

We are spending increasingly more time in digital worlds. These places range from social media discussion groups, single- or multi-player games to the ever-evolving virtual reality technology. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the migration to virtual worlds because they provided an opportunity for safe entertainment and socialization when real places were a source of threat. Interestingly, many new users said they would continue to use these solutions even after the pandemic ended. The exodus to virtual worlds may even intensify in the future, as major technology companies and even cities have begun to develop their versions of the so-called metaverse - a digital universe consisting of a combination of different technologies, including virtual reality, augmented reality and digital reality. One of the goals of developing this technology is to merge real life with the virtual as much as possible, allowing people to move all their activities into the digital world literally. Simultaneously, the continued growth of virtual places may mean a decline in the time spent interacting with real places, and therefore a decline in the latter's importance.

Despite the growing role of virtual places in everyday life, there is still a lack of research on how bonds we form with virtual places are similar to those we develop with real places and how relationships with digital worlds modify our attitudes toward real environments. Personal relationships with places where we live and work can contribute to numerous positive outcomes, such as individual well-being and a sense of belonging, pro-environmental actions, and care for the place. On the other hand, strong relationships with place can also potentially create barriers against newcomers, increase territorialism and prejudice, and significantly influence the decision to leave a place in search of another, better place to live.

This project aims to investigate how experiences with virtual places affect the bonds between people and real-world places. In addition, we will examine the extent to which the strength of ties to real-world places influences people's willingness to migrate to virtual worlds. The proposed research will contribute to the body of knowledge in environmental, social, and cyberpsychology. Our research will incorporate diverse methodologies ranging from representative survey research to experimental and longitudinal studies. To ensure the generalizability of our findings, we will explore different types of virtual worlds, including first attempts to implement the idea of the metaverse. Finally, although our main research topic is migrations to virtual worlds, in order to capture their specificity, we will compare them to decisions to migrate between places in the real world.