

REVIEW ARTICLE

Metaverse: Homogenization experience and cultural illusion

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ABSTRACT

Although the metaverse may bring technological and consumer revolution, from the perspective of cultural model, the metaverse does not lead to significant changes in social emotional structure. The metaverse is still a new form of network technology development. It strengthens visual experience and weakens tactile, taste and auditory experience from this perspective, the biggest feature of the metaverse is the violence of visual culture, which makes the “light rhyme” disappear and makes people form a homogeneous experience in the simulated world. Therefore, we should not superstitious and blindly follow the “meta cosmic culture”.

Keywords: metaverse; homogeneous experience; cultural illusion

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that “metaverse” is a popular word in 2021 and will continue to be popular in the next few years. Especially with the intervention of international Internet giants, the concept of metauniverse has become a hot topic for young students in college classes. This shows that metauniverse, as an online buzzword in 2021, has stimulated people’s imagination of the future. Ma Huateng, CEO of Tencent, put forward the concept of “all real Internet” in 2020. He believes that the next generation Internet is to fully open the doors of the virtual world and the real world, and the economy composed of games and virtual world will rise rapidly, which is roughly building momentum for the metaverse in advance. The impact of the metaverse is not only a hot discussion at the conceptual level, but also will have a profound impact on the future of

mankind. This paper regards the metaverse as a new media culture and makes a preliminary discussion on the metaverse from the perspective of cultural reflection.

2. The conceptualization of the metaverse and the origin of media culture

Metaverse originated from the American science fiction Snow Crash. In the novel, human beings live in a virtual three-dimensional space through “Avatar”, which is called the metaverse. On October 29, 2021, after Zuckerberg changed the name of Facebook to “Meta”, metauniverse became the most popular topic in the world and played the “collective Rhapsody” of high-tech industry. Many technology companies consciously approached metauniverse, put forward metauniverse development strategies, labeled metauniverse and

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vigorously publicized their industrial upgrading strategies. On the morning of November 18, 2021, Zhangjiajie meta cosmos center was officially listed in the big data center of Wulingyuan District. This has triggered a heated debate in the society. It is believed that the “intimacy” of industrial capital to the metaverse is most valued by the “concept” rather than the technology itself.

From the perspective of industry, the industry believes that metauniverse is the future of the Internet. Many science and technology companies have become the “new favorite” of the capital market after they put forward the concept of metaverse. After putting on the cloak of metaverse, the stock price of Zhongqingbao with mediocre performance has increased from RMB 7 to RMB 42. The stock of metaverse concept has been hot fried, which has obvious herd effect. Many investors do not know what metaverse is, so they follow up blindly. In the middle of November 2021, People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency and other media warned against the speculation of the metaverse, saying that we should treat the metaverse rationally.

However, the adsorption effect of the metaverse is wildly amplified. Under the background that the concept of metaverse is still very vague, “real estate speculation group” has entered the metaverse. According to Hong Kong media reports, on the morning of December 9, 2021, Zheng Zhigang, Hong Kong real estate giant and CEO of new world development group, announced to invest in the metaverse virtual world game sandbox and purchase one of the largest digital plots in sandbox, hoping to build an “innovation center” to show the commercial success of start-ups in Dawan district. According to informed sources, Zheng Zhigang’s investment in this virtual land is about US \$5 million (about RMB 32 million). At present, in the “idle fish”, the virtual real estate of the universe has also been wildly hyped, and the highest plot is priced at RMB 530,000. The entry of real estate into metaverse is not only a concept speculation, but also a new industrial trend and investment mode. As such, tourism, games, entertainment, shopping and other related industries will be labeled with the label of metaverse according

to the “characteristics” of the new industry. The value of metaverse seems to have a “cosmic” future.

Meta cosmos has brought huge market “selling points” and brand-new consumption experience. At the same time, it has also shaped a brand-new media culture. As we all know, metauniverse is different from the existing Internet. One important difference is that people can enter the metauniverse world with the help of wearable devices. In the existing Internet world, people do not need or do not have to use such wearable devices, that is to say, experiencing the metauniverse needs “setting”. However, metauniverse is essentially the “embodiment” of the next generation Internet technology and the extension of the meaning of the existing network culture.

From the perspective of media history, the media culture with the Internet as the carrier has undergone great changes in the past 20 years, and the network culture has its rich connotation in different stages. Network culture is closely related to social mentality and emotional structure. In fact, emotional structure is the embodiment of cultural model, and meta cosmic culture will also bring new cultural model. The development of network culture is closely related to social reality, that is to say, meta cosmic culture is still the product of technology and culture, but it has been greatly “transformed”. Therefore, meta cosmic culture can also be said to be a “new” network culture.

From the characteristics and trends of the development of network culture, the relationship between network culture and technological change and social civilization is very close. In cyberspace, it is the “activities” of netizens as the “main body”, and netizens as the main body of meaning production and consumption can be displayed. It is also the symbolic and virtual activities of Internet users. There are both connections and differences between network culture and real culture. After netizens enter the virtual space from the real space, their roles are changed, and even their appearance, language and personality are reconstructed. The randomness, autonomy and illusory performance of netizens

make the formation of network culture have some characteristics of “rootlessness”. However, network consumerism unilaterally exaggerates the consumption effect of the network, vigorously pursues sensory stimulation and symbolic consumption, and realizes the integration of technology and consumption.

From the perspective of technological evolution, the network age is an advanced stage of technological monopoly civilization. As Neil Postman said: “The story of technological monopoly does not have a moral center, but is replaced by efficiency, interests and economic progress. Technological monopoly abolishes all traditional stories and symbols that can bring stability and order, and tells another story about skills, technological knowledge and consumption dreams. Its purpose is to give people a special mission to ensure that technological monopoly will survive forever. With the continuous integration of network culture and consumer culture, the communication subject of network culture has changed from elite culture to grass-roots culture. The communication content presents the landscape of the coexistence of mainstream culture and subculture. The development of network culture is becoming more and more diversified, and promotes the leap from individual culture to circle culture.

The important topic of network culture is the relationship between body, mind and cyberspace. We can see the characteristics of the development of Internet culture before the metaverse era from many aspects. For example, people say that Internet culture will discuss the problems of Internet consumerism and Internet addiction. Whether there will be addiction in the metaverse era needs to be paid more attention. In addition, when analyzing the phenomenon of network subculture, there are many topics that can be extended. The problem of showing off wealth on the Internet, such as Guo Meimei, is actually spiritual poverty and loss of value. In the study of subculture, the role of self-identity and identity differentiation embodied by network ethnic groups is more obvious from the perspective of network catchwords, from “loser” to “greasy man”,

from “loss” to “curl up” and “lie flat”, it shows that the negative emotions of network subculture are obvious, from self-deprecation to lazy self-deprecation. It shows the social illusion and self-loss in the era of we media. Therefore, the performance of online social networking and performance collapse can be deeply studied from the social impact of the network.

From this perspective, the influence of technology worship and consumerism on network culture is obvious. The dilemma of network culture is that many netizens worship technology excessively and ignore the rationality of network value. The metaverse is a “new style” of technology worship. Therefore, we should be vigilant against illusory and blind technology worship, especially when the metaverse technology itself has not been formed and the concept of metaverse has not been clarified, artificially creating metaverse worship is worthy of our high vigilance.

3. The homogeneous experience of the metaverse and the illusion of “coating”

The technical orientation of the metaverse highlights the freedom of consumption. It is possible that everyone can become a completely free productive consumer when entering the metaverse world, which poses a challenge to the social order of the traditional differential order pattern. In particular, our cultural tradition pays attention to the Confucian standard and pays attention to the social circle and the relationship between relatives and strangers. The metaverse is a “new pattern” that breaks the differential order and will bring a homogeneous experience to future consumption. This kind of consumption experience is the difference of equipment rather than the difference of people, that is to say, the metaverse brings us the “same” world.

In the metaverse, due to the high consistency of experience, the differences between individuals are eliminated, “it is the decentralization of the subject, and the identity and biographical continuity of the subject are replaced by fragments and the superficial

display of symbols, feelings and ‘multiple spiritual intensity’^[1].” Each consumer has the same visual experience and makes display consumption of the virtual landscape. This kind of display consumption is a new immersive experience, which repels thought, language and dialogue “see” means consumption, and consumption means “see”. The highly consistent visual experience enables everyone to become an “equal” consumer of the metaverse. Therefore, our cultural reflection on the metaverse needs to start with people’s five senses. What the metaverse brings is the lack of taste and smell experience. The biggest feature of the metaverse is the violence of visual culture, which makes the “light rhyme” disappear, leads to the “death of objects” and “confusion of people” in the philosophical sense, and artificially creates a “fairyland on earth”, which makes everyone eager to try. In the real world, we often say that things are objective and unique, while the visual landscape of the metaverse is homogeneous and lacks the original sense. What we feel is the artificial world caused by vision. The metaverse is a highly unified visual experience. Therefore, communication and dialogue are redundant. The myth of this technology will replace the speech in reality. Speaking is an important way to exchange ideas, but in the metaverse, people don’t need to speak, especially don’t need to tell stories. This visualized landscape “is an escape from human activities, a reconsideration and correction of human practice. Landscape is the opposite of dialogue where there is an independent representation, the landscape will reconstruct its own rules”^[2]. However, “dialogue” is an important source of thought and civilization. Human civilization extends from telling stories. Our imagination and poetry are because of stories. In addition, writing and memory may be redundant in the metaverse era, especially the traditional habit of writing letters and keeping a diary is unnecessary in the metaverse. However, reading and writing are not only the way and means of the continuation of human civilization, but also an important source of media memory. The metaverse is a world of light and shadow and an artificial landscape. The so-called “all truth” is based on the “universalization” of information without any margin. However, “when

the information supply is completely out of control, people’s spiritual calm and social purpose will collapse. Without this line of defense, people will not be able to find meaning in life experience, lose memory ability, and it will be difficult to imagine a reasonable future”^[3].”

The virtualization of the metaverse will lead to people’s lack of concave convex sense of objects. Everyone is exposed to a virtual light and shadow. In real society, people’s touch sense may disappear in the metaverse, and people’s touch is no difference. However, concave convex sense is the premise to trigger people’s emotion and thinking. Losing concave convex sense will have a great negative impact on people’s subject value. As Benjamin said: “In the turning period of history, the task faced by human sensory organs cannot be completed in a simple visual way, that is, in a simple meditation. It must be completed through adaptation under the continuous guidance of tactile acceptance. “However, the lack of touch will conceptualize rather than differentiate people’s cognition of “things” in the metaverse”^[3].

In the metaverse, the problem of “coating” deserves attention. “coating justice” is a concept put forward by Professor Chen Zhong of Shanghai University of Finance and economics. He believes that: “Coating has become a common phenomenon with problems, which urgently needs conscious philosophical attention. When people seek self-interest with justice as decoration, justice becomes a coating justice is a kind of justice that is stolen and used. Its generation has complex reasons of civilization theory, morality theory, concept theory and behavior theory”^[4]. “Coating” is similar to that many things are already rusty. When painted with a layer of paint, the appearance is very bright. To a large extent, the metaverse may be a kind of technical “coating”. This “coating” enables us to see only the superficial world and will not pay attention to the dark side in reality. The “rust spots” before the coating are obscured, so we can create the myth of experience. After the “coating”, the metaverse we see is beautiful, and the technical coating is added with a beautiful halo. In the metaverse, people feel

that a better world is in front of them. However, what we see may be a “pseudo world”. As Debo said: “The images separated from every aspect of life converge into a common river, so that the unity of life can no longer be reconstructed. The scene of regrouping themselves into a new whole and fragments about reality can only be displayed as a purely silent and isolated pseudo world the specialization of images in this world has developed into an independent and self-sufficient image world, where liars are also deceived and hoodwinked^[5]. “The metaverse is regarded as a technological myth that can escape from reality and suffering. As an overall “technological prosthesis”, it dispels the truth with illusion. People are willing to seek another “self” in the illusion, but it is the “reflection” of self rather than the real-life experience.

4. Cultural illusion and the future of the metaverse

The embedding of the metaverse into space will challenge the concept of time, and even space will completely squeeze time. The metaverse is a virtual boundless space, which is broader than the real universe, but the insensitivity to time or the dilution of the concept of time will lead to the disappearance of “I am”. People have no concept of time in the metaverse. When they enter the metaverse, they feel that it is a carnival of space, and the cost of time can be ignored, so the value of time is obscured.

Illusion is meaning the traditional consumerism in the consumer society may be visual consumerism in the concept of metaverse. Consumption and experience are highly consistent. Some scholars have noticed the consumption revolution, industrial revolution and economic revolution brought by the metaverse. In reality, the goods we need to buy may be realized by clicking and touching in the metaverse. At the same time, social networking is highly technical, and the objects of social networking can be used as the objects of consumption, not the object of spiritual dialogue and emotional communication. In the eyes of many people, the metaverse is nothing more than the “happiness machine” proposed by the philosopher Nocchik, especially the immersive

experience of games, which breaks the concept of marginal effect of traditional consumption. The metaverse can continuously improve the rhythm and frequency of stimulation, and “happiness” seems to have no margin.

In the WeChat era, netizens go to praise together in the group to create similar “symbols”. In the era of metauniverse, such actions are not needed. You can communicate and communicate with a simulated person through direct touch. Consumption is social networking, and social networking is consumption. Homogenized experience leads to the death of social news McLuhan believes that media is information Internet media leads to the high prosperity of information. The traditional journalism, including the newspaper industry, has suffered a huge impact. The metaverse may bring a world without news, or even the death of social news. In fact, social news can only be obtained by interviewing and investigating people in reality. Metaverse emphasizes the equality of all people. It creates a beautiful world. People do not need to obtain a sense of existence in real life. In this virtual world, the flow of real society has no value. Metaverse is a homogeneous container. People without differences become a “whole”. Therefore, speech is superfluous, storytelling is superfluous, and the communication between people or the memory of communication is also superfluous. People are immersed in the enjoyment of the metaverse. Real news includes entertainment news and social news, especially investigative news. In reality, investigative news requires investigators to go deep into real life to capture the real story behind the news appearance, which requires hard work. However, in the meta cosmic world, it is difficult to have an environment for news production and dissemination.

Nowadays, when the network subculture develops to the “lying flat” stage, people themselves are full of confusion. People lack work passion and upward motivation, and this sense of powerlessness is highly contagious. How will the meta cultural experience and the meta cultural experience of the universe present the same era? We know that the origin of philosophy is “I think so I am”. How to

embody the subjectivity of “I” in the era of metaverse? How to present the value of individuals? This is an important topic to be discussed at the philosophical level. From the perspective of emotional structure, it is influenced by the cultural model. From the oral culture in the traditional story telling era to the visual supremacy culture in the Internet era, to the metaverse era, do we have a new unified culture, or what new emotional structure will appear? What impact will this emotional structure have on people’s all-round development and human destiny? This requires us to think further.

The metaverse is essentially a consumption and entertainment world dominated by games and marked by human sensory experience. However, social communication is not always effective in such a social world. In the era of WeChat, “telephone” is superfluous, and people’s mobile phone bill is often surplus. In fact, “dialogue” is superfluous, because we are used to communicating with WeChat and video. Traditional telephone calls seem superfluous, or unless there are important things, they will make the other party feel very strange. In the meta cosmic era, people communicate in the visual world. Between “seeing” and “being seen”, it is the extension of “technical prosthesis”. Moreover, the gaze between people, the lack of “seeing” of “eyes”, is the illusion of “watching”, and there is no real emotional communication at all.

As Mumford said: “Our ability to surpass machines depends on our ability to assimilate machines. Only when we truly understand the true meaning of objective, calm and neutral machine world, can we further understand the more complex and richer organic world and deeper human beings.” Therefore, technology and civilization are not the corresponding relationship. The more developed

technology is, the more advanced civilization is? Some technologies may have a negative impact on civilization. What will happen to the metauniverse? This is a topic that needs further thinking. Therefore, from this point of view, it is difficult to conclude whether the metaverse can bring a high degree of civilization and lead the Internet culture to a higher level.

In today’s era, people’s physical and mental health and all-round development are the fundamental task of cultural construction. We can only wait and see what significance the next generation of Internet culture brought by the metaverse will have. Therefore, for a new concept like the metaverse or the new culture and related emotional structure brought by the metaverse, the academic circles may have to think from multiple perspectives. In short, we must not be superstitious and blindly obedient to the metaverse.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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