

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

(PART 2)



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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.

(CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS EDITION)

The metaverse could be poised to magnify the misinformation problem. For one, the move to the metaverse will lead to an unprecedented explosion in the volume of information generated. Imagine multiple online worlds in which information is communicated in real time via speech, video, text overlay, facial expressions, gestures and more.

Information shared on social media platforms was relatively static, including posts, images or videos, which do not change once created and can be inspected at any time. However, information generated in a metaverse will be much more fluid, dynamic and fleeting, for instance real-time conversations and interactions between individuals. This makes information generated in the metaverse much harder to track. Many design features of metaverse platforms could also encourage and enable anonymity, empowering adversaries to spread misinformation with greater ease.

Chapter 2

New tools for improving health and behaviors

If the previous section seemed a bit of a downer, here's some good news. The metaverse doesn't just pose behavioral challenges for companies – it also creates unprecedented opportunities to improve behavioral and health outcomes. Here are a few:

Reducing unconscious bias

Unconscious bias is an insidious challenge because, by definition, it is prejudice that people aren't even aware of. It can exist in ostensibly tolerant individuals, often driven by deeply rooted societal stereotypes about others based on characteristics such as their racial identity, gender, age or body weight.

The common thread through these characteristics is that they are typically based upon sensory cues: for instance, one's physical appearance or pitch of voice. This makes the metaverse potentially transformative, since it provides an unprecedented ability to strip away these sensory cues, via avatars that

allow users to change their appearance, gender, race and voice.

This could combat unconscious bias in hiring and recruitment. Hiding the race, gender and age of an applicant from an interviewer could eliminate the potential for unconscious bias. More proactively, companies and educational institutions could use this for sensitivity training. Metaverse experiences that allow individuals to inhabit alternate personas could enable them to experience the world from the perspective of another race or gender, increasing awareness and sensitivity.

Improving long-term behaviors

The metaverse could also help people with long-term behaviors. In this case, experiences would not be about allowing people to experience the world from someone else's perspective as much as from their own perspective at a later date.

To appreciate the potential opportunity, consider that some of the most stubborn and expensive challenges we face as a species are linked to long-term behaviors. Scientists have been warning us about climate change for decades, yet we have repeatedly failed to sufficiently curb our carbon emissions. For equally long, it has been apparent that simple changes in diet, exercise and other behaviors would put a serious dent in chronic disease, which accounts for the largest portion of global health care spending. Whether as consumers or politicians, we have an unhealthy relationship with debt because of our unwillingness to spend less and save more. If we don't change our ways, each of these challenges will impose global costs in the tens of trillions of dollars in years ahead.

The problem is not awareness or even motivation to change. Behavioral economists have found the issue instead lies in some universal biases in human behavior: we tend to excessively discount future outcomes as well as consequences that are invisible or intangible.

Conversely, this also means we are highly motivated by outcomes that are immediate and apparent – and this is where the metaverse could be very effective. Imagine avatars that put people in the shoes of their future selves based on their current health behaviors. Imagine experiences that let you walk through your neighborhood in a climate-ravaged

future. Making the future consequences of our actions tangible and immediate could motivate people to improve behaviors in their own long-term interests.

Mental health benefits

Lastly, the metaverse has huge potential in addressing some significant mental health challenges. Consider post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – an often crippling affliction that will affect 1 in 13 people at some point in their lives. The US Department of Veterans Affairs has been successfully piloting virtual reality to treat PTSD. By reliving their traumatic experiences in a safe, controlled simulated environment, veterans are able to confront and tame their PTSD symptoms. While many associate PTSD with military combat, the affliction is quite common in the overall population and is on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, has fueled a silent epidemic of PTSD among frontline workers.

The metaverse is similarly useful in treating numerous other afflictions that are on the rise, from anxiety to phobias. Immersive environments could take exposure therapy – a common modality for treating phobias – to the next level. It could be game changing for amputees, where virtual reality has been shown to be effective in tackling issues such as phantom limb pain.

The metaverse has significant potential for improving health and behaviors. To achieve it, policymakers and companies will need to consider issues of accessibility. Otherwise, a metaverse that requires expensive hardware and high-speed connections could exacerbate the digital divide and prevent these benefits from reaching many people who need them most.

Chapter 3

Consumer behavior in the metaverse

The metaverse promises to be transformative for consumer behavior and marketing. To understand these implications, it's useful to turn to behavioral economics once again. Whether by intent or trial-and-error, marketers have historically converged

on many human behavioral biases and predilections to entice people to buy their wares. From the way subscriptions are priced in relation to each other to the placement of products on supermarket shelves, each decision is optimized to maximize effectiveness and can be tied back to underlying principles from behavioral economics.

The metaverse will be the same, but also different. Marketers will continue to leverage behavioral economics insights, but the unique characteristics of the metaverse mean that these will play out in somewhat different ways.

The priming effect

Consider the power of the priming effect, which occurs when an individual's exposure to stimuli or cues subconsciously influences their subsequent behavior and decisions. In one experiment, researchers found that simply raising the temperature in a room while people were taking a survey on global warming increased the importance respondents ascribed to tackling climate change. Another study found that the background of a web page can directly influence users' online shopping behaviors.■

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