

Phantom Touch, Cybersex, and Fitness for the Shy: A Meta-Ethnography of Virtual Embodiment in Social Virtual Reality Cultures

Social VR refers to platforms composed of thousands of virtual worlds created by users of VR technologies. Users of social VR engage with increasingly sophisticated technologies that synchronize the movements of their physical and virtual bodies in real time, generating the illusion of ownership of a virtual body and enabling the emergence of new forms of embodied phenomena within virtual cultures (e.g., phantom touch, cybersex, dance competitions).

Research Problem Existing ethnographic studies have predominantly focused on isolated phenomena or specific communities and are marked by significant methodological limitations concerning the confidence of evidence and the generalizability of findings. Paradoxically, despite eight years of research on social VR and over 40 field study publications, there remains no comprehensive anthropological theory of virtual embodiment – a central issue within social VR research.

Solution: Meta-Ethnography To facilitate the development of a theory of virtual embodiment, the Social Constructivist Meta-Ethnography framework developed by Soundy will be employed. Meta-ethnography constitutes a systematic approach to synthesizing qualitative data derived from field studies, aiming to generate novel theories characterized by high credibility. The objective of this approach is not the aggregation of data typical of reviews, but a rigorous synthesis of qualitative findings from diverse studies, disciplines, and theoretical orientations (including both research articles and supplementary databases), identifying patterns and relationships that are not visible within individual studies.

Research Objectives The research project encompasses two main objectives. First, it aims to employ meta-ethnography to develop a theory of virtual embodiment addressing two primary research questions:

- RQ1: How do users experience and interpret the relationship between their physical and virtual bodies in social VR cultures?
- RQ2: How do users perform embodied identities in social VR cultures?

Second, it seeks to apply meta-ethnography to systematically identify methodological limitations in existing field studies and to develop a Methodological Framework for Ethnographic Research in Social VR (FERVR), addressing current research gaps and fostering the production of more credible knowledge. This objective will be guided by a third research question:

- RQ3: What methodological, evidence, knowledge, and population gaps are present in the existing body of studies?

Significance of the Project Addressing these research aims is particularly important in light of the rapid evolution of social VR platforms as novel environments for human interaction. According to data from Statista.com, the number of VR users worldwide reached approximately 98 million in 2023. As social VR increasingly becomes a complex and significant domain of human interaction, achieving the proposed research objectives—which directly tackle its most pressing theoretical and methodological challenges—constitutes an essential and timely contribution to academic knowledge. To date, no comprehensive synthesis of field studies on virtual embodiment in social VR has been undertaken, nor have methodological frameworks been developed to enhance the quality of ethnographic research in this domain.