



# An IPA of Professional Communication Practices in Metaverse Workspaces

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## ABSTRACT

Immersive virtual environments are rapidly transforming how communication occurs within professional settings, particularly through the integration of metaverse-based workspaces. While prior studies have examined system performance and user efficiency, limited attention has been given to the subjective experiences of professionals communicating through avatar-mediated platforms. The personal meanings and adaptive strategies individuals employ in navigating these immersive spaces remain underexplored—how do professionals construct, manage, and interpret communication within virtual 3D work environments? This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how professionals experience digital embodiment, emotional proximity, and identity negotiation in the metaverse. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten professionals aged 28–45 from diverse industries experienced in metaverse-based collaboration, key themes were identified through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), including the negotiation of digital presence, blurred professional boundaries, and the emergence of new communicative rituals. Participants revealed that their communication practices involved complex emotional labor and ethical considerations shaped by the immersive, persistent nature of virtual environments. These findings provide focused insights into how digital professionalism is redefined in virtual workspaces and offer practical implications for designing user-centered metaverse platforms that support emotional and ethical dimensions of professional communication.



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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the increasing integration of immersive digital technologies into professional environments has transformed communication, collaboration, and identity experiences. Among these advancements, the metaverse—a persistent, immersive, and interactive virtual environment—has emerged as a novel arena for work engagement. Unlike traditional digital platforms, metaverse-based workspaces allow real-time interaction via personalized avatars in 3D spaces, fostering co-presence that closely simulates physical reality.

This shift reflects accelerated digitization trends, especially post-COVID-19, which normalized remote work. As organizations adopt immersive platforms to support distributed teams, professionals face new challenges in communication, identity formation, and interpersonal interaction within spatial and temporal contexts unlike conventional offices. However, unlike prior studies focused mainly on system functionality and remote work efficiency, limited research specifically examines how these immersive, avatar-mediated environments uniquely affect professional communication and identity dynamics.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies not merely in its technological novelty but in its profound impact on subjective human experience. Professionals are now expected to communicate, perform, and relate to others through mediated representations of themselves—avatars that simultaneously empower and constrain authentic expression. The lived experience of communicating in such an environment challenges traditional assumptions about proximity, professionalism, and

emotional presence. These experiences are particularly shaped by cultural norms, digital literacy, and evolving expectations around digital embodiment and social behavior in virtual spaces.

Understanding how individuals make sense of these experiences calls for an exploration grounded in phenomenology, which prioritizes the description and interpretation of lived experience from the perspective of those who live it. In the context of metaverse workspaces, where social norms and communication dynamics are still in flux, there is a compelling need to uncover the subjective meanings professionals ascribe to their interactions, roles, and identities. Phenomenological inquiry offers the methodological sensitivity required to access these nuanced, often ambiguous, personal insights and reveal the deeper human dimensions of this evolving digital phenomenon.

Research into individuals' lived experiences in digitally mediated professional environments has become increasingly significant, particularly as immersive technologies continue to transform workplace dynamics. Scholars have begun to explore how professionals engage with virtual settings, how identity is constructed through digital avatars, and how spatial and emotional proximity are negotiated in non-physical environments. Within this growing body of work, however, a clear emphasis remains on system usability, technological performance, or efficiency metrics—areas traditionally explored through quantitative or system-centric methods.

Despite the growing interest, a methodological gap persists. Much of the existing research employs survey instruments, behavioral metrics, or user satisfaction indices, which tend to flatten the complexity of subjective experiences and overlook the nuanced interpretations and emotional textures that individuals assign to their interactions in the metaverse. These approaches often fail to capture the existential tensions, relational ambiguities, and identity negotiations professionals encounter when immersed in avatar-based communication.

This limitation underscores the inadequacy of prior methodologies in fully articulating the meaningful essence of the phenomenon under study. The metaverse is not merely a digital platform; it is a symbolic and experiential space in which users “live through” their professional identities and interactions. To genuinely understand how professionals adapt to such environments, a methodological lens is needed that privileges interpretation, context, and subjective meaning—all of which are central tenets of phenomenological inquiry. Hence, a focused interpretative phenomenological approach becomes essential in illuminating how individuals perceive, experience, and make sense of professional communication within these emergent virtual domains.

In the current discourse on virtual collaboration and digital workspace design, prevailing solutions often rely on functionalist and pragmatic frameworks aimed at enhancing system usability, improving user interface design, or optimizing communication efficiency. While such approaches provide valuable technical insights, they frequently reduce complex human experiences to measurable indicators, such as task completion rates or user satisfaction scores. These methods fall short in capturing the subjective, contextual, and emotional dimensions of professional communication within immersive environments like the metaverse.

Existing studies, while technologically rigorous, tend to overlook how individuals experience presence, identity, vulnerability, and relational boundaries in virtual 3D spaces. The emphasis on performance metrics limits researchers' ability to understand how professionals internally process the ambiguity of digital embodiment, the emotional labor of avatar-mediated interactions, and the unspoken norms that emerge in these new work ecologies.

This methodological constraint reveals a clear need for a different lens—one that moves beyond behavioral observation and instead illuminates the essence of lived experience. A phenomenological approach, especially interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), offers such a lens. It allows for the exploration of how professionals make sense of their communication practices within metaverse settings and how meaning is constructed through relational, spatial, and emotional interactions. By focusing on first-person perspectives, phenomenology provides the depth and richness needed to uncover insights that remain hidden from traditional empirical methods.

Previous research has addressed various aspects of digital work environments, including how professionals manage remote collaboration and navigate new forms of technology-mediated

communication. Studies on virtual reality and avatar use have highlighted the technical and psychological dimensions of presence, but often fail to explore how individuals personally make sense of these experiences in their daily work. Literature in the field of communication technology tends to focus on quantifiable outcomes such as engagement levels or productivity, leaving the inner world of user experience underexamined. Phenomenological studies have begun to respond to this need, but few have specifically examined how professionals adapt their communication practices within fully immersive platforms like the metaverse. This study builds on this emerging body of work by focusing on the meanings professionals attach to their interactions in avatar-based workspaces.

To investigate these experiences, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), which allows for a deep exploration of how individuals interpret their own lived realities. This method is appropriate because it centers on subjective experience and focuses on how meaning is constructed in context. The IPA framework provides the tools to reveal hidden layers of emotion, identity, and adaptation that occur in immersive digital environments. Through in-depth interviews and the inclusion of visual elicitation techniques, the study seeks to uncover how communication in the metaverse is experienced and navigated by those living it firsthand. In doing so, this research responds directly to the identified knowledge gap and brings forth rich insights grounded in personal narratives.

This article is structured as follows: the introduction outlines the background and rationale for the study, followed by a detailed explanation of the context of metaverse-based professional communication. The next section presents the phenomenological methodology, including participant selection, data collection, and the use of IPA for data analysis. The results section offers a thematic presentation of the lived experiences shared by participants, accompanied by direct quotations to highlight authenticity. Finally, the discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and concludes with reflections on the implications for future virtual work design and professional identity in immersive environments.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of professionals engaging in communication within metaverse-based virtual work environments. The phenomenological design was selected for its focus on the subjective meaning of human experiences and its suitability for uncovering the depth and richness of individual interpretations of social phenomena. Rather than seeking generalizable truths, this approach prioritizes the detailed examination of personal perspectives and the context in which these experiences occur.

IPA was particularly relevant due to its alignment with the philosophical underpinnings of Heideggerian phenomenology, which emphasizes the contextual and relational aspects of being. In the context of metaverse workspaces, where presence, identity, and communication are digitally mediated, this method enabled the exploration of how professionals make sense of their roles, interactions, and boundaries in an immersive, non-physical environment.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of professionals actively engaged in virtual workspaces that operate within metaverse platforms. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least six months of continuous experience in a metaverse-based professional setting, fluency in English or Bahasa Indonesia, and involvement in regular virtual communication with colleagues or clients. Individuals were excluded if they lacked consistent metaverse interaction or were involved solely in administrative or backend operations without communicative tasks.

A total of 10 participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring variation in demographic and professional backgrounds while maintaining relevance to the phenomenon under study. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 45 years, with a balanced distribution of gender and roles

(e.g., project managers, digital consultants, IT specialists). This diversity provided a rich comparative lens to understand how different professional identities adapted to communication in the metaverse.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, guided by a protocol designed to elicit detailed narratives of participants' experiences. Interviews were conducted in private virtual meeting rooms within the metaverse or through secured video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference. Each session lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent.

The interview guide was developed based on prior literature on digital communication, identity, and presence, and included open-ended prompts exploring perceptions of digital embodiment, communication rituals, professional boundaries, and emotional responses in virtual interactions. A comfortable and non-judgmental environment was ensured to facilitate openness, with participants encouraged to reflect freely on both positive and challenging experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were then subjected to multiple readings to facilitate deep immersion in the data. Meaningful units were identified and annotated, with emergent themes categorized inductively.

The coding process was assisted by NVivo 14 to organize textual segments, though interpretation remained grounded in the researchers' engagement with the participants' words. Each case was analyzed individually before cross-case comparisons were performed to identify shared patterns and nuanced variations. Themes were refined through iterative reading, reflective memoing, and conceptual clustering, resulting in the identification of five major themes that encapsulate the essence of participants' experiences.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of [Affiliated Institution], and all procedures adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant local ethical guidelines. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms, and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Data were stored securely, and access was restricted to the research team to maintain confidentiality.

## **RESULTS**

This section presents the findings of the study through a thematic structure grounded in interpretative phenomenological analysis. The voices of participants are central to the narrative, revealing their subjective experiences of adapting to professional communication within metaverse-based virtual work environments. Five core themes emerged from the data, each reflecting essential aspects of participants' lived experiences.

### **Negotiating Digital Presence and Professional Identity**

Participants expressed a deep consciousness of how their avatars shaped their perceived professional identity in the metaverse. The construction of digital presence was not merely aesthetic but profoundly tied to self-representation and credibility in professional contexts.

“When I chose my avatar’s appearance, I wasn’t just selecting a look—I was defining how seriously others would take me in meetings.” (P03)

Several participants admitted to strategically customizing their avatars to project authority or approachability, suggesting that digital embodiment played a communicative role equal to physical appearance in traditional workplaces.

“The moment I changed my avatar’s posture and clothing, the way people addressed me shifted. It felt like I had to re-learn how to ‘dress for success,’ but digitally.” (P07)

This negotiation of digital presence reflects a tension between self-expression and conformity to virtual professional norms, raising concerns about identity management in emerging workspaces.

### Emotional Intimacy and Discomfort in Virtual Proximity

A significant theme was the paradoxical experience of emotional closeness and discomfort due to the immersive nature of the metaverse. Participants described heightened intimacy as a result of being virtually “present” in the same space, which often blurred personal boundaries.

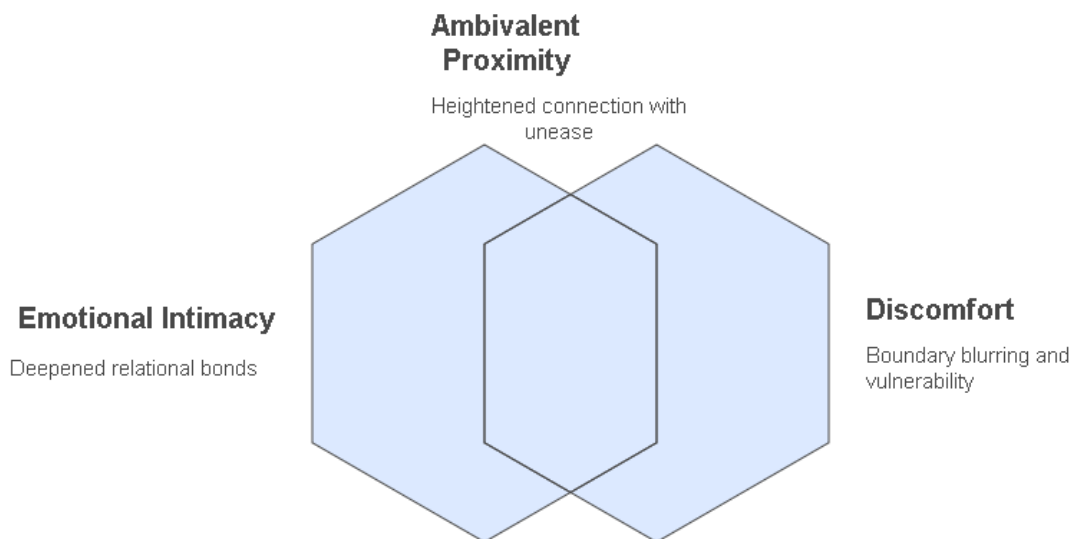
“I could see the avatar of my colleague standing right next to mine—I felt like he was really in my space. It was both comforting and intrusive.” (P06)

For some, the sensation of shared space fostered deeper relational bonds. However, others found the constant visibility and proximity unsettling, particularly when professional boundaries were poorly defined.

“Unlike Zoom, I can’t just turn off the camera. In the metaverse, you are always visible. I couldn’t hide my mood or take a break from being seen.” (P01)

These experiences suggest that the immersive affordances of the metaverse amplify both emotional connectivity and vulnerability, creating new norms around professional affect.

### The Paradox of Metaverse Proximity



### Blurred Boundaries Between Work and Non-Work Realities

The fusion of physical and virtual spaces emerged as a critical issue, with participants reporting difficulty in delineating when work began and ended. The symbolic distance typically associated with entering or exiting a workplace was absent, leading to a sense of cognitive fatigue.

“I used to shut down my computer and leave the office. Now, even when I leave the virtual space, my mind doesn’t. It’s like my job follows me in my head.” (P09)

Participants also mentioned feeling “stuck” in a performance mode, as the avatar-mediated presence lacked natural exit cues. The result was an ongoing internal negotiation to reclaim personal space and time.

“I sometimes forget to eat or rest, because the meetings just flow into each other in the virtual world. It’s seamless—too seamless.” (P04)

These findings underscore a fundamental disruption in work-life balance, introduced not by overwork, but by the spatial and temporal ambiguity of the metaverse environment.

### **Adaptive Strategies and Communication Rituals**

Despite challenges, participants revealed a range of strategies for adapting to the metaverse environment. These included developing new rituals, redefining social cues, and establishing shared digital etiquette within their teams.

“We created a rule: when your avatar stands by the virtual coffee machine, it means ‘do not disturb.’ It was our way of showing we still needed breaks.” (P02)

Such strategies reflect participants’ agency in shaping new norms for professional interaction. Others spoke of learning to read digital body language, such as avatar gestures or movement patterns, as a replacement for physical cues.

“When someone’s avatar stops moving for too long, we take it as a sign they’re distracted or disengaged. It’s our new body language.” (P05)

These adaptive behaviors illustrate how communication in the metaverse is an evolving practice, requiring shared understanding and continuous negotiation.

### **Ethical Tensions and Privacy Concerns**

The final theme pertains to ethical dilemmas and surveillance anxieties within metaverse workspaces. Participants expressed concerns about data collection, digital tracking, and the pressure to maintain a constant virtual presence.

“I often wondered—who is watching my avatar? Are my movements being recorded? It made me paranoid, honestly.” (P08)

This constant awareness of being observed shaped how participants behaved, leading some to self-censor or perform in ways that didn’t align with their authentic selves.

“I felt like I couldn’t express discomfort or disagreement. It’s all being tracked, even if no one says it out loud.” (P10)

These concerns reflect deeper anxieties about autonomy, surveillance capitalism, and the ethical design of future digital workplaces.

The participants’ narratives collectively reveal that professional communication in metaverse-based workspaces involves a complex adaptation process. This process is marked by renegotiation of identity, redefinition of emotional proximity, disruption of spatial-temporal boundaries, development of new communicative rituals, and navigation of emerging ethical concerns. These themes illustrate how immersive virtual environments reshape not just how professionals communicate—but how they experience being a professional.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Summary of Key Findings**

This study revealed that professionals working in metaverse-based virtual environments experience a complex process of adapting their communication practices, shaped by digital embodiment, emotional proximity, and blurred boundaries between personal and professional spheres. These findings directly address the central research question regarding how individuals perceive and manage professional communication in immersive, avatar-mediated workspaces.

### **Contributions to the Research Question**

The findings contribute a nuanced understanding of how professionals navigate identity, presence, and relational dynamics in a virtual space that defies conventional markers of workplace interaction. Rather than simply adjusting to a new technology, participants described a deep restructuring of how they relate to others, how they present themselves, and how they maintain

emotional and ethical boundaries. These contributions go beyond existing technical or productivity-focused analyses and provide a human-centered perspective that captures the emotional labor, social negotiation, and ethical ambivalence embedded in metaverse-based communication. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study uncovers the tacit meanings and adaptive strategies that individuals construct in response to the immersive affordances and constraints of virtual work environments.

### **Connection with Previous Literature and Theory**

These findings resonate with earlier work on digital presence and identity construction, particularly Hamilton's (2022) study on virtual embodiment in professional contexts, which similarly highlighted the performative aspects of avatar design and presence. However, this study advances the conversation by linking embodiment not only to representation but also to emotional intimacy and the management of vulnerability, aligning with Heideggerian notions of being-with-others in a technologically mediated world. Moreover, while Zhang (2021) explored alienation in VR classrooms, this research extends that analysis into the professional realm, showing that the lack of spatial closure and continuous visibility in the metaverse leads to emotional fatigue and role ambiguity. The emergence of adaptive rituals—such as avatar positioning to signal disengagement—adds a layer of socio-symbolic meaning often absent in prior research that focused solely on interaction design. In this way, the study both confirms and expands existing theory, offering new insights into how digital professionalism is lived and negotiated in post-physical environments.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings from this study hold significant implications for how organizations conceptualize digital professionalism and structure virtual work environments. At a social level, the data illuminate the emergent norms and ethical boundaries that arise when human presence is mediated by avatars, suggesting a need for culturally sensitive guidelines around virtual conduct and emotional labor. Culturally, the Indonesian context enriches the interpretation of professional communication in the metaverse by revealing how collectivist values and implicit hierarchies influence the adaptation process. Professionally, the study underscores the necessity of designing immersive platforms that prioritize psychological safety, emotional expression, and identity flexibility—not merely functionality or productivity. These insights may inform human resource policies, platform design, and digital communication training programs tailored to immersive environments.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As a phenomenological inquiry, the study focused on a small, purposively selected group of participants who possessed specific experience within metaverse-based professional settings. This focus limits the generalizability of the findings across broader populations or industries with different technological infrastructures or cultural contexts. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported narratives through in-depth interviews may have constrained the depth of behavioral interpretation compared to ethnographic immersion. The use of visual elicitation added richness but also introduced variation in participant responses based on familiarity with virtual representation. These limitations are inherent in qualitative research and highlight the importance of situated interpretation rather than universal conclusions.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

Future research may build on this study by examining cross-cultural variations in how digital embodiment and professional identity are negotiated in the metaverse, particularly among individuals from diverse sociotechnical environments. Longitudinal designs could also explore how communication practices evolve over time as virtual platforms become more integrated into organizational life. Additionally, further inquiry might integrate multimodal data, including avatar behavior logs or immersive ethnography, to enrich the phenomenological understanding of presence and interaction in 3D workspaces. These directions offer potential to deepen theoretical frameworks around digital identity and contribute to the growing interdisciplinary field of immersive communication studies.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored how professionals adapt their communication practices within metaverse-based work environments, focusing on the lived experiences of digital embodiment, emotional intimacy, and identity negotiation. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research revealed how immersive virtual spaces reshape interpersonal dynamics and challenge conventional boundaries of professionalism. Key findings include the emergence of new communication rituals, emotional labor tied to avatar presence, and blurred distinctions between personal and professional identity. These insights address gaps in previous research that overlooked the subjective, cultural, and relational dimensions of virtual work. The study contributes to a richer understanding of human experience in immersive settings and highlights the need for organizational and design strategies that support ethical, flexible, and context-sensitive communication. Future research can build on these findings by exploring longitudinal shifts in digital professionalism or comparing cross-cultural perspectives in metaverse environments.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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