

How will the metaverse change our behavior as it reshapes experiences?

(PART 1)



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The potential impacts of the metaverse on human behavior are yet unknown, but behavioral economics can help us explore the possibilities.

In brief

- ▶ The metaverse will likely have sweeping consequences for human behavior.
- ▶ To understand these impacts, we can learn from behavioral economics and recent tech experience.
- ▶ The metaverse will create new opportunities for improving behavior and mental health, and interacting with consumers.

Through much of World War 2, the B-17 Flying Fortress was bedeviled with crashes, often as the planes came in to land. The incidents puzzled investigators and, with no signs of mechanical failure, were typically attributed to pilot error. But why were so many pilots in this one type of plane making similar mistakes? The mystery would finally be solved after the war, when two US Armed Forces psychologists realized that the switches controlling the wing flaps and the landing gear were identically shaped and located next to each other. This simple design decision had made it all too easy for a busy pilot in a darkened cockpit to lower the wing flaps instead of the landing gear – with disastrous, often fatal, results.

This finding is regarded as a watershed moment in the history of design. It is also evidence of a basic principle: the design of any human-facing technology can profoundly shape human behavior. This interaction has certainly been at play with several technologies in our more recent past, from people's fears about being surreptitiously recorded, to the ways in which the design of social media platforms and smartphones has helped make them devastatingly addictive.

The metaverse promises to be a profound reinvention of human-facing technology. It will spawn entirely new human-machine interfaces, sensory experiences, social dynamics and market constructs. The design of the metaverse will therefore have sweeping implications for human behavior. Much will depend on the choices made by executives, engineers and designers.

This article is part of the EY Metaverse series. In this third article, we investigate how the metaverse might impact human behavior. In considering the behavioral implications of the metaverse,

business leaders should consider several dimensions, which this article explores in four sections:

1. Avoiding the mistakes of the recent past
2. New tools for improving behaviors and health
3. Consumer behavior in the metaverse
4. Moving forward: some principles for leaders

Chapter 1

Avoiding the mistakes of the recent past

What lessons can we learn from the recent past, and how do we avoid making similar mistakes in the metaverse? Here are some aspects to consider:

Tech addictions

The design of smartphones and social media platforms has fueled an epidemic of screen addictions. These addictions have been linked to increased levels of depression, most worryingly among teenagers. The addictiveness of these platforms may not have been intentional, but it wasn't inevitable. It was the result of business models predicated on maximizing user engagement which, when combined with A/B testing, resulted in design features – from infinite scroll to push notifications – that produced addictions while trying to maximize engagement.

What impact will the business models and design decisions powering the metaverse have on tech addictions? While we are still in early days and there are many visions of the metaverse, a common thread through many of these visions is persistence. The stated goal is to design environments that are always on, and in which people spend substantially all of their time. Will the goal of an always-on metaverse, like the goal of maximizing engagement in the social media era, drive a new wave of user addictions?

Exercise and mental health

Next, consider another design choice: locomotion within metaverse platforms.

Physical exercise demonstrably lowers depression and stress while improving quality of sleep. So, experiences in which people spend lots of time while remaining sedentary will predictably worsen mental health outcomes. Unfortunately, designing metaverse experiences in which people get real exercise – for instance, by walking or running within the metaverse using their legs – isn't practical at the current time.

Our bodies still inhabit the physical world, with all its walls to walk into and furniture to trip over. Solutions such as omnidirectional treadmills are cumbersome and require significant user investment – making them unlikely to gain widespread adoption. Will designers and engineers crack the code of physical locomotion in the metaverse? Or will a new generation of immersive and sedentary experiences lead to negative health outcomes?

Polarization and disconnection

Social media has played a significant role in fueling political polarization and diminishing social trust. Behavioral economists have extensively documented the psychological underpinnings of our tribal behaviors. While technology did not create these behavioral instincts, it weaponized them. Social media platforms enabled echo chambers and filter bubbles where people only hear from like-minded individuals. Meanwhile, algorithms seeking to maximize engagement discovered by trial-and-error that an effective way of engaging people is by feeding them moral outrage about the opposing political camp.

Without careful consideration of design choices, the metaverse could supercharge polarization and filter bubbles. Imagine not just different metaverse platforms for different political persuasions, but infinitely personalized experiences within the same platform. A liberal and a conservative walking through the same metaverse neighborhood could be shown different retailers, avatars, bots, and experiences – all customized to their political persuasion.

If the metaverse becomes an environment in which people spend most of their waking hours, this also raises the prospect of people becoming increasingly disconnected from reality – especially if these spaces are designed to conform

to people's worldviews. If social media monetized outrage, the metaverse might evolve to monetize numbing – building spaces that are escapes from the real world at a time when increasingly urgent societal challenges (climate change, economic inequality, authoritarian political movements) demand more attention, not less.

Misinformation and critical thinking

It's no secret that social media has a misinformation problem. Despite increased efforts, misinformation has proven very difficult to effectively eradicate, because of two characteristics: social networks generate vast amounts of information, and decisions about what information to take down often involve nuanced judgement calls. As a result, while automated systems play a role (e.g., video hashing allows AI to instantly take down duplicates of a conspiracy theory video) content moderation remains a labor-intensive task that often delivers imprecise results. ■

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