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FACEBOOK IS NOW META

Meta's corporate sociotechnical imaginary and the discursive construction of the Metaverse as the social platform of the future

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Abstract

The interpretive discourse-analytic framework of the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse is used to analyze how Meta's senior executives discursively frame the use of augmented reality and virtual reality in order to position the Metaverse as the next social platform during Connect 2021. The findings suggest five interpretive schemas that characterize the Metaverse as a social platform of the future: (a) the Metaverse as the next version of the Internet; (b) the Metaverse as a facilitator of presence and a connector of people; (c) the Metaverse as a marketplace in the Metaverse economy; (d) the Metaverse as a ubiquitous place in our daily lives; and (e) the Metaverse as a space designed in a responsible manner. Furthermore, this research looks into how such framing is strategically used to present the future as feasible and relevant to Meta's stakeholders, thereby constituting a strategic narrative about the Metaverse future. This thesis contends that the purpose of such a narrative is to promote a corporate sociotechnical imaginary, namely a Meta-specific vision of augmented reality, virtual reality, and the Metaverse, which not only encompasses a broader and normative view of the future of society, but also appears to follow the platform capitalism business model.

Keywords

Corporate communication, corporate sociotechnical imaginary, future narratives, Metaverse, platform capitalism, strategic narratives, Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse

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Introduction

Mark Zuckerberg announced in October 2021 that Facebook would change its name to Meta. The rebranding occurred while unveiling a new vision for the company's future at Connect 2021, which included the announcement of a Metaverse-based social platform (Stokel-Walker, 2021). According to Park and Kim (2022), a Metaverse is "a three-dimensional virtual world where avatars engage in political, economic, social, and cultural activities" (p. 4211). The Metaverse mainly relies upon augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies (Mystakidis, 2022). AR can be broadly defined as the method for superimposing computer-generated elements (e.g., sounds, videos, graphics, 3D models, etc.) into the physical world (Park & Kim, 2022), whereas VR can be loosely defined as an immersive computer-generated reality, which enables the disembodiment of the user (Park & Kim, 2022). Namely, the experience of being in one place without physically being present (Park & Kim, 2022). Last, it is by combining the physical and digital worlds via AR and VR that mixed reality (MR) emerges (Mystakidis, 2022; Park & Kim, 2022).

With 2.94 billion monthly active members as of the first quarter of 2022, Facebook is the world's most popular social network (Meta, 2022). Furthermore, 3.64 billion people used at least one of Meta's core products (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and WhatsApp) during the same period (Statista, 2022a). More importantly, the company is also the leading manufacturer of VR hardware, holding a 80% of market share in the fourth quarter of 2021 (Statista, 2022b). As a result, Meta's vision of the Metaverse appears to be the future centerpiece of online socialization, hence the need for study.

Previous research has mainly focused on Facebook as a social platform, therefore, Facebook's discursive work in corporate communications has been studied to a lesser extent

(Haupt, 2021). The aim of this thesis is to investigate how Meta discursively frames the use of AR, VR, and the Metaverse, and how such discursive framing conforms to a strategic corporate narrative aimed at aligning the company's stakeholders with the company's vision of the future. This work is inspired by previous research on Facebook's public self-presentation (e.g., Haupt, 2021; Hoffmann et al., 2018; Lischka, 2019; Rider & Murakami Wood, 2019) and existing work on the corporate framing of VR (Egliston & Carter, 2022; Nagy & Turner, 2019). With this in mind, this study builds on the notion of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015) and how corporations articulate them (e.g., Egliston & Carter, 2022; Haupt, 2021; Hockenull & Cohn, 2021; Mützel, 2021).

Some of the findings of this thesis are aligned with recent work by Egliston and Carter (2022). They established that, after acquiring the AR and VR hardware company Oculus, Facebook has focused on framing VR in terms of its capacity to connect end users, afford intimacy and affectivity. Nonetheless, this thesis contributes to the knowledge on its own by outlining how such frames and newer ones are combined to ground Meta's strategic narrative and hence position the Metaverse as the next hub for online social interactions. Finally, this thesis also aims to address what is purposefully excluded from Meta's vision of the Metaverse.

The following chapter provides a review of the literature on strategic narratives in the context of corporate communication. It explains the concept of strategic narrative and its uses according to research. Additionally, the literature review also describes the role of CEOs and senior executives in corporate communications, as well as a brief overview of the concept of future narratives and their role in corporate rebranding. The literature review concludes with an introduction to the notion of sociotechnical imaginaries, a theoretical concept focusing on the interactions and mutual shaping of science, technology, and society (Jasanoff, 2015). The methodology chapter presents the discourse-analytic approach of the Sociology of Knowledge

Approach to Discourse used in the analysis and outlines the ethical considerations for this thesis. The discussion chapter then interprets and discusses the findings in relation to the field of knowledge. Finally, the conclusion chapter summarizes the key findings of this study, as well as practical implications, limitations, and potential future research directions.

Literature Review

Strategic Narratives

Over the last years, the concepts of *storytelling* and *strategic narratives* have permeated several types of organizations, particularly corporations (Mouton et al., 2018). Both terms are part of the business communication domain known as *corporate communication* (Hansen et al., 2013). Corporate communication, according to Frandsen and Johansen (2018), is a management function that not only adopts a strategic approach to a private company's communication strategy, but also connects such communication strategy to the overarching strategy of the organization as expressed in its mission, vision, and goals. The rationale behind this approach is that by integrating a company's different communicative efforts, the more efficient style of communication will be employed to control or influence the relationship with the company's "stakeholders" (i.e., any group or individual concerned about an organization's activities; Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Cornelissen, 2020).

Consensus among scholars and practitioners exist regarding the importance of strategic narratives in corporate settings (Mouton et al., 2018). As noted by Sellow (2018), "narratives are frequently created and adapted strategically to purposely influence the way meaning is assigned to the actions of individuals, organizations, agencies, and institutions of all types" (p. 1). Consequently, strategic narratives can have an impact on both internal stakeholders (i.e., sense-making of daily activities) and external stakeholders (e.g., build reputations). For example, Sellnow (2018) argues that the stories we create and share serve an interpretive function, assisting us to make sense of daily events such as planning and carrying out plans, meeting new people or reflecting on experiences. In like manner, Erlach et al. (2020) argue that organizations are narrative systems because "underlying narratives always shape the

coordination, communication, and meaning-making of any organization” (p. 28). Regarding external stakeholders, Mouton et al. (2018) state that strategic narratives are concerned with how companies build and convey their strategies. Moreover, Sellnow (2018) argues that strategic narratives are far more complex than describing events with specific characters, actions, and contexts. Rather, strategic narratives assist companies in developing their reputations (Sellnow, 2018), because narratives help foster trust and support by developing an emotional bond with important stakeholders (Dowling, 2006). Therefore, strategic narratives are essential for the development, maintenance, and evolution of organizations (Sellnow, 2018).

According to Moin (2020), a tension between the terms *narrative* and *story* exist in the academic literature. While one school of thought believes that story and narrative are diametrically opposed, the other believes that they are similar (Moin, 2020). Nonetheless, another group of scholars (e.g., Denning, 2006, 2008; Erlach et al., 2020), use the two terms interchangeably. This thesis follows the latter convention because resolving the tension between both terms is not the goal of this literature review.

Main Features of a Narrative

As highlighted by Mouton et al. (2018), the most prominent shared characteristics of narratives/stories are the following:

- ***diachronicity***: this concept implies that the events within a narrative change over time.
- ***causality***: the events that occur in a story must be linked to one another by a cause and effect relationship.
- ***norms and breaches***: stories that breach conventions generate more tension, and thus are more likely to engage the audience.

- ***selectivity***: or the narrator's ability to establish the narrative's boundaries by starting a story earlier or ending it later, and thus determining which events are included or excluded from the narrative.

Another consequence of the tension between narratives and stories, as emphasized by Mouton et al. (2018), is that scholars do not always agree on what narratives are for. Mouton et al. (2018) argue that narratives have three main functions. First, the *explanatory function*, or the function of explaining how an event occurred owing to the narratives' features of diachronicity and causality. Second, due to the selectivity feature of narratives, Mouton et al. (2018) argue that, similarly to Entman's (1993) notion of framing, narratives have a *framing function* because a narrator can use narratives to define situations and make sense of events. Third, because narratives can frame reality and frequently involve breaking conventions, many narratives used in organizational settings serve a *legitimizing function* (Mouton et al., 2018). Such narratives depict an "organization's past, present, and future in ways that make change seem necessary, and therefore justified" (Mouton et al., 2018, p. 7). For instance, Lischka's (2019) research critically examines Facebook's founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's testimony defense at the European Parliament in May 2018. Lischka (2019) identifies how through utility narratives of artificial intelligence, Zuckerberg's speech aims to manipulate both public discussions and institutions about Facebook's legitimacy as a digital platform.

Overall, communication is critical for all types of organizations, but strategic narratives are especially important in assisting internal stakeholders in interpreting daily events within the organization, and conveying the organization's strategy to external stakeholders as well as enhancing the organization's reputation. This thesis is concerned about strategic narratives targeted principally at external stakeholders. Specifically, how Meta seeks stakeholder support

for their vision of the Metaverse. The following part of this thesis moves on to briefly describe the role of senior executives in corporate communication.

The Role of Senior Executives in Corporate Communication

The CEO is the company's face, and as such, his or her behavior has an huge effect on the organization's overall image (Ferns et al., 2008). Consequently, academics have long been interested in senior executives' roles and the impact they have on communications and corporate reputation (Tsymbalenko et al., 2020). As noted in a literature review by Tsymbalenko et al. (2020), scholarly studies in the 2000s reinforced the concept of *celebrity CEO*, which like celebrities, are idolized and their ideas are emulated. According to Huaman-Ramirez and Merunka (2021), today's celebrity CEOs, such as Elon Musk of Tesla, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, have become some of the most famous people on the planet in the last decade, and thus have a profound ability to influence brand perceptions. This is possible due to these CEOs' leadership style and their ability to attain widespread public support and drive customer interaction (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2021). Nonetheless, other representatives from other management levels, in addition to CEOs, may publicly represent a company (Tsymbalenko et al., 2020). For example, research by Zeitoun et al. (2020), establishes that besides CEOs, employees can also be powerful drivers for enhancing the corporate brand when used as spokespersons.

In conclusion, Tsymbalenko et al. (2020) propose that involving senior executives in corporate communications is a logical method of displaying the company's human side and thus developing a positive image among existing and new stakeholders more efficiently.

Future Narratives and Corporate Rebranding

Mützel (2021) explains that future narratives “can be found in situations in which a field is undergoing changes and new practices, products, technologies, and actors are ‘emerging’ and when it is unclear, which strategy amid this uncertainty about the future is best to follow” (p. 289). An activity that is critical for corporations and is surrounded by uncertainty about the future is *corporate rebranding* (Miller et al., 2014). Generally, corporate rebranding entails “the disjunction or change between an initially formulated corporate brand and a new formulation” (Merrilees & Miller, 2008, p. 538). Corporate rebranding is a complex process that frequently aims to attain buy-in from various stakeholders and revitalize a company’s brand value in order to improve the company’s operational efficiency (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). However, Amujo and Otubanjo (2012) note that rebranding initiatives are problematic because they frequently demand significant expenditure with no assurance of success.

Against this background, CEOs and/or senior executives may be required to strategically use future narratives to assist stakeholders in making sense of the situation. First, because the creation of a story for an organization’s future is at the heart of strategy development (Erlach et al., 2020). Second, because “expectations of possible future trajectories of action are narrated in the form of stories” (Mützel, 2021, p. 288). Future narratives inspire and encourage people to act by making the future they describe appear possible, relevant, and thus desirable (Denning, 2006; Erlach et al., 2020; Mützel, 2021). For example, Denning (2006) comments that a future story can transport listeners from their current context to the envisioned future by familiarizing and comforting the audience with such a future. Similarly, Mützel (2021) outlines: “while the future is uncertain and unpredictable, past or present empirical evidence can be extrapolated into the future, because stories provide reason and

rationale, interpretation and evaluation of what is going on—for oneself and for other actors” (p. 289).

Denning’s (2001) concept of *springboard story* could be another type of narrative that works in the context of corporate rebranding. Springboard stories are more than just shared experiences; they aim to empower the audience to shape their own future (Erlach et al., 2020). This is because, in a springboard story, what truly matters is not the story itself, but the new story that the audience generates for themselves, thereby co-creating their own vision of the future (Denning, 2006). According to Denning (2006), this is accomplished through relatively short narratives that avoid unnecessary detail, and describe “how a successful change was implemented in the past, but allows listeners to imagine how it might work in their situation” (p. 43).

Sociotechnical Imaginaries

Pioneered by Jasanoff and Kim, the concept of *sociotechnical imaginaries* examines the interactions and mutual shaping of science, technology, and society (Mager & Katzenbach, 2021). As defined by Jasanoff (2015), sociotechnical imaginaries are “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (p. 4). In other words, the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries highlight how ideas of progress in science and technology almost always contain broader visions of society’s future (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). Sociotechnical imaginaries are both perforative and normative. First, performative, because “by guiding the making of things and services to come, imaginations of the future are co-producing the very future they envision” (Mager & Katzenbach, 2021, p. 224). Second, normative, since

imaginaries “encode not only visions of what is attainable through science and technology but also of how life ought, or ought not, to be lived” (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 4).

An important aspect of sociotechnical imaginaries relevant to this thesis is that they are frequently conveyed through future narratives in order to make imaginaries less abstract and more relatable (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). More importantly, Jasanoff’s definition emphasizes that sociotechnical imaginaries generally favor a “desirable” future, which typically equates social progress with technology adoption (Jasanoff, 2015). Therefore, the creation and dissemination of sociotechnical imaginaries frequently suits the objectives of specific individuals or groups (e.g., governments, big tech corporations, influential CEOs, corporate communications, technology events, etc.), who will want to reinforce their specific visions and turn them into a collective imaginary in order to achieve legitimacy over the competition (Haupt, 2021; Jasanoff, 2015; Mager & Katzenbach, 2021).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis, as indicated in the introduction, is to explore how Meta’s senior executives frame the use of AR, VR, and the Metaverse, and how such specific presentation adheres to a strategic corporate narrative designed to attain stakeholder support in relation to the company’s vision of the future. On one hand, as noted by Hockenull and Cohn (2021), most research on sociotechnical imaginaries has predominantly concentrated on state actors, with few studies focusing on corporations (e.g., Olbrich & Klimburg-Witjes, 2016; Sadowski & Bendor, 2019; Smith, 2015). On the other hand, research on Facebook has primarily focused on Facebook as a social platform, with little attention paid to Facebook’s discursive role in corporate communication (Haupt, 2021). In regard with the latter, Haupt

(2021) investigates how Facebook's sociotechnical imaginary is strategically formulated to legitimize Facebook's own technology and corporate action.

Regarding VR, Nagy and Turner (2019) investigate how corporations frame VR in order to present it as the next new mass medium. Similarly, Egliston and Carter (2022) combine the corporate framing of VR with the notion of sociotechnical imaginaries to explore how Facebook constructs and sells a specific vision of VR. They focused on the period 2018—2019 after Facebook acquired the AR and VR hardware company Oculus in 2014. As such, this thesis should be viewed as a partial continuation of Egliston and Carter's work. It is partial because, unlike this thesis, Egliston and Carter also investigated how such framing of VR is adopted or contested by its users. With this in mind, this thesis aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the interpretive schemas that comprise Meta's dominant strategic narrative about AR, VR, and the Metaverse?

RQ2: How Meta's strategic narrative present the future as possible and relevant to its stakeholders?

Methodology

SKAD: The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse

Jasanoff (2015) argues that the best methods for studying sociotechnical imaginaries are interpretive research methods attempting to investigate how imaginaries “frame and represent alternative futures, connect past and future times, enable or restrict actions in space, and naturalize ways of thinking about possible worlds” (p. 24). Therefore, I selected the *sociology of knowledge approach to discourse* (SKAD) as a methodology because it is based on interpretive methods of inquiry (Keller et al., 2018). Moreover, as Keller (2013) notes, an advantage of this approach is that “the methodological richness of sociology permits a broader empirical underpinning of discourse research than is possible in approaches rooted in linguistics or discourse theory” (p. 45).

The roots of SKAD as an approach to the study of discourses in social sciences can be traced back to both Berger and Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge tradition and Foucault’s discourse concepts (Keller, 2005, 2011, 2013). SKAD aims to recreate “the processes that occur in social constructions, objectification, communication, and the legitimization of meaning structures ... at the institutional, organizational, or social actors’ level. ... and the social effects of these processes” (Keller, 2011, p. 49).

Discourses, according to SKAD, are analytically identifiable sets of normative and sense-making devices that social actors create, reproduce, and transform over time and in various contexts (Keller, 2005). In this regard, discourses emerge via social actors, who are involved in social power dynamics and conflicts for phenomenon interpretation (Keller, 2005). Nonetheless, unlike Foucault’s conceptualization of discourse, which focuses on a single discourse at a time, SKAD views discourses as diverse and contested (Keller et al., 2018). This

aspect is useful to this project owing to the socially constructed and contested nature of both sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2015; Mager & Katzenbach, 2021) and the corporate framing of VR (Nagy & Turner, 2019).

Keller (2005, 2011) proposes two main dimensions of analysis for SKAD. On one hand, SKAD is concerned with the analysis of the materialities of discourses, such as subject positions (e.g., corporate spokespersons, content creators, developers, gamers, etc.), the discursive and non-discursive practices of a discourse (e.g., AR and VR devices for demos, developer conference's brochures, VR marketing materials, etc.), and the *dispositif* or infrastructure of discourse production (e.g., developer conferences, VR gaming tournaments, Meta as a corporation, etc.). On the other hand, SKAD is concerned with statement patterns of meaning production (i.e., a discourse's internal organization or knowledge configuration). Keller et al. (2018) suggest employing five analytical concepts to analyze a discourse's knowledge configuration: (a) interpretive schemas; (b) argumentation clusters; (c) classifications; (d) phenomenal structures; and (e) narrative structures.

With the aim of answering the research questions, this thesis focuses on the concepts of *interpretive schemas* and *narrative structures*. Keller (2005) defines interpretive schemas as “typified clusters of disparate elements of meaning production, the core configuration of signs, symbols, sentences, and utterances, which create a coherent ensemble of meaning” (p. 13). According to Keller (2011), discourses differ in how such frames are merged in diverse interpretative frameworks, which are also capable of constructing new interpretive schemes that situate discourses within the social agenda. As Keller et al. (2018) explain, the term is comparable to Entman's ideas of “frame” and “framing” (see Entman, 1993), but it makes no relation to cognition or purposeful use.

Narrative structures, as Keller (2011) contends, are more than just techniques for connecting linguistic elements; rather they integrate a discourse's elements of knowledge configuration (i.e., interpretive schemas, argumentation clusters, classifications, and phenomenal structures), and structure them into a narrative. Consequently, a discourse's patterns of meaning production are structured in a more communicable manner (Keller et al., 2018). Furthermore, as implied by Keller (2005), there is some sort of strategic aim in using narrative structures since "social actors make use of story lines in order to form coalitions through different fields of practice" (p. 14). Overall, Keller's stance may be seen similar to Sellnow's (2018), who believes that strategic narratives serve a higher purpose (e.g., build corporate reputation) rather than simply describing events, characters, actions, and contexts. In other words, both perspectives regard narratives as a means of integrating disparate elements in order to create a cohesive communicative instance with the ultimate goal of communicating something, such as a corporation's strategy or legitimizing the definition of a phenomenon.

General Approach

In order to investigate how Meta's senior executives characterize AR, VR, and the Metaverse, I analyzed the transcript of the Connect 2021 keynote video (Meta, 2021). This approach is motivated by previous research that sought to investigate how big tech corporations depict VR technology at developer conferences (e.g., Egliston & Carter, 2022; Nagy & Turner, 2019). As noted by Nagy and Turner (2019), developer conferences like Connect serve as "sites for the construction and circulation of narratives that transform conflicting visions of what VR is and how it should be used into settled, legitimated outcomes" (p. 539). Hence, as Egliston and Carter (2022) argue, developer conferences provide an excellent setting for investigating the creation and circulation of technological imaginaries.

Moreover, the fact that keynote addresses at developer conferences are frequently carefully staged presentations by corporate spokespersons in which they convey their company's vision of itself and its future (Nagy & Turner, 2019), is also relevant for this thesis.

Egliston and Carter (2022) outline that, because of their specialized audience, only a small number of people attend developer conferences. Nonetheless, because keynotes at developer conferences are frequently streamed online, they have the potential to influence discourse to a larger audience (Egliston & Carter, 2022). For instance, the Connect 2021 keynote video has received over 6,930,000 views to date.

Applying SKAD

SKAD employs the data collection and analysis methodologies proposed by grounded theory (Keller, 2011; Keller et al., 2018). As Keller (2011) states, SKAD prefers a line by line sequential analysis of data when working on the reconstruction of patterns of meaning production. This entails, as Keller et al. (2018) note, the elaboration of categories (or *codes*) that label patterns of meaning production. *Coding as* described by Charmaz (2014), consists in dividing data into small pieces that combine to form abstract ideas that account for data. Nonetheless, as Bryman (2012) describes, critics believe that the coding practice may cause a loss of context. Another significant critique of coding in grounded theory is that, despite offering a rigorous method for generating concepts, it is frequently difficult to understand what theory is being developed to explain a phenomenon (Bryman, 2012).

Because SKAD is an interpretive research method, it has the same limitations as other qualitative research methods. According to Bryman (2012), one of the most serious disadvantages of qualitative research is that it relies too heavily on the researcher's interpretation, and thus is deeply influenced by the researcher's biases. As a result, critics argue that qualitative research is difficult to generalize and often lacks transparency (Bryman,

2012). To mitigate these flaws, I attempted to be transparent about the coding steps, which are detailed in the following section.

Data Analysis Steps

For the data analysis I followed the systematic method used by Haupt (2021, Figure 1). The approach involves three major phases. The first phase consisted in creating an outline of the keynote content. This included elaborating the keynote’s transcript as well as planning the analysis schedule needed to proceed to the next phases of the study. In order to produce the 53-page final version of the transcript I closely watched the entire keynote twice. The first time to create the text and the second to double-check and correct errors in the transcript.

The second phase involved importing the final version of the transcript into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to begin with the *initial coding* (see Charmaz, 2014), which involved identifying general patterns and elaborating preliminary ideas to pursue in the subsequent data analysis phase. Examples of codes in this phase are: *the Metaverse, challenges building the Metaverse, rebranding, and technology evolution*.

Figure 1

Phases of the Research Process

Phase 1: Approaching data	Phase 2: Initial Coding	Phase 3: Integrating Findings
Objectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> obtaining an outline idea of the keynote content 	Objectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying broad pattern and categories creating preliminary ideas 	Objectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> refining preliminary ideas elaborating view of the broader picture
Main Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> defining the analysis timeline visualize the event video elaborate the final transcription 	Main Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> initial coding of the data close reading of the transcription several times writing annotations 	Main Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> re-examining the transcription focused coding interpreting and integrating different concepts and categories

Note. Adapted from “Facebook futures: Mark Zuckerberg’s discursive construction of a better world” by Joachim Haupt, 2021, *New Media & Society*, 23(2), p. 242. Copyright © 2021, © SAGE Publications.

The third phase involved employing *focused coding* (see Charmaz, 2014) to identify and develop the most salient codes, as well as clustering them into fewer but more elaborated categories. These included codes such as, *connect people*, *embodied internet - be in the experience*, *VR into everyday life*, *education in the Metaverse*, *gaming and entertainment in the Metaverse*, *working in the Metaverse*, *responsibility*, *the creative economy*, and *the next version of the Internet* (see Appendix 1 for an overview of codes). Last, I determined the most important and frequently occurring code or overarching category that could incorporate all of the codes.

Ethical Considerations

A brief discussion of the study's ethical implications is essential as part of a research project of this scope. In terms of the project's empirical component, the text analyzed is a transcription of a public keynote that was streamed online in a video format aimed at the general public. The transcript I developed is a word-for-word reproduction of what was said during the address. In this regard, I validated my transcript by comparing it to the video to avoid attributing incorrect statements to the keynote speakers.

As stated by the CODEX rules and guidelines for ethical research (Uppsala University, 2022), when humans are involved in research, they must be informed about the research and its implications, as well as have the freedom to refuse participation. Since my research is based on publicly available sources and thus subject to scrutiny, issues of privacy and confidentiality that would be otherwise important, are not relevant anymore.

Findings

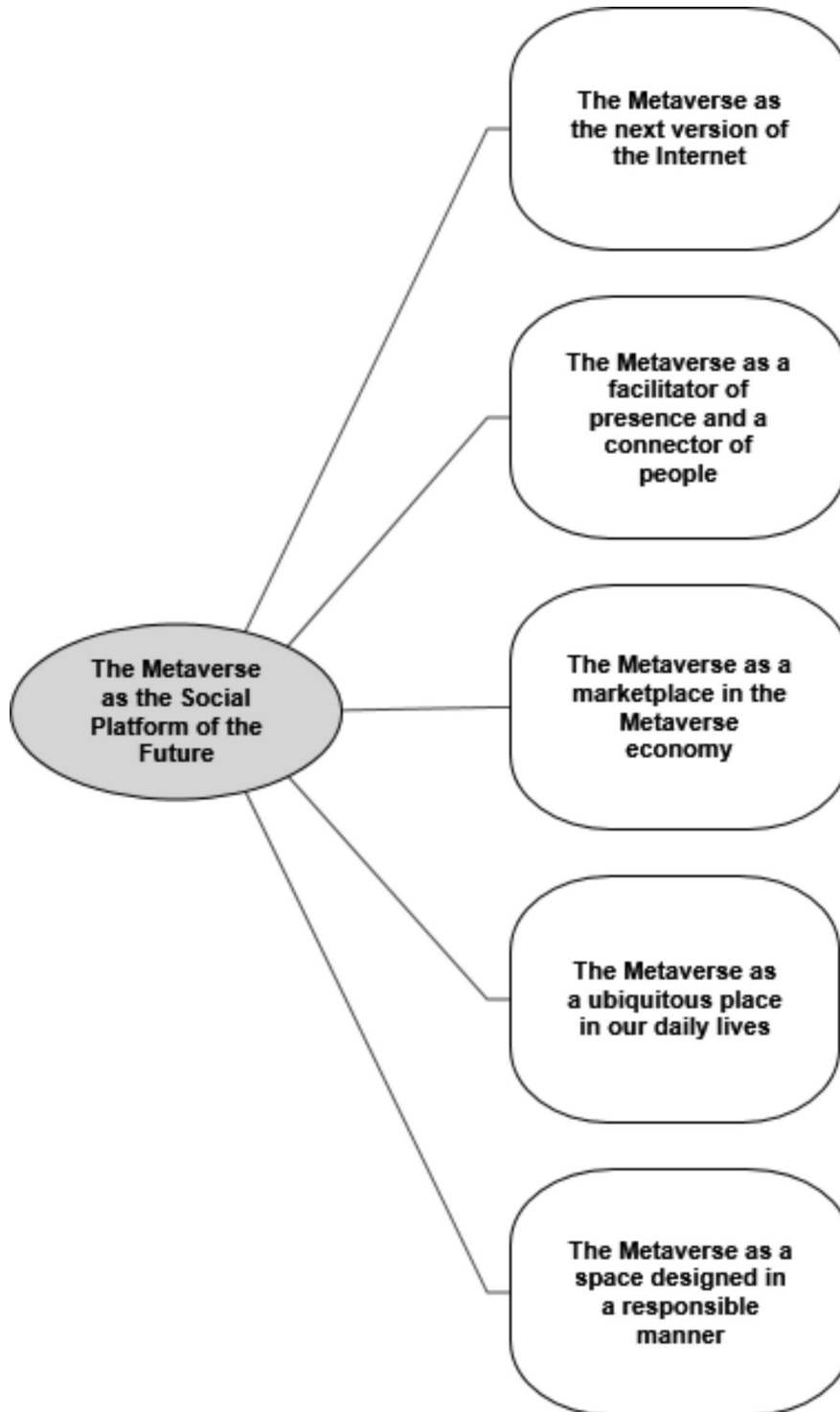
The reconstruction of Meta's corporate sociotechnical imaginary has been divided in two main parts. The first section of this chapter describes the interpretive schemas that constitute Meta's framing of AR and VR use, and the Metaverse as a social platform. The second section looks at how Meta employs such framing to create a corporate narrative that portrays the future to its stakeholders as feasible and relevant. The convention followed to present the transcript excerpts consists of a timestamp between square brackets formatted as follows: "quotation" [hours:minutes:seconds].

The Metaverse as the Social Platform of the Future

The Metaverse as the social platform of the future emerged as the most prominent theme from the analysis of the Connect 2021 keynote transcript. Even though the concept of VR as a social media platform is not new (e.g. Egliston & Carter, 2022), the interpretive schemas found show how Meta envisions the use of AR and VR within the Metaverse as the next iteration of the Internet. As a result, the Metaverse as the social platform of the future is pervasive, driven by Meta's existing services and platforms, as well as AR/VR research programs. The five interpretive schemas associated with this theme are depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Interpretive schemas



The Metaverse as the Next Version of the Internet

The first interpretative schema present in the Connect 2021 keynote refers to the idea of *the Metaverse as the next version of the Internet*. In his speech, Zuckerberg introduces its company's vision of the Metaverse as the next chapter of the Internet's history. Zuckerberg starts the keynote with a brief comment about the history of technology, in which he states: "the basic story of technology in our lifetime is how it's given us the power to express ourselves and experience the world with ever greater richness" [00:19]. This apparently simple statement has in reality two functions. First, it serves to frame technology as a positive factor as it fosters self-expression and allows individuals to experience the world with ever-increasing richness. Second, the "basic story of technology" implicitly frames technology's nature as constantly evolving. Hence, this utterance grounds technological progress as something normal and positive, that has already happened in the past, and is likely to occur in the future. This stance reflects Silicon Valley's tech culture beliefs in which not only the "future is just around the corner" (Markoff, 2015, as cited in Svensson, 2021), but also a "future in which digital technologies imply a better quality of life" (Svensson, 2021, p. 118). As a result, since the introduction of the speech, a major pillar of Zuckerberg's strategic narrative is introduced, namely that technological evolution is positive and necessary for social progress and that the Metaverse emerges from the very fabric of this ongoing progress.

The idea of the Metaverse as the next version of the Internet is reiterated throughout the keynote and used to legitimize the rebranding as Meta. For instance, when Zuckerberg states the Metaverse "is the next chapter of our work, and we believe for the Internet overall" [36:52]. Likewise, he later adds, "I believe the Metaverse is the next chapter for the Internet, and it's the next chapter for our company too" [01:10:41]. Both utterances perform the same function, namely connect Meta's emergence as a company to the overall evolution of the

Internet (and technology) and the aforementioned Silicon Valley's tech culture ethos. In this manner, Zuckerberg justifies the strategic decision of becoming a Metaverse company in the eyes of its stakeholders.

Furthermore, the Metaverse is defined as a "place" with almost endless possibilities in which Zuckerberg claims "you're going to be able to do almost anything you can imagine" [00:46]. More importantly, the Metaverse is conceptualized as capable of erasing the frontier between the physical and the virtual world:

You're going to be able to bring things from the physical world into the Metaverse, almost any type of media that can be represented digitally, photos, videos, art, music, movies, books, games, you name it. And lots of the things that are physical today, like screens, will just be able to be holograms in the future. [08:45]

Moreover, "you'll be able to take your items and project them into the physical world as holograms and augmented reality too" [09:20].

Moving across the different spaces within the physical-virtual continuum is yet another important characteristic of the Metaverse:

You're going to be able to move across these different spaces on all kinds of different devices, sometimes using virtual reality so you're fully immersed, sometimes using augmented reality glasses, so you can be present in the physical world as well, and sometimes on a computer or phone so you can quickly jump into the Metaverse from existing platforms. [09:20]

With a simple analogy Zuckerberg frames "moving across the Metaverse" (i.e., *teleporting*) as a simple and effortless action: "teleporting around the Metaverse is going to be like clicking a link on the Internet. It's an open standard" [07:41]. As a result, this analogy may serve to anchor the future in something that is not only simple to understand but also

likely relatable to almost all stakeholders. In other words, by linking the future to the present, uncertainty about specific aspects of the future may be reduced, making it appear more feasible.

The Metaverse as a Facilitator of Presence and a Connector of People

Due to the affordances of combining AR and VR technology, and Meta's already-existing social platforms, the Metaverse is envisioned as an enabler of presence and connection among users despite being physically distant. As noted by Zuckerberg, 'the most important experience of all, [is] connecting with people' [03:20]. Later, he continues: "we are also making it easier to communicate with your friends across different layers of reality" [11:42]. Later in the keynote, Michael Abrash, Chief Scientist of Meta's Reality Labs, further reinforces the idea of connecting people: "I think the Metaverse is really going to be first and foremost about connecting people" [01:02:24]. Moreover, in the final part of the keynote, Zuckerberg adds, "while most other tech companies focus on how people interact with technology, we focus on building technology so people can interact with each other" [01:10:41].

Therefore, according to Meta's narrative, what truly separates the Metaverse from already-existing social platforms are the experiences and the feeling of presence that the specific affordances of AR and VR will unlock. This distinguishing feature is summarized as "the embodied Internet". Namely, the Metaverse "will be more immersive, an embodied Internet where you're in the experience, not just looking at it" [00:46]. Furthermore, Zuckerberg later adds, "we'll be able to express ourselves in new, joyful, completely immersive ways and that's going to unlock a lot of amazing new experiences" [01:39]. In fact, "instead of looking at a screen, you're going to be in these experiences" and "everything we do online today, connecting socially, entertainment, games, work is going to be more natural and vivid"

[02:13]. Hence, the Metaverse is presented as an environment that will enhance users' interpersonal connectedness by increasing feelings of proximity at a distance:

First, the feeling of presence. This is the defining quality of the Metaverse. You're going to really feel like you're there with other people. You'll see their facial expressions. ... All the subtle ways that we communicate that today's technology can't quite deliver.

[06:01]

Zuckerberg later on elaborates,

I'm proud of what we've built so far and excited about what comes next as we move beyond what's possible today ... beyond the limits of distance and physics, and towards a future where everyone can be present with each other. [01:16:27]

In Zuckerberg's speech, the need for a more vivid experience of the Internet contrasts with the idea that "screens just can't convey the full range of human expression and connection. They can't deliver that deep feeling of presence" [02:49]. Hence, the need for "technology that's built around people and how we actually experience the world with each other" [02:49]. In his quest against screens, Zuckerberg claims the Metaverse "isn't about spending more time on screens. It's about making the time that we already spend better" [02:49]. It is nonetheless a paradox that the AR glasses and VR headsets used to be "present" in the Metaverse have embedded screens. Besides, Zuckerberg asserts that users' devices will let people free of distractions and provide a sense of presence: "our devices won't be the focal point of attention anymore. Instead of getting in the way, they are going to give you a sense of presence, the new experiences that you're having and the people you're with" [09:53].

The experiences and feelings of presence enabled by AR and VR technologies will also improve how users experience Meta's already-available services, allowing them to stay connected with friends and family. For instance, by bringing Messenger to VR, "you're going to

be able to invite your friends to a Messenger call and soon you'll be able to explore somewhere together or join a game" [12:16]. Furthermore, as Meta's CTO, Andrew Bosworth notes, by bringing AR technology to Instagram, users could experience their Instagram feed in a new manner: "developers want to be able to place persistent world-locked content, like animated holograms or your Instagram feed in your real space" [47:18].

To conclude, Zuckerberg's vision of the Metaverse is ultimately presented as a facilitator of human connection due to the affordances of both AR and VR technologies. Such technologies allow for an immersive experience and a feeling of authentic presence paradoxically enabled by disembodied end users, as it is only by acquiring a new virtual body in the Metaverse domain that this true presence can finally happen. In turn, such increased "feeling of presence" experienced in the Metaverse serves Zuckerberg to situate Meta as a facilitator of close relationships between end users.

The Metaverse as a Marketplace in the Metaverse Economy

The Metaverse is portrayed as a platform for content production and distribution. The platform's goal is to connect content creators and game developers with end users, thereby establishing a Metaverse economy. Zuckerberg acknowledges the importance of content creators and game developers for his vision of the Metaverse: "at the end of the day, it is really the creators and developers who are going to build the Metaverse and make this real" [15:50].

The advantage of *the Metaverse as a marketplace in the Metaverse economy* is highlighted by claims showing the different opportunities the Metaverse will unlock. As Vishal Shah, Meta's Head of Metaverse Products states, "our goal is to provide a way for as many creators as possible to build a business in the Metaverse" [38:12]. That will be possible because "the Metaverse will offer more choice than we've ever seen before" [37:26]. As a result, "there will

be many different kinds of creators in the Metaverse. Creators who make digital objects, creators who offer services and experiences” [38:12]. Additionally, “businesses will be creators too, building digital spaces or even digital worlds. They’ll sell both physical and digital goods as well as experiences and services” [39:03].

Furthermore, Meta strategically positions itself as a content creation facilitator for all creators, but particularly novice creators, emphasizing the creative tools that the company has developed for creators as well as the creative community that has emerged as a result. As noted by Sue Young, Product Director at Facebook,

We’re democratizing AR creation and enabling a global community with the tools and the knowledge necessary to develop the AR content and experiences that people love to use ... we created a tool ... that makes AR creation possible for novice creators who have no proper experience in art, 2D or 3D design. [51:02]

This statement is intended to entice creators of all levels to participate in the Metaverse economy, because fostering a Metaverse economy necessitates the availability of content for purchase by users.

Besides creators, the Metaverse is envisioned as a platform built by and for game developers, who will be able to earn a return on their investment as the Metaverse grows in popularity. For instance, in order to make the platform more attractive to game developers, Zuckerberg frames it not only as a vibrant community with existing cutting-edge content, but also as appealing owing to the already existing involvement of large video game development companies such as Epic Games.

It already has some of the most fully built-out digital goods, the most active creator and developer communities, and major platforms like Epic are working to build out the Metaverse starting with gaming. For our part, we’re heavily investing in building a

healthy VR and AR ecosystem, so the game studios can keep building and gaming creators can keep creating. [18:12]

On the one hand, such statements may inspire other large and medium-sized game development companies to create games for the Metaverse. On the other hand, this may have the opposite effect on small organizations, which may be hesitant to participate due to limited resources. Nonetheless, Zuckerberg presents game development for the Metaverse as not only profitable today, but also as even more profitable in the future:

A growing number of developers are already profitable, we expect to invest many billion dollars for the years to come before the Metaverse reaches scale. Our hope, though, is that if we all work at it and within the next decade, the Metaverse will reach a billion people, host hundreds of billions of dollars of digital commerce and support jobs for millions of creators and developers. [35:54]

Furthermore, the latter statement frames Meta as not only heavily invested in the Metaverse economy, but also as something positive for society due to the millions of new jobs created.

The benefit to end users is highlighted by claims about the breadth of content available on the platform, particularly the games already available on Meta Quest Store. For instance, during the conversation between Deborah Guzman, Studios Manager, and Zuckerberg, it emerges that several games are already available or will be available to be played in the Metaverse (e.g., “Echo VR, Beat Saber, Onward, Pistol Whip”, “Population: One” and “Grand Theft Auto San Andreas” [23:03]). Another advantage for end users is emphasized by statements about the new governance and ownership models Meta is researching. As Zuckerberg notes,

You want to know you own your items, not a platform. Now this is going to require not just technical work, like some of the important projects that are going around crypto and NFTs in the community now. It's also going to take ecosystem building, norm setting and new forms of governance. [08:13]

Likewise, Vishal Shah adds,

We're also exploring new types of ownership models and entitlements to ensure people feel confident that they actually own something. This will make it easier for people to sell limited edition digital objects like NFTs, display them in their digital spaces and even resell them to the next person securely. [39:09]

Last, the Metaverse is portrayed as a thriving ecosystem that is rapidly expanding, with low fees to attract both content creators and game developers. As Zuckerberg explains, "it's critical that creators and developers can make a good living doing this" [15:50]. Hence, "we also need to help build ecosystems so millions of people can have a stake in the future, can be rewarded for their work and benefit as the tide rises, not just as consumers, but as creators and developers" [34:11]. For that reason,

We offer our creator and commerce tools either at cost or with modest fees to enable as much creation and commerce possible ... we have hundreds of millions of businesses on our platform, and we have a rapidly growing ecosystem and a thriving business. [35:22]

As a result, Sue Young comments that, "the Metaverse is well-positioned to be a strong digital economy for creators ... and we want to make sure creators are ready to share their creativity and capitalize on this emerging opportunity from day one" [51:02].

Therefore, Meta positions creators and game developers as key stakeholders in the Metaverse's development as well as key actors within Meta's strategic narrative. Indeed, Meta's vision of the Metaverse as a marketplace in the Metaverse economy may not be

supported in the absence of creators and developers. In other words, a Metaverse economy cannot exist without purchasable content that end users can buy. As a result, the Metaverse is presented as a thriving ecosystem brimming with business opportunities to persuade creators and game developers.

The Metaverse as a Ubiquitous Place in our Daily Lives

The interpretive schema of *the Metaverse as a ubiquitous place in our daily lives* serves Meta to normalize the use of AR and VR in different contexts of our everyday life (e.g., entertainment, education, fitness, gaming, work), which in turn, is used to legitimize the Metaverse as omnipresent social platform.

Gaming is utterly important in Meta's vision of the Metaverse, not only because content is required to generate a Metaverse economy, but also because as Zuckerberg explains, gaming is intended to be "how a lot of people are going to step into the Metaverse for the first time" [18:12]. As a result, gamers are seen as the group most likely to first populate the Metaverse envisioned by Meta. As Zuckerberg notes, "a lot of the most interesting games out there take advantage of how you can move physically around" [22:23]. Therefore, gamers are expected to be familiar with AR and VR technologies since many games already make use of such technologies. Nonetheless, as Zuckerberg outlines, the emphasis on gaming is because it "provides many of the most immersive experiences and it is by far the largest entertainment industry" [16:19]. Therefore, the importance of gaming stems from its potential for profit generation.

Despite the significance of gaming, Meta recognizes the importance of reaching out to less niche audiences in order to make the Metaverse a mainstream social platform. As a result, Meta concentrated on framing the use of AR and VR as compatible with domestic contexts (e.g., entertainment, education, fitness, and remote work).

Entertainment in the Metaverse is imagined as accessible from any part of the world due to users' disembodiment provided by VR technology. This aspect is mainly conveyed via video recreations, however, Zuckerberg supports the images using rhetorical questions: "imagine your best friend is at a concert somewhere across the world. What if you could be there with her?" [12:54], and, "what if there was an after party that anyone could go to no matter where they were?" [14:09]. Such rhetorical questions serve Zuckerberg to emphasize the idea conveyed by the video recreations of being able to enjoy entertainment despite geographical limitations.

Education in the Metaverse is also portrayed as something totally different from today's. According to Marne Levine, Meta's Chief Business Officer, "in the Metaverse learning won't feel anything like the way we've learned before" [32:09]. She continues, "what if you could learn about anything in the world just by bringing it closer to you?" [30:42]. This rhetorical question could be interpreted as a way to portray education in the Metaverse as more "accessible" and "open". In other words, by presenting the Metaverse as a platform with enough resources for those users who may want to learn about "anything in the world", Meta positions itself as a gatekeeper, not only providing access to "unlimited" educational content, but also in novel immersive ways never seen before. As Levine notes,

In the Metaverse you'll be able to teleport not just to any place, but any time as well.

Ancient Rome. Imagine standing on the streets, hearing the sounds, visiting the markets to get a sense of the rhythm of life over 2000 years ago. [31:39]

Fitness is also another aspect of the Metaverse as a ubiquitous place in our daily lives which also benefits from AR and VR affordances to experience doing exercise in new ways. As Zuckerberg explains, "you just have your VR headset and with it, you can do anything from boxing lessons to sword fighting to even dancing. ... Or imagine your Facebook group cycling

goes an AR charity ride” [22:33]. Moreover, as Zuckerberg describes, “you’ll be able to work out in new worlds, even against an AI” [22:23]. Therefore, fitness in the Metaverse is gamified to make exercise more like a game and thus more interesting or enjoyable.

Regarding remote work, as Zuckerberg explains, “you’ll also even have a home office where you can work” [07:10]. Remote work in the Metaverse relies upon the idea that, since “remote work is here to stay for a lot of people ... we’re going to need better tools to work together” [26:28]. For that reason, the Metaverse is imagined as a distraction-free environment where working is enjoyable. As Zuckerberg explains, “imagine a space where you can tune out distractions and focus on the task at hand. And when you’re ready to share what you’ve been working on, you can present it as if you’re right there with the team” [26:28]. Furthermore, remote work in the Metaverse is envisioned as “very positive for our society and economy” [29:22], providing new opportunities for people while also being environmentally friendly, due to end user disembodiment. As highlighted by Zuckerberg,

Giving people access to jobs in more places, no matter where they live, will be a big deal for spreading opportunity to more people. Dropping our daily commutes will mean less time stuck in the traffic and more time doing things that matter. And it’ll be good for the environment. [29:52]

In conclusion, Meta presents the use of AR and VR in a variety of contexts in users’ lives in order to normalize the use of these technologies, which not only legitimizes such technologies as necessary tools to expand those everyday situations, but also the Metaverse as a ubiquitous social platform fully integrated into our daily lives.

The Metaverse as a Space Designed in a Responsible Manner

The Metaverse (and, by extension, Meta as a corporation) is portrayed as a social platform concerned with issues such as interoperability among different Metaverse platforms

and open standards; inclusion of all types of people, things, or ideas; and data protection and privacy. According to Zuckerberg, “in order to unlock the potential of the Metaverse, there needs to be interoperability” [07:41]. For instance, “you should be able to bring your avatar and digital items across different apps and experiences in the Metaverse” [07:10]. However, concrete examples of interoperability are significantly limited, for example, in comparison to the amount of time allotted for showcasing the Metaverse’s advantages for content creators.

Additionally, Zuckerberg presents Meta as a company that cares about inclusivity and is invested in founding research on it: “this year we’re opening up support for even more research because we need those independent perspectives to make sure we’re living up to another one of our principles: consider everyone” [53:50]. Moreover, “we announced grants for research on the impact of AR, VR, and smart devices on people who aren’t currently using them, especially communities whose perspectives have often been overlooked, as well as best practices for creating inclusive environments” [53:30]. However, no further information about who are those “communities whose perspectives are frequently overlooked” nor what entails an “inclusive environment” are provided.

Further claims are made in order to portray Meta as a responsible company that provides users with information about how personal data is collected and used. For instance, Meta’s President of Global Affairs, Nick Clegg notes, “people want to know ... especially that we play our role in helping to keep people safe and protect their privacy online” [51:43]. Hence, that means, “being transparent about how things work, what data is collected, and how that data is used over time” [53:12]. However, no additional information is provided about how the collected users’ data will be used. Likewise, the speakers provide few concrete examples of specific measures to protect users’ data and privacy. Regarding users’ privacy protection, Zuckerberg gives the following example:

You'll get to decide when you want to be with other people, when you want to block someone from appearing in your space, or when you want to take a break and teleport to a private bubble to be alone. [08:45]

Hence, privacy in the Metaverse is presented in terms of methods to reduce forms of "social surveillance" (Marwick, 2012). Namely, "using social media sites to broadcast information, survey content created by others, and regulating one's own content based on perceptions of the audience" (Marwick, 2012, p. 382).

To conclude, the Metaverse is envisioned as a responsible social platform, which also benefits Meta as a company as well. Nonetheless, specific examples of what it means to be a responsible platform are scarce.

Presenting the Future as Possible and Relevant to Stakeholders

This thesis argues that the interpretive schemas presented above conform the basis of Meta's strategic narrative of the Metaverse as the social platform of the future. Each interpretive schema is used to pique the interest of one or more stakeholder groups. First, *the Metaverse as the next version of the Internet* helps all stakeholders understand what the Metaverse is all about. Second, *the Metaverse as a facilitator of presence and a connector of people* and *the Metaverse as a ubiquitous place in our daily lives* appeal to a broader range of potential end users interested in new ways of socialization. Third, *the Metaverse as a marketplace in the Metaverse* is primarily aimed at content creators and game developers, but investors may also be interested. Finally, the interpretive schema of *the Metaverse as a space designed in a responsible manner* is addressed at investors and other institutional actors such as policymakers and advocacy groups.

Nonetheless, such interpretive schemas *per se* are not sufficient to make the future seem feasible. It is by connecting the future with past or present evidence that future narratives make the future appear less dystopian and thus possible, and consequently motivate and inspire people to believe in such a future (Denning, 2006; Erlach et al., 2020; Mützel, 2021). As such, Zuckerberg begins his intervention at Connect 2021 keynote by recounting the origins of Facebook and how technology has evolved alongside the company:

Back when I started Facebook, that mostly meant text that we typed on computers. ... and recently, as connections got faster, video has become the main way that we experience content. We've gone from desktop to web to phones. From text to photos to video. But this isn't the end of the line. [00:46]

Likewise, by the end of the speech:

Facebook was born in a specific time and place, a college campus, the Web. It was what we could build at the time to put people back into our experience of technology. ... it was always clear that the dream was to feel present with the people we care about.

[01:11:34]

However, as Erlach et al. (2020) mention, future narratives do not conceal the truth about the future. Rather they acknowledge the steps and limitations on the path to the future (Erlach et al., 2020). Likewise, Meta's strategic narrative about the Metaverse's future as a social platform recognizes the challenges as well as some of the steps the company is taking to achieve its goal. For instance, regarding AR glasses, Zuckerberg explains,

There's a lot of technical work to get this form factor and experience right. We have to fit hologram displays, projectors, batteries, radios, custom silicon chips, cameras, speakers, sensors to map the world around you and more into glasses that are about five millimeters thick. [01:01:02]

He later comments about VR: "immersive all-day experiences will require a lot of novel technologies. And for the last seven years, our research team has been working on a broad array of technologies that are necessary for these next-generation platforms" [01:01:25].

Additionally, the idea that the Metaverse is co-constructed among Meta and third-party developers is repeated throughout the keynote. For instance, when Zuckerberg states,

And yes, there will be challenges and risks and disruption of established interests, but there will also be opportunities and benefits that we can't even imagine yet ... We'll all need to work together from the beginning to bring the best possible version of this future to life... [01:13:09]

Therefore, it could be argued that Meta's strategic narrative employs the interpretive schemas presented in this thesis to portray the Metaverse as the social platform of the future in a way that is meaningful to its stakeholders. However, by connecting the past or present with the future and acknowledging the difficulties along the way, Meta's strategic narrative about the Metaverse's future makes such a future appear feasible, and thus potentially inspiring for its stakeholders.

Discussion

RQ1 in this study sought to determine the interpretive schemas that comprise Meta's dominant strategic narrative about AR, VR, and the Metaverse. This study presents five interpretive schemes that constitute the basis of Meta's strategic narrative about the use of AR, VR, and the Metaverse as the social platform of the future: (a) *the Metaverse as the next version of the Internet*; (b) *the Metaverse as a facilitator of presence and a connector of people*; (c) *the Metaverse as a marketplace in the Metaverse economy*; (d) *the Metaverse as a ubiquitous place in our daily lives*; and (e) *the Metaverse as a space designed in a responsible manner*.

The way Meta frames the Metaverse as a social platform is consistent with prior research concerned with Facebook's framing of VR (e.g., Egliston & Carter, 2022). These commonalities can be explained by the fact that Egliston and Carter studied OC5¹ in 2018 and OC6 in 2019, respectively, while the current study focused on Connect 2021. This means that, in such a short period of time, part of Facebook's discursive framing of VR has remained almost consistent, though, adapted according to Meta's new strategic goal of becoming a Metaverse company.

As the social platform of the future, the Metaverse is envisioned as the next version of the Internet. Namely, an embodied Internet where users can be in the experience, which also constitutes a new way of framing the Internet and social media platforms. Furthermore, the Metaverse as the social platform of the future is imagined as a *facilitator of presence and a connector of people*, with AR and VR affordances allowing users to stay connected and develop a sense of presence at distance. This interpretive schema is aligned with Egliston and Carter's (2022) research which reported Facebook's focus on framing VR in terms of its capacity to

¹ Oculus Connect (OC) was the previous name for the Connect event because Facebook purchased Oculus, an AR and VR hardware company, in 2014. In 2020, OC7 was renamed Facebook Connect, and in 2021, it was finally changed to Connect.

connect end users, afford intimacy and affectivity at a distance. On the whole, this conceptualization of the Metaverse as a social platform, is similar to the idea of Facebook as “social infrastructure” (see Haupt, 2021; Hoffmann et al., 2018; Rider & Murakami Wood, 2019). Namely, Facebook as “a public service that benefits all who use it, regardless of background or intention” (Rider & Murakami Wood, 2019, p. 644). As a result, in line with Egliston and Carter’s (2022) observation about Facebook’s framing of VR, the Metaverse is imagined as a social infrastructure that mediates and enhances human communication via AR and VR technology.

Furthermore, the interpretive schema of *the Metaverse as a ubiquitous place in our daily lives*, not only normalizes the use of AR and VR in everyday situations, but also legitimizes the Metaverse as a pervasive social platform that is deeply integrated into our everyday routines, which in turn are enhanced by AR and VR affordances. While Egliston and Carter (2022) observed Facebook’s framing of “everyday VR” for tasks like communication with others, the interpretive schema of *the Metaverse as a ubiquitous place in our daily lives* provides additional insight into how AR and VR are positioned to be used in new situations like education, fitness gamification, or remote work.

Additionally, the Metaverse as the social platform of the future is also imagined as a *marketplace in the Metaverse economy*. Such a Metaverse economy operates by outsourcing the content creation for the Metaverse to content creators and game developers, whose creations will subsequently attract more users to the platform. Moreover, the interpretative schema of *the Metaverse as a marketplace in the Metaverse economy* is used to present the Metaverse as an exciting ecosystem with a myriad of business opportunities and content for users. This framing is similar to Egliston and Carter’s (2022) findings where VR is viewed as a platform for content creation and distribution, fostering connections between creators and end users.

However, the interpretative schema of *the Metaverse as a marketplace in the Metaverse economy* has a greater emphasis on the social aspect of content creation. For instance, providing examples of content created by artists or influencers that is ready to be shared via Meta's already existing social media platforms in AR or VR format, as well as new ways to interact with fans and followers in the Metaverse. Nevertheless, such framing obscures Meta's evident economic motivation, because Meta derives revenue through enabling interaction among users, content creators, and game developers. Srnicek (2017) refers to this business model as "platform capitalism".

According to Srnicek (2017), platforms have control since they provide the infrastructure for their services, allowing them to monitor and extract all interactions between the various parties engaging in such platforms. Consequently, platforms are developed as systems for collecting and exploiting user data (Srnicek, 2017). The hunger for collecting users' data compromises users' privacy (Zuboff, 2015). In this context, both the Metaverse as the social platform of the future and Meta as a corporation are characterized as responsible and concerned about interoperability, inclusivity, data protection, and privacy. However, these subjects are briefly discussed throughout the keynote. For example, privacy in the Metaverse is articulated as "social surveillance" (Marwick, 2012), and thus as a problem of individual accountability. Such framing benefits Meta because it allows it to position itself as a responsible organization concerned with its users' privacy without having to explain how data is used to predict and modify human behavior, thereby perpetuating the "surveillance capitalism" system (see Zuboff, 2015). Consequently, questions about how the data gathered through the use of AR and VR devices could benefit Meta's profit motivations remain unaddressed, which is especially concerning given Facebook's previous unethical data collection practices and privacy issues (e.g., Cambridge Analytica).

Concerning RQ2, the findings indicate that the interpretative schemas presented in this thesis are used to build Meta's strategic narrative of the Metaverse as the social platform of the future in order to make it exciting to its stakeholders. The interpretive schemas are combined in a way that they constitute a future narrative that acknowledges future challenges while frequently tying the future to the past or present, eradicating uncertainty about the presented future, and thus encouraging and persuading Meta's stakeholders to believe in such a future. This future narrative adheres to the "golden fleece" structure. Such narrative structure, as noted by Erlach et al. (2020), comprises of a beginning (based on the current organizational identity), an objective as one potential resolution to the story (i.e., develop the Metaverse as a social platform), and specific impediments that may arise along the way (e.g., fitting sensors inside AR glasses).

Moreover, Meta's strategic narrative is embedded in Silicon Valley's tech culture ethos, where according to Svensson (2021), "the future is painted in bright colours" (p. 119). Likewise, Meta's future narrative of the Metaverse is based on Silicon Valley's optimistic vision of the future and the premise that the world can be made a better place through technological solutions. Consequently, the Metaverse as the social platform of the future is presented in a very positive light, not only in terms of tone, but also in terms of what is promised and its overarching goals. Such presentation not only contains a broader vision of society's future, but it also provides a specific vision of that future, which Meta aims to reinforce and transform into a sociotechnical imaginary in order to gain legitimacy over other companies invested in the Metaverse.

Conclusion

This thesis demonstrated how Meta's senior executives frame the use of AR, VR, and the Metaverse as the social platform of the future. The interpretive schemes of *the Metaverse as a facilitator of presence and a connector of people*; *the Metaverse as a marketplace in the Metaverse economy*; *the Metaverse as a ubiquitous place in our daily lives*; and *the Metaverse as a space designed in a responsible manner*, complement or, in some cases, expand the findings reported by Egliston and Carter's (2022) research. Additionally, this thesis identifies a new framing for the Metaverse as a social platform, namely *the Metaverse as the next version of the Internet*.

Furthermore, this thesis provides a more in-depth understanding of how such interpretive schemes were used to create Meta's strategic narrative about the Metaverse as the social platform of the future, using a future narrative to inspire and motivate the company's stakeholders by making the future appear possible and relevant to them. In turn, such a narrative implies a broader and normative vision of society's future, resulting in a corporate sociotechnical imaginary that is strategically reinforced in order to achieve legitimacy over competition. However, such imaginary is open to challenge and transformation by other social actors active in the various arenas surrounding the Metaverse.

The findings of this thesis have some practical implications for organizations and communication practitioners who work with future narratives. In line with the existing knowledge (e.g., Denning, 2006; Erlach et al., 2020; Mützel, 2021), future narratives must have a strong connection to reality in order to be perceived as plausible. Otherwise, the story may appear unrealistic and the audience will lose interest. Additionally, a compelling future narrative can be accomplished by grounding the future in the past (e.g., its history) or by beginning with a realistic depiction of the company's current situation (e.g., its mission). Last,

a good future narrative does not hide the existing challenges. Conversely, they acknowledge the necessary steps and limitations that lie ahead.

Nevertheless, a significant limitation of this thesis is that the analysis consisted solely on the transcript of Connect 2021. Consequently, the method chosen for the analysis ignores the multimodal aspect of communication, which could have aided this thesis in examining other interpretive schemes that were potentially excluded from the current analysis. Future research should be conducted using multimodal critical discourse analysis or visual semiotics to investigate potential interpretive schemas that were overlooked in the current study. Another study could use such research methods to investigate why spaces in the Metaverse are frequently represented as wide, open, and bright.

Last, another important limitation is that this study is primarily concerned with the statements of Meta's senior executives, which are only one subset of the actors involved in the social construction of technology; thus, this thesis does not consider how such discourses are received and may be contested by other social actors (e.g., content creators, developers, and users). Future research conducted outside of Silicon Valley may provide insights into how technologies such as AR and VR are socially constructed by different actors in other parts of the world, allowing for the identification of potential sources of contestation. Such research may include other approaches to discourse research, such as critical discourse analysis, to produce an investigation more focused on the use of language or the use of future narratives as rhetorical devices for the social construction of AR, VR and the Metaverse as the social platform of the future.

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Appendix 1

Overview of Codes

Quotes	Initial Coding	Focused Coding	Interpretive Schemas
<i>The next platform and medium will be even more immersive, an embodied Internet where you're in the experience.</i>	The Metaverse	The next version of the Internet / Embodied internet - Be in the Experience	The Metaverse as the Next Version of the Internet
<i>I think the Metaverse is really going to be first and foremost about connecting people.</i>	The Metaverse	Connect People	The Metaverse as a Facilitator of Presence and a Connector of People
<i>You're going to really feel like you're there with other people. You'll see their facial expressions. ... All the subtle ways that we communicate that today's technology can't quite deliver.</i>	The Metaverse	Feeling of presence	The Metaverse as a Facilitator of Presence and a Connector of People
<i>And you could also drop an exclusive product in the Metaverse, where only available to your most ardent fans who pay the special access to get that product.</i>	The Metaverse	The Creative Economy / For Creators	The Metaverse as a Marketplace in the Metaverse Economy
<i>The Metaverse will remove many of the physical constraints we see on commerce today and make entirely new business possible.</i>	The Metaverse	The Creative Economy	The Metaverse as a Marketplace in the Metaverse Economy
<i>This will make it easier for people to sell limited edition digital objects like NTFs, display them in their digital spaces and even resell them to the next person securely.</i>	The Metaverse	The Creative Economy / For Users	The Metaverse as a Marketplace in the Metaverse Economy
<i>Imagine a space where you can tune out distractions and focus on the task at hand.</i>	The Metaverse	VR Into Everyday Life / Working in the Metaverse	The Metaverse as a Ubiquitous Place in our Daily Lives

<i>Gaming is how a lot of people are going to step into the Metaverse for the first time.</i>	The Metaverse	VR Into Everyday Life / Gaming and Entertainment in the Metaverse	The Metaverse as a Ubiquitous Place in our Daily Lives
<i>Imagine learning how The Forum was built by actually seeing The Forum get built right in front of you.</i>	The Metaverse	VR Into Everyday Life / Education in the Metaverse	The Metaverse as a Ubiquitous Place in our Daily Lives
<i>To make sure we're living up to another one of our principles: consider everyone.</i>	The Metaverse	Responsibility / Inclusivity	The Metaverse as a Space Designed in a Responsible Manner
<i>You'll get to decide when you want to be with other people ... or when you want to take a break and teleport to a private bubble to be alone.</i>	The Metaverse	Responsibility / Privacy and Safety	The Metaverse as a Space Designed in a Responsible Manner
<i>Importantly, you should be able to bring your avatar and digital items across different apps and experiences in the Metaverse.</i>	The Metaverse	Responsibility / Interoperability	The Metaverse as a Space Designed in a Responsible Manner
<i>Over time, I hope we are seen as a Metaverse company.</i>	Rebranding		
<i>Our mission remains the same, still about bringing people together.</i>	Rebranding		
<i>And while this may sound like science fiction, we're starting to see a lot of these technologies coming together.</i>	Challenges building the Metaverse		
<i>With all big technological advancements, there are inevitably going to be all sorts of challenges and uncertainties.</i>	Challenges building the Metaverse / Technology Evolution		
<i>Video has become the main way that we experience content.</i>	Technology Evolution		
<i>The speed that new technologies emerged sometimes left policymakers and regulators playing catch-up.</i>	Technology Evolution		