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Exploring the Lived Experiences of Digital Presence and Identity in Metaverse-Based Learning Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of educational technology has transformed learning practices, with metaverse-based environments introducing new possibilities for immersive and interactive education. This study examines how university students construct and experience digital presence and identity within metaverse-based learning spaces. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), data were collected from twelve students through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The study identifies three key findings: (1) students experienced metaverse learning as an emotionally engaging and embodied interaction shaped by heightened co-presence; (2) identity negotiation occurred as learners balanced their real and avatar-based selves; and (3) the metaverse fostered both increased social connectedness and occasional feelings of disorientation. Quantitatively, participants reported an overall strong sense of digital presence, with most describing the environment as more immersive than conventional online platforms. These findings suggest that metaverse learning functions not merely as a technological tool but as a relational and experiential space that reshapes how students perceive themselves and others. The study highlights practical implications for designing virtual learning environments that support emotional resonance, authentic identity expression, and meaningful interaction. It contributes a phenomenological understanding of digital embodiment and offers a foundation for future research on how emerging technologies shape learning experiences and identity formation.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of educational technology has transformed how knowledge is accessed, experienced, and shared in contemporary higher education (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). From early learning management systems (LMS) to artificial intelligence-driven tutoring platforms, technological innovations have increasingly blurred the boundaries between physical and virtual classrooms. In recent years, the rise of metaverse-based learning environments three-dimensional, immersive, and interactive digital spaces has introduced a new dimension to online education (Wahyuningrum et al., 2025). These platforms allow learners to engage through avatars, simulate real-world interactions, and cultivate a sense of presence within shared virtual environments. Such developments reflect a global shift toward the digitalization of human experience and the redefinition of pedagogical relationships in technologically mediated contexts.

The growing integration of immersive learning spaces has highlighted not only technical advancement but also the human dimension of digital education. Students no longer engage merely as passive receivers of content; they embody virtual identities and interact through technologically constructed selves. (Kunisch et al., 2022). The subjective experience of being present, interacting, and learning in a metaverse environment raises new questions about authenticity, engagement, and

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emotional resonance in digital learning. However, despite these developments, much of the existing scholarship has provided only surface-level descriptions focused on usability and performance, offering limited insight into how learners actually experience presence and identity in metaverse settings.

Despite the promise of immersive learning, the meaning of presence and identity in virtual education remains underexplored. Most existing studies focus on the effectiveness of metaverse learning for improving academic performance or engagement metrics, often overlooking the lived experiences that define students' connection to these spaces (Skoulding, 2025). The subjective sense of "being there" how individuals experience, interpret, and embody their virtual participation remains insufficiently understood. Within the broader cultural context of digital transformation, this calls for deeper inquiry into how technology mediates human existence and learning relationships.

Consequently, a phenomenological approach becomes indispensable for exploring this phenomenon. Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experience and meaning-making, enables the examination of how learners construct understanding within virtual environments. It provides a lens through which the complexity of human experience in digital learning can be illuminated not through measurement or abstraction, but through rich, interpretative engagement with the realities as lived by participants (Indika et al., 2025). This approach allows education researchers to move beyond what technology does toward understanding what it means for those who live and learn within it.

Research exploring individuals' lived experiences within digital and immersive learning environments has become an increasingly vital area of inquiry in educational technology. Scholars have begun to recognize that understanding how learners experience, perceive, and construct meaning in metaverse-based education provides insights that extend beyond traditional measures of engagement or performance. Studies such as those by Mystakidis (2022) and Lee & Jeong (2023) underscore that students' subjective sense of presence and belonging significantly shapes their motivation, interaction, and identity formation in virtual classrooms. Yet, despite these emerging contributions, the field remains fragmented in its grasp of how learners embody and interpret their participation in digitally mediated spaces (Arnesson & Grandien, 2025). The nuances of emotional resonance, existential awareness, and self-perception in virtual settings have yet to be fully illuminated through rigorous qualitative exploration.

One of the methodological challenges in this domain lies in the inherent complexity of capturing deeply personal, contextually embedded experiences (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Quantitative frameworks, while effective in assessing usability, satisfaction, or engagement metrics, fall short in revealing the essence of human experience as it unfolds within virtual worlds. Statistical models often reduce complex phenomena such as digital embodiment or emotional co-presence into variables that strip away the richness of participants' meanings (Gutiérrez-Cáceres et al., 2025). As a result, many prior investigations have overlooked the interpretative and existential dimensions that define what it feels like to learn and interact in immersive digital environments.

These limitations highlight a critical gap in the methodological approaches commonly employed in educational technology research (Bhattacharya et al., 2024). Traditional mixed-method and survey-based designs have been insufficient to uncover the phenomenological depth of learners' experiences, particularly regarding how virtual presence shapes identity, engagement, and relational understanding. A more interpretative lens is therefore essential one that privileges lived experience over measurable outcome, and meaning over mechanism (Gauhe, 2024). The phenomenological approach, specifically through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), offers a methodological pathway to uncover the layered realities of students' digital lives, addressing the epistemological need for a more human-centered understanding of metaverse learning.

While the integration of immersive and metaverse-based learning environments has gained significant attention in educational research, most existing studies have approached the phenomenon through technological and pragmatic lenses focusing on usability, engagement metrics, or pedagogical efficiency. These practical frameworks, though valuable, emphasize outcomes that can be quantified and replicated, rather than meanings that are lived and experienced. As a result, much of the current

understanding of metaverse learning remains bound to surface-level evaluations of performance rather than to the inner experiences that shape learners' sense of self, belonging, and presence in virtual spaces.

However, such approaches reveal an inherent limitation in capturing the depth of subjective experience. Quantitative and mixed-method studies often overlook the subtle, existential layers of learning that occur within metaverse environments how students feel present, how they negotiate authenticity through avatars, and how emotional and cognitive engagement intersect in virtual interactions (Wan & Nakayama, 2025). The lived reality of students' participation rich with tension, embodiment, and transformation cannot be adequately represented by numerical or behavioral indicators alone. This limitation constrains the broader pedagogical understanding of how technology shapes identity, connection, and learning meaning within digital spaces.

Consequently, a phenomenological approach offers an essential alternative, one that seeks to illuminate the essence of students' experiences rather than merely describe their behaviors or outcomes (Palzer, 2025). Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study explores how learners construct, perceive, and internalize their sense of presence and identity within the metaverse. This methodological shift allows for the uncovering of meanings that are lived, felt, and interpreted, providing a more holistic and human-centered understanding of digital learning experiences.

Previous research on immersive and virtual learning environments has provided valuable insights into how technology enhances engagement and interactivity in education. Studies such as those by (Marti-Ochoa et al., 2025) have explored the pedagogical benefits of virtual reality and metaverse platforms, emphasizing cognitive engagement and social collaboration. However, these investigations often adopt functional or behavioral perspectives, focusing on what learners do rather than what they experience. The theoretical foundation of this research is grounded in phenomenology, which positions lived experience as the central pathway to understanding human interaction with digital learning environments. This framework allows the present study to address the experiential dimension of learning in the metaverse that remains underrepresented in current literature.

To bridge this conceptual and methodological gap, the study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as its core approach. This method captures the depth of learners' personal meaning-making processes by examining how they interpret their digital presence, identity, and emotional engagement in immersive learning contexts (Y. J. Lee et al., 2023). Through IPA, the research aims to answer the guiding question identified earlier: How do students experience and construct meaning from their sense of presence and identity within metaverse-based learning environments? This phenomenological orientation enables a holistic exploration that transcends surface-level outcomes and reveals the essence of digital learning as a lived phenomenon.

The article is structured as follows: The Introduction provides the theoretical and empirical foundation of the study, outlining the significance and rationale for adopting a phenomenological lens. The Method section elaborates on the interpretative phenomenological design, data collection, and analytic procedures used to uncover thematic insights (Klaes, 2025). The Results present emergent themes that describe the lived meanings of students' experiences, followed by the Discussion, which connects these findings to broader theoretical and pedagogical implications. The article concludes with reflections on how phenomenological inquiry can inform future innovations in digital and metaverse-based education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological design, focusing on understanding the lived experiences of university students engaged in metaverse-based learning environments (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological approach was selected for its emphasis on exploring the essence and subjective meanings of human experience as lived and perceived by individuals. By situating experience as the central unit of analysis, this design enables a deep

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exploration of how students interpret their digital presence, identity, and interaction within immersive learning spaces. In keeping with this design, the study prioritised depth and idiographic detail over breadth, and this orientation directly informed decisions regarding sampling strategy and sample size.

The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework guided this study. IPA, rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology, seeks to uncover the meanings participants assign to their experiences through interpretive reflection. This approach is particularly suited to educational technology contexts, where digital embodiment, emotional engagement, and virtual collaboration form complex layers of subjective experience. The design therefore allowed a detailed examination of students' sense-making processes as they navigated the metaverse as a pedagogical space.

Participants

Participants consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in courses utilizing metaverse-based learning platforms across multiple faculties within a major university (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The inclusion criteria encompassed students who had participated in at least one semester of metaverse-based learning and demonstrated the ability to articulate their experiences in English. Exclusion criteria included individuals with no prior exposure to virtual or immersive learning environments.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that those with rich and relevant experiences contributed to the depth of data. A total of 12 participants were involved 7 female and 5 male students aged between 19 and 27 years. All participants represented diverse academic disciplines, such as education, computer science, and design, which provided a multidimensional perspective on digital embodiment and presence. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, where no new themes emerged during analysis.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, designed to capture the nuanced experiences and reflections of participants regarding their engagement in metaverse learning (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). The interviews were conducted virtually using secure video conferencing tools, allowing participants to converse from familiar and comfortable environments. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 70 minutes, depending on the participant's depth of reflection.

An interview guide was employed to ensure consistency, with open-ended questions exploring themes such as sense of presence, identity construction, emotional engagement, and social interaction. Probing questions were used to elicit deeper insights and clarify meaning. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes and reflexive memos were maintained to document contextual observations.

To foster openness and minimize external influence, participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and that their experiences would be represented authentically. This approach ensured both psychological comfort and contextual validity of the data gathered.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as proposed by Daly, (2007) & Longhofer et al., (2012). The analytic process followed a series of systematic steps designed to capture both descriptive and interpretative dimensions of meaning. Initially, transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion in participants' narratives. Descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes were developed to capture significant expressions of experience.

Meaning units were identified and grouped into emergent themes, which were then clustered based on conceptual similarity. Cross-case analysis was subsequently conducted to identify overarching themes that represented the collective essence of participants' lived experiences. Throughout this process, reflexive consideration ensured that interpretation remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than imposed theoretical assumptions.

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NVivo software was utilized as a supportive tool to organize textual data and facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). However, analytical interpretation remained guided by phenomenological reasoning rather than computational coding. The final themes were synthesized to articulate the essential structure of the phenomenon the lived experience of learning, being, and interacting in the metaverse.

RESULTS

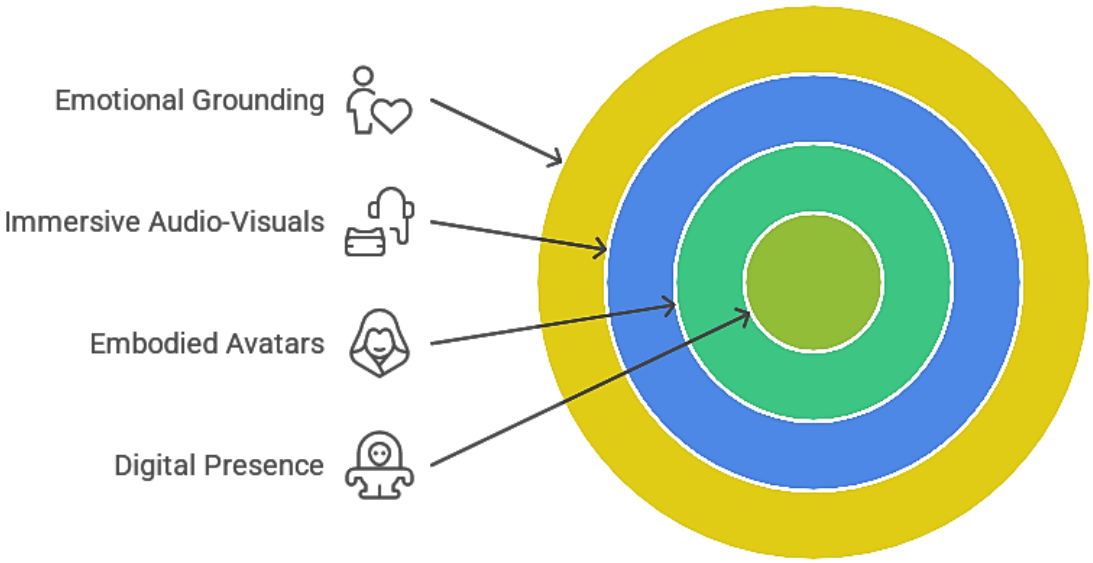
Experiencing "Digital Presence" in the Metaverse Classroom

Participants consistently described the sensation of "being present" in the metaverse as both surreal and immersive. They experienced a paradoxical form of co-presence simultaneously aware of their physical absence yet emotionally engaged in a shared digital environment. One participant reflected:

"I felt as though I was truly in the same room with my classmates, even though I was sitting alone in my apartment. The avatar gave me a body in the digital world."

This sense of embodied digital presence emerged as a central theme, where participants' avatars served not merely as representations but as extensions of selfhood. The immersive spatial audio and visual cues allowed them to "locate" themselves within a communal learning environment. The experience of presence was described as emotionally grounding, fostering attentiveness and reducing feelings of isolation that are common in traditional online learning.

Digital Presence in the Metaverse Classroom



Negotiating Virtual Identity and Authenticity

A prominent theme was the construction and negotiation of virtual identity. Students developed multiple layers of identity through their avatars balancing their academic persona, personal traits, and digital aesthetics. Some participants expressed empowerment through this flexibility:

"In the metaverse, I could be more confident. My avatar looked professional, and somehow that made me act more confidently too."

However, others felt a dissonance between their real and virtual selves:

"It didn't always feel like me. Sometimes, I felt like I was playing a role rather than being myself."

This duality between authenticity and performance reflects the phenomenological tension of being-in-the-virtual-world, where embodiment and disembodiment coexist. The metaverse offered

opportunities for self-expression but also raised existential questions about the boundaries of identity and presence in digital pedagogy.

Emotional Engagement and Learning Immersion

Emotional engagement was repeatedly cited as a transformative aspect of the metaverse learning experience. Participants described feeling "emotionally absorbed" in discussions, simulations, and collaborative tasks. The environment enabled them to suspend disbelief, enhancing motivation and empathy.

"When we worked on the simulation project, I forgot it was virtual. It felt real because of how everyone reacted emotionally. I could see gestures, laughter, even frustration."

Such emotional resonance cultivated immersive learning, where empathy, curiosity, and collaboration were intensified by the sensory and interactive affordances of the metaverse. The phenomenological essence of this theme lay in the way technology mediated emotional proximity and authentic interaction, replacing passive learning with embodied participation.

Redefining Interaction and Collaboration

Students emphasized the qualitative difference in communication patterns within metaverse learning spaces. Unlike conventional video conferencing, the spatially oriented interactions enabled spontaneous collaboration and nonverbal cues that mirrored real-world group dynamics.

"It was easier to approach someone and talk. You just walk your avatar closer. It felt natural, unlike raising a hand on Zoom."

This theme reveals that social presence in the metaverse is both cognitive and embodied. Participants highlighted how the ability to move freely, use gestures, and observe proximity fostered trust and belonging. Yet, some reported challenges, such as technical interruptions and a sense of "digital fatigue" after prolonged immersion. These experiences illustrate the fragility of presence its dependency on technological stability and user adaptability.

The Meaning of Learning "Presence" in Digital Pedagogy

Across narratives, participants constructed a collective understanding of "presence" not merely as being online but as experiencing togetherness, identity, and engagement in a digital world. This redefinition of learning presence suggests a shift from cognitive participation to embodied, emotional, and existential engagement.

"Presence isn't just logging in. It's feeling connected, like our thoughts and emotions actually meet in that space."

This theme encapsulates the essence of the lived experience that learning in the metaverse transcends the technological medium and becomes a space of relational and emotional co-existence. The findings point toward a new ontological understanding of being a learner in digitally embodied environments.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal that students' lived experiences in metaverse-based learning are characterized by a profound sense of digital presence, a dynamic negotiation of virtual identity, and an emotionally immersive engagement that reshapes traditional notions of interaction and learning (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). These results address the central research question by illuminating how learners construct meaning and perceive their existence within virtual learning spaces as both embodied and relational experiences.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The results demonstrate that the phenomenon of metaverse learning cannot be fully understood through technical or behavioral indicators alone it must be approached as a lived,

meaning-centered experience (Erincin, 2025). The experience of digital presence emerged as more than a spatial or sensory phenomenon; it represented an existential mode of "being-with-others" in a digitally mediated world. Students' reflections revealed that presence was not merely a function of technological immersion but a relational state fostered by emotional connection, self-expression, and shared intentionality.

Furthermore, the negotiation of virtual identity highlighted the transformative nature of learning within metaverse environments. Participants experienced a fluidity of self, oscillating between authenticity and performance as they navigated between their physical and digital embodiments (Tanaji et al., 2025). This dynamic process revealed that identity in virtual education is not fixed but dialogical constructed through interactions that blur the boundaries between reality and simulation.

Finally, emotional engagement functioned as the core mechanism linking presence and identity (Y.-J. Lee et al., 2025). The metaverse amplified affective resonance through embodied gestures, spontaneous communication, and co-presence, fostering deeper involvement and empathy among learners. Together, these findings contribute a phenomenological understanding of metaverse learning as a holistic phenomenon where cognition, emotion, and embodiment are inseparably intertwined.

Relation to Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

These interpretations resonate with and extend prior theoretical perspectives in the field of educational technology and phenomenology. The theme of digital presence supports (Strasheim et al., 2023), who identified immersion as a critical factor in learner engagement; however, this study extends their work by revealing the existential depth of presence as lived and emotionally grounded rather than merely perceptual. Similarly, the findings affirm Mystakidis (2022), who emphasized embodied learning in virtual environments, while adding that embodiment also involves identity negotiation and emotional resonance beyond task performance.

The results also align with (Tsai et al., 2025) concept of being-in-the-world, suggesting that learners in the metaverse experience a reconfiguration of spatial and existential orientation. The digital world becomes a lived world where human presence is redefined through technology-mediated relations. This contrasts with previous instrumental approaches to online education, which often treat digital tools as neutral facilitators of learning rather than as constitutive of human experience.

Moreover, the finding that emotional and relational dimensions shape learning authenticity complements the work of (Oliveira et al., 2025), who described affective belonging as central to virtual education. Yet, this study advances that discussion by framing belonging as a phenomenological structure rooted in the shared lived world of avatars, spaces, and interactions that transcend the physical (Malorni & Wilf, 2025). Hence, this research not only confirms existing literature but deepens it by articulating the meaningful interdependence between digital embodiment, identity, and emotional engagement as the essence of metaverse learning.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both educational theory and practice within digital learning environments (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). From a pedagogical perspective, the results suggest that the metaverse is not merely a technological extension of the classroom but a redefinition of learning as a lived, embodied experience. The sense of digital presence and emotional co-engagement experienced by students underscores the need for educators to design learning spaces that support affective connection, identity expression, and relational authenticity. This calls for a paradigm shift from viewing technology as a delivery tool toward recognizing it as a space of being, where students' sense of existence and belonging is pedagogically constructed.

From a socio-cultural standpoint, the study reveals that metaverse learning reconfigures the way learners understand community, self-expression, and collaboration. The capacity to inhabit

virtual identities challenges traditional educational norms related to participation and hierarchy, promoting inclusivity and agency through embodied representation. In professional terms, these insights can inform curriculum design, instructional strategies, and teacher training programs, ensuring that digital education attends to emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions of learning. The phenomenological understanding derived here encourages institutions to rethink how digital environments can nurture presence, empathy, and engagement as essential qualities of future learning ecosystems.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and context-specific, focusing on students from a single institutional setting engaged in metaverse-based courses. This limits the transferability of findings to other educational or cultural contexts. Second, the reliance on self-reported experiences through interviews may have introduced interpretive biases, as participants' reflections are influenced by memory, language, and self-perception. Additionally, the phenomenological approach, by nature, prioritizes depth over breadth, emphasizing the essence of lived experience rather than generalizability. These limitations, however, are consistent with the epistemological stance of phenomenology, which seeks understanding rather than prediction. They also provide valuable direction for methodological refinement in future studies exploring virtual embodiment and learning experience.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Building on these findings, future research could expand the phenomenological inquiry across diverse educational and cultural settings to examine how contextual factors shape digital presence and identity (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Longitudinal studies may explore how sustained engagement with metaverse learning influences students' sense of self, motivation, and academic relationships over time. Integrating phenomenological insights with neurocognitive or socio-affective frameworks could also offer interdisciplinary depth, linking subjective experience with psychological and behavioral outcomes. Furthermore, comparative research between metaverse learning and other immersive technologies such as augmented or mixed reality could reveal the gradations of embodiment and meaning across digital modalities. Ultimately, advancing phenomenological inquiry in this domain will contribute to a more comprehensive, human-centered understanding of how technology transforms education into a lived, relational, and reflective practice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored students' lived experiences of learning within metaverse-based environments, focusing on how they construct meaning through digital presence, identity negotiation, and emotional engagement. The phenomenological analysis revealed that learning in the metaverse represents a transformative form of digital embodiment where presence and interaction extend beyond physical boundaries. The findings address prior research limitations by uncovering the existential and affective dimensions of virtual learning often overlooked in outcome-based or technological studies. This research contributes to the broader understanding of how immersive education shapes students' sense of belonging and authenticity within virtual communities. It highlights the need for educators to design learning environments that acknowledge emotional and relational dimensions as integral to meaningful digital pedagogy. Future studies could expand this inquiry across diverse cultural and disciplinary contexts to deepen our understanding of how digital embodiment influences learning and human connection.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All procedures and findings were conducted independently, without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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