at least implied in the various trainings available (Whitmer, 2019). Further, if one is unable to achieve financial enrichment, one must simply work harder on it. After all, in neoliberal subjectivity, if your numbers do not hold up against the successful ones, there is only one culprit to blame – you (Sugarman, 2015).

In addition to anxiety produced by competition, self-promotion on social media means spending considerable time and energy on creating and maintaining the image of the online persona, which can be very different from the everyday one. Thus, the work that goes into promoting the brand of self can be seen as a kind of emotional labour (Marwick, 2010) as it requires ongoing monitoring of the self as well as the audience from the perspective of the emotional affects, such as whether the content one creates produces the desired emotional response. While in real life one’s identity and subjectivity are not static and can be impacted by

various contexts even throughout the day, the self as a brand has less mutability. It must remain consistent within the online identity created (Whitmer, 2019). This is a direct consequence of treating a person as a commodity – a commodity must be easily identifiable and traceable through time to exist. If the branded self changes too frequently, it is unclear what the brand is. One of the qualities of the brand is precisely its predictability – the followers of the brand must know what to expect when they turn to it. This works well to advance commercial products and services in real life. However, performing the same persona online can place a lot of pressure on an individual engaged in self-branding, impacting their online subjectivity as a result.

Neoliberal Virtual Subjectivity. Thus, the Internet has provided a unique opportunity for individuals to apply the same set of sophisticated branding strategies used by big corporations on a small, individualized scale. One need not buy airtime on TV or rent a big billboard on the main city square to advertise their brand. All they have to do is create a social media account or an avatar in the virtual world and start advertising with no or minimal costs. As described above, self-branding often involves presenting yourself as a commodity (Hearn, 2008; Hu, 2021; van Nuenen, 2016). It can hardly be argued, therefore, that thinking of oneself as a commodity and engaging in practices needed for self-branding leave no mark on the subjectivity of individuals engaged in such behaviours. At the end, to successfully brand oneself as a commodity, one has to treat and to think of oneself as such (Khamis et al., 2017). Thus, the relationship between self-presentation online, self-branding to enhance this presentation, and self-commodification can be extensive.

Virtual Web: Neoliberal Virtual Subjectivity in Metaverses

While the influence of neoliberalism on individual identities and subjectivities is not a new topic (Bowsher, 2019; Davies, 2015; de Botton, 2004; Leyva, 2019; Martin, 2002; Teo,

2018), the question of how this may work in the particular context of the virtual subjectivity needs to be theorized further, particularly from the perspective of meta-subjectivity. The efforts in *virtual* web to decentralize the power in the virtual space and to promote individual ownership is reminiscent of deregulation of capital markets and of removing the trade barriers in the real world. These are the concepts at the core of neoliberalism (Ragnedda & Destefanis, 2020). I, therefore, argue that neoliberal ideas will likely take a very active role in virtual spaces and in the shaping of meta-subjectivity in the upcoming *virtual* web technology. After all, neoliberal ideas are already impacting our online presence and virtual subjectivity in various ways, such as through self-commodification and self-branding discussed above. Thus, *virtual* web will enter the online world where self-branding and self-commodification are already normalized and, therefore, these practices will likely be adapted further to the metaverses. Specifically, for those who already “made it” on social media, it will make sense to extend their success in the new virtual worlds as well. For those who have seen the online successes of others, it will provide opportunities to participate in a new market, without established influencers, bloggers, etc.

In *virtual* web, the users will have ownership of their avatar and their creations in the virtual space, which most likely will be an extension and expansion of the existing systems. The relationship between technology and society is not a straightforward one, however: it is not enough to know the historical technological developments and their impacts to determine how new technologies will shape subjectivities. Nonetheless, the historical trajectories can be informative in terms of identifying some of the potential outcomes. If anything has been learnt thus far, it is that the technologies do not have a uniform impact on individuals, with some positive, some negative, and some neutral outcomes. The positive influences, as well as the neutral ones, are important for the development of societies. However, I believe that the negative

influences merit greater consideration at this time. For one, we do not need to prepare for the positive outcomes, while lack of consideration of potential problems can render them more difficult in the future.

If we assume continued individual involvement in Internet use with the advent of metaverses, it is difficult not to draw parallels with social media use and gaming as metaverses will be combining these elements and introducing more. If one is encouraged, through neoliberal ideas, to view oneself as a commodity now, the avatars created, with the available infrastructure, can be even more susceptible to the ideas of self-commodification and especially self-branding. Thus, the issues that were identified at the earliest onset of widespread use of the Internet – Internet addiction, Pathological Internet Use, depression, isolation, and loneliness – all can increase with further development of the metaverses. Of course, these issues will not impact everyone, but the impacts might be severe for those afflicted as the immersive and pervasive nature of metaverses will have the potential to amplify these challenges. Users may find themselves increasingly detached from reality as they invest more time and energy into their avatars and virtual experiences. The enhanced interactivity and sensory engagement offered by metaverses, including both virtual and augmented reality experiences, can make it harder for individuals to distinguish between their virtual and real-world experiences. This blurring of boundaries may lead to disenfranchisement from the real world, especially if the individual is using the virtual worlds as a means of escape. At the same time, being within a virtual world does not allow one to actively engage in ameliorating the situation they are in, leaving a lot of room for deterioration of circumstances and very little chance of improvement.

Further, we need to consider how the emerging metaverses will be entering our daily lives. For instance, it is safe to assume that prior to launching, the metaverses will be (and, to

some extent, already are) advertised to potential users. Marketing works by creating images of the future that we, as potential consumers, are enticed by (Brown et al., 1996). It follows then that marketing can play a role in the way the future will be shaped – if enough people are sold on a particular version, that version may become alive. Thus, advertisements of new products and ideas can have consequences in the real world. For instance, the psychopharmaceutical industry, while proclaiming to bring empowerment (especially to women), is engaged in creating a problem: a construction of an overly emotional person (woman) who needs to be responsabilized for ensuring her mental health and stability no matter the circumstances (e.g., Chananie, 2005; Metzl, 2003). Technological developments have an additional facet of long-standing techno-optimism and techno-pessimism (Hammett, 2018). The optimistic (utopian) version sees the promises of technologies to solve everyday problems. However, as seen with the psychopharmaceutical example above, sometimes the problems being solved are also first created by the advertisers. The pessimistic (dystopian) version sees the potential for continuation and exacerbation of current trends in the world: exploitation of people and the planet, deepening inequalities, and further fragmentation of cultures and societies into individualized responsibilities. Thus, the new ways in which we interact lead to new ways of establishing the networks of desire (Kozinets et al., 2017), creating new ways of production and consumption, thereby firmly developing the new technologies within the established neoliberal capitalist ideas.

Theorizing Neoliberal Meta-Subjectivity. Considering the high level of integration of neoliberal ideas into daily lives, the neoliberal meta-subjectivity will almost certainly arise (unless there are considerable disruptions). This type of subjectivity, therefore, will continue relying on instrumental reason as the primary mode of thinking about and interacting with the now virtual world, incorporating such key characteristics as individualism, self-reliance, and the

continuous drive towards self-optimization in a what will be seen as a competitive, market-driven environment. The users who will enact the neoliberal meta-subjectivity will prioritize personal success and self-promotion, driven by the need to stand out in a virtual economy where everyone competes for attention and resources. The emphasis will be on creating and maintaining a personal brand (extension of existing social media practices), often to the detriment of forming meaningful relationships. However, in metaverse, it will be possible to extend the individualism to hyper-individualism, by focusing on yourself and neglecting to actually communicate with anyone. Even now, some forms of AI technologies, most notably the large language models, are capable of mimicking human interactions (Gürcan, 2024; Sekulić et al., 2024). By the time metaverses are launched, it is plausible and even likely that these models will be further advanced, perhaps to the point of fairly accurately representing the character traits one chooses for the models in speech. Thus, the users themselves may be able to mostly eliminate the need to actually interact with their audience – only to create and share the content. While from the perspective of instrumental reason, this is a beneficial feature of metaverses, it will lead to even greater isolation than is noted with the advent of social media platforms in *dynamic web*.

Moreover, within metaverses, the neoliberal meta-subjectivity can take on a completely different approach to self-improvement than is seen within the social media era. Specifically, avatar customization can now be the predominant form of self-change, leading to at least two new major outcomes: skillsets and relationship with oneself. The skillset required to make the customizations one believes to be beneficial will be different from the skillset within *dynamic web* online world. While changing basic characteristics can be fairly straightforward, if one needs the avatar for specific purposes, one must consider the potential audience and customize

the avatar according to their preferences or even create multiple avatars that are configured in corresponding ways. In this sense, the self-commodification we see with personal branding online now can have a much more far-reaching impact. Which leads to the second major shift – the relationship with oneself. There are concerns even now that the online personas created through personal branding can have negative impacts on individual wellbeing (Whitmer, 2019; Zreik, 2024). However, the avatar created, in a sense, can have a life of its own – it can always behave in predetermined and prescribed ways, remain positive no matter what and unfailingly represent the ideals set force by the creator of the avatar. The discrepancies between the avatar and the lived experience in the real world can look less like a gap and more like an abyss, amplifying the negative experiences some have now as a result of self-commodification. This difference between the real-life self and the avatar may lead to unfavourable self-comparison, whereby one's avatar may lead the better life one has always hoped for. Consequently, the users may be inclined to favour spending their time online, living the virtual life of their dreams, to the detriment of the real-world experiences and relationships. In the longer run, it is likely that, while satisfying at the moment, engaging in metaverses may lead to and exacerbate pre-existing mental health issues, especially depression and anxiety, which have been identified as issues related to social media use. Moreover, if online presence can be problematic now, leading to Cyber-Syndrome and Internet addiction, the more enticing the virtual world and the more complete feeling of unique participation through avatar building and customization, the more prevalent such issues will be.

Foucauldian Approaches

Foucault (1975) discusses the internalization of gaze, whereby people continuously observe, monitor, and judge themselves, making sure that they do not cross the acceptable limits

of behaviour – a form of panopticism where it is not the outward gaze of the surveiller that leads to behaviour modification, but an inward gaze of the always potentially surveilled. According to Foucault (1975), therefore, the discipline is not forced, but administered through a calculated internal gaze. But the question is what happens to this self-monitoring and surveillance process in the virtual worlds, in which our avatar, and the meta-subjectivity associated with it, are independent of our real-life identity. Is it a new level of authority that we experience as the creators of a completely new subjectivity? Or does the self-monitoring simply take on a new form?

Further, biopower, and particularly biopolitics (Foucault, 2007/1979), will play a prominent role in determining the power structures within the metaverses. Biopolitics, as a subset of biopower, specifically addresses how states intervene in a variety of essential processes of human life. For instance, introducing laws or promoting policies aiming to optimize and control the health, productivity, and welfare of populations would all constitute biopolitics exerted on the population. Foucault (2007/1979) argues that these interventions cannot be seen as necessarily beneficial or even just neutral. They are also techniques of power that aim at shaping and governing individuals in profound ways. This framework helps to analyze a variety of contemporary developments, including the implications of new technologies in monitoring and regulating human life. Most importantly, the contemporary extension of Foucault's (2007/1979) concept of biopolitics to "soft biopolitics", which denotes collection of user's data online and its categorization and use for commercial, advertising, political, statistical, and other purposes, provides another avenue for understanding the impacts on the virtual being and meta-subjectivity (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Finally, Foucault (1982) considers ways in which "human being turns

himself into a subject” (p. 778). With the advent of contemporary technologies and the future possibilities of the metaverses, this concern becomes even more pertinent.

Static Web: Internet, Virtual Reality, and the Promise of the Future

With the advent of computers and especially the Internet, which enabled communication and storage of information across different devices and independent of the intentions of a specific user of the Internet, the surveillance and biopolitics entered a new era (Manokha, 2018). However, at the early stages of Internet use, most users were not aware of the data being collected and of the implications thereof. Furthermore, given the limited ability of users to develop and enact online subjectivity at this stage, self-surveillance and soft biopolitics can be said to have been at their infancy. In fact, there was much optimism for the potential powers of the Internet and other related technologies, for example, in terms of providing further educational opportunities (Allen, 2006). This optimism, of course, spread to other areas as well. For instance, speculating about potential opportunities VR technologies will bring, Briggs (1996) highlights the potential medical uses, such as training future surgeons to perform surgeries on virtual patients, and the opportunities for the advertising industry to sell virtual products. While recognizing the limited abilities of VR at the time, Briggs (1996) supposes that the technology will be in much better shape within 10 years and will be able to cater to multiple diverse fields, from arts to military. While the timeframe projections may have been underestimated, the diversity of applications remains a salient point for advertising this technology today (see section ***Dynamic Web: Internalized Gaze Online***). Most importantly, though, the technological development here is presented from a neutral position – it is just another tool which will simply enter the world as is: “Virtual reality is neither good nor bad” (Briggs, 1996, p. 18).

However, it is naïve to portray technological developments, especially ones that are supposed to permeate society, as neither good nor bad. This semblance of neutrality attempts to oblivate the circumstances in which the technologies are being developed, such as the power dynamics, and the circumstances that they will serve to recreate and reinforce, if we agree to frame them as neutral. In essence, then, neutrality is a very active position of preserving and enforcing the status quo. In fact, even at this time, these technological advancements can be seen as potential instruments of power that may be used to regulate populations through subtle means. As the technologies become more widespread, they become part of the shaping of societal norms and practices. By claiming neutrality, we obscure the ways in which these technologies can be used to surveil, categorize, and discipline individuals, reinforcing existing hierarchies and inequalities. Thus, rather than being neutral, technological developments evident in *static* web already are roots for influencing the distribution of power.

Dynamic Web: Internalized Gaze Online

Surveillance Capitalism. With the advent of *dynamic* web technologies, the possibilities of collecting personalized online user data quickly became apparent, which triggered significant changes in the online world. Zuboff's (2018) concept of surveillance capitalism denotes the collection and analyses of users' data for the purposes of economic gains. One of the most immediate and significant implications of surveillance capitalism is the erosion of individual privacy. Users' online activities are constantly monitored, recorded, and analyzed, often without their explicit consent or understanding. The analyses of the activities are then used to generate profit, thus leading to the commodification of behaviour and the corresponding issues it poses for the users' autonomy, agency, and the exploitation of experiences in the absence of any regulatory frameworks that would protect users from such predatory corporate behaviours (Zuboff, 2022).

One of the ways the profits are attained is through predicting human behaviour based on the data generated. For example, by anticipating the products or services the user may need and providing advertisements targeting these specific needs. However, the analyses of the data generated are not limited to such suggestions, which may even be seen as helpful. Rather, there are intentions of behaviour modification as well – a much more controversial practice whereby user data is used to nudge the user in a certain direction to influence the user's decisions (Aho & Duffield, 2020; Zuboff, 2018).

The ability on the part of companies invested in collecting user data to manipulate the users means that surveillance capitalism generates significant power imbalances between corporations and individuals. Control over user data can give unprecedented influence over social, economic, and political processes (Aho & Duffield, 2020). This power asymmetry can undermine democratic principles, as a few powerful entities gain the ability to manipulate information and shape public opinion. Zuboff (2018) therefore argues that surveillance capitalism poses a fundamental threat to democracy. It creates an environment where informed consent and individual autonomy are compromised, eroding the foundational principles necessary for a democratic society to function. A significant part of everyday lives is lived out online for many people, which means that the influences being exerted on individual users are done by those who were not elected to make such decisions on behalf of the people.

Chilling Effect. An additional component of the users' data being collected is the fact that as users become aware that this is happening, their online behaviour may change. In *dynamic* web, unlike *static* web, many people are aware of their data being collected and used, which can lead to self-discipline online. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that when people become more aware of users' personal data collection, the tendency to self-monitor and self-

sensor online increases (Manokha, 2018). For example, when Edward Snowden revealed the global scale of online surveillance in 2013, the chilling effect, whereby online participants are deterred from openly expressing their opinions online, was noted (Eide, 2019). Hence, despite the hopes for the openness of the Internet and the ability of the users to access information and to express themselves freely, the power structures that are making use of the available information shape individual subjectivities and instill practices of self-governance online. The chilling effect, however, is not only limited to the fears of the data being collected by governments or corporations. Another dimension of this phenomenon is seen when the potential audience is assumed to be highly heterogeneous and to have easy access to the information posted by individual identifiable users, which tends to be the case for most social media platforms. In these circumstances, some may revert to expressing opinions that no one can find offensive to avoid confrontations (Manokha, 2018), thus internalizing the gaze.

Of course, the chilling effect does not have a uniform influence on subjectivities. Some individuals believe they have nothing to fear if their personal data is collected and stored, or that they may even benefit from it (e.g., receiving targeted information or advertisement for products and services that they may find useful). Similarly, there are those who are comfortable expressing opinions that will stir emotions in some groups and are actively pursuing this. However, the chilling effect does impact the subjectivities of some, thereby influencing their behaviours, namely the internalized gaze that enables self-governance online. Over time, this internalized gaze can profoundly shape one's subjectivity and agency, as individuals navigate their online presence with an acute awareness of being watched, self-regulating through self-censorship and thereby perpetuating the dominant power structures embedded within digital technologies.

Social Media. In the online world, and especially on social media, we are looking for connections, entertainment, knowledge, acceptance, etc. Our profiles are usually linked to our real identities, with profile pictures frequently showing our presentable picture or our adorable pet. We have some “friends” that we may or may not know in real life. We monitor and watch what we write, which picture of us we post, and what moments of our life we share. The limits of acceptability or desirability of our choices usually mimic the norms of the society in which we live, which are governed by the surveillance techniques, such as normalization (Selinger & Rhee, 2021).

Through examination, our social media profiles are being watched and judged and through normalization, we watch what we post and share with others according to the projected norms. The owners of social media encourage certain practices and norms while excluding others. The individual choices on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are very similar to the self-monitoring process that Foucault describes. We are concerned not to share too much or post something that shows us in a negative light. Usually, our choices focus on the positive aspects of life that are considered normal on a day-to-day basis. We share photos of our pets, a beautiful scenery that we are visiting, the food we are eating, or the selfies that we choose among tens or hundreds of photos that we take, which go through another layer of editing. That is supposed to be the representation of the “real” us. On social media, everything becomes a token and a marker of who we are. We are the person that we want to be. And we can also imagine others as we wish to. However, all this self-crafting is being watched and judged all the time. Creating the online subjectivity can potentially give us a sense of empowerment, as we become the author of our own identity, choosing, editing, and deleting any aspects of the identity as we want, which can be even more enticing for certain populations, such as people with

disabilities (Bowker & Tuffin, 2007), but will be pertinent to everyone entering the virtual world. This is already a step above the control we have in the real-life social settings.

Online subjectivity may represent a phantasmatic identity, in which our avatar portrays our fantasies rather than our real-life social identity. At the same time, surveillance techniques are augmented as a result of new technologies. Specifically, VR headsets are capable of collecting a plethora of personal data, which can be then used in a manner similar to current use of data collected from online users, for example, to inform advertising (Preece et al., 2022). These advertisements, in turn, target and nudge consumers in the directions needed for profiting – a form of soft biopolitics. This application of data not only informs consumer behaviours, however. In order to shape behaviours, it needs to shape subjectivities – by, for instance, creating a need for product or service, which aligns with the neoliberal context in which the online interactions occur.

Virtual Web: Theorizing Internalized Gaze in Metaverses

When it comes to the internalized gaze, the question is do we still monitor ourselves and try to be acceptable in *virtual* web when everything is anonymous? If yes, what are the norms and limits? Already we can find a livestream of a gamer in a free world game, like The Witcher 3, in which the avatar is busy killing the dogs and cute cats rather than fighting the evil dragon. This example is, of course, outside of the typical norms and limits within the gaming worlds as, typically, such actions are simply impossible to perform. However, various forms of violence are normalized in the real world, too, with neoliberalism exacerbating the normalization of some forms of violence (Berdayes & Murphy, 2015).

Most importantly, though, would breaking such norms signal a meaningful redefinition of norms in terms of social and cultural structures of power? I suppose that, while presenting as an

opportunity for the user to experience the world differently, metaverses may not necessarily lead to these differences addressing such fundamental questions as inequalities, for example. Rather, these differences will be, in line with neoliberal thinking and the existing turn to focus on the self, expressed as individual choices unavailable in the real world. Transgressive acts within virtual environments thus risk being framed as personal experimentation rather than as challenges to shared norms. Even if the individual choice is subversive, its political and social significance remains limited if they are not taken up collectively and institutionalized as new norms within the virtual worlds. Without forms of collective action capable of stabilizing and generalizing these practices, their effects are unlikely to extend beyond the level of individual experience, remaining superficial. Further, in the context of the metaverses, there is indeed a possibility of creating your own set of limits and norms and acting according to them. In other words, metaverse is a world in which you can be your own government. There is also a possibility of creating a new you or, with the help of VR, for example, experiencing being someone else in real contexts or worlds altogether alternative to our reality.

There are technological developments that are necessary for the Metaverses to become reality. Some of these developments will have to be related to Virtual Reality (VR) technologies, such as VR headsets. Various headsets for gaming have already been developed and are widely available. However, these are not the only uses of VR headsets. For example, as Zhang et al. (2023) systematic review indicates, VR headsets (along with other extended and augmented reality technologies) are being actively studied for use in the medical field, both for helping medical professionals to prepare for surgery and for patients undergoing recovery. Other promising fields for VR technology include education (e.g., Çankaya, 2019), work environments (e.g., Vasarainen et al., 2021), industrial uses (e.g., de Freitas et al., 2022), and, of course,

shopping experiences (e.g., Xi & Hamari, 2021). However, it should be noted that the current research into VR, although expanding, remains limited (Preece et al., 2022). Importantly, VR headsets are frequently presented as objects of utility, neutrally entering the world, i.e., without impacts on broader societal structures, including the power structures (Botez et al., 2020). It is through the normalized existent structures, whereby, for example, growth equals development equals good for all, that current systems are being reproduced and further normalized. After all, technologies are being developed by humans, who, whether they realize it or not, frequently recreate the conditions present in their societies. This has been noted, for instance, with Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies, which recreate discriminatory practices in the decision-making processes (e.g., Ferrer et al., 2021). Thus, the technologies developed for and used in the metaverses will have implications for the experiences and subjectivities of users.

Despite the freedom that the metaverses promise, we have already established boundaries, norms and ways of perceiving, which will shape our ways of being in the metaverses as well. Which norms will the users subvert due to anonymity? If gender or class inequality is normalized in one's society, will the metaverses provide an avenue for alternative or will the inequalities take new virtual lives? Further, if some corporations decide to sponsor certain metaverses, will those be created in ways that nudge us towards consuming certain products or services? After all, advertisements are already advanced and influential (Alwitt & Mitchell, 2022; Kang et al., 2020). If you become a part of an advertisement, will it not have more impact? Especially if the advertisement is subtle and entertaining and does not feel at all as if someone is trying to sell you something. Instead, it can feel that you are making a free choice.

Virtual web will be a further step forward, requiring more commitment and engagement from the individual. Correspondingly, if we are already influenced by such data collection, via

the advertisements we see and news articles that pop up in our news feeds, for example, getting more of our data means that these and other information collected will be used further.

Considering that social media algorithms have already been criticized for negatively impacting mental health (Braghieri et al., 2022; O'Reilly et al., 2018), increasingly engrained virtual being may pose further risks as well. Specifically, Han (2017) indicates that Big Data has driven a new form of digital panopticism, which is a perspectival – surveillance that does not have blind spots – by definition. This phenomenon is enabled by users engaging in self-tracking and self-monitoring, amounting to auto-surveillance when the data collected is exchanged online with other users or with corporations. Essentially, the user functions simultaneously as a guard and an inmate (Han, 2017). Moreover, in Big Data, all information is stored forever, making a more complete picture of the user, which can be used for micro-targeting advertisements based on users' profiles – an example of digital psychopolitics – the use of individual psychology to influence political outcomes (Han, 2017).

The surveillance marketing will become more and more intertwined with soft biopolitics as the amount of information collected from the users of new technologies will keep growing, increasing, for example, the ability of advertising to mimic ideas popular with consumers, such as was seen with empowerment currently (Chananie, 2005). Thus, this fusion of surveillance and biopolitics facilitates the creation of highly personalized marketing strategies that tap into, but also create new, needs and wants. The manipulation of user behaviours does not only help to perpetuate consumerism but also influences the broader societal norms and expectations. Moreover, the illusion of choice and empowerment presented by such marketing strategies can obscure the underlying mechanisms of control, further entrenching the existing power dynamics.

Meta-Subjectivity: A Foucauldian Perspective. From a Foucauldian perspective, meta-subjectivity within the context of metaverses can be characterized by the interplay of surveillance and gaze, soft biopolitics, and the treatment of individuals as subjects. This meta-subjectivity will be shaped by the ways in which power, knowledge, and technology intersect in virtual spaces. While the decentralization of metaverses has great promise in terms of anonymity, most users will still create fairly stable avatars, who will develop relationships with other avatars. Therefore, even with the absence of a link towards a real-life identity, there still will be perceived constraints on the acceptability of certain behaviours according to the avatar's built character. The fact that the avatar may be significantly different from the real-life user does not mean that the user will not feel the pressure of norms and expectations of others and engage in self-regulation to conform to the expectations and maintain the built reputation and relationships. In this sense, it is likely that the experiences of users in *dynamic* web will translate more or less directly into the experiences of users in *virtual* web – as an iteration of the digital panopticon.

Further, another promise of decentralization is increased security and, most importantly, privacy, ensuring the users' data is not collected and used without the users' knowledge. While very enticing considering the soft biopolitics engaged in with Big Data in seen in *dynamic* web and especially the social media, a similar problem will arise with metaverses. The platforms, like the Metaverse, will be owned by certain companies, who will have their own rules and regulations in terms of data collection and use. While it may not be as easy for a company to collect the users' data, they may implement incentives to do so (such as allowing free access to their specific metaverse platforms or certain features within it). After all, the companies investing in the development of the metaverses are planning to benefit financially from these investments. Currently, user data is where a lot of profit lies. Therefore, the companies will try to

ensure that they have the power to collect user data. Even if such practices will become more transparent, the privacy envisioned in *virtual* web will be circumvented by those informing how the *virtual* web is being developed.

Finally, while users might experience a sense of autonomy and freedom in customizing their avatars and, in a sense, creating their own virtual identities, this process will be mediated by multiple intersecting factors, including the technologies and platforms they use (and the encompassing power structures), economic interests (their own as well as those of the technological companies or other players they will enter the metaverses), and cultural influences (although metaverses will appear to be open to reinvention of cultural norms, those will not remain open and in flux indefinitely). Thus, the construction and performance of avatar identities will be shaped by the power dynamics within the metaverses as users will not be able to stay outside of the broader discourses that will emerge within the metaverses. As a result, although the power structures will likely be somewhat different, or at the very least will be experienced as if they were different by the users, they will most likely operate as reinforcement to the existing norms with minor variations rather than as opportunities to renegotiate the power structures of the society. Consequently, the appeal of the freedom to choose will be enticing to many. However, the meta-subjectivity, analyzed from a Foucauldian perspective, presents as a subjectivity that is unique (after all, it will be an opportunity for the users to express themselves in ways that are not possible in real life) and yet embedded in the technological and economic frameworks of the metaverses, reflecting broader societal trends and power relations.

Agency and Resistance: Meta-Subjectivity and Sociotechnical Imaginaries

Above, I have provided an overview of current neoliberal and Foucauldian approaches to online subjectivity and theorized potential impacts on meta-subjectivity in Metaverses. In line

with critique of neoliberal influences and power structures, I have focused on the potential negative outcomes for individual subjectivities. However, a comprehensive approach following these traditions also requires looking at agency and resistance that are available, especially from a collective perspective. To do this, I deviate from psychological traditions and turn to Science and Technology (STS) studies as this field is active in investigating the implications of technological developments on societies. Specifically, I focus on the influential concept of sociotechnical imaginaries as it can be applied to virtual reality (Preece et al., 2022).

I rely on the definition of the sociotechnical imaginaries that was introduced by Jasanoff (2015): “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (p. 322). This concept, thus, allows looking into collective forms of self-understanding as they relate to technology and institutions of power, while at the same time offering diverse potentialities for the future. In this sense, sociotechnical imaginaries can be drivers of social change. At the same time, following Preece et al. (2022), it is not only important to imagine the futures that we would like. It is also necessary to consider which visions of the future are undesirable and, therefore, should be actively worked against. This point is particularly salient in light of the issues related to relying on neoliberal market logics, for instance. Further, Chimirri and Schruabe (2019) argue that our self-understanding, in light of the developing technologies and their influences on the society at large and on our daily realities, is fundamentally underdeveloped, in large part due to the lack of imaginaries. We simply do not know the extent of the impacts of the technologies on our sense of self. This situates psychology, as a discipline, as a suitable medium to study the impacts of technological developments and use within societies on individuals and their subjectivities – the

psychology of technology (Chimirri & Schraube, 2019). Subjectivity here is seen from the more-than-human perspective, whereby technologies are inextricably connected to our everyday experiences – whether we reflect on this connection or not.

Moreover, the different possible futures are influenced by technology, but their imaginaries also shape the technologies of the future. It is a two-way street. For instance, the knowledge of the uncanny valley phenomenon – fear of or discomfort about robots being too much like humans that people may experience – is an imaginary specific version of a future (one in which robots resemble us a lot) that informs the development of robotics now, aiming to overcome this phenomenon (e.g., Zhang et al., 2020). Thus, current ideas and ideologies influence how the sociotechnical imaginaries emerge and are shaped. Therefore, considering the possibilities involves taking into account current sociohistorical context, as well as the various actors that can have significant impacts on the development of technologies, such as corporations and governments. These considerations are important as they are part of what shapes the normative implications. If we, as a society, expect a plethora of metaverses to emerge, enabling us to shop, work, play, interact online, then the metaverses being developed will take into account these perceived expectations and deliver products – metaverses – capable of fulfilling at least some of these expectations. Otherwise, if users consider these products underwhelming, they will not engage with the new technologies.

Consequently, we as users do have a fundamental power in terms of possibilities to provide our own imaginaries. If these imaginaries are cumulative, i.e., there are enough potential users with specific expectations, then the imaginaries may drive the directions in which research into and development of these technologies are taken. Currently, we are still at the infancy stages of the metaverses, which gives us opportunities to engage in deliberate articulations of the

futures we would like to emerge with their development. That is why articulating some of the potential negative consequences is also so important – we can consider which futures we do not want (e.g., ones in which everything is commodified and driven by profit, or ones in which self-governance spirals down). We can take into consideration potential negative mental health consequences as well. Noting that, perhaps, these will be only severe for a small proportion of users, we can still consider what safeguards should be in place that will help balance the improvements of user experiences with wellbeing.

These possibilities will not be available forever. Currently, as the ideas of the capabilities of metaverses remain murky, we have a great chance of both indicating what we wish for the most and what we fear. Of course, these may change with time. However, at this stage, there is more room for input from the future users of the technologies. After all, in the game development world, including VR experiences, user feedback impacts the development of games prior to launch in a variety of ways, from the very basic (e.g., interface layout) to the most fundamental gameplay mechanics (Liu et al., 2019; Rossi et al., 2020). If imaginaries are, in part, “patterns of forgetfulness and attentiveness” (Vogler, 2002, p. 625), it is possible to be purposeful about the patterns we forget and choose to attend to, thus making our choices into prescriptive sociotechnical imaginaries, capable of challenging rather than reproducing the current economic and power structures, allowing for the new meta-subjectivities to be agents of change and resistance.

One method for approaching the sociotechnical imaginaries is through narrativity or storytelling. Well-constructed narratives not only convey the meanings better and to larger audiences, but they also contribute to “a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience” (Worth, 2008, p. 42). Thus, the imaginaries need to be thought-through and shaped

into narratives that are captivating while at the same time conveying the meanings intended. In essence, the construction of the meta-subjectivities can be seen as beginning now, while we are contemplating how to envision potential futures and how to discuss them, with the language we use and the narratives we create playing a central role. The narratives created will establish the desired futures by indicating what it is that is expected from the technologies to come, while also enabling us to set the boundaries, develop ideas about ways of relating and subjectivities enacted (Preece et al., 2022). For the boundaries, similarly to the uncanny valley, we can decide what we collectively do not want to see in the future metaverses. In terms of relations, we can consider whether we would like metaverses to resemble real life communications more than social media, for example (especially considering the issues with social media use discussed in the section **Dynamic Web: Internet and the Roots of Neoliberal Virtual Subjectivity**), and aim for that. Finally, the impacts on subjectivities in real life and on the meta-subjectivities must be considered. If counter-narratives are not presented, our subjectivities will be shaped by the needs of the companies to sell us technological products of the future. However, if the companies investing into the development of the technologies want consumers in the future, these consumers can have an impact on the way the technologies are developed. For instance, user-driven development and innovation is being actively used in software development, from entrepreneurial designs to sustainability approaches (Leidtke et al., 2012; Tacer et al., 2018).

Agency and Resistance: Example of Digital Learning

One important aspect where digitalization of daily lives is particularly important is learning, which is transforming with the emergence of new technologies in *dynamic* web. Schraube (2024) argues that while there are many benefits inherent in the use of technologies, such as faster access to information and easier communication with fellow learners, there is a

need to balance reliance on technologies with offline experiences, drawing on the benefits of both worlds. Adapting to the new ways of learning also means introducing different frameworks for integrating and using the technologies that are available. While there are those who bemoan the new developments and critique, for example, the use of AI in educational settings (e.g., Bearman et al., 2023; Popenici, 2023), it is worth remembering that resistance to technological developments and belief that these developments will hinder the abilities of learners to acquire new knowledge and make use of it is nothing new. For instance, Socrates was concerned with the development of writing and this new technology, he feared, would reduce learners' need to rely on memory and, therefore, this cognitive skill will be irreparably damaged in future generations (Yuzwa, 2019). Thus, considering the potential negative effects of new technologies on learning has a long history.

Nonetheless, the tendency towards digitalization also gives us opportunities to rethink the structuring of learning. For example, Schraube (2024) argues for psychological approaches to understanding learning that centre individual experience, in a sense that conditions must be present that allow the individual learner use the technologies in a productive manner, rather than trying to regulate (or exclude) the use of certain technologies already available to learners. This stems from Schraube's (2024) conceptualization of learning as a *worlding practice* – a practice that enables us to understand and interact with the world in which we live, both being shaped by it and shaping it through our experiences and understandings. In other words, learning is seen as:

...a *worlding practice*, grounded in people's conduct of everyday life and crucial to the development of their agency. Learning is the capacity that enables us humans to relate to the world in which we live and to form the knowledge, understanding, and skills

necessary to live our everyday lives in it together with others and to participate in creating and shaping the world. (Schraube, 2024, p. 6)

From this position, therefore, integration of technologies into the learning process is fundamental to both be consistent with the already existing world realities of the learners and also to enable learners to further develop and understand the world in which they live. In this sense, the practice of learning is inextricably intertwined with critical questions concerning the learners' world from the perspective of the learners themselves (Schraube, 2024).

Despite the many benefits of the digitalization of learning and the importance of integrating it into the learners' experiences, there are significant limitations as well. Schraube (2024) identifies the individualization of learning can produce a limitation that must be contended with. On the one hand, there must be a degree to which learning is individualized. After all, there is not one universalized learning strategy that can be applied to all learners at all times in all spheres of knowledge. On the other hand, individualization taken to the extreme (which is increasingly possible with online learning, for example) leaves the learner without a possibility to connect the learned knowledge to the larger context, meaning that there cannot be systematic social and cultural consideration of varying influences. Moreover, individualization of learning in the digitalized context also returns us to the issues of self-surveillance and self-monitoring, where digital learning is instrumentalized and the learning experiences, rather than being worlding practices, become segregated through the individualization (Schraube, 2024). Thus, from Schraube's (2024) perspective, the biggest issue with individualization of learning is the absence of dialogue in the broadest sense. For example, there is limited opportunity for collaboration in the sense of discussion, argumentation, contradiction, or extension of the learner's own or someone else's argument. While these activities are fairly simple in person,

online they tend to become quite limited, frequently resulting in cooperation (splitting up tasks between different learners or sharing relevant information with one another) rather than in truly collaborative efforts. Similarly, the dialogue in the broadest sense, whereby the material is learned and applied within contexts, is limited within the digitalization of learning. In a sense, there is a danger that the act of finding information online becomes equated with learning, to the exclusion of all other components necessary for the learning to be, indeed, a worlding practice. For the learning to lead to integrated, actionable knowledge, one must be able to apply the learned material, not to simply recite a fact or a definition.

If we extend the trend of *dynamic* web's digitalization of learning into the realms of *virtual* web and the metaverse, we can hypothesize a few potential outcomes. One primary concern is that the problematic aspects and limitations highlighted by Schraube (2024) could become even more pronounced. In this evolving landscape, technologies are expected to play increasingly critical roles in our daily lives, fundamentally transforming the learning experience. This transformation might lead to a heightened individualization of learning, where the process becomes increasingly fragmented and disconnected from broader contexts. Such a scenario would make it less likely that the digitalization of learning would be a holistic and inclusive practice. Instead, learning could become more reliant on online methods to the exclusion of other traditional and experiential forms of education. However, there is also a possibility that the metaverse could reshape the learning experience in a positive direction. If the technology within these virtual worlds is advanced enough and seamlessly integrated into the learning process, it might foster environments where meaningful dialogue and interaction become possible once again. In the metaverse, individuals do not need to be physically present in the same room to

interact as if they were face-to-face, potentially overcoming some of the isolation associated with digital learning.

Despite this optimistic potential, the easier and more likely outcome is the negative transformation, where the pitfalls of digital learning are exacerbated unless proactive measures are taken. Positive transformations require deliberate thought and effort. We must engage in forward-thinking and imaginative planning to harness the best aspects of emerging technologies. By introducing practical strategies for employing these technologies, we can address and mitigate foreseeable issues. It is essential to envision and strive for a future where the digitalization of learning is not only efficient but also inclusive and contextually rich, ensuring that technology enhances rather than hinders the educational experience.

Conclusion: Reflection on Critical Traditions for Theorizing the Meta-Subjectivity

The projected introduction of metaverses, immersive digital environments of *virtual* web where users will be able to form entirely new online lives with entirely new selves, will very likely result in emergence of meta-subjectivities, which may take on a variety of modes. Employing critical traditions, particularly the critique of neoliberalism and Foucauldian approaches, provides important frameworks for understanding the complexities of these emerging meta-subjectivities. These traditions underscore the importance of examining the structural forces that shape subjectivities in virtual spaces, while also providing avenues for developing potential ways for agency and resistance within the forthcoming *virtual* web era.

Specifically, neoliberalism, characterized by market-driven policies and individualism, will have fundamental structural impacts on the architecture and governance of metaverses, at least the ones that will be originally created by big technological companies. These virtual worlds, therefore, will operate on economic models that prioritize profit maximization,

commodification of user experiences and of users' subjectivities through their avatars, and data extraction. Neoliberal logic, guided by instrumental reason, thus, will inform how users will think of and navigate the environments of the metaverses. The perspective on the meta-subjectivity from the standpoint of critique of neoliberalism illustrates the tensions that will arise between individual agency and systemic economic forces that will inform how the virtual identities are shaped.

Foucauldian approaches offer a complementary lens, focusing on the power relations and the tools by which meta-subjectivities will be regulated in the metaverses. Foucault's concept of gaze, biopolitics (especially as it is extended into the notion of soft biopolitics in the digital worlds), and subjectivation are particularly relevant, as they demonstrate the pathways through which metaverses can function as spaces of surveillance, self-regulation, and normalization. In these *virtual* web environments, users can be subjected to continuous monitoring and data collection, even if the starting assumption is the possibility of decentralization and increased privacy of data as these notions can easily become illusory, just like the anonymity of the Internet user in *dynamic* web is not supported by the practical information collection conducted by technological giants. The production of meta-subjectivity will therefore be informed by the discourses created by platform developers, advertisers, and other players, including the users themselves, who will engage in construction and reinforcement of certain subjectivities, the ones that align with the established norms.

These critical traditions, therefore, enable theorization of meta-subjectivity in metaverse that takes into account the current thinking influenced by neoliberal ideas and the existing power relations, emphasizing the role of structural forces in the formation of new subjectivities. At the same time, this encourages critical reflection on the potential methods of agency and resistance

within metaverses. By recognizing the ways in which meta-subjectivity will be influenced by neoliberal and Foucauldian dynamics – if its development is left in the hands of companies developing the metaverses, we can explore avenues for fostering more equitable digital environments, ones that deliver on the promises of Internet technologies, rather than capitalizing on them at the expense of the users.

Chapter 3: Psychoanalytical Traditions

Introduction

The modern world is filled with technological advancements that have defined our sense of time and space (Jackson, 1994; Turner & Turner, 2006). These technologies have permeated our personal and public lives. Turkle (1995) proposes that technologies are never just tools. Through the use of technology, we are forced to see ourselves and the world differently. To begin with, the word ‘virtual’ implies some kind of artificiality or fakeness – something that is not quite real. And in many instances, the virtual in fact is but a symbol of the real. For example, a virtual kiss or a virtual hug is not quite the same as a real kiss or real hug. Even though the meaning behind these virtual symbols can be understood, they are not experienced the way real kisses or hugs are. Similarly, when someone is playing a shooting game, most likely they will not lose sleep because they shot a bunch of random virtual people for fun – the gaming process tends not to weigh on one’s conscience as it is not registered as being real. In fact, often the measure of the quality of a virtual entity is based on how close it has come to mimic reality, with gamers commenting on how ‘realistic’ the latest iterations of their favourite games are (Sobociński, 2019). Nevertheless, the assumption usually remains that the game (or other virtual space) is not quite real. This assumption is what I intend to question in this chapter by relying on the psychoanalytic traditions.

Classical psychoanalytic traditions, with their focus on unconscious processes and the construction of the self through fantasy and desire (Bion, 1962; Freud, 1900/1967; Lacan, 1975/1999), offer unique lens on the phenomenon of virtuality – even if they could not have predicted the technological forms the virtuality takes today. For instance, Freud’s (1900/1967) insights into the psychic reality of dreams and fantasy emphasize that the mind is always already

engaged in a form of virtual experience where imagined scenarios shape subjective reality. In this sense, virtuality is not a novel disruption of reality but rather an extension of psychic life into new media. What is historically new, however, is the externalization of this internal ‘virtual’ space through the digital technologies – social media, virtual reality, AI instruments – which now impact the individual subjectivity in ways that Freud and other early analysts could not have foreseen. Yet, their frameworks – particularly the tension between the pleasure principle and the reality principle (Freud, 1911/1974) – remain instructive for thinking about how technological developments, and especially the virtual reality in the metaverse, transform the traditional mechanisms of desire, identification and fantasy. Classical traditions thus retain their relevance by helping us historicize virtuality not merely as a technical innovation, but as a vehicle through which modern subjectivity is shaped.

To explore the concept of virtuality, let us start from the literal meaning of the word ‘virtual’ which is a derivation of Latin word *virtuālis* which means potentiality, something that may come to be (Massumi, 2014). Therefore, from the perspective of its origin, virtuality is not artificiality or fakeness but more so one of the dimensions of possibility – it may come into existence or it may not (one simply does not know). With this definition, virtuality acts like a spring of potentialities from which different possibilities – including technological developments – emerge, solidifying some of the virtual potentialities in the world. To take a simple example, when I am sitting behind my computer and typing these words, I am using one of the solidified potentialities (computer) which has replaced the previous mode of reality – writing this chapter with pen and paper. Moreover, if we go further back in time, we can note that writing on paper itself was a virtual potentiality emerging and replacing oral presentation of ideas. Therefore, the emergence of virtual potentialities changes our interaction with and sense of space and time.

From the example above, for instance, one no longer has to rely exclusively on hearing a teacher speak to learn the material as there are written materials. Consequently, human virtual precedes the technology and is as old as the language itself that can describe abstract ideas and images that can be in the realm of potentiality and not reality (Krebs & Frankel, 2021).

I begin by introducing key psychoanalytic concepts used in the chapter, briefly discussing their relevance to the understanding of the virtual spaces and the emergence of meta-subjectivity. What follows is the examination of the influence of the virtual spaces generally, and the metaverse specifically, through the lens of different psychoanalytic traditions. As a result, I discuss multiple potentialities for the development of the meta-subjectivity and its implications from the different psychoanalytic perspectives.

Key Psychoanalytic Conceptualizations

Psychoanalysis and Virtuality

Psychoanalysis is known for its curiosity and exploration of humans' inner worlds (de Vos, 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that there are multiple perspectives within psychoanalysis offering interpretations of the technological influences on human subjectivity (e.g., Freud, 1900/1967; Jung, 1966; Samuel, 1985; Winnicott, 1958). To explore the virtuality from a psychoanalytic perspective, first we have to focus on the concept of virtual as it is defined in psychoanalysis. Freud (1900/1967) used the term 'virtual' in his seminal book *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In chapter seven of the book, titled "The Unconscious and Consciousness-Reality", Freud (1900/1967) discusses the virtual as a property in our inner mind created by the use of intuition, imagination, observation, and thought. All these different functions operate in a symbolic space, which gives the opportunity for the individual to tolerate paradox and epoch, which, at their bases, are a temporary suspension of disbelief. In other words,

before creating a relationship with an object, an individual needs to have a preconception of the virtual existence of that object. After Freud (1900/1967), other psychoanalysts also described and commented on the virtual. Winnicott (1971), for example, described the virtual as a potential phenomenon that comes into existence during play as, when one is playing, the boundary between the self and others is not very clear. In fact, Winnicott (1971) believed that paradox and chaos are normal parts of a baby's mental world. In a similar manner, Bråten (1987) claimed that, for an infant, every object is virtual, meaning that every object creates a potential space to be filled with the 'virtual other' through the experience of object relationships.

To understand the psychoanalytic perspectives on virtuality, we can draw parallels between our activities in the digital virtual (smartphones, computers, internet space, etc.) and the inner psychic activities. For instance, searching on Google, posting an idea on Facebook and sharing an ideal vacation location on Instagram have clear similarities to thinking, fantasizing and dreaming. Therefore, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, each one of us has a virtual within us that gives birth to our ideas, many of which we can see expressed within the digital virtual space nowadays. Whether we turn towards a device or turn inwards, we are engaging with an alternate mind space that can be a continuation of our empirical reality or an escape from it (Greš et al., 2023; Van Den Eede, 2014; Wallace, 2018). This dichotomy can be seen as a continuation of the famous psychoanalytic dichotomies, such as inner versus external world, consciousness versus unconsciousness, internal objects versus real objects and so on. Throughout this chapter, I explore the possibility of bridging these dichotomies through the metaverse in which the fantasies and dreams may take an external form in the virtual space. In other words, I focus on the following question: Can the metaverse be the context within which the inner world takes an outward representation, and the outer world (including our body) is turned into an inward

representation? Of course, this phenomenon may be said to be already happening, albeit to a lesser extent, in *dynamic* web and the social media (e.g., Warren-Smith, 2020; Young, 2011). The digital technology has already fully or partially rendered every aspect of everyday lives of many people and their reality into a symbolic dimension (Zuboff, 2015). It is therefore possible that the metaverse will render our symbolic life a virtual presence. To begin exploring the symbolic life, I look at dreaming.

The Public Dreamers

In psychoanalytic theory, dreams play an important role (Ferro, 2019; Fonagy et al., 2018). We can hardly find any psychic phenomenon more free and more inclusive than dreaming (Ogden, 2009). Dreams combine the most personal and private aspects of our being with the most imaginative and non-representable dimensions. Comparing our dreaming life to the possibilities presented by the digital virtuality can shed some light on how our digital life in the metaverse can be much closer to our dreaming life rather than the life in the real world. To begin with, the fluidity and freedom in dreams can be compared to the fluidity and freedom of action in the digital world. However, the difference is that in the digital world we can be in full control of our actions and surroundings, whereas in dreams that is not the case (Scott, 1999). Therefore, the interesting question is whether there is a connection between our digital virtuality and the virtual within. Is it possible that the element of control in our digital lives gives us an outlet to control our dreams – even if only temporarily?

Social media has moved our intimate lives into a more public space (Miguel, 2016; Utz, 2015). If death, birth, weddings, and even a brunch with a close friend was previously a personal experience shared only with a limited number of people in our inner circle, social media has transformed these experiences into a public domain, giving birth to a booming industry in which

influencers are sharing their private experiences with strangers over the Internet (Yilmaz et al., 2020). Even though social media presence and online engagement generally have become fairly engrained in many people's lives, the restrictions on in-person interactions introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic have further increased in volume and normalized new online practices (Venegas-Vera et al., 2020). Although following the release of pandemic restrictions, some of the previous interactions reverted back to in-person, in many instances the move towards online communications had a more lasting impact. For instance, many more jobs became fully or partially remote (Sahut & Lissillour, 2023). Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, personal interactions have undergone changes as well. For instance, it was not uncommon to have funerals in which people would attend virtually, which made funerals more accessible to people who had limited personal contact with the deceased (MacNeil et al., 2023). In the meantime, the social profile of the deceased continued to be active, and people could like or comment on the posts (Alexis-Martin, 2020). Although not a new practice (Gibbs et al., 2020), this has also seen an increase of use during the pandemic as a way of dealing with grief in unusual circumstances (Alexis-Martin, 2020).

The publicization of the private domain inevitably changes the values and protocols associated with the personal domain and puts pressure on the private experience to dissolve in a more collective force and, throughout this dissolution of the internal into external, some essentials are lost (Ou, 2009). In this way, the collective self takes more and more space in our virtual presence and pushes back the more private one. As a result, the digital virtual gives us the opportunity to show our inner life in a representable form but at the same time by doing that we are losing the inner and private quality of it. The boundary between the private and the public becomes very fragile, which can have some serious negative impacts on our mental health since

some of our unconscious dimensions that need more stillness and solitude do not get any opportunity to thrive (Naslund & Aschbrenner, 2019; Strauß & Nentwich, 2013). In other words, the interiorized self is devoured by a digital self that dreams publicly (Giegerich, 2007). If in the old times the patient undergoing psychoanalysis had to lie on the couch, close their eyes and tell their psychotherapist about their dreams to disclose the unconscious material, these days psychotherapy clients do that by reaching out to their smartphones to read a text that they received from their spouse or the comment that they posted after a break-up. The digital virtual has permeated even the most confidential and private spaces of psychotherapy making psychodynamic approaches more so cyber-dynamic.

Narcissus: Watching the Watcher

The concept of narcissism is considered to derive from the myth of Narcissus, a young man incapable of seizing to look upon his own reflection, stunned by his own beauty (Pulver, 1970). Narcissism and the distinction between healthy and pathological narcissism has been one of the major topics in psychoanalytic literature (Kochhar-Lindgren, 1993; Teicholz, 1978). Healthy narcissism is represented in a person who acts confidently and has a strong sense of agency and positive self-image regardless of the external feedback, whereas the pathological narcissism is distinguished by a compulsive need to be flashy and bigger than life to get positive regards from others, most likely in an attempt to cover points of vulnerability from others (Kohut, 1971). However, in everyday language the term narcissism is typically used loosely to describe anyone exhibiting inclinations of grandiosity and overconfident behaviour – the inclinations that tend to be disliked in others (Holtzman et al., 2010). Although in these circumstances the term is used unprofessionally, it nonetheless can be perceived as a diagnostic label of the other, who, once labeled with a psychological disorder, appears to be inferior

(MacDonald, 2014). Narcissism and its less extreme counterpart, narcissistic tendencies, have been weaponized by people in relationships throwing these words at each other and this weapon takes a whole new dimension in the age of social media (Kristinsdottir et al., 2021). Furthermore, in practice, social media technologies give people with narcissistic behaviours a much wider range of audience and options compared to their ‘real’ social life (McCain & Campell, 2018).

Healthy narcissism is considered an essential part of human growth and development in psychoanalytic literature (Slavin & Kriegman, 1992). Freud (1991/1914) saw narcissism as the continuation of our regression to the ‘primary narcissism’ inherent in each baby. Therefore, from this perspective, everyone has been a narcissist at one point. Some scholars even believe that without narcissism it is impossible to love the other (e.g., Derrida, 1995). There is an intricate and sometimes conflicting relationship between the self-interest and the interest of the other in all our relationships (Gerbasi & Prentice, 2013; Rocha & Ghoshal, 2006). Living in the age of normalized and prevalent self-gazing via technologies, particularly through selfies (Lobo & Gowda, 2016), one can simultaneously fall in love with oneself (just like Narcissus’ self-love emanated by gazing at his own reflection in the pond) and make this self-love public by sharing the selfies on social media to add an external validation component as well.

However, aside from the typical presentation, there are other interpretations to the myth of Narcissus. What if Narcissus was not staring at the reflection of his image in the water, but at the reflection of his face being in a union with its background of trees and the sky? Moreover, what if Narcissus has completely lost his subjectivism and had an a-subjective experience with the nature around him (Hillman, 1979)? Thus, according to Hillman (1979), the main attraction for Narcissus was not his beauty, but watching his own existence in the context of his surrounding from a different perspective. To give a contemporary example, let us imagine the

first time one sees a recording of oneself in a family video. For many, this experience may elicit an uncanny feeling as a result of hearing oneself or seeing oneself from a third person perspective (Harlin, 2014). It is an interesting experience from which we may learn about ourselves and our interactions with others. This reinterpretation of the Narcissus myth is not new. Even in the time of Freud there were people with similar ideas about the myth. For example, Lou Andreas-Salomé (1962/1921), was an early follower of Freud who believed that Narcissus fell in love with watching himself being in the world and not necessarily with his own image per se.

I argue that these different readings of the myth of Narcissus can coexist in the digital world. Narcissism, as a term, can be used in the sense of someone being self-absorbed to the point of ignoring the surrounding world or as someone embracing and cherishing the world with themselves in it. In the metaverse, with the opportunity to enhance ourselves, narcissism, therefore, can take on a new dimension typically unavailable in the real world. Whatever the interpretation, there is a reason why Narcissus is unable to stop gazing at the reflection – he likes what he is seeing there. Although this level of self-appreciation does happen in the real world, there are plenty of those who would like to alter how they look or some other personal characteristics, such as personality (Edmonds et al., 2008; Vandervoort et al., 2015). In a sense, the metaverse offers one a magic brush to make oneself into their own personalized version of Narcissus – and to fall in love with this new digital self, especially if the experience of appreciating one's physical appearance or character traits has been a struggle for one previously. Thus, there will be a possibility to compensate for the lack of narcissism (or the opportunity to be narcissistic) in the real life by creating oneself virtually and falling in love with oneself from the distance and the proximity of the digital mediation of the experience. In other words, the metaverse gives one a potentiality in which one puts one's perfect self into a virtual world and

enjoys watching that perfect self matching perfectly with the world around. The virtual world will help one to ward off the (lack of) other's gaze and approval by immersing oneself endlessly into one's own self.

The literature on narcissism expressed on social media overwhelmingly suggest that there is a positive correlation between the number of hours spent on social media and grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Alloway et al., 2014; Andreassen et al., 2017; McCain & Campbell, 2018). Another area of concern is the strong relationship between narcissism and problematic social media use (Casale & Banchi, 2020). Moreover, there appears to be a very strong relationship between narcissism and the number of selfies that one posts online, especially in public profiles that have an exhibitionist nature (Singh et al., 2018). One can imagine that the research into narcissistic behaviour exhibited in the metaverse will be done and it will also look at it from the pathological perspective. However, I argue that there might be opportunities to heal the damaged self-esteem and address feelings of shame by developing healthy narcissism in the metaverse. If one learns to embrace and love oneself in the context of the digital world and in the presence of virtual others, maybe one can use this learning to find ways of appreciating themselves in the real world as well.

The Delicate Dance Between the Real and the Virtual

Freud (1911/1974) discusses a major tension in our psyche between two principles that he refers to as 'the pleasure principle' and 'the reality principle'. The pleasure principle is looking for an instant gratification: when one feels hungry and one eats, the pleasure of satisfying the hunger is fulfilled. However, reality often gets in the way of the pleasure principle. For example, one cannot eat if there is no cooked meal readily available or if one is in the middle of a work meeting. To live in harmony thus means finding ways to live within these tension and

polarities – finding a balance between satisfying one’s desires with the reality of being unable to do so immediately or, sometimes, at all. One way to deal with reality being in the way of desire is by creating another polarity, namely illusion (Struhl, 2020). In other words, when the desire is impeded by reality, one can escape through wishful thinking to make that intolerable reality more tolerable. However, if in the real world one’s desires are constantly being hindered by reality, this shield of illusion needs to become thicker and stronger, to the point that one will need to spend the mental energy on keeping up the illusions alive in one’s mind rather than tackling the obstacles of reality. This can create a sense of numbness towards everyday problems in real life (Krebs & Frankel, 2021). Pushing relentlessly against the reality without using the virtual shield can lead to the loss of creativity and ignoring reality can lead to psychic destruction (Kalsched, 1996). Therefore, in psychoanalysis, the idea of a healthy mind can be seen as the balancing act, whereby one aims not lose oneself by delving too deep into the illusions and at the same does not feel overwhelmed by the pressures of the reality, which can drive one towards destruction just as well.

Considering that illusions are necessary to deal with the pressures of reality, the virtual presents an interesting potentiality to displace the illusions created by the mind. In the virtual world, therefore, is not the desire itself that is in tension with reality, but the virtual creation. In making the reality more tolerable, what virtual does is that it takes the edge away by making obstacles almost invisible, making the reality appear to be more accessible. At the same time, the virtual makes the reality more desirable by idealizing it and putting it on a pedestal (Mitchell, 1988). From this point of view, thus, the virtual becomes the over-idealized version of the reality to make the reality more accessible and tolerable in our mind. However, no matter how much one immerses oneself in the virtual within, the reality check will keep one afloat preventing one

from drowning in the virtual. Therefore, any technological effort to create a digital virtuality will be counterbalanced by an unconscious desire to overidealize the reality. At the same time, the virtual subjectivity can become an idealized subjectivity as it can easily veer off into being completely different from the ‘real’ subjectivity in ways that one considers preferable. In metaverse, however, the potential for the virtual subjectivity to be regarded as simultaneously illusionary (it is fulfilling a desire) and real (it does exist outside of one’s mind) can hypothetically disrupt the balance between creativity and psychic destruction, pushing the boundary either way. On the one hand, it can make one’s real life more tolerable by providing a hyperreality in which one can use the over-idealization towards oneself and the surrounding world and, on the other hand, it can alienate one from the reality to a degree that stepping out of the virtual reality into the real world will pose serious threats.

The dichotomy between the real and the virtual is already embedded within the *dynamic* web, most evidently in the social media interactions. For example, this is reflected in the new terminology developed, such as ‘IRL’ – a commonly used abbreviation for ‘in real life’ (Stedman, 2020). The mere fact that one needs to clarify now whether something is a virtual presence or is happening in real life signifies the dichotomized relationship between the virtual (not really real) and the real. At the same time, one can see how the geographical obstacles are shattered thanks to digital virtuality, bringing people together from all corners of the globe (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It is almost magical. Moreover, if someone cannot befriend people in the real world for whatever reason, the digital virtuality offers another opportunity to do so. To put it in psychoanalytic terminology, *dynamic* web has already started mediating between the real and the virtual by giving the illusions of the virtual a layer of reality. It is possible that for some users, *virtual* web will be able to almost entirely replace the reality with illusions of the

virtual as these illusions continue to approach the real in the way they are experienced. Further, from a psychoanalytic perspective, when the balance and inseparability of the virtual and the real is disrupted in a patient, the analyst treats it as a pathology and tries to foster the return to the balance because to deal with reality, sometimes one needs the creativity of diving into the virtual and one needs the reality check in order not to drown in the virtual – i.e., seize responding to the real world by withdrawing into an illusory world built by one's own mind (Lerner, 2021). What will happen to this pathologization when, in the metaverse, the virtual will have a potentiality to become the real, at least for the person involved?

As previously mentioned, the virtual (especially when it comes to the metaverse) can be compared to the dreams. Dreaming something pleasant tends to be an enjoyable experience. For instance, when one wakes up in the middle of a pleasant dream, one often tries to go back to sleep immediately hoping to continue that dream (Flanagan, 2001). On the other hand, having a nightmare often leads to waking up feeling anxious, with heart racing, leading to a sense of relief that it was just a dream (Roberts et al., 2009; Spoormaker et al., 2006). However, the question is whether the fear experienced during a nightmare is real? At the very least, the increased heartbeat suggests that, for one's mind, the fear indeed is real (Perogamvros et al., 2019). In a similar manner, the seductiveness of the digital virtuality lies in the fact that it has a potential to give us a 'real' pleasure, not a 'virtual' one. Therefore, participating in a virtual world with all the possibilities is as if one is in charge of their dreams and can have all the pleasure that one desires. This can potentially lead into a trance-like state in which the digital sleepwalkers wearing their goggles can experience a sense of 'high' that they rarely experience in their real life. There is no Freudian reality check to create a balance between reality and pleasure anymore. From a Freudian perspective, the metaverse could then be described as a wish-granting machine

that regresses us to a primary process, resembling earlier stages in life in which our desires were gratified immediately.

Eros Redefined

For many contemporary users of all that *dynamic* web has to offer, gone are the days when one had to go to bars, parties, clubs, or any other places of social gatherings to meet people and, possibly, find love. Now, with the magic of one's smart phone, all one has to do is install the app and swipe right on a picture in Tinder (Hobbs et al., 2017). Moreover, with cybersex, one does not even need to see the other person in real life to have sex (Shaughnessy et al., 2011). In the virtual space, sex has become pervasive and readily available upon demand, sometimes even leading to problematic behaviours, such as Internet sex addiction (Blinka et al., 2022; Griffiths, 2001). Of course, for enterprising individuals, this is seen as the context for a booming business on Instagram and Tik-Tok with 'OnlyFans' accounts giving one an intimate window to one's object of desire (Van der Nagel, 2021). This interactive pornography has revolutionized the erotic realm, liberating libido and creating a hypersexual space in which regulations and control have boiled down to a simple online question: "Are you over 18 years old?" With one click of a button, you are – it is that easy.

The digitally freed Eros and the created mass hypersexual space reminisces of Freud's (1905/1974) '*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*' in which he explores the ideas that sexual desire does not give any importance to personal identity and that any sexual act is group sex even if it happens between only two people. Now, in the digital era, anything pornographic that one can imagine probably already exists. In fact, there is even a concept delineating exactly that – Rule 34 of the Internet (Bernstein et al., 2021). The digital virtuality has already come up with 3D immersive 'first person point of view' pornography that has made the actual contact with the

‘other’ in the sexual desire obsolete (Bersani & Phillips, 2008). Whereas Freud (1905/1974) stipulated interaction between both sides is necessity in sexual excitement, the digital virtuality has bypassed it and has made a polyamorous space in which one’s unconscious desires and perversions have found a delightful home.

Our social persona has imposed a self-governing superego on us that has left little to no room for our sexual wishes and desires (Moeller & D’Ambrosio, 2021). Some of these fantasies are buried under multiple layers of religious, political, professional, and ethical considerations. However, in the privacy of one’s home and hidden behind an anonymous virtual presence, these walls crumble down, and id starts to emerge. If Freud (1905/1974) believed that the suppression of the sexual desires is an unavoidable step for survival, the virtual has created an opportunity to unleash these desires anonymously without jeopardizing the foundation of the society and civilization. However, this freedom redefines Eros in a new way that does not correspond to its function in everyday real life. Thus, the virtual sexuality might create a gap between this redefined Eros and its non-virtual counterpart in one’s real life. All of a sudden, the embodied real-life sex may become mundane and boring (fitting under the constraints imposed by the superego), while the sexuality experienced in the virtual space knows no limits. If sex with dolls and avatars was once a limited industry, now it is a rapidly growing market with the promise of incorporating AI technology into the silicon sex dolls, making them even more appealing (Danaher & McArthur, 2017). Some even believe that in a few decades, marriage with dolls, robots and virtual avatars will be legalized, at least in some places around the world (Knafo & Bosco, 2017).

As disembodied sex with non-humans becomes more popular, the market responds to this demand by creating newer, cheaper and more exciting opportunities (Döring, 2009;

Mergenthaler & Yasseri, 2022). However, the proliferation of the possibility of finding sexual gratification online has its implications. For example, online porn addiction is becoming a growing reason for clients to seek psychotherapy and professional help to deal with it (de Alarcón & et. al, 2019). Furthermore, young people with porn addiction have unrealistic expectations about sex that later on create serious psychological problems for these individuals and their sexual partners (Meehan, 2023). The addictive nature of online porn is rooted in its diversity and ease of access. It is a big red button for a dopamine rush that is hidden in one's smart phone and ready to go in the privacy of one's home without any need for the 'other'. Now, imagine adding control and agency to online porn that can make it interactive instead of just voyeuristic. The metaverse, or at least some part of it, might turn into 'meta-perverse', giving its users the freedom to unleash their suppressed desires without worrying about the consequences and creating new possibilities for new addictions to develop and be categorized in the future iterations of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. These addictions will also most likely present as opportunities for some pharmaceutical companies to develop a pill and for some psychotherapists to open 'meta-clinics'.

The virtual sex is also reminiscent of Lacan's (1975/1999) famous saying that "there is no such a thing as sexual relationship" (p. 7) by which he means that engaging in a sexual act with someone requires a degree of virtuality or fantasy being projected on the sexual partner. Therefore, the sexual partner becomes the 'object of desire' – more like a masturbatory tool – while the fantasy becomes 'object cause of desire', something that we 'really' want. These fantasies might be related to the sexual partner in a different time or in an imagined state or they might be about someone else entirely. Therefore, having sex from a Lacanian perspective is masturbating with each others' bodies (Badiou & et. al, 2017). However, applying this concept to

virtual sex poses some interesting questions: If we believe that the desire is rooted in lack (Lacan, 1975/1999), what happens to desire when there is no lack? Does having unlimited access to fulfilling fantasies kill desire? What will happen when an augmented reality goggle (like Apple Vision Pro) will allow one to superimpose their fantasy onto their real embodied sexual partner? Will it enhance the sex or kill it? How would it impact the interpersonal space after the sexual act? One potentiality seems very likely: the metaverse will revolutionize sex again and we should be prepared for the various directions that it might take. Such preparation starts with anticipatory theorization.

Virtuality in Psychoanalytic Traditions

Virtual Space from a Winnicottian Perspective

To look at human subjectivity from a Winnicottian perspective and to apply it to virtual subjectivity, I start with Winnicott's (1958) idea of how subjectivity is created. For Winnicott (1958), from birth, the infant does not exist outside of his relationship with the mother. The infant's growth and survival are dependent on his interaction with the mother and the environment. If the infant has a 'good enough' mother and a facilitating environment, the infant will gradually differentiate himself from others. This is the beginning of human subjectivity from Winnicott's (1958) perspective. The differentiation of oneself from others creates an opportunity to imagine and perceive the other as an entity outside of oneself, which can take symbolic functioning, yet still play a crucial part in one's development. The 'holding environment' described by Winnicott (1958) physically and psychologically supports the infant during the integration process. But this integration can be disrupted in a moment of crisis or stress, which leads to disintegration or regression back to the mother. If, at one point, one could differentiate oneself from the mother as opposed to seeing the mother as an extension of oneself, is it possible

that one can see their virtual presence as yet a different ‘other’ presence that can function independently? In other words, can one differentiate oneself from one’s virtual existence as opposed to seeing it as just an extension of oneself? From this perspective, the virtual subjectivity can be seen as one’s infant going through integration and disintegration in its existence in the virtual world. The beginnings of such virtual subjectivity and how it may function are already seen in *dynamic* web. For example, one can represent one’s true self or false self (or a combination of both) on social media and the presented self can be recognized or admired or misunderstood in the online world (Monacis et al., 2021). In a scenario in which one presents one’s false self, and this false self gets acknowledgment and recognition, it is possible that this false self goes through integration and becomes an alter ego. Then, the possibility of interchanging one’s subjectivity at will may serve as a form of escape. Contemporary media already have been seen to promote escapism (e.g., Anwar et al., 2025), whereby individuals, when faced with unpleasant emotions, can easily distract themselves by engaging in various online activities (e.g., social media, gaming). Having an alter ego with a separate life, set of characteristics, social circumstances, etc., can serve as a more extensive escape mechanism, both from the real world and, if the threatening circumstances happen to occur online, from the online world.

Theorizing virtual subjectivity from a Winnicottian perspective involves two more concepts: playing and transitional object. For the infant, the synchronicity of wanting a mother’s breast and receiving it shortly after signaling this want creates the illusion that the infant is the owner/creator of the breast. As the infant grows older, he is faced with frustrations due to him wanting the breast and not getting it. This frustration is too much for the infant who wants to have access to the mother all the time. Therefore, the infant chooses an object (for example, a

doll) as a transitional object to fill the maternal gap when the mother is not around. Through playing with the transitional object, the infant gradually defines himself and the transitional space expands to the outside world as the infant sees himself as part of a whole (Winnicott, 1958). The virtual world can be seen as the virtual expansion of the transitional space in which one can assume a role and play with others either through role playing video games or interactions in the metaverse. Although we are aware that we are not ‘real’ in that virtual space, the immersive experiences can pull us into the character, which may create the same sense of empathy in us as towards someone in real life. The mirror neurons work the same whether we interact with someone in the real world or in the virtual space (Jacoboni, 2009). Consequently, the virtual space can start having a more important role than mere entertainment. For instance, by alleviating one’s anxiety of living in the real life and of the obstacles one faces in it, one can start preferring their virtual subjectivity to that of the real world. It can be seen as similar to the way the anxiety of dependence and of not having all that he wants when he wants pushes an infant into the transitional object and space. The virtual world makes one omnipotent, a space where one can have what one wants when one wants it just with a few clicks. The joy of experiencing the omnipotence of infancy as an adult is a novel experience that is unobtainable for many adults in real life.

Avatar as Modern Persona: A Jungian Perspective

The concept of false self is also related to Carl Jung’s (1966) concept of persona. Persona lies between the inner world (intrapsychic) and the outer world (intersubjective). Therefore, persona acts as the manager between the self and the other. Using Freudian concepts of id, ego and superego, persona is engaged in the reality principle, preventing id from expressing itself in a socially unacceptable way (Jung, 1966). Therefore, part of the subjectivity remains

unexpressed or unrecognized by the other. As a result, persona acts like a mask that mediates between the self and the outer world, or, in different words, between consciousness and society, with the goal of impressing the other while preserving the self. Jung (1966) did not recognize persona as pathological per se. In his thought, pathology happens when the individual starts considering persona as a full representation of the self. The ‘masking’ function of persona is noteworthy here (Jung, 1966). Although the mask acts as a wall between the real self and the reality, protecting them from each other, as a mask it also should suit the face that is being covered by it. In other words, there is a relationship between the self and the persona that it uses as a mask. From this perspective, the term false self might not be accurate and, instead, one can refer to a ‘partial self’ as it is the self that chose the particular emanation of persona that would fit it (Balick, 2018). In other words, there is a relationship between the self and the persona chosen as not every persona fits every self.

In the virtual world, the persona can shape subjectivity in a number of ways, with variations in between two extremes. On the one hand, in the virtual world, one can let go of the persona and allow the parts hidden in the shadow to show. It is easier in the contemporary online world to find a place and community for any number of previously socially or culturally unacceptable ways of being (e.g., joining a conspiracy theory group that is being ridiculed by family and friends in the real world). On the other hand, one has an even greater power to edit parts of the persona/avatar in the virtual world than one ever could in the real life. For example, one can change one’s appearance, mediate the use of language or filter out undesirable character traits. If the persona’s function is getting recognition for the psyche, in the digital age, it is one’s virtual presence that fulfills the same function. It represents the ‘self’ in a desired way. If the loop of getting recognition and engaging in a permanent cycle of change to fit the social

desirability norms has limits in one's social persona, those limits are fading away in the virtual world. The user can keep editing the avatar to make it more desirable and the mask can, therefore, become less and less similar to the user's real self. Thus, the 'partial self' seen in the persona in the real life can, in fact, turn into a 'false self' in the virtual world. As the gap between the 'real self' and the 'false self' widens, the real self may lose the competition of desirability. In *dynamic* web, for instance, this can be seen through the phenomenon of 'Snapchat dysmorphia' in which the users are asking the plastic surgeons to make them look like their edited photos used as profile photos in Snapchat or other platforms (Belluz, 2018). Thus, the false self becomes the one the user strives to become in real life. As the gap between the real self and the persona/avatar gets wider, one may find oneself seeing living one's real life as desirable. With the virtual mask enabling continuous easy changes in the chase of perfection, it is possible that some users will spend more and more time living in the virtual realm as it becomes more enticing, making tolerating the real self ever more difficult. This is precisely what Jung (1966) described as a pathological persona.

Samuel's Concept of Selfhood and Ogden's Analytic Third

The study of online subjectivity from a psychoanalytic perspective is, in a sense, a study of selfhood as Samuel (1985) defines it. For him, selfhood is the potential for integration of total personality. Further, Samuel (1985) sees identities as fundamentally relational – mediated by one's engagement with others. Considering that one of the main features of new technologies is their power to connect people, Samuel's (1985) conceptualization of selfhood needs to be considered, especially as it relates to the development of the online subjectivity. The social media emphasis on the ability to maintain contact with others is clearly demonstrated by Facebook's mission statement, which is to "give people the power to build community and bring

the world closer together” (Smithson, 2023). In this interconnected world, identities are being mediated online more and more. Now, the question is whether this online presence creates a new set of identities or rather it raises our awareness of the multiplicity of our selfhood that is more contingent and contextual than we may have thought it may be.

Building on the Jungian concept of alchemy, which is seen as a symbolic representation of different parts of the individual psyche that amalgamate (Jung, 1944/2014), Samuel (2013) explains how selfhood is fundamentally a relational concept in which two or more substances combine and create a third thing that is completely new – hence the analogy of alchemy (as cited in Balick, 2018, p. 16). Similarly, Ogden (1999) believes that in a therapeutic setting, as a result of the relationship between the analyst and the analysand, a third entity is born, to which he refers as the ‘analytic third’. The analytic third has a life of its own in the space between the therapist and the client (Ogden, 1999). It is through careful exploration of the transference (client unconsciously shifting their past feelings and emotions onto the therapist) and countertransference (therapist unconsciously shifting their past feelings and emotions onto the client) projected onto the analytic third that the therapeutic work helps the client to understand the distinction and the relationship between the persona and the true self and reach a sense of selfhood (Ogden, 2004).

I argue that, in the virtual space, one of the potentialities is that a third entity is created that is very similar to Ogden’s (1999) analytic third. Like Ogden’s (1999) analytic third, this third entity – virtual subjectivity – has a life of its own. However, the difference is that there is no therapist to control or mediate the relationship between the client and the third identity in the safe space of a therapy room. In the metaverse, technology replaces the therapist and gives the

tools to the user to create the third entity which might develop according to one of the following three scenarios:

1. The third entity acts as the extension of one's persona interacting with the virtual world. This scenario describes millions of users who are acting as 'themselves' with their real name and description using the virtual world to extend their communication with others.
2. The third entity becomes the id acting without the limitations of the reality principle. This scenario describes the users that use aliases to make use of the anonymity offered by the virtual space to explore their shadow without being worried of their social acceptability.
3. The third entity takes a life of its own with a new virtual persona. (Samuel, 2013, as cited in Balick, 2018, p. 16)

It is in the third scenario that meta-subjectivity emerges, whereby the user engages in the virtual world to create an avatar and a new persona accompanying it that has nothing to do with the user's social persona in the real world. This virtual persona interacts with other virtual personas creating a new set of third entities, with the combination of these virtual third entities leading to the creation of the virtual selfhood. The virtual selfhood then expands itself in the virtual world independently, making the need of mediation by the analyst obsolete and irrelevant. However, given that the meta-subjectivity that emerges in this way can be considered a full alternative to the subjectivity in the real world, it may be prone to all experiences available to the real-world subjectivity. While the novelty and potential for exploration can be fascinating, once the user is habituated to the meta-subjectivity, some issues may emerge as well. For example, what happens if the meta-subjectivity experiences a crisis? One of the possibilities in such a

situation is that the user will seek therapy to address the issue with the meta-subjectivity. Thus, although the metaverse can present an opportunity for the creation of a meta-subjectivity that is different from the user's subjectivity in the real world, it is unlikely to resolve all problems – it will resolve some while leading to the creation of other, previously unknown issues.

Object Relations and Virtual Subjectivity: A Kleinian Perspective

Object relations theory in psychoanalysis is concerned with how we treat others as objects of our love, attachment and emotional focus (Kernberg, 1995). Since in the metaverse emotional relationships will be formed with virtual objects in the virtual world, a Kleinian perspective that takes virtual *objects* as *subjects* can help understand the emotional relationships formed (Klein, 1932/1969). The virtual objects in the metaverse are reactive and interactive and, therefore, one can project one's feelings onto them as if they are real people. However, one might argue that not every projection reveals a part of our real identity. In a world in which we can be anything and everything, the virtual space acts as a Rorschach metaphor in which we cut through gender, class, race, political ideology, etc. and carve out a new identity.

An emotional relationship with an inanimate object is not a new phenomenon, however. One can argue that people have had emotional relationships with *things* for as long as we have owned *things* (Downes et al., 2017). However, if the focus is specifically on interactive relationships with a virtual object, perhaps it can be traced back to tamagotchi that hit the market in 1996 (Lawton, 2017). Tamagotchis were virtual pets that lived on a small LCD screen placed in an egg-like shell. One was supposed to take care of and nourish them from the hatching of the egg so that they grow up. These Japanese toys acted as relational artifacts that expected their users, mostly kids, to treat them as subjects (Lawton, 2017). The pets relayed their needs through the tiny screen (through beeps and flashing “!” signs to signal that attention is needed), whereby

the caregivers had to feed them, clean them and nurse them so that they do not die, which they did if left unattended for an extended period of time (Ruckenstein, 2008). These toys were the pioneers of human/machine psychology as they were able to elicit real emotions and attachments from their users. They became the object of love and attention so deep that some schools had to ban them as children were being too distracted by the needs of their pets (Miller et al., 2002).

The success of tamagotchi prompted the development of a series of toys, some of which overtake the market every once in a while to this day (Berriman & Mascheroni, 2019). Examples of these toys are abundant, from a Furby, which is not virtual but a physical owl-like creature that demands its owner's attention and nurturing just like a tamagotchi, to Sony's Aibo, a dog robot, and Hasbro's 'My Real Baby', which is a robot baby that cries and has to be fed, hugged, tucked into bed, etc. (Francis & Mishra, 2009). Some of such robots, like Paro, have been advertised as 'therapeutic robots' because of their positive response to language and touch (Shibata & Coughlin, 2014). All these unfamiliar objects of our desires and emotions are designed to evoke familiar feelings. At the same time, it reminds us of Freud's (1919/2003) description of the eeriness of dolls as 'uncanny' and, indeed, it is still the best way to describe the psychological relationship between the humans and the machines: it is uncanny. The virtual world injects the familiar feelings into unfamiliar objects and invites one to project the familiar feelings onto them – love them, get attached to them and live with them. With the emergence of the metaverse, one can go even a step further and *be* them. In the virtual world, we can make ourselves into new objects/subjects interacting with other objects/subjects. From Kleinian perspective, the first object is an internalized image of the mother which may or may not be a true representation of the real mother (Klein, 1932/1969). Therefore, it can be argued that even in the pre-Internet era, the first object was, at least in some sense, virtual. Objects are

conceptualized in a baby's mind based on their functions (part objects) and hence we learn to distinguish between the good breast and the bad breast and finally, through tolerating this ambiguity, we combine them as the mother figure (Klein, 1932/1969). Later, we learn to use transitional objects to comfort ourselves in time of distress, which helps us gain independence and alleviate anxiety (Litt, 1986).

Now, let us examine the metaverse through this lens. First, one creates a virtual identity in a virtual world. The virtual subjectivity is born through the process of developing the virtual identity. From the very first act of choosing a name for one's virtual presence; it is possible to start experiencing an alternative way of being – as one no longer has to be oneself. Then, one creates an avatar, which acts as a virtual transitional object, giving one independence in the virtual presence and an opportunity to redefine oneself. Throughout the process of avatar creation, one is interacting with the tools and options that act as *part objects* based on their functions. Finally, one starts making relationships with the other objects in the metaverse and projecting one's emotional needs onto them. These objects might be other avatars or simply other *things* in the virtual space that one interacts with. Through these interactions, one's avatar can develop different attachment styles and, if one's environment creates a 'good enough' space, one can hope to have a healthy existence in that space. Yet, unlike the baby who does not have a say in creating the 'good enough' environment (Whitehurst, 2018), one will be in full control of the virtual environment around one's meta-subjectivity, which can offer therapeutic tools for those with insecure and anxious attachment styles to experience a secure attachment style in the virtual space. Whether and how that secure attachment style can be exported onto the real world self is a practical question to be explored.

Virtual Space as a Pseudo-Container: A Bionian Perspective

Melanie Klein (1932/1969) in her object relations theory mainly focused on the intrapsychic experience of projective identification through which the baby projects part of his internal object on an external object (mainly the mother). This is the beginning of the development of an internal world composed of psychic objects and relationships. We are not conscious of their development, but we can see them when they are projected onto the real world. Wilfred Bion (1897-1979), a British psychoanalyst, added an interpersonal aspect to Klein's theory that takes into account the mother's response to the baby's projection and the interpersonal aspect of their relationship (Ogden, 2011). Therefore, object relations from a Bionian perspective is a bi-personal model rather than Klein's uni-personal model. Bion (1962) uses the term 'container' to describe the mother's role as opposed to the baby's projective role, which he calls the 'contained'. He uses this model to explain how thinking develops in a baby as a result of the baby's interaction with the environment (Bion, 1962).

Bion (1962) believed that thinking is a process that is developed as a result of the pressure forced on the psyche by the thoughts. This was the opposite of what psychologists tended to believe at that point (O'Shaughnessy, 1981; Sandler, 2018). Bion (1962) argued that there are pre-conceptions that include our desires or expectations that may or may not be realized. When we satisfy these desires or expectations, we feel pleasure. But what happens when these desires are not satisfied? Bion (1962) held that the unrealized desires are the source of frustration that is caused by the presence of an absence. When faced with this frustration, there are two possibilities: either the person has enough tolerance to tolerate the frustration that leads to development of thinking ability, or the frustration is beyond the person's tolerance threshold, in which case it is projected outside, which is an evasive maneuver rather than a resolution to or

a modification of the frustration source that is considered to be a ‘bad object’ now (Bion, 1962). Therefore, when facing frustration, depending on one’s tolerance levels, one either clings onto the existing thinking capacity or one engages in projective identification. Therefore, in Bion’s (1962) model, the tolerance threshold becomes a crucial element in developing the thinking apparatus.

To further conceptualize his ‘thinking theory’, Bion (1962) introduced another concept – the ‘containment process’. As mentioned above, projective identification is a bi-personal phenomenon from Bion’s (1962) perspective that includes two sides: the container and the contained. When the frustration level is beyond the tolerance threshold, the unbearable contents (‘beta-elements’) cannot be contained anymore and must be projected onto/evacuated into a container (Bion, 1962). The container, originally the mother and later the Other, takes the beta-elements from the contained, the baby, and processes and digests these raw beta-elements turning them into ‘alpha-elements’, which are more digestible to the original projector (Bion, 1962). In other words, a good enough mother will take on the baby’s frustrations, transform them into more tolerable and digestible feelings and return them to the baby. For adults in the modern world, this process usually happens in the therapy room (Stürmer, 2019; Taylor, 1984). However, if the mother is unable to do the containment, the baby will re-introject the indigestible beta-elements, which through time will turn into an anxiety to which Bion (1962) refers to as the ‘nameless dread’.

Applying the Bionian perspective to the social media and the virtual space, the virtual space can be conceptualized as a ‘pseudo-container’ onto which one projects one’s day-to-day frustrations or boredom, trying to escape from or make a meaning of what one cannot understand or tolerate in one’s daily life. This is a bilateral relationship between us and the virtual space: we

both shape it and are shaped by it. Of course, people use the Internet for a variety of reasons, meaning that not all uses of it will be necessarily as of a pseudo-container. However, when needed, it can serve to contain one's raw sensations, desires and frustrations. The idea of containment is not a pathological concept. In fact, Bion (1962) sees it as a necessary developmental process that can eventually lead to maturation of the thought process. However, virtual space as container will not necessarily fulfill the same function. For example, the currently existing artificial intelligence and the algorithms imbedded in the social media are used to detect one's negative emotions (beta-elements) and to provide one with more material that is likely to also elicit the beta-elements so that one keeps using the media platform one is on (e.g., Abbas et al., 2021; Horner et al., 2023; Keib et al., 2018). Instead of digesting those raw emotions and giving one a more digestible content, social media algorithms only focus on increased engagement, thus piling up the beta-elements and obstructing one's thinking abilities altogether by creating an emotional overload that leads to 'doomscrolling' in which one scrolls down the feeds endlessly to consume an endless stream of negative news and anxiety-provoking material creating the nameless dread that only gets worse by engaging with the social media more (Roseberg et al., 2020).

Still, for some people, the social media can serve as an escape from their daily lives, which makes it appear as if the social media can help one avoid some the unpleasant feelings emerging in the day-to-day life. However, one can also develop tolerance to the images and videos one consumes online, leading to the need for ever more engagement to be entertained and distracted from one's life (Griffiths & Kuss 2017). Another consequence of getting habituated to the social media exposure is the need to spend more and more time on the platforms, which may lead to negative psychological consequences (Brunborg & Andreas, 2019). In some cases, this

can even lead to dependency on or addiction to the social media, supporting an unbalanced view of life in which one escapes from the ‘bad’ reality to the ‘good’ virtual (Hou et al., 2019). This represents a pseudo-containment since the beta-elements are not transformed to alpha-elements that promote one’s growth and maturity. The virtual space robs one of the opportunities to experience a healthy frustration and instead gives one a numb identity, one whereby one does not have to think. One has everything one needs to feel better, all the time. There is no room for frustration. And, from a Bionian perspective, no frustration means no maturity and no growth in one’s thought processes (Bion, 1962). The social media is a pseudo-container that hijacks thought development rather than developing it. Over time, one learns that the virtual world is the answer for every ‘bad object’ one encounters in real life. However, this leads to a confusion in one’s sense of self:

The dominance of [projective] identification confuses the distinction between the self and the external object. This contributes to the absence of any perception of two-ness, since such an awareness depends on the recognition of a distinction between subject and object. (Bion, 1962, p. 307)

Within this confusion, one’s sense of self is intertwined with the external objects. As problematic as the social media use is from this perspective, the metaverse can be a curious antidote to this issue. Since in the metaverse one will be able to live, work and communicate as one does in the real world, meaning that one can spend much more time there, it will inevitably create frustrations in the virtual world that can be projected onto other avatars or artificial intelligence, which are familiar or programmed to ‘help’ one to digest the expressed frustration. If the mechanism of virtual containment will not be present in the metaverse, it is very much possible that we do the opposite of what we do now, meaning that we will project the virtual frustrations

into the real world, trying to distance ourselves from the ‘virtual bad’. Since the metaverse is a world in which we will have more control over the environment variables, it is possible to theorize a function that keeps the frustrations at tolerable levels that lead to thought development or accommodates the users with containers that help them throughout their virtual journey, like a pocket-sized, well-balanced, good enough virtual mother.

McLuhan and the Metaverse

Among many things, McLuhan (1964/2001) in his seminal book, *Understanding Media*, discusses the notion of extending the self. This work can serve as a bridge to psychoanalytic theorizing about subjectivities in the virtual spaces. For McLuhan (1964/2001), each new medium extends human capabilities. This notion of extension resonates with psychoanalytic accounts of the ego’s boundaries and its constant negotiation between inside and outside, self and other (Freud, 1914/1991). This notion of extension, of course, is something that one experiences on a daily basis when interacting with the intersubjectivity of the other. However, McLuhan (1964/2001) saw the potential of technology to make a further, much more encompassing change to the extension of the self:

Today... we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (pp. 3-4)

McLuhan (1964/2001) makes this extrapolation of the potential technological developments and our interactions with them at the time when the only media available were

cinema, television and radio, all of which projected upon a passive audience with no interactive features. This eerie statement, however, is also an indication of techno-optimism – the expectation of a revolution promised by a new radical advancement in technology and expected to enhance the human life (Königs, 2022). As enticing as it sounds, techno-optimism is but one side of the coin, one potentiality that may become a reality or it may not. For if media extend the body, they also displace and destabilize psychic investments, opening new terrains for identification, projection and fantasy. In virtual environments, the subject increasingly inhabits a disembodied and dispersed state, echoing what in psychoanalysis is understood as the fragmented and decentered nature of the self (Turkle, 1995). The ego is not a unified whole, but a precarious construction shaped by unconscious drives, relational dynamics and fantasy formations – conditions intensified in the virtual space. McLuhan's (1964/2001) media studies can thus be read psychoanalytically: each new technological extension reconfigures the psychic composition, offering new vehicles for desire, new avatars for identification, and new screens (literally and metaphorically) for projection. McLuhan (1964/2001) and psychoanalysis together illuminate the increasingly virtual body of the digital subject – extended, fractured and exposed in novel yet historically grounded ways. Therefore, there is a chance that *virtual* web, and the wonders promised by it, is not as revolutionary as it is being advertised (Wan et al., 2024). It is yet another form of extending the self and defining our subjectivity in the space in-between us and the virtual world.

Nonetheless, historically speaking, there have been sudden advancements in technology that changed our civilization in a fast and revolutionary way. Gutenberg's printing press is probably one of these inventions (Childress, 2007). Within 50 years following its invention, the number of books produced in Europe exceeded the number produced in the preceding thousand

years (Carr, 2010), which facilitated a number of changes, including undermining the Catholic Church and rise of modern science among other things (Eisenstein, 1980; Jara-Figueroa et al., 2019; Scialabba, 2013). Some believe that the impact that *dynamic* web had on our civilization is comparable to that of Gutenberg's printing press (e.g., Balick, 2018). With *dynamic* web becoming part of our daily life since the early 2000's, the amount of information produced every 2 days exceeded 5 exabytes, which equals the amount of information produced between the dawn of civilization through to the year 2003 (Balick, 2018). In fact, *dynamic* web was the explosion of data caused by its interactive nature. But the rapid explosion of data (regardless of its value) is not everything that *dynamic* web brought to us. Through the use of social networks, our connections to other people also changed both quantitatively and qualitatively. We found imagined audiences on social networks, a concept reminiscent of Freud's (1914/1991) internal objects, whereby we internalize the witnessing of ourselves through the lens of others (boyd, 2007; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). However, there is some nuance when it comes to the understanding of internal object as, in different traditions of psychoanalysis, the internal object has different meanings. Whereas for Freud (1914/1991), it is a mechanism in the interaction between superego and ego, for object relations theorists, it is the introjection of objects from our original relationships which builds our subjectivity (Turkle, 2011). After we introject these objects, we then project them onto others as we build our imagined audiences. The virtual space, for the user is thus created as a 'hyper-other-directedness' in which our thoughts and feelings are validated instantly (Turkle, 2011). It is not the length or quality of the validation that matters, it is the ubiquitous nature of the social media and the speed with which we can get validations that makes it qualitatively different from all other forms of validation that we can receive.

Whereas the extension of the self and other-directedness in *dynamic web* are mediated through social networks, metaverse and blockchain technology of *virtual web* will create an unmediated connection between the users, which is qualitatively different than the social media interactions. On social media, because the ‘other’ is far away from us, the experience is that of an ‘imagined’ other, although it is still considered intersubjective. This imagined other naturally requires more projections based on internal object relations, whereas in *virtual web*, the interaction is happening face-to-face, or better to say avatar-to-avatar, which mimics much more closely the nature of our private interactions in the real world rather than the networked interactions we have on social media. Therefore, the metaverse will create a context in which it will be possible to produce a secondary set of internal objects that have not originated from our early relationships, but rather from our id and fantasies. In the next step, we extend not ourselves but these alternative internal objects into the metaverse, projected as an avatar. Then, through the real-time interactions in the metaverse with others, we will seek recognition and other-directedness for our avatar, which is another pathway through which the meta-subjectivity can emerge.

Turkle and Identity in the Age of the Internet

Sherry Turkle is one of the pioneers of scholarly works on the subject of identity in the virtual spaces. Her seminal book, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (Turkle, 1995), seen as an important contribution to our understanding of online identities at the time publication, now can be considered a classic in the field (Bolter, 1997). In this book, Turkle (1995) first addresses the difference between the ‘real’ and the ‘not real’ and then discusses how the blurred boundary between these two in the age of the Internet impacts our sense of self and identity. She believes that the old inflexible computers were modernist in nature, whereas the

Internet, with its decentering and complex nature, is more of a postmodern phenomenon. Turkle (1995) saw the Internet as a concrete realization of postmodernism that provided one with an opportunity to arrange and rearrange oneself. Turkle (1995) studied extensively Multi-User Domains (MUDs) that can be considered early versions of the virtual world experience. Users could create fantasy worlds while working with each other within the MUDs, which for Turkle (1995) was the psychological representation of the fragmented self and decentered subject. However, her conclusion about these early rudimentary prototypes of the metaverse was that although we create a new identity in these worlds, it is not quite the same as the real world identity, mostly due to the short-lived nature of the virtual experience and the dominance of the real world experiences in the users' lives. For Turkle (1995), the virtual subjectivity was a temporary subjectivity that did not expand into a full-scale identity, yet nonetheless it enriched the user's real life identity.

Further, Turkle (1995) makes a distinction between the role of computers in the pre-Internet and the post-Internet era. The pre-Internet era is characterized by calculations done by computers, whereas the post-Internet era adds another layer to the computers – the 'simulation'. Turkle (1995) believes that the children growing up in the age of computers and video games take everything at 'the interface value', hinting at their identification with the virtual reality rather than with the non-virtual (real world) counterpart. As a result, she argues that we are becoming more and more psychologically intertwined with computers and, with the emergence of the Internet, we continuously cycle through several identities and self-understanding developed as a result of the online interactions. These identities may even sometimes be contradictory. The addition of the psychological level to the mechanical level of online presence is the key to the possibility of considering the virtual world as real (Baym, 1997). In fact, Turkle

(1995) refers to MUDs as a combination of story writing and computer programming. The same way we identify as characters of the stories we read or write, we may identify with the characters we created within the MUDs. This identification, while not the same as the real world identity, may be experienced as real.

Importantly, Turkle (1995) discusses these ideas in the 1990's, when virtual reality was just taking its baby steps. Since *static* web was mostly focused on written words, it makes sense that she compares MUDs with story writing. With contemporary technology and with the emergence of *virtual* web and the metaverse, the comparison of our identities in the modern versions of the MUDs has moved away from characters in the books and is more like characters in the movies or video games. And since immersion (a sense of deep involvement) in movies and video games is deeper and more lasting than in books, it can be hypothesized that our suture (connection to the medium in a way that makes one forget about the mediated nature of the experience, making it feel as a real experience does) experience in the metaverse will be more immersive than what Turkle witnessed in the 1990's (Miller, 2019). Another limitation that Turkle (1995) suggested was the short-lived experience of MUD users which made their newly formed identities transient. It is understandable that the early virtual worlds did not have a lot to offer, and the users got bored with it after the initial excitement and sense of novelty diminished. However, with the metaverse, it is a completely different story since the users will be able to work, make money, play, relax, and socialize in the virtual space – fulfilling many functions of the real world that were previously unavailable in the virtual spaces. So, it is very likely that some users will spend hours and hours as their alternative identities, something that was uncommon in the 1990's but has been rising ever since (Vilhelmson et al., 2018). All in all, Turkle (1995) opened a new horizon to the subject of virtual identities, introducing the

framework through which the experiences of virtual identities can be explored and, with some modifications, even extended to the metaverse.

Virtual Identity Meets Artificial Intelligence

It is very difficult to browse online these days without seeing any trace of Artificial Intelligence (AI), with the AI seeming to extend into ever more domains (Kurian et al., 2023; Meng, 2025). The explosive success of ChatGPT was enticing enough to lead to the proliferation of AI tools being integrated into a variety of new and existing products, such as support in search engines as well as tools designed for research, education and art, among others (Alordiah, 2023; Makridakis et al., 2023; Marquis et al., 2024). AI has been very promising in some areas and, as a result, stirred many discussions around the issue of using this technology, especially concerning how it can be used responsibly (Dastani & Yazdanpanah, 2023; Dorr et al., 2023). Some of the discussions centre around the potential of AI to replace humans in various spheres of work, the implications of such replacement and whether it would be for the better or the worse (e.g., As'ad & Al Omari, 2025). Some consider whether AI now or in the future may pose a threat to humans and our systems (e.g., Rosengrün, 2022). Some discuss whether and which policies are needed to regulate the development and application of AI technologies (e.g., Mayo, 2023).

When we consider existing technologies, they often have a very specific function that is analogous to some non-technological counterpart: airplanes 'fly' (like a bird), phones connect people (like letters), fridges keep the food cold (like ice), cars help people to move around (like horses); but what does AI do? Think? Deduce? Compute? Analyze? Predict? Come up with creative ideas? What is the analogous non-technology in the real world that does all of these things? Would that be us, humans? Perhaps, AI can be said to 'think and act' (like humans). Of

course, one can argue that all AI does is work with the pre-existing data that has been fed to it in training or that it is finding online, which is exactly what it is designed to do. But is that not what humans do as well? Marvin Minsky (1927-2016), often credited as the father of AI (Patil-Takbhate et al., 2024), believed that the idea behind why people do not believe in a thinking machine is that computer programs are made of bits and can only operate in the limits within which they have been defined (Minsky, 1982). He compared AI to a human mind that resides in the brain made of neurons and yet does not limit its capacity (Minsky, 1980). Maybe that is why we call consciousness the hard question of philosophy because we still do not understand how brain cells become the thinking mind (Dennett, 2018). Minsky believed that AI is like a society composed of multiple interacting programs embedded in a complex computer system (Gams, 2016). AI does not have to know everything, all it needs to know is how it can learn. Therefore, instead of comparing computers to the human mind to understand how computers work, maybe it is better to compare the human mind to computers since, it appears, we have more knowledge about the functioning of the latter. Comparing the human mind to AI leads to depicting the human mind as a learning machine (Sergievskii, 2020). However, it creates a problem – the problem of ‘I’. In a complex system of interacting pieces and program, there is no sense of ‘I’ but a fragmented and decentralized self that thinks that he thinks. It is a big blow to one’s ego that defines oneself as a ‘thinking animal’ not an animal that has different parts of brain perform their little functions and learn how to learn. Therefore, comparing the human mind to AI becomes an anti-ego theory that may evoke many resistances. Turkle (1984/2005) reflects upon these resistances from the perspective of anti-ego theories being too difficult for people to integrate:

... theories that deny and “decenter” the “I” challenge most people’s day-to-day experience of having one. The assumption that there is an “I” is solidly built into ordinary language, so much so that it is almost impossible to express “anti-ego” theory in language. From the moment that we begin to write or speak, we are trapped in formulations such as “I want,” “I do,” “I think.” Even as we articulate a “decentered” theory there is a pull back away from it, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. (p. 265)

Further, Turkle (1984/2005) traces back the idea of decentralized self to Freud’s (1900/1967) conceptualization of the unconscious that dethroned ego and questioned the idea of the ‘self’. However, the psychoanalysts after Freud tried to centralize ego and put it as the master of the mind again (e.g., Kohut, 1971). What ego psychology did to psychoanalysis might as well be describe as forgetting of psychoanalysis because it questioned the most revolutionary concept of psychoanalysis by creating a definition of the unconscious that is acceptable to the conscious mind (Wallerstein, 2002). For instance, Jacoby (2018) believes that this regression happened because psychoanalysis was under a lot of tension from popular culture to question itself and had to sacrifice and compromise to appease both popular culture and the people’s ego. Similarly, we can extrapolate the same argument to AI to explain why we do not like being compared to AI – it threatens our centralized notion of the self.

As AI advances further, the distinction between a human and an AI might become ever more challenging to note, especially when it comes to the metaverse. For example, imagine being in a metaverse with high resolution graphics and with realistically looking avatars. When communicating with a fellow avatar, how will one know whether they are a human or an AI? And what happens if the fellow avatar does not believe that we are human and calls us an AI? What happens to us when we are taken as AI? Will we think differently of ourselves? Will our

centralized subjectivity take it as an insult, collapse under this accusation? Or maybe some will learn to embrace a decentralized and fragmented subjectivity. The embrace of new possibilities for one's subjectivity in the metaverse is another pathway through which meta-subjectivity may emerge – recognizing that successful functioning in the metaverse will require a different set of characteristics than those needed in the real world, one might adapt to the point of developing a subjectivity that is not quite suited to the real world, but integrates well into the metaverse. This decentralized self might create tension, as the idea of the unconscious did when Freud (1900/1967) put it forward. But then again, it might be appealing to many. After all, the unconscious mind is filled with all sorts of taboos that we are secretly drawn to (Bohm, 2018). In the metaverse, one can engage with sexuality and aggression behind the safe mask of the online persona and attribute these desires to being part of one's meta-subjectivity, but not part of the real world self. Thus, one can touch the dreams, embrace them, feed them, and then ban them again to the unconscious. Meta-subjectivity can therefore be seen as just a fragmented part of one's virtual subjectivity, which itself is a small portion of one's real world self.

Red Pill or Blue Pill? Žižek, Jouissance and the Curious Case of The Matrix

The idea of a metaverse in which we are disconnected from the real world and plugged into a virtual reality is not new. *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) is one of the famous examples of this idea in the cinematic form (During, 2006; Erk, 2016). A close reading of *The Matrix* and its sequels might give us some ideas why the metaverse might end up being very appealing. For instance, Žižek (2023a) tries to decode *The Matrix Resurrections* (Wachowski, 2021), the most recent film in the franchise, using the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* (Lacan, 1968/2007). The movie is set within the world where humans are stored in capsules operated by a big machine called the Matrix. The humans are plugged into the Matrix,

which gives them the fantasy of a normal life – a purely virtual existence experienced as if it were their real life. But why does the Matrix need humans? Apparently, it uses them as batteries. However, Žižek (2023a) believes that the Matrix does not need human mind as a battery cell that provides energy. In fact, it could easily manufacture better alternatives to use as its energy sources. What the Matrix is feeding on then is human *jouissance*.

The French word *jouissance*, which in the literal English translation means pleasure, in Lacanian terminology is very different from its literal meaning. For Lacan (1968/2007), pleasure is the reduction of tension in our psyche. If one is hungry, one eats a burger and feels pleasure from satisfying the hunger. But *jouissance* is a complex form of pleasure that goes beyond satisfaction and is intertwined with pain (Moncayo, 2018). For example, if, after satisfying the hunger, one continues eating ten more burgers to a point that one feels sick, that is *jouissance*. Similarly, having sex with someone is pleasure. However, having sex or masturbating many times in a single day to the point of pain is *jouissance*. Therefore, *jouissance* is taking the pleasurable act and repeatedly engaging in it until it is no longer experienced as pleasurable.

In *The Matrix Resurrections*, there is a character called the ‘Analyst’ (playing with the word psychoanalyst?) who is in charge of finding a way to produce more energy from humans. He realizes that he can do that by manipulating humans’ fears and desires. The more humans enjoy, the more surplus-enjoyment will be produced for the Matrix. However, the virtual world created by the Matrix is not based on the pleasure principle. It goes beyond the pleasure principle, as described by Agent Smith (a virtual embodiment of the Matrix) in *The Matrix*:

Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops [of the humans serving as batteries] were lost. Some believed

we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that, as a species, human beings define their reality through suffering and misery. The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from. Which is why the Matrix was redesigned to this: the peak of your civilization. (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)

For Žižek (2023a), *The Matrix Resurrections* stands for capital and the symbolic order. Pleasure is something that humans lost upon entering the symbolic order and *jouissance* is their repetitive and traumatic attempt to regain this pleasure. For the Matrix, the real surplus is the repetition of the trauma that perpetually subverts pleasure and happiness and from which the humans cannot escape. When the desire meets its limit in confrontation with the real, *jouissance* is experienced. But what happens if this limit is transgressed? This is where the Matrix meets the metaverse. One's opinion about the idea behind *The Matrix* franchise might be a good indication of one's opinion about the upcoming metaverse. One can hold a pessimistic view of the movies, seeing them as depicting a hopeless situation of the human devoured and controlled by capitalistic world in which freedom is impossible. Alternatively, one can see as a progressive alliance between the machine and the human in which they both benefit from each other. Žižek (2008) in his book *The plague of fantasies* reflects on the future in a virtual world:

...the obverse of this suspension of the distance which separates me from a faraway foreigner is that, due to the gradual disappearance of contact with 'real' bodily others, a neighbor will no longer be a neighbor, since he or she will be progressively replaced by a screen spectre; general availability will induce unbearable claustrophobia; excess of choice will be experienced as the impossibility to choose; universal direct participatory community will exclude all the more forcefully those who are prevented from

participating in it. The vision of cyberspace opening up a future of unending possibilities of limitless change, of new multiple sex organs, and so on, conceals its exact opposite: an unheard-of imposition of radical closure. (pp. 198–199)

Thus, the metaverse will offer us the famous choice between the blue pill and the red pill, with a caveat of a possibility of a real choice. For Žižek (2023a), this choice in *The Matrix* is a false one because the blue pill is a placebo. If we choose the blue pill, nothing happens because we are already in the fantasy world – we simply allow things to keep going the way they do and forget about the Matrix that is behind it. Further, Žižek (2023a) takes a pessimistic view on the red pill, arguing that if one chooses that option, the Matrix simulates the experience of escaping the imprisonment from the capsule floating in a liquid, while in reality nothing changes either – one simply enters into a different version of a simulated world.

I argue, however, that the metaverse will have a potentiality to offer this choice of blue versus red pill in a more meaningful way (assuming that we are not really living in a Matrix, that is). For this choice to be meaningful, the setting of the metaverse must be right. If there is one lesson to be drawn from *The Matrix* franchise, it is that the metaverse should not aim to provide a ‘perfect’ world in which only pleasure-without-pain is found with no room for *jouissance*. Such an experience will likely lose its appeal and become yet another cyberspace among many others within a few years of its creation. After all, we live and interact in the real world where our interactions are mediated by our fantasies imposed on us by the symbolic order. However, this symbolic order is not an object in the world but a frame through which we interact with objects (Žižek, 2023a). Thus, for us to transcend the symbolic order is akin for Neo to step out of the Matrix. Yet, no symbolic order, as discussed above, is problematic. The solution is to offer a way to overcome the limitations imposed by the symbolic order in the real world, but not to

abandon the idea of limitations altogether – the limitations in the metaverse must be substantially different from the real world (offering a way to transcend the experiences of the real world) while simultaneously still having a potentiality to lead to *jouissance* (offering a realistic virtual alternative to the real world). If successful, this may create a powerful and appealing world with layers of fantasy-as-reality that will be meshed with reality-as-fantasy. In that sense, the metaverse will be able to provide a context to reshape our subjectivity in the real world into a meta-subjectivity. Thus, for those who will not be interested in joining in the world of metaverse, there is always an option to stay out of it – the blue pill. On the other hand, for those interested in exploring the potentiality of a virtual world that functions as an alternative reality in which one can develop an alternative self (through meta-subjectivity), the metaverse will be offering that – the true red pill.

The Fantasy that Cannot be Subjectivized: A Lacanian Perspective

Two seemingly opposing results of the developments in technology are at work. First, people have become more and more sedentary, relying on computers and robots to do many of the manual tasks previously performed by people (Griffiths, 2010). Second, at the same time, technology has contributed to the context of business of everyday life, where everyone is, in fact, expected to be busy (Holdsworth, 2021). As a result of this, the relationship with our own bodies is changing. As Žižek (1996) puts it, a “subjectivization” process (turning reality into cyberspace) is in a correlation with an “objectivization” process (exposing our inner body to external technological stimuli). Through this correlation, the boundary between inside and outside gets blurred. On the one hand, the inner body is bombarded with all sorts of external objects (bypasses, pacemakers, etc.), transplanting and implanting almost every organ of the body, a process Virilio (1995) described as “endo-colonization”, which is in a way the opposite

of the colonization of outer space by us. And, on the other hand, by using VR technology and immersion in cyberspace, we are defining the outside from the inside, treating our inner space as outside reality. The inner reality in the virtual space can be more real than our real self in the sense that it can include parts of our selves that we are not ready to accept in the real life. For instance, my character in the metaverse can be an extroverted and promiscuous woman whereas in my real life I am an introverted cis man who would never dare to represent himself in that way. This virtual/unreal identity gives one the opportunity to explore the truth of oneself more so than in the real life as there are minimal to no risks involved if no one knows the online identity. Hidden behind the avatar, one can articulate and play out one's wildest dreams in the metaverse. This disinhibited world can potentially create an influx of desire that leads to repressive de-sublimation, in some cases leading to chaotic and sadomasochistic violence (e.g., see Žižek, 2023b).

To explore this phenomenon further, we can use the Lacanian distinction between imaginary identification and symbolic identification (Lacan, 1966/2006). In imaginary identification, one presents a wrong image of oneself and identifies it as such to play a game or have fun with friends. For example, imaginary identification is frequently used when one plays video games – if one is a peaceful person who would never imagine or desire to kill anyone, one can still play a shooter game with friends and slay some enemies in the game. However, in symbolic identification, one presents one's true self but count on it being taken as fake or artificial. For example, if one's social persona is a pacifist who is dealing with suppressed aggression, this aggression can be unleashed in the safe space of the shooting game and no one would suspect that the aggression exhibited there is one's true nature (Muller, 1989). Symbolic identification is, of course, used in the social interactions as well. For instance, say I am someone

who makes awkward statements in social settings, which brings me a lot of shame and humiliation. One way to deal with it is not to talk much in the social settings and to create a socially acceptable mask to hide behind. The other solution (symbolic identification) is to exaggerate and joke about everything so that people take my occasional awkward statements as a joke as well and, therefore, I can hide my true identity behind this ‘fake’ mask, which is more real than anyone realizes.

The symbolic identification is visible in many daily interactions, such as texts and online chats. For instance, when a friend sends you a funny meme, and you reply with ‘LOL’ (Laugh Out Loud) or an emoji that is laughing while rolling on the floor, chances are you do not have even a smile on your face while replying to this message, let alone a loud laughter, but it does not mean that your reply did not have any truth in it. The funny meme probably created a light atmosphere and gave you a sense of relief after a hard day and although you do not literally laugh out loud, nonetheless you enjoyed it. This is how Lacan (1966/2006) defines decentered subject, when one externalizes the most intimate feelings through an Other, which can be an emoji, avatar, etc. The metaverse creates a third space in which things one does or says are not ‘real’ yet at the same time they are not ‘not real’ either. Whether one is engaging in imaginary or symbolic identification, it requires its own set of rules of conduct. For example, engaging in sexual exchanges in the virtual world, can one do whatever one wants simply because it is not real? It could be very much so if one is dealing with an artificial creation. However, if one is in contact with another avatar representing another person, rules of engagement would still apply. After all, something does not have to happen in the real world for one to experience real emotions. One can ‘really’ fall in love although one has never met in person. One can have real

heartbreaks. Therefore, this third domain that creates the context for the decentered subject to present its symbolic projection needs a symbolic order as well.

As previously discussed, Turkle (1984/2005) described the move from modernist to postmodernist view in technology, from imitation and calculation to simulation. Whereas imitation tries to replicate a pre-existing reality, simulation generates a semblance of a non-existing reality and, therefore, does not differentiate between natural reality and its artificial reproduction. However, behind our virtual subjectivity there is a subjectless computation, a series of 1s and 0s, which is neither the virtual reality that we experience in the virtual world nor the physical component of the virtual world (chips, electric boards, wires, etc.). For Lacan (1966/2006), the computation underlying modern science is the bridge to reach multiple narrativizations. The metaverse is the pure Lacanian Real: the subjectless computation that creates a virtual reality in which multiple narrativizations of one's subjectivity can occur.

Embodiment in a 'Virtually Actual' Space

Psychoanalysis has been dealing with the virtual since the beginning of the discipline (e.g., Freud, 1900/1967). When we discuss object relations, projections or introjections, we are in fact considering virtual experiences of real people in our lives that impact our emotional life. Even in the therapy room, every time a transference or countertransference happens, it is yet another form of virtual reality in which we project our emotions not onto the real people that those emotions are about but redirect them on their virtual representation in the form of the therapist or the patient (Lemma, 2015). Therefore, the definition of the virtual as of something fake or less than the original does not do justice to the very rich virtual space that one enters through psychoanalysis, whereby the virtual world becomes a space that can be colonized by our wishes and fantasies.

In working with the digital media too, the virtual has become an augmentation of the reality rather than an alternative to it. In today's world, a large part of our communications has become a disembodied simulating presence that does not quite match Baudrillard's (1981) notion of 'simulation as deception'. In fact, Coleman (2011) refers to this new form as 'simulation as an aspect of co-presence' in which we communicate together through the mediation of the digital space. Every time that we communicate through technology, even as simple as a text message, we are making 'real' contact that, despite its simple form, can have significant impact on our lives. The more sophisticated forms of virtual technology, like the metaverse, combine different visual, relational and spatial elements of real life in a way that makes having a virtual presence in the metaverse a combination of both reality (e.g., our emotional responses or engagements with others) and virtuality (e.g., the setting within which our interactions take place). From this perspective, this curious amalgamation emerges as a new space which is neither purely real world nor purely virtual, but a space that can be called 'virtually actual' (Coleman, 2011).

One of the questions that needs examining is the fate of the body in the virtual space, as attention to bodily experiences forms an important part of psychoanalytic theories (Carignani, 2012; Lemma, 2014; Toffoli, 2011). Within these discussions, the virtual world is frequently referred to as 'cyberspace' (e.g., Stratton, 1997). The 'cyber' part of cyberspace can be traced to the Greek word *kybernetes* which literally means someone who rules, such as a governor (Fourkas, 2004). Cyberspace, therefore, is a space in which one can rule over or control one's reality or at least make one feel as if in control (Stratton, 1997). Everything that one wants is just a click of a button away. After all, we are controlling the technology, but are we? The sense of rage, grief and loss upon lack of access to one's phone or the Internet is profound for many, so much so that we might pose the question of whether the cyberspace is a technology that gives us

control, or does it take control of us (Lingiardi, 2008)? The frustration that one experiences upon the disconnect from the virtual space probably is a good reminder that we are still embodied beings with limited control over our world. However, when one does overcome the hardware aspect of the problem and does have access to the virtual space, what happens to the soft bodies in front of these hard machines? Can cyberspace free us from the constraints of our body? Or maybe a better question is, can our sense of embodiment change in the cyberspace and whether that new sense is transferable to our real world? If yes, can we argue that with changes in our embodiment our sense of self, our subjectivity also changes? Will the concept of ‘body transfer illusion’ raised by the neuroscientists working on the virtual space also lead to ‘subjectivity transfer’ (Lemma, 2015)?

There are many scholars who have anticipated that the cyberspace will be a space in which new identities can be tested and, if the users are pleased with their experiences as their new selves, the virtual space can act as a transition space facilitating the users’ transition to their new selves (Barak & Suler, 2008; Turkle, 1995, 1984/2005; Suler, 2002, 2004; Allison et al., 2006; Dini, 2009). But what gives the virtual space the power to do that? To address this question, we have to see what happens to our embodied self in the virtual space.

When we consider our body, there is a temporal link associated with it (Birksted-Breen, 2012). Our embodiment also has a physical history to it. The virtual space can suspend both the physicality and the temporality of the embodiment experience and create a discontinuity between one’s virtual subjectivity and one’s physical history and connections. All the object relations the users have projected throughout their lives now can be redefined and re-projected in the virtual world. The disruption of the historical embodiment can disrupt the relationship to reality (Popat, 2016; Price et al., 2021). This disruption has been transient so far due to the technological

limitations of the virtual world (Price et al., 2021). However, with the emergence of the metaverse, there is a potentiality that the disruption of one's relationship with reality can be extended or, for some, even become permanent in the sense that the real-life subjectivity will be perceived as a temporary disruption (taken out of necessity) to the preferred meta-subjectivity. In such case, it is also possible to theorize a situation in which one temporarily re-projects the online object relations to some elements in one's real life rather than the other way around. Prioritizing the meta-subjectivity may, at least in part, be due to the difference in one's embodiment experiences in real life as compared to the metaverse, where one's virtual body does not have the limitations of the organic bodies. Thus, technology can de-objectify the body and give one a feeling of having a super-body.

Virtual space can also overcome some of the limitations that users experience with their relationships in the real world. A simple example is the possibility of staying in touch with loved ones over great geographical distances granted by the technologies. In the virtual space, we can deny our body's presence in our relationships or at least demote it to a pseudo presence (Žižek, 2023b) and thus avoid the grief or the pain associated with separation. Consequently, we can have access to the pleasure principle without the annoying disruption of reality. The gratification without any delay might have other consequences as well since creating a short-cut for one's desires makes anticipation of the fulfillment of desire obsolete. Yet the anticipation of obstacles in the way of desires and the ability to overcome them is an important stage in our mental and emotional maturation (Freud, 1920/1961). Thus, there is a possibility of a number of psychological impacts of the virtual presence for our psychic development, but they are challenging to anticipate – both in terms of the potential positive and negative outcomes (Fonagy & Target, 1996). The virtual world can also change our relationship with the 'other' since the

‘other’ in the virtual space can be created by another self rather than being a complete stranger. This other does not have the opacity of a persona and, as a result, is more transparent. In a world in which we can project our inner world as a visual representation and interact with it, the boundary between the virtual and the real can be blurred to a point of isomorphism (Gibbs, 2007). Since, at least for some, the inner world will be the preferred reality, it can lead to the development of an omnipotent meta-subjectivity that can create anything that it imagines without the contextual limitations, such as having to take into consideration the limits of physical bodies. For instance, if one wants to create a very attractive avatar in whatever gender one desires with a body that one does not have to do anything for (e.g., work out, eat healthily, brush the teeth regularly, etc.), it can easily happen with a few clicks. This may have a profound impact on how one experiences emotional and sexual life. For example, the anxiety of not being good enough for the other can vanish, making the other an object that is no longer outside of one’s control.

“On the Internet, Nobody Knows You’re a Dog”

Internet in general and the virtual worlds in particular provide not only an opportunity to explore freely the virtual space, but to also explore and experiment with one’s identity or to even start creating a new identity or identities. As *The New Yorker* cartoonist, Peter Steiner (1993) puts it: “on the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (Figure 1). This simple cartoon drawn in 1993 was reprinted so many times that now it is the most reprinted *The New Yorker* cartoon of all time (Binswanger, 2023). When the original cartoon was sold at an auction for \$175,000, it became the most expensive cartoon in history as well (Binswanger, 2023).

Probably, part of the appeal of this cartoon was its prophetic nature in the sense that the artist saw the potentiality of the Internet to offer new ways of being to its users even at the early stages of the Internet. However, the question is how these newly developed and redefined

Figure 1*Peter Steiner's 1993 Cartoon*

subjectivities in the virtual space can impact one's subjectivity in the real world. For instance, Biocca (1997) introduced the concept of 'progressive embodiment', through which he tried to show how the online avatar can impact one's social, physical and psychological sense of self. He argued that getting used to one's online avatar can lead to unnatural adaptations in one's offline self, whereby the users, in a sense, become cyborgs in their real life. I argue that, although this is not an inevitable fate of all users in the virtual space, nonetheless some users will not be able to or even will not want to compartmentalize their alternative identities to keep each identity limited to its domain. Thus, there will be an overflow of the subjectivities created through the

avatars into the real life subjectivities. Some users, for example, will find the virtual world to be a perfect place to create an ideal self that might be very different from their real self. Some research already suggests that people who are struggling with different aspects of their psychological wellbeing are more likely to create an ideal self in the virtual world (Bessière et al., 2007; Gabarnet et al., 2023). Now the question is whether the users with their ideal self emanating online, who are struggling to express themselves in the real world, are benefiting from their avatar or are experiencing further psychological difficulties in the real world as a result? This question is of course not limited to people with pre-existing psychological health struggles and can easily be extended to those experiences difficulties with their subjectivities based on other grounds. For instance, this can easily be the case for marginalized people and minorities as well. Imagine someone who is gay but having trouble with embracing this identity in the real life. When he goes home and logs in to his virtual world in which he can openly express his sexual orientation and get validation and acknowledgement in the virtual world, his online subjectivity is strengthened. However, how much of this newly found confidence can be translated into his real life? Is his virtual subjectivity his ‘ideal realization’, authentic representation of the self, or his ‘idealized realization’ which is an inauthentic representation of the self (Lemma, 2015)?

Thus, for some users, the metaverse will be an opportunity to create a new identity, but this identity can lead to a significant discrepancy between one’s meta-subjectivity and real-life subjectivity. If the user experiences his authentic self in the metaverse, how is he going to adapt back to his less pleasant and less authentic identity in the real life? Will this discrepancy create a crisis or an opportunity? I argue that both scenarios are possible. For some, the metaverse will be a domain in which they can live their life wearing their most authentic mask and having to

change back to their social persona in the real world may lead to a plethora of negative psychological impacts, such as anxiety or depression. In this case, we can anticipate that the user will start withdrawing from the social life in the real world as he will prefer to live his life in his meta-subjectivity as much as he can, especially if it becomes a world in which he can make money, thus satisfying both social and financial needs in the metaverse and making going out to the real world redundant. Some argue that if there are many users who follow this path, it may lead to an ‘atomocracy’ – a narcissistic individualized world in which the user operates solely on the pleasure principle and the reality principle becomes obsolete (Law, 2013). At the same time, for others, the positive experiences with their meta-subjectivity will be inspiring, giving encouragement to take steps in the real world to approach the developed meta-subjectivity, thus trying to converge the ideal realization in the metaverse and the real-world subjectivity.

Andre Green’s ‘As-If Personality’

Andre Green’s (1986) idea of narcissism and as-if personality, although developed to discuss the tendencies in the real world, can also be applied to the virtual world and its impact on one’s sense of self. Andre Green (1927-2012) was a French psychoanalyst who provided a unique reading of the attachment theory (Fonagy & Campbell, 2015; Moosavian, 2020). He believed that connectivity and attachment for a child can lead to the development of a superficial personality, one in which the child is solely focused on how to be seen as unique and exceptional by the parents/others (Green, 1986). The desire to be desired is rooted in the pain that the child goes through when he experiences loneliness and emotional betrayals (Green, 1986). The child who struggles with abandonment issues regularly and develops an anxious ambivalent attachment style tries to win the approval and validation of the other through an endless mimicking of others, leading to perceiving the self as if he was someone else. As a result, the

idea of the self in the child is incomplete, replete with holes, which may lead to a relentless anxiety. To overcome this anxiety, the person is led towards a personality that Green (1986) describes as ‘as-if personality’. It is a personality filled with illusions, which are nonetheless treated as if they were true. The problem is that creating and pretending to be those illusions becomes more and more complicated and exhausts the person’s mental energy, leaving them in a state of extreme sorrow and anxiety (Green, 1979). However, the struggle is not merely to get approval or validation. It is a struggle to be loved, or as Green (1979) puts it, it is “an essentially conflictual, ambiguous nature of desire, which is conceivable as the desire of the desire of the Other” (p. 69).

Thus, the as-if personality creates a derailed personality which has a beautiful and appealing shell but is empty and fragile inside. The constant pressure to act according to as-if situations leaves no room for being real (Solomon, 2004). I argue that, just as it is possible to develop an as-if personality in the real world, it is also possible that it will emerge for some as a result of their experiences online. In such a case, the personality developed will be a facsimile of life that is created online, with the feelings and relationships of this personality having nothing to do with the user’s real self. Once one starts on the trajectory of developing the as-if personality, the tendency is for the gulf between the self and the as-if personality to keep increasing, making the idea of reaching any kind of emotional harmony an out of grasp dream (Schwartz, 2023). The person engaged in sustaining the as-if personality becomes better and better in adapting himself to what he believes the society wants to see in him, but at the same time he is aware of his empty shell which becomes preoccupying (Schwartz, 2023). One of the ways the as-if personality deals with the feeling of falling into the dark abyss of emptiness is by acting more flamboyant and larger-than-life, trying to cover the lack of real personality reflecting their true self. At the same

time, there is a need to defend against the lack experienced and the as-if personality becomes more and more immersed into their online escape, be it the Facebook or TikTok persona created, a video game character or the virtual world avatar.

The avoidance of the real world self combined with constant acting to avoid the emptiness of the as-if personality shell is what Green (1986) calls ‘the death narcissism’ because it is a self-destructive narcissism that buries the real self deeper and deeper every step of the way. The other possibility – ‘life narcissism’ – is not much better because the person is very much aware of the empty self but keeps a façade, every day coming back to his impoverished self, mostly self-medicating using some kind of substance (Green, 1986). The person becomes stuck between life and death, refusing to bury the mask and unable to embrace the real image. Thus, there are three possible scenarios for the conflict between the real personality and the as-if personality. In the first scenario, the person strives to become the image built up by the as-if personality. This is a recipe for endless anxiety because it means chasing a fantasy. The as-if personality is not stable as it needs to continuously adjust and adapt to be liked by the others (Green, 1986). Therefore, one can never adjust one’s real-world personality fast enough as it is a demanding task, and the as-if personality is constantly being ‘updated’ with new characteristics, not to mention the possibility that some of the fantasized characteristics will be out of the person’s reach altogether in the real world. In the second scenario, the person also would like to become the developed as-if personality but realizes the futility of such attempts. Consequently, this realization leads to a sense of loss – loss of the possibility to be the version of the self that one considers to be superior to the real-world self – and depression. The third scenario is the only positive scenario in which the person becomes conscious of the desires the as-if personality caters to and of the limitations of their fulfillment in the real world. By paying attention to the

needs and constraints one is encountering, it becomes possible to develop one's personality in the real world, rather than spending the time and effort on maintaining the as-if personality (Schwartz, 2024).

The metaverse might promote any of the scenarios mentioned, with some being potentially more likely than others. However, there is also a possibility that it might offer a fourth scenario. By creating a very distinct subjectivity which has nothing to do with the real self, the person can actually become the as-if personality in this meta-subjectivity without the concern of conflating it with the real-world subjectivity. The lacks experienced in the real world thus might become more tolerable since the real identity is not all one has. When there is a meta-subjectivity that is a full alternative to one's real subjectivity (rather than the play-acted as-if personality), one can indulge oneself in the metaverse without it necessarily leading to feeling deficient in the real world. Of course, the fourth scenario is not going to be a given – not everyone who will engage in the metaverse and develop a meta-subjectivity will successfully separate it from the real-world subjectivity without conflict. However, a combination of self-awareness and discipline opens a new opportunity for dealing with the as-if personality in the metaverse.

Meta-Subjectivity in Psychoanalytic Traditions

Reflecting on the metaverse, I would first like to consider the scope of this technology. Following their invention, some technologies become inextricable parts of our life while others remain more limited in their reach. When it comes to digital technologies, the Internet itself can be considered relatively ubiquitous and so can smartphones (Mehra et al., 2025). Indeed, in our society, it is quite a challenge to find an adult who is not exposed to these technologies on a regular basis. Second, there are technologies that are well-spread, but not ubiquitous – e.g., social

media. While everyone who uses the social media must use the Internet, not everyone who uses the Internet uses the social media. Further, there are subsets of digital technologies that are very well received by certain groups of people and are relatively or completely unused by others – e.g., gaming or AI assistants. I believe that, at least for a number years after its introduction, the metaverse will be part of this third group, whereby there will be some people who will ignore its existence entirely, some will try it and decide that it does not have enough to offer them (these might engage with it sporadically, but will not become regular users), and, finally, there will be a subset of people for whom the metaverse will transform their lives. It is this latter group of people who are most likely to develop the meta-subjectivity.

Like any other technology, the metaverse is not going to have inherently positive or negative impacts – it will depend on how one engages with this technology. One of the big opportunities presented by the metaverse that have not been previously available is the development of meta-subjectivity. There are multiple ways in which it can potentially emerge and multiple possible benefits that it can offer. However, there are also possibilities that the developed meta-subjectivity will have negative consequences. Anticipating some of the negative consequences may be beneficial in informing how these technologies develop and how they can be integrated into the daily lives with success. We might also anticipate what kind of mechanisms will be needed to mediate the user experiences so that they have better chances of benefitting from the technology.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the possibility of the emergence of meta-subjectivity within the metaverse marks a significant change in the structure of the self for the users who will engage with the metaverse to this extent. For these users, it represents not merely a new identity or avatar, but a third entity (Samuel, 1985) – neither fully real nor fully imaginary – that may

challenge the traditional boundaries of subjectivity. The metaverse, as a digitally constructed symbolic environment, offers a space wherein the user can escape the constraints of the symbolic order – including living according to social rules and expectations – and instead flirt with an unhindered engagement in the pleasure principle without the repressive boundaries of the reality principle. Thus, the meta-subjectivity can emerge as an omnipotent entity – capable of creating its own world, its own image and its own social engagements. This form of subjectivity will have a possibility of exerting full control, providing a refuge from the anxiety of real-world interpersonal relations and the limitations of the embodied self.

Yet, at the same time, with all the power afforded to it, this meta-subjectivity is very likely to be deeply ambivalent, requiring adjustment and thoughtful engagement as unrestrained access to such a technology may lead to tensions, confusion and other negative mental health consequences. For example, on the one hand, developing a meta-subjectivity offers therapeutic potential – by providing the ‘good enough’ environment (Whitehurst, 2018) that might lead to secure attachment and allow the users to work through the needs unmet in the real world. On the other hand, the users may perceive their meta-subjectivity as more authentic or desirable, making them wish to displace the real-world subjectivity entirely. Thus, the avatar may become the true site of identification, while the physical self will be reduced to a shell performing the bare minimum required in the real world to allow the user to return to their meta-subjectivity in the metaverse.

At the core of this dilemma lies the question: is meta-subjectivity a symptom, signalling deep dissatisfaction with one’s life and inability to engage in meaningful change in the real world, or a transformative extension of the self? If the users displace their libidinal investments into the metaverse, where they are immediately fulfilled, they risk removing the very lack that

animates their desires (Lacan, 1975/199). The metaverse, in this instance, serves as a place where all desires are met, further exacerbating the users' negative experiences in the real world as addressing issues in the real world requires time and effort – the same time and effort that can now be spent in the virtual space, enjoying life through one's meta-subjectivity and demoting the real-world subjectivity and the unmet needs there into the realm of unfortunate disruption from the pleasure-filled fantasy. However, this same meta-subjectivity has a potentiality to become a transformative fantasy, a transitional object between the lacking self in the real world and a re-imagined, potential self in the metaverse. The key lies in how the user navigates the discrepancy between their real-world and virtual subjectivities. If the meta-subjectivity becomes a model of aspirational change (e.g., a potential to try different ways to develop confidence or interpersonal skills), it may offer a pathway for genuine psychic transformation. But if it becomes a refuge from the real and a denial of the lacks experienced in the real world, it may transform into a digital superego – demanding perfection, control and pleasure without cost.

Ultimately, the meta-subjectivity is not simply another technology to escape the reality for a time. It can serve as a tool that reflects the users' longing for coherence and comfort in an increasingly complex and fragmented world (Jeong & Seol, 2022; Rescher, 2020), where one has a desire to be seen and recognized accompanied by the fear of being known and rejected. As psychoanalytical subjects, the users will be called upon not to reject this opportunity outright nor to submit to it unquestioningly, but to navigate the emergent tension – recognizing the fantasy, understanding the lack and, perhaps, using this new context to expand their subjectivities.

Conclusion: Reflection on Psychoanalytic Traditions for Theorizing the Meta-Subjectivity

As illustrated by the exploration of various psychoanalytical traditions in this chapter, there are many ways in which the meta-subjectivity can emerge and develop within the

metaverse, a space where the boundaries of selfhood are more fluid, experimental and potentially volatile than in the real world. Just as the subjectivity in the real world is shaped by lived experiences, interpersonal relationships, exposure to different learning opportunities, and the sociocultural context, the meta-subjectivity in the virtual space will be influenced by the unique types of interactions, environments and identities that the users encounter in the metaverse. However, the expanded possibilities of the metaverse mean that the experiences to which the users can be exposed will be amplified, accelerated and even distorted in unprecedented ways, ways that are not imaginable now due to the limitations of the physical world around us. Moreover, the virtual worlds offer not just new experiences, but entirely new ways of being, where identities can be extended, suspended or radically reinvented. At the same time, exposure to the metaverse's diverse immersive experiences will not impact everyone in the same way. For some, it may profoundly alter their sense of self (leading to the emergence of the meta-subjectivity), while for others, it may leave their subjectivity largely intact.

The psychoanalytic perspectives, with their focus on the unconscious processes, interpretations of dreams, symbolic meanings, and identity formation, offer a comprehensive framework for exploring the many potentialities through which the meta-subjectivity can arise. For instance, it is quite possible that the unconscious will not simply follow the users into the metaverse – it may be reconfigured by the experience. Dreams, desires, anxieties, and defenses could find novel forms of expression in the metaverse, leading to emergence of meta-subjectivities that are at once familiar and alien. After all, the meta-subjectivity will still be recognized as oneself, at least on some level, while also being potentially completely different from the subjectivity in the real world. The possibility of this new meta-subjectivity to influence the real-world subjectivity is another consideration that arises as prominent within the

psychoanalytic traditions. Thus, alongside considering the possible benefits to the users of developing a subjectivity alternative to the one they hold in the real world, including expanded self-awareness and new modes of relationality, I have tried to theorize the possible risks, such as the fragmentation of the self or the development of new forms of dependency and addiction. It is important to recognise that not every user of the metaverse will develop a meta-subjectivity. However, for those who do, the implications could be life changing. Therefore, anticipating the potentialities and considering the psychological, social, and ethical implications of the emergence of the meta-subjectivities is essential as we move further into the upcoming age of virtual existence.

Chapter 4: Existential-Phenomenological Traditions

In this chapter, I look at virtual subjectivity from existential and phenomenological lens, engaging both classical and contemporary approaches. The existential frameworks aim to understand human experience and engagement with the world (De Haan, 2017; Nilsson, 2018). In other words, they try to explore big questions, like ‘Why do we exist?’ or ‘What is the purpose of our existence?’. I will be applying the same questions to the concept of the virtual world and exploring how our virtual self engages in such a world. My argument is developed by considering whether the metaverse can be considered a ‘place’ in its own right and, if so, what kind of place, from an existential perspective, it may constitute. Further, drawing on the notion of ‘project’ taken from Sartre (1956) and Heidegger’s (2008) existential philosophy, I explore the implications of the metaverse as a place for the user’s subjectivity. Specifically, I consider how virtual subjectivity defines the existential project as the project of making a new ‘being’ in the virtual space (Vella & Gualeni, 2019).

Then, I look at the relationship between virtuality and phenomenology. The phenomenological perspectives are instrumental in critical reflections on embodiment and corporeality (Bizzari, 2024; Gallagher, 2014). Thus, I focus on embodiment in the metaverse from the perspective of its impacts on the user’s brain, e.g., by exploring the disembodied mind versus embodied brain (Papadopoulos, 2018) potentialities in the metaverse, and on corporeality more broadly. Constitution of personhood in the virtual space is the main focus, showing both emancipatory and delimiting characteristics of virtuality from the phenomenological point of view and theorizing the implications for meta-subjectivity. Specifically, I develop an argument that the mechanisms inherent in the virtual space have self-determining and self-redefining features that lead to the development of virtual subjectivity and, specifically, meta-subjectivity.

The forthcoming development and introduction of metaverses will likely present new possibilities for human existence generally and for our existential and phenomenological understandings, which may lead to a variety of impacts for the subjectivities of the users who will engage with the metaverses, especially for those who will do so on a regular basis. The new modes of existence and of self-understandings bring about new potentialities for the emergence of meta-subjectivities, eliciting the need to consider what it means to be a subject in a virtual environment that is unlike any virtual environments to which the users have had exposure thus far.

Combined, the existential-phenomenological approaches allow for a critical reflection on the nature of reality and on the implications for one's subjectivity as a result of interactions within that reality (Valle & Halling, 1989; Zieske, 2020). In other words, in this chapter, I focus on the importance of understanding human existence within the new realm of possibilities that metaverse will provide. The subjective experiences, especially as they are mediated through the user's embodiment, are also of key concern here. Thus, the existential-phenomenological lens allows simultaneously looking at the impacts of the new modes of being and new ways of experiencing on the user's sense of self, thereby impacting the subjectivities.

Augé and Heidegger: Is Metaverse a Place?

There are ongoing discussions of the various implications of the possibilities of conceptualizing the virtual reality generally and the metaverses specifically as 'places' (Ayiter, 2019; Dai & Liu, 2024; Firat & Tabibi, 2023; Kofoed-Ottesen, 2020; Malpas, 2009; Oleksy et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Some of these discussions are informed by architectural studies, including Augé's (2000) distinction between 'places' and 'non-places', whereby a place is a space that is occupied by human beings (or could be seen as potentially occupied by human

beings in the future) and “where something is said about relationships which human beings have with their own history, their natural environment and with one another” (p. 9). This conceptualization provides some dimensions against which the metaverses can be evaluated: historical context, environment, and relationships. The non-places, in contrast, are defined by Augé (2000) in terms of personal experience as it relates to one’s subjectivity, whereby a non-place emerges “when human beings don’t recognize themselves in it, or cease to recognize themselves in it, or have not yet recognized themselves in it” (p. 9). Whereas we have an intuitive understanding of what a place is (e.g., home, office, museum, art gallery, restaurant, etc.), a non-place can be seen as a space where one ‘loses oneself’ – most commonly in a crowd, such as at a subway station or at the airport, where one transitions through the space without consideration of the environment, establishing lasting relationships with others, or even maintaining a sense of self. From these definitions, it follows that there is no space that is inherently a place or a non-place, as our experience in it is fundamental for understanding any given space as a place or non-place.

Similarly, in Heidegger’s (1971) work, there is no inherent place or non-place. A place (location) is considered to be a “thing” that “gathers the fourfold” of earth and heaven (our surroundings and environments in the physical sense), divinities (not necessarily in a religious sense, but rather referring to cultural values transmitted through our history), and mortals (us, human beings, including our social relations with one another) (Heidegger, 1971, p. 153). Thus, it is the presence and recognition of all of the fourfold components that can make something into a place for someone, while still being a non-place for someone else. I argue that the positions of Augé (2000) and Heidegger (1971) converge in the sense that both identify the physical environment alone as insufficient to constitute a place, seeing the cultural and social components

as prerequisites as well. For Augé (2000), it is a relationship one has with history and with other human beings within a given space that makes that space into a place. Without these components, one is seen to not ‘recognize themselves’ in it (Augé, 2000). Within Heidegger’s (1971) conceptualization, these components correspond to divinities (historical significance) and mortals (human beings and their relations).

Within this framework, then, any space can potentially become a place – the physical attributes appear to merely serve as environmental cues for identification of the specific space. For instance, Heidegger’s (1971) *Schwarzwaldhaus* (Black Forest house) is the pillar example of the fourfold as it is a space easily identifiable as a place – beyond the scenic physical environment components, it speaks to the history and familial relations throughout the generations. However, Heidegger (1971) similarly describes the bridge, which beyond being a simple functional object for many, can be a location of significance for others, thus acquiring all the components of the fourfold. It should be noted that Heidegger’s (1971) and Augé’s (2000) conceptualizations do diverge. Heidegger (1971) considers a place to always be a place, but not all human beings are always recognizing it as such, while for Augé (2000), human recognition is a prerequisite for a place to be identified as one. However, this distinction only highlights that it is not the physical environment that plays the central role in the making of (or recognition of) a space into (as) a place, but rather the cultural and social significance that one associates with it and is capable of recognizing.

Consequently, for the metaverses that will emerge, as long as there are some stable environmental cues (e.g., when you intend to go to Paris, it is always a recognizable Paris, not London, New York or a fishing village), there is a possibility for that space to be a place. The historical, cultural and social significances will gradually acquire more substance as the user

keeps returning to the space, exploring it, and forming relationships with other users. Similarly to spaces in the real world, there needs to be a level of engagement with the surroundings, some form of attachment for the space to become a place, but once it does it very well may become as important for the user as the places in the real world. This potential for virtual spaces to become places carries a number of significant implications that may influence our subjectivities.

For instance, Tuvalu, an island country in the Pacific Ocean that is projected to become submerged into the ocean as a result of climate change, is turning into “the first digital nation”, indicating on its state website that “By recreating its land, archiving its culture, and digitising its government, Tuvalu can exist as a nation even after its land is no more. Our digital migration has begun” (Tuvalu, 2024). The potentiality of a digital nation implies reconsidering what constitutes a nation (especially as it relates to specific places in the real world, such as landmarks) and, consequently, what constitutes nationhood and citizenship when a nation becomes entirely digital. Nationality and citizenship are significant parts of identities for many and, therefore, inform our subjectivities (Canning & Rose, 2001; Karki, 2023). Thus, the possibility of being of nationality and acquiring a citizenship that are digital-only can carry significant implications. Moreover, should this experiment with digitalization of nationhood be successful, it is likely that the practice will spread. First, Tuvalu is not the only island nation that is at risk of being submerged – there are many others, especially the Pacific Islands nations (e.g., Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Maldives, among others (Tapu, 2020). Second, if the transfer into the virtual is successful, it may spread to include states that are not at risk. For example, when internet became a prevalent technology used by many, governments around the world introduced their own websites and offered services through these websites to the citizens. Similarly, should the digitalization of nations become a regular practice, the governments may find it useful to

have representation within the virtual worlds as well. Thus, nationhood and citizenship may become less bound to the physical place and more tied to a virtual place.

I would like to propose a few potentialities for the meta-subjectivity that may result from the digitalization of real-world places and identification with them in the virtual spaces of the metaverse. To start, based on Heidegger's (1971) and Augé's (2000) conceptualizations of place, whereby the historical, cultural, and social components are of primary importance, I assume that the digitalization experiment will be successful, at least for some members of the nations involved. Losing the physical connection with the land is difficult not only in the sense of statehood, but also from many cultural perspectives (Wells, 2022). Thus, the ability to maintain the cultural practices associated with the land, at least to some extent, will be taken up. If one has access to the landscapes and landmarks within the virtual world, one will be able to build on that – remembering the history of the place and of the key figures in it, exploring the existent cultural practices and developing new ones, as well as establishing new relationships within the virtual world. While this potentiality is fairly straightforward (it only requires bringing what already exists into the virtual world and developing the sense of nationhood from that), there are other potentialities that are being introduced with the new possibilities of the virtual world.

For example, if nationality and citizenship are not tied to a physical place in the real world, will it further increase civil engagement? Online activism now frequently does not translate into action in real world and is, as a result, dubbed 'slacktivism' or (less frequently) 'clicktivism' by the critics (Cabrera et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2018; Zohouri et al., 2020). Although there are strong proponents of digital activism as well (e.g., Madison & Klang, 2020), the evidence this form of activism can have impacts tends to point in favour of short-term activities and ability to collect funds for specific causes (Cooper, 2023). Thus, even if the term

‘slacktivism’ does not adequately describe the opportunities to participate through online action, the hope in the transformative power of the accessibility of the internet to bring people together and to effect social, political and cultural changes did not get born out either (Zohouri et al., 2020). Thus, the same tool that is capable of empowering the marginalized and giving voice to those not frequently heard can be used to reinforce the stereotypes and the existing norms, as can be seen in some of the feminist movements online (Chen et al., 2018).

The question is, then: What will happen if political engagement will be possible online? What happens if you can have a protest in the metaverse, not on the streets? For many, digital activism is the only form of activism for a variety of reasons as the ability to come out to the streets requires many components (e.g., physical and mental ability to do so, free time, ability to cover transportation costs, etc.). However, if the governments (and other influential organizations) will have a presence in the metaverse, that is, if there will be a specific place in the virtual world where one can come to interact with one’s government and to show support for or dissatisfaction with some of the decisions, it will remove a multitude of barriers that currently exist for people who would like to engage in political, social or cultural movements, but can only do so online. Furthermore, having a place in the metaverse to express one’s opinions to the government means that one does not have to be in the city where such a movement is happening. Indeed, one need not be even in the country. Essentially, the ability to participate through the metaverse has a potentiality to further enable and strengthen online activism – perhaps, finally realizing some of the initial hopes for the transformative potential of the internet.

From this perspective, conceptualizing places within the virtual worlds can have implications for one’s sense of subjectivity as it can both transform the ideas of nationhood and citizenship (which no longer have to be tied to a specific physical place in the real world) and

allow one to be the citizen one cannot be in the real world. Thus, one's meta-subjectivity has a potentiality to become a more active and engaged one, increasing one's agency and empowering actions that are currently faced with many obstacles. Furthermore, the meta-subjectivity may be open to self-identification in ways that are not available in the real world. For example, once the practice of establishing nations in the virtual world becomes widespread, what is to stop online groups and communities (already existing or the ones that will emerge in the future) from creating their own nation in the virtual world? These nations and their citizenships will have to be formed on the basis other than being born in a specific place in the real world or having parents that have been born in such places. Rather, there can be other characteristics (e.g., common interests) that can lead to acquiring the digital citizenship in the metaverse. It is also possible to theorize that when such nations become stronger, their citizenship will carry more weight – granting its holders the privileges that will extend beyond the metaverses into the real world.

Of course, these developments appear to be far into the future. However, conceptualizing them and considering the potential implications grants us an opportunity to rethink some of the established modes of belonging to certain groups based on nationality. It is an opportunity that can transform the way we engage in political activities and one that can have significant implications for one's meta-subjectivity as well as real-world subjectivity.

Baudrillard and Malpas: What Kind of Place is Metaverse?

Baudrillard (1981) and Malpas (2009) present different perspectives on the issues concerning the quality of the metaverse as a place. For Baudrillard (1981), the discussion centres on the reality of the virtual worlds, or rather, the absence thereof. Malpas (2009), on the other hand, takes issue with the conceptualization of the virtual reality as an autonomous place.

Although these approaches diverge in many respects, they both are aimed at understanding the relationship between the virtual and the real world and, therefore, provide important insights for theorizing the potentialities of the metaverses.

I begin by addressing the question of the whether, following Baudrillard (1981), metaverse can be seen as a new kind of simulacrum. Baudrillard (1981), in his discussion of the representations of reality, identifies 4 stages, whereby an image serves different functions:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (p. 73)

In other words, during the first stage there is an attempt to represent the reality as it is (e.g., a documentary video made with no preparations and no edits). During the second stage, the representation is altered (e.g., make-up artists prepared characters for filming or the video has been edited to create a smoother flow of the story). Once we reach the third stage, the representation no longer aims to replicate reality in some fashion – it only contains some resemblance of it (e.g., a propaganda video showcasing evidence that the Earth is flat is presented as a documentary). In the final stage, there is no representation of reality – a simulacrum is presented and acquires a life of its own (e.g., a cut-seen video in an online game showing the backstory of the character and presented as if one is viewing a documentary about the character).

It is not the existence of simulacra per se that is problematic, however. Baudrillard (1981) draws attention to the displacement of reality with simulacra to highlight that simulacra are

creating a sense of hyperreality (more-real-than-real), thus being more enticing than the real. In addition, when hyperreality becomes the standard, one may cease to recognize the real as such. When applied to contemporary situation whereby many people are experiencing the world through their screens, the simulacra generated by the screens are shaping the consciousness and, therefore, the subjectivities (Danesi, 2024). Thus, despite its relatively short history and the early stages of development, metaverse has already garnered criticism for being a simulacrum (e.g., Danesi, 2024; Rospigliosi, 2022). The difficulties that will be presented by the metaverse are in its potentialities. Specifically, the reality representation in the metaverse can easily be any of the four stages presented by Baudrillard (1981). The problem is that, like with some media already today, it can be difficult to tell which is which when one is immersed into one of the worlds within the metaverse. Consequently, following Baudrillard's (1981) argumentation, the metaverse is a place that can displace the reality, creating a tension between the two and, metaverse being a hyperreality, generating a potentiality whereby the hyperreal will be able to draw more and more attention.

However, as Malpas (2009) argues, the metaverse cannot be conceptualized as an autonomous place, which carries significant limitations to its ability to displace the real world as it inherently depends on the real world for its functioning. This nonautonomy can be seen both in the physical hardware (e.g., VR headsets) needed for accessing the virtual reality generally and the metaverses specifically, as well as in the reliance on the physical body and its senses to experience the metaverse. From this perspective, although a metaverse can be considered to be a place, it is nonetheless a place that can never be independent of the non-virtual, real world, constituting its causal non-autonomy. Moreover, for Malpas (2009), the lack of autonomy of virtual reality extends beyond its inherent dependency on the real world in the physical sense.

There is also a dependency on the real world in the sense of reliance on the content (i.e., contentual non-autonomy). First, from the perspective of not creating anything new in the virtual worlds, but rather incorporating the existing ideas, stories, places, elements, etc. that exist in the real world. Second, even if something completely new and independent of the real world were to be created in the virtual reality, anyone who comes to engage with it would still bring their experiences and understandings that are embedded within the real world, not developed afresh within the virtual reality. As Malpas (2009) explains, the “meaning of items and events that appear within the virtual is invariably dependent on their embeddedness within the larger world-frame that is the everyday” (p. 136).

Consequently, if we consider the metaverse a non-autonomous place, it cannot be seen as something that could potentially displace the reality with simulacra. Rather, the metaverse should be considered as another aspect of reality. The metaverse, thus, will be inherently impacted by the real world and may impact, in its turn, the real world as well, but it will not be a displacement of it. It will not be an alternative place where one can go instead of being in the real world. Of course, one can get immersed into the virtual world, but one cannot continue living there independently of the real world. If nothing else, no matter how attached one is to or immersed into their avatar in the metaverse, there must be interruptions to take care of the physical body that exists in the real world. Thus, Malpas’ (2009) conceptualization is diametrically opposed to Baudrillard’s (1981). While, at this point, it is not possible to determine which of these conceptualizations will have more prevalence, or even, perhaps how these conceptualizations may each contribute concurrently in the future, leading to an unforeseen intermingling, it is possible to consider the potential impacts of the metaverses on subjectivities in light of these ideas.

Accordingly, let us first consider Baudrillard's (1981) conceptualization, whereby there is a dichotomous relationship between the real world and the virtual (simulacrum). From Baudrillard's (1981) perspective, then, the simulacra are competing with the real world and, being hyperreal, they may be enticing enough to win. Perhaps, we can see a comparable outcome now for those who suffer from Internet addiction or gaming disorder issues (André et al., 2020; Chou et al., 2005). Given that the metaverse is being designed to be more engaging and immersive than the internet and games, it is possible that such issues will become more prevalent. With the added complication of not just surfing the internet or playing with characters, but potentially being someone else (i.e., developing a meta-subjectivity), the metaverse may indeed displace the real world for some and may be interpreted as the 'real world' because one gets to be who they want to be and do what they like doing in the virtual reality, which is not a possibility for many in the real world.

Thus, the concerns raised by Baudrillard (1981) may yet become realized. However, I argue that this dichotomy also might lose its relevance when we combine reality with the virtual, which gives birth to virtuality, which is another route via which meta-subjectivity can emerge. In contrast to virtual reality, which is a space that can be common to many people, virtuality refers to the specific combination of the virtual spaces with which an individual engages (Breuer, 2020) with these spaces therefore becoming places for the individuals engaging with them. While these places might be similar across different individuals, the unique ways in which the users interact with them, both in the physical and emotional sense, lead to virtuality, which is unique to each individual. This virtuality has a more extensive application in modern civilization and can encompass any form of data transfer and networking technologies, including cell phones, TVs, social media, GPS systems, etc. In a way, then, modern life has already been inundated by the

virtual spaces, which poses a question of whether everything is becoming, or falling into, simulacra, as Baudrillard (1981) would have it, or is becoming simply a part of the everyday, as per Malpas (2009).

From the perspective of our lives being already embedded within the world filled with technologies and, thus, being part of virtuality, the metaverse will simply be another (new) dimension to this experience. As with other new technologies, some will benefit from it, while for others it may lead to problematic use. For example, there are clear indications that social media use can exacerbate feelings of loneliness (Hunt et al., 2018; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021) or may help people stay connected with their friends and loved ones (Satusky, 2011; Simons et al., 2023). However, I would like to extend this argument beyond the somewhat simplistic explanation that new technologies are tools, and it is simply a matter of how one uses them. This explanation places the blame for problematic technology use on individuals without considering the context and the structural issues that may lead to increased prevalence of problematic use. If metaverse is a place that may, for some, follow the route identified by Baudrillard (1981), then there is a responsibility to consider the negative implications for the meta-subjectivity emerging in such circumstances.

While problematic internet use may not be new, the problems that will arise as a result of metaverses may be significantly more pronounced as the immersion experience on these platforms will be far greater than that experienced with internet use. Thus, for the users who will be interested in exploring the metaverses, there have to be safeguards in place to prevent development of serious issues, rather than trying to address the issues when they already arise. For instance, informing the potential users of the potential issues, encouraging monitoring and limiting time spent in the metaverse (such techniques have shown some effectiveness in

decreasing the negative impacts of social media use (Hunt et al., 2018) and providing contact information to access support services if issues do arise can be some of the steps that may be taken.

Reconceptualizing Heidegger and Sartre: Existentialism and Meta-Subjectivity

Being-in-the-Meta-World

One of the frameworks that I apply to explore meta-subjectivity is the existential framework, in which I explore and extend Heidegger's (1996) concept of "Being-in-the-world". Heidegger uses this concept to signify existence from a perspective of purposeful orientation, while also refraining from the differentiation between subject and object (Dreyfus, 1995). In fact, Being-in-the-world can be seen as a holistic approach to understanding our existence: there is no separate 'being' and separate 'world' – they must function in totality (Mulhall, 2013). It follows that Being-in-the-world is, in a sense, a state of being which simultaneously impacts our perceptions of the world and is impacted by these perceptions. Heidegger's (1996) conception, thus, questions the possibility of pure consciousness gazing out into the world as, for example, part of Being-in-the-world is performing social and public roles. While decontextualization is not impossible in principle, it is regarded as a deficient form of Being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1996). The interconnectedness of Being-in-the-world means that our social roles must be intertwined with our most intimate feelings as well – as nothing is separated out. After all, we are always in the process of Being-in-the-world and, therefore, are always contextually situated. Therefore, understanding oneself requires recognizing that one is situated within the world (Mulhall, 2013).

When it comes to virtual reality generally and metaverses specifically, then, Heidegger's (1996) conceptualization of Being-in-the-world is confronted with a question of whether

anything changes fundamentally with the introduction of *virtual* web. Here, the potentialities one envisions depend on the conceptualization of the virtual reality and metaverses one uses.

Specifically, Baudrillard's (1981) characterization of displacement of the real world with the simulacrum will lead to significantly different conclusions from Malpas' (2009)

conceptualization of the virtual world as simply another dimension of the real world. Within this discussion, it is important to highlight again the distinction between virtual reality as we now know it (i.e., based on *dynamic* web infrastructure) and metaverses, which will be functioning within *virtual* web. While metaverses will rely on virtual reality experiences, they are intended to be fundamentally different from the virtual reality experiences that are available at the moment. The current conceptualizations that address virtual reality generally tend to focus on the already existent and used technologies – based on *dynamic* web infrastructure.

For instance, Vella and Gualeni (2019), drawing on Heidegger (1996), explore the implications of “Being-in-the-virtual-world” of the user engaged in a virtual reality experience. Here, Being-in-the-virtual-world can be seen not as replacing Being-in-the-world, but rather as a part of the real world experience (Vella & Gualeni, 2019), thus following Malpas' (2009) characterization of the virtual places as inherently dependent upon the real world. However, the authors' conceptualization of virtual reality as part of the real world rests on their understanding of the virtual reality from the perspective of gaming as it is currently engaged in – what they sometimes refer to as “Being-in-the-gameworld”, where “a virtual subjectivity is nested within the individual's actual subjectivity, and thereby figures as a practice within the individual's existential project” (Vella & Gualeni, 2019, p. 8). First, using the concepts of “Being-in-the-gameworld” and “Being-in-the-virtual-world” interchangeably obscures the fact that, even now, one may engage in virtual reality experiences that are not based on gaming. Although Vella and

Gualeni (2019) acknowledge this, they do not consider whether non-gaming virtual reality experiences have any significant differences from the gaming experiences for the users. Thus, this conceptualization of “Being-in-the-virtual-world” is limited. Further, by conceptualizing the virtual subjectivity as “nested within” the real world subjectivity, the implications of virtual reality experiences are excluded from consideration as well. Consequently, given that this conceptualization is limited even for understanding the *dynamic* web virtual reality experiences, I argue that it will not hold when the *virtual* web and metaverses will launch, as these experiences will be fundamentally different from the current user experiences online, including within gaming.

To consider the potentialities within *virtual* web, I propose the concept of “Being-in-the-meta-world”. I argue that it will be possible for some users to experience the metaverse as a world indistinguishable from the real one (even if they do know they are within a virtual reality situation). Furthermore, the ‘I’ in the metaverse can be substantially different – one can invest time and energy into developing their avatar according to their desires, not only in terms of the physical characteristics, but also character traits. Thus, when one becomes the avatar in the metaverse – their existence there can be described as Being-in-the-meta-world. Just like Being-in-the-world can be deficient, not everyone will be able to experience Being-in-the-meta-world. In part, the experience will depend on one’s embeddedness within the metaverse. For example, does one have a job there? Friends? Hobbies? Does one engage in social and political activities? The fundamental difference between Being-in-the-world and Being-in-the-meta-world will be in the fact that Being-in-the-meta-world is much more amenable to change. Further, while currently there is no way of escaping Being-in-the-world, the metaverse will present an alternative state of

being. To explore the potentialities opening up with these possibilities, we need to further consider the relationship between one's self and the facts of the world one is surrounded by.

Thrownness/Projectuality

Let us begin by considering Heidegger's (1996) concept of projectual disposition (*Entworfenheit*), which means thrownness ahead of one's current situation. It provides the possibility of transcendence from 'thrownness into the world' to 'thrownness ahead of oneself'. By 'thrownness into the world' (*Geworfenheit*), Heidegger (2008) means that our understanding of our existence depends on the facts of world (both their objective presence and our subjective interpretation of them). In other words, we are thrown not into an abstract, neutral world, but one filled with a set of facts that are situated within a specific historical, social, political, and cultural context – depending on our time and place of birth and living. It is through interaction with the facts of the world that we define and develop our individual selves. Within Sartre's (1956) conceptualization, this is our existential situation, whereby we deal with the facts of our life, such as living in a specific geographical location, having a job, some friends, liking and disliking certain things, etc.

Although our existential situation, or thrownness into the world, is important, it does not define us as human beings. That is, there is a difference between existential situation and selfhood (Sartre, 1956). Our existential situation provides the context within which we can develop our goals, that is the 'project' (Sartre, 1956) or projectual disposition – thrownness ahead of oneself (Heidegger, 1996). The possibility of thrownness ahead of oneself, then, is a potential future (a better version of oneself) one is striving to achieve. Similarly, Sartre's (1956) project can be broadly seen as the journey through which the individuals walk to goals that they defined for themselves. This journey is also referred to as 'projectuality'. Thus, whether

something is meaningful or not depends on whether this something leads the individuals towards the identified project. It is the project that gives directionality to the individuals' existence. While projectuality or thrownness ahead of oneself in the real world frequently requires overcoming obstacles (Vella & Gualeni, 2019), in the virtual world, you can be thrown ahead of oneself just by the virtue of the possibilities embedded in the technology itself. For example, you can manipulate the variables that in the real world are either very difficult or impossible to change, such as skin colour, nationality, height, etc. So, instead of overcoming obstacles, the issue becomes in which direction you want to be thrown ahead of yourself.

Therefore, the notion of projectuality is applicable to the virtual world and is relevant when considering the potentialities of metaverses. Moreover, I argue that projectuality in the metaverse is more complex than projectuality in the real world as there are at least two distinct possibilities. On the one hand, we can look at our existential situation in the metaverse as an extension of our being-in-the-world (for example, following Malpas (2009) and the virtual subjectivity as developed by Vella and Gualeni (2019)) and, on the other hand, the virtual subjectivity can be understood as emerging within a distinct existential situation on its own (an example of which can be Baudrillard's (1981) interpretation of the implications of virtual reality). It is possible that for some, the metaverse will serve as an extension, while for others it will be an alternative to being-in-the-world. Let us consider each of these possibilities.

If a user can use the metaverse to pursue some of the projects they find challenging in the real world, thereby simply using the metaverse as another aspect of being-in-the-world. The ease of achieving these projects may be beneficial or not. From one perspective, if the user is able to overcome some of the obstacles in the metaverse and fulfill their desires with some projects, they may move on to other projects, within the metaverse or in the real world. From another

perspective, though, projectuality is important as a process, not in terms of actual achievements of the desired outcomes (Sartre, 1956). In other words, one's meaning in life is derived in the process of pursuing different projects, not as a result of achieving them. Thus, if a user is able to quickly and easily achieve all of the set goals, if the obstacles can be overcome in a blink of an eye, then one may arrive at a situation where one is able to complete set projects faster than one comes up with them. One of the possibilities that results from this lack of purpose is a feeling of emptiness, related to a host of negative consequences for one's wellbeing (D'Agostino et al., 2020). Thus, achieving goals on a consistent basis without putting some effort into it renders these goals meaningless. Consequently, the possibilities opened up with the introduction of metaverses may carry some dangers the users should be aware of.

If one sees the metaverse as an alternative to being-in-the-world, paradoxically, this issue might not become as prevalent. That is exactly where meta-subjectivity becomes important because, no longer being restricted to the real world, it increases the number of possibilities for individuals' projects as well as the number of different opportunities for the pursuit of these projects. Thus, being-in-the-meta-world implies that one explores their existence within a world with a new set of facts, thereby engaging a new subjectivity that does not necessarily have the same projects as the real subjectivity in the real world. In other words, being-in-the-meta-world means learning how the new world one is in functions and setting challenging enough projects within the logic of that world, rather than trying to fulfill the needs developed as a result of projects existing in the real world. There are other potential dangers associated with this form of engagement with the metaverse, however. For instance, if one starts preferring being-in-the-meta-world to being-in-the-world (as one is enticed to do according to Baudrillard (1981)), one might neglect the real world with negative consequences for oneself (e.g., weakening social

relations, underperforming at school or at work, physical health issues due to malnutrition or limited physical activities).

Meta-Subjectivity

The possibility of overcoming obstacles and achieving set goals allows one to transcend the existential situation, thus giving the individual the potentiality that Sartre (1956) calls human freedom. For example, as a psychotherapist, I have the option to see myself as anything that I want in addition to seeing myself as a psychotherapist. If I deny all this potentiality and see myself only as a therapist, which is a fact of my existential situation, I am denying my freedom. Sartre (1956) refers to this denial as ‘bad faith’. However, I argue that bad faith is usually the result of obstacles in achieving potentiality, whereby one sees oneself as incapable of overcoming these obstacles. In fact, in the real world, there are many limitations that can interfere with one’s ability not only to achieve different potentialities, but even to consider their possibilities. For example, one can be busy, tired, overwhelmed with existing responsibilities, or simply have set conceptions of how one should view oneself and believe it to be too unrealistic or naive to consider alternative potentialities for oneself in the real world. At the same time, Sartre’s (1956) conceptualization of selfhood, by definition, is not limited to the real world. In fact, the transcendent nature of selfhood grants itself easily to expansion and extension made possible by the virtual world, whereby exercising human freedom is more easily accessible than in the real world. Considering all of the difficulties with exercising human freedom in the real world, one of the enticements of the virtual world can be precisely this – a much more readily available set of potentialities to explore, as overcoming obstacles in the virtual world is easier than in the real world (Vella & Gualeni, 2019).

Given that exploring the positive aspects of being-in-the-meta-world, and the human freedom that can be exercised there, is relatively easy (and has been mostly focused on thus far), I would like to consider some of the potentialities that can be negative within the context of the virtual existential situation. Specifically, although the avatar in the metaverse can be one's form of an alternative self, it is nonetheless an object rather than a subject. In other words, an avatar does not exist as a human, but rather as a possession.

This can have a number of implications in the metaverse. For example, one may rent an avatar to experience the personality associated with the avatar in which case the use of the avatar may be conditional (e.g., when one rents a car in the real world, one is required to ensure that the rented object is not damaged in the process of use or pay for the damages). Further, although the metaverse and *virtual* web promise greater security, it is not impossible to imagine that someone's avatar may be stolen. In addition, certain places within the metaverse will still have the rules that must be followed (e.g., when the governments will have their digital representations in *virtual* web, they will inevitably have some rules of conduct in place). Consequently, with all the freedom presumed to become available within the metaverse, one can still lose access to one's avatar if they fail to behave according to the established norms. While the rules and norms may be different from the ones we experience in the real world, the ideal of the metaverse may still fall short of allowing greater human freedom.

To conclude, if one follows Heideggerian perspective in considering the development of meta-subjectivity, a few conditions must be met. First, the user must experience Being-in-the-meta-world, by which I mean that the user needs to consider existence in the metaverse as an alternative to rather than an extension of Being-in-the-world. If the user sees the metaverse as an extension of Being-in-the-world, the subjectivity will still likely be impacted, as it is the totality

of one's world that informs one's Being and vice versa (Heidegger, 1996). However, being an extension also means that one does not develop a separate meta-subjectivity but rather integrates the experiences into one's Being. Second, the issues of thrownness ahead of oneself must also be addressed for a meta-subjectivity to emerge. The user's new developed subjectivity in the metaverse has to be sufficiently different from the real world subjectivity so that the goals that the user pursues in the metaverse are distinct from the goals one has in the real world. Otherwise, the user is simply using the metaverse to fulfill some unmet needs in the real world. It might be a useful approach, but it relies on one's existing subjectivity rather than developing a meta-subjectivity.

For the users who meet the two above conditions, it becomes possible that the meta-subjectivity emerges. However, there is no specific way in which this form of subjectivity can develop. Given that one's subjectivity is inextricably connected to the world one lives in (Heidegger, 1996), the experiences the user chooses to engage in within the metaverse will be shaping the direction of the development of the meta-subjectivity. Thus, from an existential perspective, the metaverse allows one to explore a variety of possibilities not just in terms of places one visits or activities one engages in, but in terms of how the 'I' is rethought and reshaped, starting with the idea that the meta-subjectivity itself does not have to constitute just one potentiality – the user may develop multiple avatars with distinct characteristics and interests, each of which will lead to the emergence of a separate meta-subjectivity. In essence, the metaverse then provides a possibility for developing new ways of being.

Papadopoulos: Disembodied Mind vs. Embodied Brain

From an existential perspective, being-in-the-meta-world may lead to the development of meta-subjectivity in a number of ways. Some of these ways, experienced through an avatar (or

even multiple avatars) have been explored above. However, there is also a potentiality for a completely different way of existence – one where metaverse will serve as a space where ‘pure’ mind can function – a mind that does not need to consider the needs and limits of the body (at least at the time of being in the metaverse) and does not inhabit an avatar. In other words, metaverse allows for an exploration of the disembodied mind. From a traditional Heideggerian perspective, this mode of existence is not considered to be a possibility as Heidegger (1996) denies the feasibility of gazing out into the world without there being a physical someone doing the gazing. Being-in-the-world, after all, requires a Being that is capable of interacting with the world, and a ‘pure’ consciousness has no means of doing so. Nonetheless, it must be considered that these Heideggerian conceptions have been developed precisely in the absence of any practical means of achieving a disembodied experience. Given that such an experience will become a possibility in the metaverse, it needs to be considered, even if it would be but a deficient mode of being-in-the-meta-world from a Heideggerian existential perspective. After all, Heidegger (1996) allowed for the existence of deficient forms of Being-in-the-world, when one engages with the world in a decontextualized manner, limiting one’s experiences and, therefore, one’s potentialities for Being. Similarly, we can at least consider the disembodied mind experience as a form of decontextualized being-in-the-meta-world.

Thus, from the standpoint of Cartesian dualism (Descartes, 1641/1988), the thought may finally overcome the flesh, so much so that the concerns of the flesh may be rendered entirely irrelevant to the experience of the world the user is immersed in. This disembodiment can be liberating, offering new ways to explore identity, to transcend physical limitations and to engage with others. Yet, it also raises critical questions about the user’s ability to relate to the experiences produced in the metaverse. For example, will the users be able to interpret

disembodiment as an authentic experience? Or will it feel like being in an altered state (e.g., a dream or a drug-induced state)? How will the users relate to themselves without a body? Is it possible that such an experience leads to dissociation? Will some of the users learn to experience their subjectivity without a sense of fracturing in the absence of a body? What happens to experiences that tend to rely on embodied cues, such as empathy (Jardine, 2022)? Will the users be able to maintain a coherent sense of self? What are the implications for the real-world self?

The notion of the disembodied mind, when embraced fully, leads to the vision of the body as mere flesh that is a limiting factor to the limitless potentiality of the mind – the flesh is the source of errors, providing misleading sensations, driving desire for immoral acts and, ultimately, failing us when we die (Papadopoulos, 2018). Thus, meta-subjectivity envisioned from this perspective promises freedom from mortality first and foremost (if one's self can be 'downloaded' into the digital networks). In addition, if one has no body, one does not have to deal with the plethora of social, cultural and political issues associated with having one, such as race, gender, sex, and ability. Without the body, these concepts simply cease to exist, removing the tensions surrounding such issues one may experience in the real world.

Although it is difficult to predict how any individual user's meta-subjectivity will be impacted by the experience of the disembodied mind, some of the potentialities can be explored. For some users, the experience of existing without a body may feel deeply authentic, as joy or satisfaction can arise from stimuli regardless of whether they originate in the physical world or the virtual one. In our current experiences, social media already offers evidence of this: some social media users derive genuine emotional responses from digital interactions (e.g., the joy of getting likes or reactions one experiences to others' commenting on their posts; Graciyal & Viswam, 2021). In fact, the metaverse will need to ensure that the experiences users get there are

treated as authentic as otherwise the users may lack the motivation to return once the novelty of being in the virtual world without a body is exhausted (Lavuri & Akram, 2024; Wang et al., 2021).

In terms of how the experience of the disembodied mind may interact with one's sense of the self, there are also multiple possibilities. For instance, one of the possibilities is dissociation — which can be disconcerting for some or perceived as a stress-free state. In case of the former, for example, the user may experience detachment from oneself or even a fragmentation of the self in the absence of embodied cues. That is, users with such experiences may feel as if they are incomplete as one's body is a significant part of oneself for many (Ferrè et al., 2014). In this case, the fracturing of the self will diminish the users' capacity to enjoy and embrace the disembodied mind experience. In the case of the latter, a stress-free state is likely to be experienced by the users who have a tendency to associate physical burdens with their bodies. In other words, the physical body, even in the disembodied mind experience, may retain a significant influence on the trajectory of the development of meta-subjectivity in the metaverse. Specifically, one's relationship to one's own body in the physical world may be a mediating factor in how the user perceives their presence in the metaverse in the absence of the body. For instance, someone who is physically ill or bed-ridden might find the metaverse without a body particularly liberating, offering an escape from the immediate discomforts and limitations of their corporeal condition. Conversely, the users who take pleasure in their physicality might find disembodiment less appealing — diminishing their ability to fully enjoy the experience. Of course, for many users the experience will fall somewhere in-between, with some aspects being enjoyable while others not so much. Nonetheless, such experiences can leave a lasting

impression as they will constitute a completely unique way of interacting with the world, even if that world is purely virtual.

Having considered the potentiality of the disembodied mind experience and taking into account the multiple possible limitations of such an experience, I suggest that it is more likely that the experiences in the metaverse will be built more in line with the idea of the embodied brain rather than the disembodied mind. At the end of the day, the physical body still serves as an anchor to many of the virtual reality experiences currently available (Chen et al., 2023; Shin, 2018). Thus, as tempting as the idea of the disembodied mind can be, the tendency in the developing virtual reality technologies (on which the metaverse will rely) is more often than not focused on reintroducing forms of embodiment that are alternative to the ones that are possible for us to experience in the real world (Guy et al., 2023; Mills et al., 2022; Sansoni et al., 2022). It is possible that the human need for physical presence and connection, at least for now, remains too strong to embrace the disembodied mind, albeit that might change with time and as a variety of forms of meta-subjectivity develop. For now, however, it is more likely that the tendency will be leaning towards an embodied brain – a reconfiguration of the body, rather than an escape from it, challenging us to rethink what it means to be fully present both in the virtual and the physical worlds.

Thus, in the context of the metaverse, the concept of embodiment offers a critical intervention into the limitations of traditional neuroscientific and genetic paradigms (Raja, 2022; Rehmann-Sutter, 2002). These earlier frameworks have often conceptualized the brain as a self-contained, modular system or as a product of fixed, genocentric determinism (Papadopoulos, 2018). Such views neglect the essential role of environmental, social and bodily influences in shaping cognition and subjectivity. Embodiment, by contrast, positions the brain not as an

isolated command centre, but as a dynamic and context-sensitive organ – one that emerges through continuous interactions of the body with the world. This emergent view, as presented by Papadopoulos (2018), emphasizes that the brain’s development and function are inseparable from the ecosystems it inhabits, both within the body (intraorganismic) and beyond it (extraorganismic). Thus, the brain is quite literally embodied, integrated into and responsive to the broader systems and subsystems that constitute it, including hormonal networks, affective states, sensorimotor feedback, cultural practices, and, lately, technological environments.

The body that engages with the metaverse is not merely a passive recipient of sensory data but an active participant in the creation of experience. As such, the emergent body exists within its own developmental trajectory, shaped by the specific contingent conditions of its existence. It is emergent precisely because new forms of embodiment and selfhood in digital spaces are constantly being negotiated through interactions that are limited (and enabled) by both biological constraints and technological affordances. The brain will be formed and reformed through embodied practices that are themselves shaped by cultural norms, environmental feedback and, increasingly, immersive digital technologies (Fuchs, 2017; Loizzo, 2023).

In the metaverse, where virtual spaces intersect with corporeal experience, subjectivity should be sought of as emergent, co-constructed through real-time engagements with immersive, responsive environments that blur the boundaries between self and the world, physical and virtual, organic and synthetic. A subjectivity that thrives in such an environment is meta-subjectivity. In this way, the metaverse may become a new site for the unfolding of embodied meta-subjectivity – a space where the malleable brain and the emergent body respond to virtual stimuli, rewire through interaction and co-evolve with their environments. The subject in the metaverse is not a disembodied avatar but a complex, embodied assemblage whose cognitive and

affective capacities are deeply entangled with the media, infrastructures and rhythms of the digital life. This reconceptualization challenges any lingering dualism between the mind and the body, or between the human and the machine, and invites a rethinking of what it means to be a subject in a world where embodiment extends beyond the skin into the virtual architectures of experience. Ultimately, then, at least for now, the metaverse does not negate embodiment – it intensifies and reconfigures it, offering new terrains where the embodied brain can be reimagined, contested and even made anew through the emergence of meta-subjectivity.

If we consider that the embodiment is involved in the interpretation of experience and production of meaning (Papadopoulos, 2018), the meta-subjectivity becomes important precisely from the perspective of which body one can inhabit and how one interprets that experience, not the total dissolution of the need for a body. The disembodied mind, then, is not making us free by removing race, gender, ability, and other aspects of our identity dependent on our physicality. The removal of these aspects simply limits our ability to interact with and understand the world around us. Context matters when it exerts influence. One cannot experience something differently if that category of experience is simply removed. The connection between the body and the brain will most likely get reinforced and reimagined in the metaverse rather than being erased.

Merleau-Ponty: Meta-Subjectivity Through Corporeality in the Virtual World

The natural limits of our bodies can be extended in the virtual world, not only enabling our own body to perform beyond the expectations in the real world, but also experiencing another body entirely, i.e., ‘body swapping’ (Bolt et al., 2021; Thériault et al., 2021). By exchanging the body with another existing person or embodying various avatars created in the virtual reality, one can explore, extend and modify the corporeal capacities and the associated

experiences. From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's (2012) body-oriented phenomenology, such changes in the perception as they relate to one's body must necessarily inform the subjectivity as the body and the mind are interconnected with changes in one leading to changes in the other. For example, VR technologies can transform our experiences of our own bodies by shifting the perspective from the body as the starting point of experience to the body being the object of observation. Specifically, the VR performance titled 'The Machine to Be Another' (TMTBA) is designed to create the possibility of swapping the virtual bodies between two different users (Harth et al., 2020; Jarvis, 2019). Such an experience can be achieved when two users are engaged simultaneously, whereby, through a specific VR set-up (e.g., involving live-feed cameras), they are able to see their own self from the point of view of the other person. This experience can be enhanced by instructions and aid from assistants. When successful, the participant experiences their own body as if from a distance – from the point of view of observer (Jarvis, 2019), which can provide new insights and perspectives to the participant.

This experience is different from observing oneself on a recording or through a mirror (in both of these instances the starting point of experience still is the body) as the participants are not used to the sensation of being an onlooker to their own body in real time. This experience creates a contradictory sensation as, rationally, the participants know that they cannot be in a place different from their own body, but the sensory input that they are receiving from their eyes (via a live camera feed in the VR headset) tells them that it is so. This new added perspective on the body can inform the perspective on one's subjectivity more generally as well as on the interconnections with others as our perception of ourselves is informed by our corporeality. For instance, one of the participants in Harth et al. (2020) study was doing the virtual 'swap' through TMTBA with his wife and, having the opportunity to look at himself from a distance, realized

that his physical appearance can be intimidating for his wife. Thus, the experience of distancing from the usual vantage point granted the participant an ability to reflect upon the effect he can have on others, of which he has been previously unaware.

At the same time, it should be noted that this experience of viewing oneself from a distance is not the same as viewing oneself from someone else's perspective – at least not yet. After all, it is still the same person who is doing the observation and reflection upon the body viewed. Thus, there is a limit to the usefulness of the experience in terms of informing our abilities to perceive the world from another person's point of view. The contemporary VR technologies have not yet found a way to reach in this direction. In fact, this is one of the significant limitations of the VR highlighted by Harth et al. (2020):

Unfortunately, today's VR setups lack a focus for a deeper understanding of walking in another's *mental* shoes. These kinds of experiments would have to make elaborate use of another's experiencing, thinking and feeling. However, how could this be made accessible? (p. 10)

Indeed, the question of not only swapping the viewpoint on the own body, but also introducing the elements necessary for one to have a virtual experience that allows to transform temporarily into another person can be fundamental for the future developments in the metaverse.

As unlikely as it appears now even to those who are advancing research into extending our self-understanding through the VR technologies, it is conceivable to theorize possibilities that would enable not just the virtual body swap, but also, at least a partial mental one, leading to the emergence of a version of meta-subjectivity that would be based on the merging of one's subjectivity in real life with one embodied in the metaverse.

First, even if it could not be ensured that one would be able to transform into a specific alternate subjectivity with 100% accuracy – that is, experiencing exactly the same sensations, thoughts, and feelings in response to exposure to the same situations – the aim, at least initially, can be achieving experiences other than one's own. In other words, instead of aiming to virtually inhabit a specific subjectivity (e.g., of a family member) in a way that would not only be indistinguishable to the onlooker, but also would allow one to process the experiences in precisely the same way as the family member would, the focus can be on achieving experiences that one would not typically have were one still inhabiting their own body. This shift in goals of providing a possibility for experiencing an alternative subjectivity to one's own, but not a predetermined one, is done out of necessity. It is currently impractical to aim for a complete swap of body and subjectivity, given that subjectivity depends on many interplays between many different factors. Moreover, even if it were possible, a question then would arise if that were still your own subjectivity, if the thinking and experiencing is exactly the same as that of another person? Aside from being impractical, this does not appear to be desirable either. After all, when we invite someone to walk in our shoes and we attempt it, we want them to understand them better, not to lose ourselves in the process.

However, it is possible to theorize a manner in which one can alter not just the visual perception of one's own body through a VR experience, but the perception of multiple other components as well, such as the way one interacts with others or the way one experiences their embodiment in the metaverse, which, according to Merlau-Ponty (2012), will lead to an altered perception of one's subjectivity. Moreover, instead of inhabiting or observing one's own body in the metaverse, the user can create an avatar that has a body different to their own one in real life. This body can then become an avatar whose background and experiences can be shaped by the

user and that can be different from the user's own life story. In a sense, this could be an exploration of endless 'what ifs' on the part of the user – imagining and living the virtual reality of being in another body that experiences a different life.

Should this be achieved, we can say that a meta-subjectivity that is alternative to, rather than being an extension of, one's subjectivity emerged. For the meta-subjectivity to emerge, therefore, instead of attempting to swap bodies with another real person, the focus should be on creating a realistic avatar in the metaverse that can become inhabited, providing one with a new vantage point – an opening into the world other than one's own body – and thus conceiving the “inconceivable”:

“But when it comes to my body, I never observe it itself. I would need a second body to be able to do so, which would itself be unobservable. When I say that I always perceive my body, these words must not be understood in a merely statistical sense, and there must be something in the presentation of one's own body that renders its absence, or even its variation, inconceivable.” (Merlau-Ponty, 2012, p. 93)

There are two main arguments advanced by Merlau-Ponty (2012) here. One, the body cannot be absent or changed in any significant way. This argument can be countered in the metaverse by inhabiting the avatar that is different to one's self in appearance. The components of such an avatar that are needed to be convincing for a body swap are already known: realistic visual graphics, similarity to the original body (although, with practice, this aspect may be less relevant²), and fluidity of movement, whereby the movements one intends to make are made by

² As one gets more experience inhabiting different bodies in the virtual environment, they may become accustomed to seeing something that diverges significantly from their daily self and still experience it as themselves. Currently, under some conditions, body swapping into a different gender (Bolt et al., 2021) and race (Thériault et al., 2021) has already shown some promise.

the avatar without delay (Harth et al., 2020). The second argument advanced by Merlau-Ponty (2012) is that even if one encounters an ability to use a “second body”, the problem of observability (or rather lack thereof) would not be resolved. However, the “second body” obtained via an avatar in the metaverse can be observed and acted with from a distance – the way a player in a videogame now can act through a first-person view (as if looking through the eyes of the avatar) or a third-person view (ability to view the character in full). In fact, there is some evidence suggesting that the third-person view may not be inferior to first-person view in the ability to produce a sense of immersion in gaming (Black, 2017). Early research into the differences between these viewpoints in VR appears to point that there are some benefits to each of these viewpoints, with first-person view producing a stronger sense of embodiment, but third-person view providing a better sense of spatial awareness, with no differences observed in terms of the sense of agency (Gorisse et al., 2017). Thus, the difficulty with the observability of the “second body” can be overcome via a third-person view of the avatar in the metaverse.

Just inhabiting the avatar, however, can be insufficient for developing new perspectives equivalent to walking in someone else’s mental shoes. At the same time, taking on another’s perspective as if one’s own may not be as radical an idea as it sounds. This can be achievable through exposure to an avatar that is not an empty shell to be entered into, but a character with their own story and accompanied by training for the user. After all, a story is a powerful tool, evident even in such simple mediums as reading books. One can get immersed into the character’s life and associate oneself with a specific book character or with certain characteristics of that character once one is familiarized with the story (Kuiken et al., 2004; Van Horn, 1997). More importantly, when one is acquainted with the story well enough, one can develop a fairly accurate idea of how the main characters behave generally and even anticipate character

reactions (both behavioural and emotional) to certain situations to which the characters are exposed (Donahue & Press, 2014; Komeda et al., 2009). Similar familiarization happens with visual modes of storytelling, such as movies and TV shows, and both book and visual modes of storytelling can have influences on one's life in such aspects as values and relations, for example (Breen et al., 2017). In the metaverse then, the exposure to the avatar's story can be beyond written or visual cues – it can be something the user experiences and it can serve as a form of training, preparing the user to be someone other than who they are in real life. The training period is typical for many games – it can provide both the background of the character and teach the user how to operate the character prior to launching into the game. This form of online interaction is thus fairly familiar to some users.

To achieve the meta-subjectivity in metaverse, I propose that the training should consist of physical and psychological components. For the physical component, the user would have to learn some of the typical movements of the avatar embodied. These do not have to be complicated but should be unique to the avatar in some ways. Again, this is parallel to the training one currently completes in gaming. Before proceeding to the open virtual reality in the metaverse, the user should be able to demonstrate that they can move in ways typical for the selected avatar by completing a trial. Likewise, the user should be exposed to the avatar's story to learn the avatar's characteristics and the encompassing typical behaviours for this avatar. There can also be a test for the psychological component. For example, the avatar may encounter situations requiring some form of action (can be simply engaging in a dialogue with someone). This action must be performed in accordance with the avatar's character in order to be able to proceed. The training, of course, needs to be accessible and interesting. Movements that are too complicated or expectations of specific behaviours in ambiguous situations will not lead to

successful integration of the user with the avatar inhabited. However, the combination of exposure to the background story of the avatar along with learning to move like the avatar and behave like the avatar may produce a much stronger effect, making it possible, at least for some, to inhabit a meta-subjectivity that is substantially different from the user's subjectivity in real life. The ability to do so might also depend on practice.

Outside of trying out different avatars for the fun of it, this ability to inhabit an avatar with a specific story and personality, not just in the corporeal sense, but also in the mental sense, can enhance the user's capacities for understanding others – one of the potential merits of VR particularly highlighted in works aiming at combatting stereotyping and stigmatization (Bolt et al., 2021; Thériault et al., 2021). It can also be used for practical goals, such as helping one choose a career path by experiencing the day-to-day of the job in the virtual world and seeing if that would be of interest. Thus, the metaverse can be seen as a tool with multiple applications, not just another dimension for gaming and other forms of entertainment. Further, if this inhabiting of an avatar and taking on the avatar's subjectivity, a few questions relating to the body-oriented phenomenology arise: How will meta-subjectivity inform one's sense of corporeality? In other words, how will switching between bodies in the virtual world impact the experiencing of one's body in the real world? What potentialities will this have on one's subjectivity in the real world?

By embodying the meta-subjectivity through the aid of the avatar, the user can simultaneously experience a different sense of corporeality and reflect upon the self in the real world from the point of view of the second body. Whereas TMTBA only provides a physical view of one's own body, the meta-subjectivity will allow for reflecting upon the self from the distance of being someone else (the avatar) at the time of reflection. Therefore, in theory, one's

experiences in the real world can be transformed by reflecting upon them while being in the virtual world. Further, following Merleau-Ponty (2012), if one's experience of one's corporeality changes, it informs the subjectivity as well. The nature of the impact on the subjectivity will vary widely, however. It may largely depend on the avatar inhabited and the reflections experienced as a result of the embodied meta-subjectivity. In addition to these reflections potentially carrying positive and negative aspects, one's reaction to them is also unpredictable as one does not have to accept the reflections made while being an avatar, just like we do not necessarily accept the feedback we receive from others in our daily lives.

Metaverse: New Corporeality, New Brain, New Ways of Being

When it comes to the metaverses, individual ways of being, including the users' brains and bodies, are not fixtures – they are dynamic, recombinant systems (Papadopoulos, 2018), capable of changes and of creation of new forms of existence. Within the embodiment ideas, as they relate to the metaverse, one can already see the shift towards the understanding of individual corporeality as changeable and fluid, co-constructed with the environment to which the user is exposed (Ristola, 2025; Zhipu, 2023). In fact, as the body will be mediated through multiple technological media, including avatars, interfaces, and sensory feedback systems, the notion of the fixed self is likely to be replaced with an idea of a fluid or easily changeable self or even multiple selves. Within a distributed network, where anything is possible, the body does not have to be amenable to slow changes, as it is in the real world, and it does not have to be just one body. Moreover, such malleability is not limited to the body. For instance, the idea of recombinant brain advanced by Papadopoulos (2018) – the brain that is plastic and capable of reconfiguring itself – becomes a possibility where the virtual body inhabited by the user is modifiable at a whim and within seconds. Such transformations of the virtual self will likely

require a meta-subjectivity that is capable of quickly accepting the new self, without going through extensive periods of adjustment to the new physical appearance. At the same time, the new physical appearance will likely have an impact on the user's conception of the self (e.g., Taylor & Carlson, 2025), igniting the inherent need for the meta-subjectivity to be fluid and accommodating. Within such a world, the boundaries between the user and the system will be continually blurred and renegotiated.

The capacity for the brain to self-generate and reconfigure on demand is not merely a possibility afforded by the metaverse, it is the current cultural ideal – a vision that the brain is endlessly improvable, hackable and adaptable (Papadopoulos, 2018). This vision aligns with a form of secular creationsim, grounded in the belief that individuals can, through mastery of neurophysiological processes, create new forms of life, consciousness and existence (Papadopoulos, 2011). In the metaverse, this belief may take on a concrete expression in the proliferation of brain-computer interfaces, cognitive enhancement technologies, and immersive neurofeedback systems. The development of these technologies, therefore, promises not only greater cognitive control but also a form of self-authorship – recasting the users as engineers of their own neurobiological structures. Yet this promise of neuro-enhanced agency, along with the promises of new possibilities that it carries, must also be examined in light of the politics of neurogovernance (Nazaripour, 2024; Williamson et al., 2025). For instance, neurobiological modulation may as easily become a site of new variations of biopower, wherein the imperative to optimize the self becomes a normative goal (Anidjar et al., 2023; Ling, 2023). Consequently, within this framework, the meta-subjectivity may become a neuroeconomic project – constantly upgrading and endlessly malleable, yet always with the outlook of improving the self under the pressure to conform to metrics of productivity, focus, and enhanced performance.

At the same time, the brain's plasticity also holds a potential for resistance. When the brain-technology systems are understood as the foundation of meta-subjectivity which affords the users new capabilities, the new brains and the emergent meta-subjectivity may become the site of empowerment and control. The very quality that makes the brain a target for optimization – its capacity to change – is also what can allow for the invention of new forms of being. In the metaverse, this might mean exploring non-normative forms of embodiment and subjectivity: avatars that defy human proportions, identities that transcend gender and race, and perceptual environments that alter the very structure of sensory experience. These are not merely aesthetic choices but can be considered to be neural interventions – experiments in rewriting the self through digital environments, a possibility for a truly autocreative brain (Papadopoulos, 2018). This can radically transform the way the user experiences being-in-the-meta-world and, consequently, in the real world. By engaging the brain's capacity for plasticity in unexpected, even subversive ways, users can articulate new neuro-social relations that escape the constraints of neuro-normativity. In this sense, resistance is not located outside the system but emerges within its logic – through the reappropriation and redirection of the tools of modulation themselves. In other words, the very attraction of the metaverse as a radically free world where anything is possible is precisely what will allow the users to imagine and try living in a world that is alternative to the current systems in place (not just another variation of the same).

Finally, it should be noted that the meta-subjectivity that may emerge will be neither biologically determined nor completely digitally autonomous (as immersive as the virtual experience may be, there will still be the user's body that needs to connect to the virtual world in order to function there). Thus, the meta-subjectivity will be continually shaped through recursive interactions between the brain, body, environment, and technology. The users will not simply be

inhabitants of the new virtual surroundings, they will be shaped and, to some extent, produced by the digital environments they choose to engage with. The subjectivity in the metaverse, thus, cannot be understood solely in terms of agency or representation. For some users, it will not be simply an extension or modification of their real world subjectivity, but will take on a life of its own, in some ways independent of one's subjectivity in the real world. For these users, the meta-subjectivity will emerge as part of the neuro-digital entanglement – a process in which the self will be modulated, distributed, and recombined across organic and artificial domains. The metaverse, then, is not just a new medium but a new space with its own systems and structures that can be similar but can also be completely different from the real world. In the metaverse that aims to provide an alternative to the real world, the self will be seen as fluid, the embodiment will be redefined, and the meta-subjectivity will be seen as a new possibility, capable of going beyond digital space as entertainment into the new realm that challenges the current social and political structures.

Conclusion: Reflection on Existential-Phenomenological Traditions for Theorizing Meta-Subjectivity

The existential-phenomenological traditions offer rich and diverse frameworks for theorizing meta-subjectivity within the metaverse, emphasizing lived experience, embodiment, and the situated nature of selfhood. Rooted in the conceptualizations of such thinkers as Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, these traditions highlight that subjectivity is not a detached, abstract essence but a dynamic mode of engaging with the world. When applied to the metaverse – a digitally constructed space that can both mimic and completely reframe physical reality – these perspectives compel one to consider what it means to inhabit metaverse as a place and how virtual embodiment, presence, and intersubjective encounters may reshape our

understanding of the self. For example, the question of whether the metaverse constitutes a place that is separate from the real world is bound up with how individuals dwell, orient themselves, and project meaning. For instance, for Heidegger (1971), being in a place is not passive, but is necessarily intertwined with acting. In this light, the metaverse challenges conceptions of a place, such as those advanced by Augé (2000), that would render it essentially a non-place existence due to the virtual being inherently grounded in the material real world (e.g., the technologies producing the metaverse must be supported in the real world). However, the user's being-in-the-meta-world is less concerned with the practicality of the technologies involved and more with the experiences – if one engages in the virtual world and cares for the outcomes of one's being and interacting in that world, the experience is not that different from one's being in the real world. In other words, the user's experience is what determines whether the metaverse is a place – if one's engagement in the metaverse is meaningful, it becomes a space of new possibilities.

Further, in virtual spaces, where the users may engage a variety of avatars and navigate digital environments, the tension between authenticity of the virtual experience and the limitations of the real world becomes especially salient. The metaverse may offer expanded forms of self-expression and freedom, but it also risks detaching one's subjectivity from the grounding of the physical body and the material world (through which our experiences and self-understanding are continuously modulated), potentially reducing the lived experience to a mere simulation. Phenomenologically, this raises questions about whether such experiences maintain the depth and coherence required for considering the experiences to be authentic, or whether they signal a fragmentation of being. Of course, one of these options does not have to prevail over the other. For some users, developing a meta-subjectivity will be a self-evident, organic outcome in response to the new embodiment possibilities. That is to say, the users who will easily emerge

into the new environments and embrace inhabiting the new digital bodies, who will be open to experiencing something outside of the realm of possibilities in the real world, will very likely be the users for whom meta-subjectivity will be simply an adaptation to the new circumstances. For other users, such experiences may be more problematic, making the altered corporeality of the metaverse a disconcerting rather than liberating experience. Thus, the phenomenological approaches pose important questions relating to the multiple potentialities of embodiment experiences within the metaverse.

Finally, aside from the important implications for the self that are considered here, the existential-phenomenological lens also invites a critical reflection on the ontological and political potentialities of being and experiencing in the virtual worlds. Specifically, as the metaverse is a domain of disembodied interaction where self-representation is easily modifiable, the traditional notions of being-in-the-world can be examined, decoupling them from physicality, thus reframing existence as a mediated and contingent phenomenon. Phenomenologically, the experience of the virtual disrupts the immediacy and authenticity of lived experience, introducing layers of abstraction that can both expand and alienate the self. Politically, this decentering of embodied beings holds emancipatory potential by enabling fluid identities and subversive modes of relationality. Thus, the meta-subjectivity can emerge as a site of tension where existential freedom confronts structural power and where the question of what it means 'to be' can be reexamined in a new light.

Chapter 5: Meditations on Meta-Subjectivity: Engaging Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology

In this chapter, I try to bring all relevant conceptualizations of the subjectivity in the virtual worlds together and examine the application of current psychological theories of subjectivities to the concept of meta-subjectivity. Broadly speaking, meta-subjectivity is a new form of subjectivity that may emerge in some users of the metaverse. It is a new concept that has not yet been articulated. I believe that this concept is needed as the subjectivities that may emerge as a result of exposure to and immersion into the metaverse will be very different from the subjectivities that have already been described in relation to the user engagement with the online world, such as online subjectivity or virtual subjectivity. While these conceptualizations aim to capture and describe the subjectivities experienced when engaged in the online world, using the same concepts to describe the user subjectivities in a new setting will not be productive and may lead to conceptual confusion. After all, the metaverse, in a sense, will be a transitory experience, a bridge between the real-world experiences (e.g., with the ability to mimic and enhance some of the real-world experiences) and the user's online presence. Thus, online or virtual subjectivity, already established as concepts capturing the latter in contrast to the real world (Gualeni & Vella, 2020; Wark, 2019) are rather limited when the aim is to analyze the experiences in the metaverse context, which can have deep and meaningful engagements drawing on the real-world experiences. Moreover, my conceptualization of meta-subjectivity is not focused on identifying one specific way in which meta-subjectivity emerges and manifests itself. Rather than being a unified concrete subjectivity that has specific characteristics (e.g., neoliberal subjectivity (Dean, 2017) or fascist subjectivity (Teo, 2021)), meta-subjectivity is characterized by the context within which it is formed – the metaverse – and by its distinction

from the user's subjectivity in the real world. In other words, it is possible to develop a meta-subjectivity only when engaged in some activities in the metaverse and the developed meta-subjectivity is a form of subjectivity that is different from the user's subjectivity in the real world.

Thus, I am interested in exploring the possible implications for the study of subjectivity within today's fast-changing technological landscapes, particularly by paying attention to the future potentialities. Specifically, I explore how my concept of meta-subjectivity allows to advance our understanding of subjectivity as it will be evolving with the introduction and implementation of the metaverses. My theorization of the meta-subjectivity relies on psychological analysis of the potential impacts of the technological developments, both the existing ones and, more importantly, the ones upcoming with the introduction of *virtual* web and the metaverse. While there are different disciplines that examine the impacts of technological developments, such as science and technology studies (STS), and I have drawn on some conceptualizations developed outside of the boundaries of the psychological discipline, the aim of the dissertation is nonetheless to remain focused on the psychological perspective in order to provide a theoretical overview of the potentialities of the metaverse for the subjectivities. Thus, I begin by briefly outlining the key discussions of meta-subjectivity from the three approaches outlined in this dissertation: critical traditions, psychoanalytic traditions, and existential-phenomenological traditions. These outlines serve to highlight the different perspectives on meta-subjectivity that can be conceptualized as well as their implications. Next, I provide some overarching considerations for the development of meta-subjectivity and the importance of exploring its potentialities in advance. The main idea here is not to try to predict which of the traditions described better addresses the meta-subjectivity. I argue that there are multiple

possibilities for the development of the metaverses and for the emergence of meta-subjectivities. Moreover, these possibilities are not mutually exclusive. It is also important to note that the theorizing I offer from the different perspectives is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative, showing that there are multiple approaches that can be undertaken, and they can lead to a variety of outcomes.

Consequently, I believe that one of the goals of psychology in engaging with conceptualizing meta-subjectivity should be to try to identify some of the preferable ways for the meta-subjectivities to develop, i.e., in ways that are subversive to the current neoliberal trends, ways that produce counter-narratives and allow for sociotechnical imaginaries that bring about change in the virtual and, perhaps, in the real world.

Finally, I also indicate the limitations of this work and discuss ways in which they may be addressed in the future, paying attention to both theoretical and empirical routes. My dissertation relies on existing literature pertaining to current technological developments and their possible impacts on subjectivity, concentrating on theorizing meta-subjectivity. My interpretation of this literature and its application to theorizing the possible outcomes in the future may serve as a starting point for the discussions that we, as psychologists, must have. In order to have such discussions and to provide a critical view that avoids blind techno-optimism, we need to develop a new set of concepts that helps us capture the new phenomena. My hope is that this work is a steppingstone in that direction.

Theorizing Meta-Subjectivity: Brief Summary of the Approaches

Each of the approaches undertaken for investigating the meta-subjectivity potentialities has yielded a number of implications, stemming both from the diversity of the theoretical perspectives within each approach and from the inherent flexibility in the development of the

new technologies. Thus, here I try to consolidate and systematize the theorizing presented in the previous chapters (see Table 1 for an outline of the main components of each of the theoretical approaches). It should be reiterated that the approaches used in this work were chosen to examine the different aspects contributing to the formation of the user's subjectivity: thinking, feeling and being/embodiment. Thus, these approaches do not integrate in a predictable manner (at least, not at this point when the metaverses have not been launched yet), but rather provide an overview of the range of interpretative theoretical perspectives within their corresponding traditions.

Critical Traditions

As neoliberal values are fairly embedded in everyday lives of many people (Cahill, 2020; Cerny, 2008), the users embracing these values are likely to develop a meta-subjectivity that is consistent with the neoliberal views as a result of engagement with the metaverse. In fact, there is a possibility that the metaverse will incline the users towards adopting such a subjectivity through the immersion experiences that will make neoliberal-leaning meta-subjectivity most adaptive to the presented contexts. Thus, there is a strong possibility that, if left unchecked, the meta-subjectivity that aligns well with the neoliberal values and norms will be one of the most prevalent forms that emerges. This form of subjectivity emphasizes individualism, self-reliance, and relentless self-optimization (all traits easy enough to adopt and augment in a virtual environment), pushing users to prioritize personal branding and success over any other meaningful goals, such as forming social connections and relationships (Leme, 2023; Nehring & Röcke, 2024; Zreik, 2024). In a sense, then, this adaptation of the *virtual* web technologies can be seen as an extension of the existing trends in *dynamic* web, particularly with the way social media use has developed and perpetuated the neoliberal thinking applied towards the self and

Table 1*Summary of Perspectives on Meta-Subjectivity*

	Critical Traditions		Psychoanalytic Traditions	Existential-Phenomenological Traditions
	Embracing neoliberal values	Resisting neoliberal values		
Conceptualization of Meta-Subjectivity	as an improved self	as a form of dissent	as potential for self-transformation	as alternative ways of being
Beneficial Potentialities	Easily fit into the neoliberal structures by perceived freedom to experiment with avatars	- Anonymity - Step outside existing boundaries	- Self-exploration - Addressing ongoing issues that are difficult to amend in the real world	- New ways to experience embodiment - Explore the self and others' identities by challenging norms
Problematic Potentialities	- Idealized meta-subjectivity may lead to resentment towards real world subjectivity - Surveillance and self-discipline through soft biopower	- Difficulties associated with going 'against the flow': isolation, loneliness, exclusion	- Metaverse as escape from reality - Self-fragmentation - Addiction	- Neurogovernance - Pressures to optimize the self to fit into the existing norms
Broad Implications	Extending the current neoliberal structures and power relations into the new digital environments	Collective agency and resistance through reimagining a new social structure in the new environment	Metaverse can be a useful tool from the psychological perspective, but needs guidance and oversight	Possibility of empowerment to disrupt current notions of normativity in psychological, social and political structures

actively engaged in forming the neoliberal subjectivities (Iványi, 2023; Türken et al., 2016).

However, in the metaverse, these tendencies may intensify, with hyper-individualism enabled by AI technologies and customizable avatars that can replace real interactions. Building and maintaining relationships in the real world requires effort and involves risks (e.g., one may be misunderstood or rejected), while being in a virtual world may offer perpetual availability of an understanding companion, albeit one based on AI technologies. There are online users already engaged in a variety of relationships with AI through chat (Alabed et al., 2024; Fernandez-Borsot, 2025), making this potentially even more appealing when one cannot know for sure in the metaverse who is behind the avatar, a real world human or an AI? Moreover, in the metaverse, avatar personalization could become a primary mode of self-expression, shifting the focus of self-improvement and potentially deepening the disconnect between the users' real and virtual selves. This disparity may worsen the mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression, as users might increasingly favour their idealized lives in the metaverse performed by their idealized meta-subjectivities over the real-world experiences, mirroring and potentially exacerbating the issues already seen with current social media use (Braghieri et al., 2022; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

Further, from a Foucauldian perspective, the meta-subjectivity that will emerge in the metaverse will be shaped by the intersection of power, knowledge, and technology (Bergen & Verbeek, 2021; Heyes, 2014), particularly through such mechanisms as surveillance, soft biopolitics, and self-regulation (Dorrestijn, 2012; Gamez, 2023; Rodríguez-López, 2023). Despite the potential for anonymity and decentralization in the virtual world (and the unlimited freedom these promise), the users will still likely construct relatively stable avatars bound by social norms and expectations, leading to self-discipline, much like the digital panopticon in

dynamic web (Carbone & Lingua, 2023). While *virtual* web promotes greater privacy and user control, corporate interests will likely find ways to collect data through incentives and platform control, undermining possibilities for true autonomy by offering to exchange anonymity for enhanced access to a variety of features, for example. Moreover, avatar creation according to the users' own desires may appear to be liberating, but as long as it remains mediated by technological, economic, and cultural forces to which all users are exposed, the choices made are likely to reinforce existing power structures rather than dismantling them. Ultimately, while the users may feel empowered by the freedom to express unique identities, this freedom is embedded within and limited by the broader frameworks of control and societal norms that will likely continue to operate in the metaverse.

Nevertheless, the critical traditions also offer an exploration going beyond the critiques of neoliberalism and the power structures that will exert influences on the emerging meta-subjectivity. The new spaces and possibilities of the metaverse will likely offer potentialities for new forms of agency and resistance as well. Particularly, the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries (developed within the STS) is well-suited to considering such potentialities as it draws attention to the possibilities offered by collective envisioning of the future, rather than focusing only on individual engagement with the developing technologies (Jasanoff & Kim, 2019; Kuchler & Stigson, 2024). The sociotechnical imaginaries are, essentially, collectively held visions of desirable futures shaped by science, technology, and social values (Jasanoff & Kim, 2019). They offer an opportunity to critically consider the directions in which the technologies are being developed prior to the implementation of these technologies. Through collective efforts, signaling what the social expectations and desires of the users are, the sociotechnical imaginaries have the capacity to also question the current prevailing ideologies

and power structures (Kuchler & Stigson, 2024)). As metaverses are still in early stages of development, the future potential users have a unique opportunity to influence the direction of the development by articulating both what they hope for, including ways of ensuring decentralizations and anonymity, and what they wish to avoid, such as excessive commodification or the possible mental health harms. Storytelling and narrative construction can be powerful tools for shaping the sociotechnical imaginaries, helping to guide the future technologies toward more inclusive, ethical, and human-centred outcomes (Roßmann, 2021). Thus, if the users fail to engage critically and creatively now, while there is still time to influence the directions of the metaverse development, the future meta-subjectivities may be molded primarily by corporate interests. However, if collective, thoughtful imaginaries are developed, they can challenge the existing systems and foster more empowering digital futures.

Psychoanalytic Traditions

The metaverse, like other digital technologies, will likely impact the users unevenly – some will ignore it, others will engage with it briefly or in a limited capacity, and a subset will likely have their lives transformed by it. This transformation, from a psychoanalytic perspective, may give rise to meta-subjectivity, a new mode of selfhood that may exist between the real and the imaginary. For individuals, this emergent subjectivity offers both therapeutic potentialities and psychological risks. It can serve as a powerful tool for self-exploration and transformation, providing a space to experiment with identity free from the real world constraints, allowing one to explore different personality traits and behaviours through the avatar, making it safe for the real world subjectivity to engage in what would be perceived as taking a risk were it done in the real world with real people (Schermer, 2018; Van der Geest et al., 2012). On the other hand, if the users become too immersed – viewing their virtual self as more desirable or as a more

authentic representation of their identity than their real world subjectivity – they may retreat from reality, potentially exacerbating dissatisfaction with life or certain aspects of it and worsening mental health issues. The key question, then, is whether meta-subjectivity will be seen by the users as an opportunity to, among other things, work on their self-understanding or will be used as a form of avoidance. Therefore, for the users that do develop the meta-subjectivity, its impact will depend on how these users navigate the tension between their virtual and real identities, using the metaverse either as an escapist fantasy or a space for meaningful psychic growth.

Ultimately, the metaverse offers a space where subjectivity can be fluid, experimental and be exposed to new immersive virtual experiences. Just as real world subjectivity is shaped by relationships and culture (Gill, 2008; Lara et al., 2017; Ortner, 2005), the meta-subjectivity will likely be molded by the unique environments and interactions the users will encounter in the virtual spaces, which can amplify or distort experiences in unprecedented ways. Psychoanalytic perspectives thus provide a valuable lens to examine how unconscious processes, desires and symbolic meanings (Bernet, 2020; Civitarese, 2016) might be reconfigured in the metaverse, giving rise to versions of the self that are both recognizable and radically different. While some users may remain largely unaffected, others may undergo profound shifts in self-perception, which can offer opportunities for growth or lead to risks, like self-fragmentation or addiction to the metaverse experiences. Recognizing these varied outcomes, there is a need to anticipate the psychological, social and ethical implications of meta-subjectivity as virtual existence may become integrated into daily lives.

Existential-Phenomenological Traditions

While the real world presents many obstacles that hinder individuals from realizing a range of potential ways of expressing themselves (Inglehart & Oyserman, 2004), the virtual world – especially the metaverse – offers a more accessible space for exploring alternative identities and possibilities. However, despite its promise of expanded freedom, the metaverse also imposes limitations, such as ownership of avatars, behavioural norms and potential for regulation, which can constrain the users' self-expression. From a Heideggerian perspective, for meta-subjectivity to develop, two conditions must be met: the users must see their existence in the metaverse as an alternative to, not merely an extension of, the real world, and they must pursue goals unique to the virtual space. This perspective thus differs from both critical traditions and psychoanalytic traditions in its insistence on necessarily treating the metaverse as a space of its own where one can develop a new way of being – being-in-the-meta-world, which is not dependent on one's being-in-the-world. Within the critical and psychoanalytic traditions, it is assumed that a meta-subjectivity congruent with real world objectives may emerge (e.g., for critical traditions, it may be a subversive subjectivity or, for the psychoanalytic ones, it may be a subjectivity that helps the user overcome some concerns experienced in the real world with more ease). Yet from the existential-phenomenological perspective, a meta-subjectivity cannot be considered separately from one's subjectivity in the real world if its purpose continues to be concerned with the real world problems. Here, the metaverse serves to enable the users to rethink and reshape the self by engaging with multiple avatars and identities, thus opening up new existential possibilities to be explored for their own merits.

The metaverse, therefore, has a potentiality to radically reshape the concepts of selfhood, embodiment and subjectivity by enabling the users to adopt fluid, changeable ways of being. The

brain and body plasticity in the metaverse mean that both will no longer be fixed entities, but dynamic, reconfigurable systems co-constructed with digital environments. Technologies, such as avatars, brain-computer interfaces, and neurofeedback, enable rapid transformations of the virtual self (Gholizadeh HamAbadi et al., 2024; Han et al., 2023; Mitsea et al., 2025), fostering the emergence of a meta-subjectivity that adapts quickly to new identities and appearances.

While this flexibility opens up possibilities for self-authorship, alternative way of being and empowerment, it also raises concerns about neurogovernance, where the users may feel pressured to optimize themselves according to normative standards of productivity and performance rather than pursuing their own goals. Still, the same brain plasticity that invites regulation also allows for resistance, enabling the users to explore non-normative identities and perceptual experiences that challenge dominant cultural and neurological norms. After all, the meta-subjectivity in the metaverse is not purely digital or biological but emerges from a recursive interaction between brain, body, technology, and environment – creating a new, fluid form of selfhood that can disrupt existing social and political structures.

Conceptualizing Meta-Subjectivity

The conceptualization of meta-subjectivity is an original idea developed in this dissertation allowing me to theorize a potential new user subjectivity in relation to a specific set of upcoming virtual experiences that will emerge with the introduction of *virtual* web and the metaverse. While the user subjectivities have been explored from a psychological perspective in *static* web (e.g., Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Davis, 2001) and are extensively studied in *dynamic* web (e.g., Arola, 2010; Balaji & Murthy, 2019; Bruns, 2013), my work focuses on the upcoming transition in the user digital environment, pre-emptively considering the potentialities of exposure to the metaverse. As the different theoretical traditions employed evidence, there is no

one meta-subjectivity at this point, but a series of possibilities for the development and expression of this new form of subjectivity. Finalizing the concept is not feasible for now as it is difficult to predict exactly how the metaverse will look, which of the proposed functions and options will be introduced, what interface the users will need to engage with the metaverse, etc. Moreover, the recent developments in the field of artificial intelligence also contribute to the ambiguity of how the metaverses that will be launched will operate (Yang et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, theorizing the potentialities of meta-subjectivity is important in order to consider the implications of the new technologies ahead of their introduction. To this end, the theoretical perspectives employed for theorizing were particularly successful in the analysis as they were helpful in exploring the conceptualization of the meta-subjectivity in a more universal way, providing an overarching theorization that can be developed further in a more nuanced way using other theoretical approaches. Moreover, the theoretical traditions chosen enhance the originality of the conceptual approach as they provide an opportunity to explore the thinking (critical traditions), feeling (psychoanalytical traditions) and being/embodiment (existential-phenomenological traditions) that may emerge in the metaverse for those users who develop a meta-subjectivity. The theoretical traditions used in this dissertation are reinterpreted and extended to encompass the digital paradigm within which the meta-subjectivity will emerge. Thus, while drawing on established theoretical traditions for analyzing subjectivities, I also rely on theoretical innovation in order to apply the theories to the potentialities that are not yet present but may become a part of our everyday lives once the metaverses are introduced and if they become ubiquitous.

Meta-subjectivity, thus, can emerge through a variety of routes and can take on diverse directions in its development. It is a form of subjectivity that is clearly distinct from the virtual

subjectivity, which can be considered to be supplementing real world subjectivity. The meta-subjectivity will be a step towards erasing the boundary between the virtual and the real, offering continuity rather than episodic engagement typical for virtual subjectivity. Meta-subjectivity will likely operate as an infrastructural condition of everyday social, economic, and affective life. Under these conditions, subjectivity will be shaped continuously through hybrid environments, rendering virtual mediation a taken-for-granted condition of experience rather than a discrete realm of interaction. It is not a given, as some users will not engage deeply enough with the metaverse to develop a meta-subjectivity. However, for those who do, there will likely be multiple new opportunities to explore that are not mutually exclusive. For instance, just because some user may start off with the idea of the metaverse being a place where one can quickly and nearly effortlessly work on self-improvement, it does not mean that this user will never come to consider the metaverse as a place for developing an entirely new way of being. Thus, the different perspectives offered here through the theoretical and philosophical psychological traditions are meant to demonstrate that the inherent flexibility of the metaverse means that there are wide-ranging possibilities for responses towards it by the different users and even for the same users who will be exposed to different experiences within the metaverse and especially those who will spend substantial time engaged in the new virtual worlds.

In part, then, how the users engage with the metaverse will depend on their subjectivity in the real world and the objectives that they have in mind when connecting to the virtual world. In part, it will also depend on the users' location in terms of the social connections (e.g., are the users satisfied with their relationships or are experiencing loneliness?) and political engagement (e.g., do the users embrace neoliberal capitalist values or are seeking for ways to undermine them?). Another large component of the way the users' experiences develop will depend on the

expectations they have of the metaverse. For instance, if the expectations will be based on the advertisements produced by the companies launching their versions of the metaverse, they will likely be aligned with the current neoliberal tendencies. However, if the users will be exposed to other possibilities (e.g., new opportunities for self-exploration rather than self-molding to fit in or engaging in subversive political actions), there will likely be a number of them who will be interested in at least seeing what potentialities the metaverse has to offer outside of those outlined by those trying to sell a product.

Thus, I argue that the discussions about the upcoming metaverses and their possibilities are important now, while the potential future users can be introduced to the ideas of exploring the metaverse as a place that can be an alternative to, not just a mere extension of, the real world. The ideas of using the metaverse as a place of disruption, or as a therapeutic environment, or as an entirely new and previously unavailable experience (e.g., being someone else or living in a different historical time) can be discussed now. There is nothing inherently beneficial or harmful in the technological developments. In fact, as Turkle (2016) reminds us, what matters the most is our ability to use the technology with intentionality, keeping in mind that it is a tool, not a substitute for our self-reflection, social relationships, or sociopolitical engagements.

Engaging Theoretical and Philosophical Approaches in Psychology

The technological developments and their impacts on various aspects of our lives are longstanding topics of investigation, with periodical surges in interest when new tools become available (Brosnan, 2002; Kool & Agrawal, 2016; Mustapha et al., 2022). For instance, in the last few years, following the introduction of ChatGPT at the end of 2022 (Wu et al., 2023), discussions of AI and its current and potential future capacities have firmly entered both the public and academic discourses (Beghetto, 2023; Carstens & Friess, 2024; Van Noordt & Tangi,

2023). However, more often than not, these considerations carry overarching connotations, such as whether AI is coming for people's jobs (Marcin, 2025), stifling creativity (Moustaghfir & Chankob, 2025), or even whether it is an existential threat (Xu et al., 2024).

As important as such discussions are, they may be more useful when they happen in anticipation, whereby there is time to influence the direction of the development of the technologies, rather than as afterthoughts. Moreover, psychology as a field may offer the consideration of potentialities for one's mental life in addition to the larger social and cultural changes. Such considerations, by necessity, have to rely on nonrepresentational methods as envisioning future possibilities cannot be done comprehensively via natural-scientific methods and must rely on theorizing (Teo, 2024). In fact, integrative processes that take into consideration a variety of aspects of mental life as it is experienced within specific sociohistorical, cultural and political conditions require synthesizing from a variety of perspectives rather than trying to divide the whole into sizable parts to be investigated in isolation from each other and from the larger social influences. That is not to say that empirical research is not valuable. It simply is not the only way to acquire knowledge, especially when it comes to studying human subjectivity (Teo, 2024). In fact, I do draw on the existing studies in order to complement and further inform the theoretical and philosophical approaches adapted in this dissertation where it is appropriate. However, these studies do not form the core of my arguments as they are limited to what is available now technologically, both in terms of the experiences to which users' may be exposed and in terms of systematically recording and interpreting these experiences (e.g., Bolt et al., 2021; Çankaya, 2019). Therefore, while they do provide some substantive information in terms of the current state of affairs, the possibilities for

the future cannot necessarily be extended from these experiences, as making linear extrapolations is a rather limited way for envisioning the future potentialities.

Thus, my goal in this dissertation is not to provide a systematic overview of the meta-subjectivity that will emerge as a result of the users' experiences in the metaverse. In fact, I argue that the emergence of meta-subjectivity is a potentiality, not an inevitability. However, given that this potentiality may (and likely will) emerge for some users, I believe it is useful to consider how the meta-subjectivity may develop and what some of its potential implications are, both in for the individual and in terms of broader, societal implications. Such theoretical and philosophical speculations may inform potential ways of engaging with the technologies as they emerge – not just as another component of everyday life, but as a potential sphere of influence where one's agency can lead to the development of new practices, discourses, questions, and explorations that are guided by the users' intentional critical engagement within the metaverse.

One way such a possibility can be explored is if one considers in advance that the new technological tools being developed do not have to be used in the way their developers envision them. After all, artists creating their art and writers publishing their books, irrespective of the intentions they have in terms of the messages they are trying to convey through their work, do not have control over how those messages are understood, interpreted and used. Similarly, while the metaverse may be created in line with the current neoliberal capitalist tendencies, that is not to say that it will not be possible to make use of it in subversive actions. Thus, by considering the ways in which the status quo can be challenged, how the new technologies and the subjectivities that emerge may be transformative for the individuals and for the society, the psychological theorizing I engage in aims to make these possibilities more tenable in the future, to give them a more structured and concrete potentiality. As subjectivity remains a fluid project, open to

changes and transformations, so too the psychological armchair theorizing and reflection is necessary to gain better, if incomplete, understanding of the human mental life (Teo, 2024).

Indeed, there are multiple beneficial potentialities that the users may explore in the metaverses. However, they are not a given and it should not be taken for granted that opportunities for meaningful engagement and user agency will be easily and readily available. First, in order for the users to achieve the benefits associated with the virtual experiences, they must be aware of their existence and of the different ways in which they can approach the metaverse. Of course, the most readily available mode of engagement will be aligned with the neoliberal structures as this mode will likely be the one advertised by the companies promoting their versions of the metaverse. In fact, as the metaverse projects are envisioned by the developing companies as opportunities to benefit financially, the modes of use of the metaverse that will be advertised will necessarily guide the users towards the goals set out by the companies.

Consequently, one of the roles of theoretical and philosophical psychology is to envisage other potentialities that would benefit the users without supporting the existing power structures. For example, there can be created a set of avatars based on real-world people's experiences that allows the users to explore a variety of different perspectives. If these avatars are easy to access (e.g., free for use and offer a wide range of options, such as different ages, genders, backgrounds, etc.) and are placed in realistic settings that share someone's story, the users will be able to participate in meaningful interactions that help them learn more about others and, perhaps, themselves in the process. Of course, there will be services offering these kinds of experiences for profit. However, if creating such avatars is an easy process, such an opportunity to engage does not have to be monetized.

Such potentialities can be considered and explored now, ensuring that the information about possible problematic potentialities is also considered in advance. Thus, psychologists can offer guidance for harm reduction (this can be adjusted as more studies on existing and emerging technologies are done) and even consider a variety of interventions, drawing on current knowledge of the problematic use of a variety of technologies, combined with anticipated future issues. Certainly, such guidance and interventions would have to be amended as more information becomes available. However, starting early and ensuring that psychological knowledge is used to contribute to the discussions of the upcoming technologies may help prepare some of the users. Moreover, drawing on past experiences with technologies, we can also consider who are the users who would benefit the most from early interventions and how these users can be reached. For instance, if the interventions need to focus on children or adolescents, it is probably most beneficial to develop guidance for the parents who will likely have some control over the different aspects of their children's engagement in the metaverse, such as time spent there and accessibility of certain services. As parental controls that currently exist for approaching problematic internet use tend to be limited (Lukavská et al., 2020; Martins et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2023), this is one area which needs to be considered and addressed prior to the implementation of metaverses.

More broadly, early considerations and development of informed discussions, conceptualizations, interventions, and guidance can help in breaking the cycle of psychology as a field being complicit in normalizing and reproducing the existing power structures. Psychology, despite longstanding critique, is still grappling with the outcomes of its various unethical historical involvements as well as contemporary perpetuation of the existing norms that are implicated in reproducing inequalities (Canham, 2018; Shapiro, 1999). However, the

development of new technologies offers an opportunity to take a different route. As more information becomes available and further considerations are brought forth, it would be naïve to consider only the positive aspects of the upcoming technologies, both on the individual and on the sociopolitical levels. Ensuring that the technologies are used to the benefit requires intentionality (Turkle, 2016), which can take on a variety of forms, such as establishing some limitations on their use prior to the technologies becoming ubiquitous and leading to a number of well-anticipated or new issues. As we truly cannot predict how the metaverses will impact our subjectivities, including the new possibilities of the meta-subjectivities, it is best to proceed with caution, to learn from the mistakes of the past rather than dismissing them as individual failures that need to be addressed at the individual level. For instance, the problematic internet use and gaming affects about 10% of the undergraduate students, with negative outcomes in terms of both academic performance and mental health (Stevens et al., 2020). Thus, in order to address the upcoming challenges that will be presented by the metaverses, including for the development of meta-subjectivities, practical measures need to be developed in advance. Psychologists can play a key role in this, in consultation with a variety of other specialists (e.g., science and technology studies scholars) as well as be informed by the experiences and expectations of the lived experience experts of a variety of technologies already available, including gaming, VR and other augmented reality technologies.

Limitations

One of the most challenging limitations for this dissertation is related to its most basic premise – that of anticipating and theorizing future possibilities. Currently, there is very little practical information regarding the metaverses, from the hardware that will be required to the virtual worlds that will be accessible – all is more or less speculative at the moment. This

information is needed to enable one to build the theorizations more definitively. However, such information will likely be available only much closer to the launch of the metaverses, at which point much of their mechanisms will be in place and not very amenable to change. Thus, while optimally one would have access to the current developments in order to influence them, in the absence of such an option, the potentialities should still be considered, drawing on what little information is accessible now. When it comes to technologies, of course we can draw on the historical developments to see how the technologies of the past have been developed, introduced and integrated into our daily lives. Nevertheless, the historical insights should not be treated as direct parallels as the technological developments and their implementations are not linear (Rega, 2022). Further, while there do exist some indications of what the metaverses can look like, based on the previous experimentations with virtual reality as well as the new VR technologies being tested, it is not clear how the technological companies developing the metaverses will implement these experiences, if at all. Thus, there is not enough practical information available at the moment to extrapolate the full scope of potential experiences within the metaverses, which consequently limits the theorization of the implications of such experiences for the subjectivities of the users.

Another limitation is related to the theoretical and philosophical approaches taken. A variety of other perspectives, especially from other branches of the social sciences and humanities, could further contribute to the investigations of the implications of the metaverses for subjectivities. While the focus on psychological approaches allows for a greater focus on the considerations of possible future impacts for individual users, it is not the only route through which such considerations could be contemplated. Moreover, there is an entire field – science and technology studies – that is dedicated to investigating the scientific and technological

impacts on a broader scale, taking into account the contexts in which the technologies are developed and implemented. Combining knowledge generated in this and other disciplines with the psychological investigations undertaken in this dissertation can enhance our understanding of the upcoming metaverses and their impacts on the user subjectivities in a more nuanced way.

Finally, it is unclear how the metaverses will be taken up by the users. In this dissertation, it is assumed that the metaverses will eventually be widely available, accessible and in demand. However, at least at the early stages of their implementation, the costs may be prohibitive for many users, considering that it is likely that there will be need for equipment for virtual and augmented reality experiences. Even if the costs will be manageable, the next question is whether there is a potential for the metaverses to be as ubiquitous as social media, for example, or whether they will rely on more targeted audiences, such as those engaged in video gaming. In either case, the deliberations presented in this dissertation would be relevant, but in the latter instance, the number of users to whom it would apply would be much more limited. Of course, there is a third possibility that, despite the time, effort and resources invested into developing the metaverses, the users simply will not engage in the virtual worlds created. We have seen examples of this in the past with platforms, such as Second Life (Kuntze et al., 2013), gaining some popularity at launch, but never becoming a widespread phenomenon.

Notwithstanding these limitations, it is nevertheless important to consider the implications of the metaverses for subjectivities. Even if the metaverses will not arise into a new ubiquitous way of digital engagement, the idea of more engaged technological future is unlikely to go away – it may simply be postponed until further technological innovations will allow for more enticing platforms to be developed. Moreover, should the metaverses indeed become a popular way for people to spend their time now, working, playing and meeting others, it is

imperative to consider how we would prefer for such engagement to proceed so that it is beneficial for the users rather than leading to another set of issues related to technologies.

Conclusions and Next Steps

This work provides the beginnings, the building blocks from which theorizing and conceptualizing of the future technological developments in terms of their implications for subjectivities can be undertaken. It highlights the different theoretical and philosophical psychological approaches that can be used to gain insights about the impacts of the technologies in question. Whether the metaverses will be the next revolution in our way of engaging with the digital world or not, undoubtedly there will be other technological advances, such as AI developments or the eventual likely introduction of robots into our daily lives (Soni & Nigam, 2025; Raj & Kos, 2022), which will reshape many aspects of our lives. In asking questions about the future technologies, I aimed to highlight the importance of their introduction for individuals and their subjectivities, but also to consider what these technological changes would mean on a larger scale – for our social, cultural and political lives. While there is a sense of inevitability associated with the technological changes (short of a global catastrophe, it does appear unlikely that the developments in the digital worlds will seize), there is nothing inevitable in how these technologies will be met by the users and the extent to which we will allow them to shape us rather than us meaningfully shaping them (Turkle, 2016). It is important that more deliberate attention is paid to what the introduced technologies are capable of producing and what we would like them to be. It may be difficult to shape the technological developments in exactly the ways we envision, but it is worth considering and at least trying to anticipate the different possibilities and which of these possibilities are preferable prior to the developers taking such decisions for us.

Consequently, the meta-subjectivities that can emerge as a result of engaging in the metaverses are worth considering and exploring prior to them becoming an inevitability for some users. While there are multiple perspectives presented here, they are not exhaustive. Thus, more research and discussions are needed into the potentialities presented by the meta-subjectivities, along with how they may be achieved as there can be multiple approaches to these investigations. After all, new technologies frequently present us with new opportunities. However, making use of these opportunities is up to us – the metaverses can easily become relatively simple extensions of the existing life, embellished only by a variety of options not ordinarily available. On the other hand, as different theoretical and philosophical perspectives explored here evidence, there are potentialities that are radically different from the day-to-day experiences in the real world and that can have implications for the real world. From the psychoanalytic perspectives, whereby the metaverse can be used to explore deeper our unconscious desires and help us deal with them to the potentialities of alternative ways of being, being-in-the-meta-world – the metaverses may have much to offer, but these possibilities must enter into our discussions and imaginaries about the upcoming technologies. Other perspectives should also be introduced as the more explorations are done now, the easier it will be to navigate the technological developments once they become available.

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