

# The metaverse and consumer psychology: An introduction to Research Dialogue

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*There's something happening here*

*But what it is ain't exactly clear*

Buffalo Springfield, 1966

Everyone's talking about the Metaverse these days. Companies are investing billions of dollars into its development, even changing their names to align with the concept, even though experts do not appear to agree on what it is or how it should be defined (or even whether it should be capitalized). Yet, the billion-dollar investments suggest that firms are pretty certain the Metaverse will develop and be (at least potentially) enormously profitable, even though, to paraphrase Buffalo Springfield, how is not exactly clear.

In the target article of this Research Dialog, Hadi et al. (2023) take on the daunting and ambitious challenge of making sense of what the Metaverse is, or at least is likely to be, and its implications for how, what, when and from whom consumers buy. They begin by providing a definition of the Metaverse, which may seem paradoxical given the noted lack of current consensus on its definition. However, to be fair, even though it may seem heretical to behavioral scientists, reaching consensus on a precise definition of the key construct may not only be unnecessary for studying it, but likely fruitless. Indeed, in the case of new technologies, the changes can be so rapid that definitions are often obsolete by the time researchers agree on definitions (termed the *moving-target problem*; Bayer et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, a working definition is necessary to move forward, and Hadi et al. (2023) do just that. They structure their conceptualization around five specific features that in combination define the Metaverse: digital mediation, spatiality, immersive, shared, and real-time operation, and provide brief descriptions of each. Most importantly, they use their working definition as a starting point for an in-depth discussion of some potential implications of the Metaverse for consumer behavior. Recognizing that the implications for consumer research are likely limitless, they narrow their focus by structuring their discussion around three core domains of consumer research: identity, social influence, and ownership. In doing so, they discuss how current knowledge in these three domains may apply to consumer life in the Metaverse and how the Metaverse may also lead to new knowledge about these core concepts. They then conclude with an extensive research agenda for tackling the many questions that their review and discussion raise.

In the first commentary, Belk (2023) expands on the Hadi et al. (2023) target article by providing additional insights into how the Metaverse may impact the consumer journey through the Metaverse, structured around the five definitional elements and the three core consumer concepts provided by Hadi et al. In doing so, he suggests concepts and metaphors that may be useful for considering how consumers interact with and are impacted by the Metaverse: the notion of liminality (the vague threshold between the real world and the virtual world), the Metaverse as an experience machine, consumers of the Metaverse as desiring machines, the Metaverse as a (shared) hallucination. These metaphorical ways of

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Target article: Rhonda Hadi, Shiri Melumad, and Eric Park. The metaverse: A new digital frontier for consumer behavior <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1356>

Commentary 1: Russell Belk. The digital frontier as a liminal space <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1357>

Commentary 2: Dr. Stefano Puntoni. Already here: Metaverse in touch and sound <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1358>

thinking about the Metaverse are important because they enable imagining something that does not yet fully exist, or as Belk (2023) notes, “imagining the Metaverse is a projective exercise” (p. xx).

In the second commentary, Puntoni (2023) focuses on the Metaverse-related concepts of augmented reality and virtual reality and questions two common assumptions that inform discussions of the effects of digital technologies on consumer experiences: the conflation of augmented and virtual reality and the emphasis placed on visual experiences in discussions of potential Metaverse effects. Puntoni stresses that although augmented and virtual reality may share some characteristics, they are fundamentally different concepts (which Belk, 2023 notes as well). Whereas augmented reality experiences involve ones that make enriching changes to existing experiences and behaviors (smartphones, wearables), experiencing virtual reality applications “require profound changes in the way humans interact and decide to spend their time” (p. xx). Puntoni goes on to make the case that a focus on augmented reality effects may be a more immediately fruitful avenue for future research because augmented reality applications are more likely to be adopted by consumers, and thus more likely to influence their everyday behavior, because augmented reality applications enhance current experiences rather than requiring the adoption of very new experiences. Relatedly, Puntoni argues that discussions of the Metaverse (and potential research questions) tend to focus more heavily on visual sensory perceptions, and less on the effects on other senses such as touch and sound, even though touch and sound effects of augmented reality devices are now common (e.g., vibrating phones, listening through headphones and earbuds, etc.).

In summary, this Research Dialogue offers direction on a completely new phenomenon, the Metaverse, so new that it has not yet fully emerged. The combination of the target article and the two commentaries provides a roadmap for consumer researchers interested in being at the forefront of a new and emerging technology and thus at the forefront of a research area that examines the effects of the Metaverse on all aspects of consumer experiences.

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