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Metaverse Diplomacy: Borrowing From AESPA’s “Kwangya” Public Space ^[1]

The technological revolution has altered how society interacts. The Internet has opened the door for a different kind of engagement where face-to-face interaction is replaced by virtual platforms. This advancement affects the world of diplomacy.

What used to be secret and exclusively state-led activities have expanded. Non-state actors play more roles with the increased utilization of digital platforms that focus on the creation of dialogue. Proponents of public diplomacy often argue that the core concept is 'public' and that public engagement became the essence of diplomacy. Thus, the creation of virtual platforms was driven by the need to engage with a wider public. The use of social media as a public diplomacy instrument through Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and even TikTok is becoming more prevalent. We are still navigating this technological 'shock' and figuring out how to utilize the new digital-social platform. Thus, the birth of the metaverse adds to the complexity of public diplomacy.

Our current external environment doesn't always make the job easier. Especially post-pandemic, virtual connections have replaced the old way of doing business and are accepted as the new normal framework. The idea of the metaverse has existed for more than 20 years, though it wasn't until 2021 that the concept became widely accepted. By the end of 2021, it seemed as though "metaverse" is the most mentioned keyword in contemporary narratives.

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How should governments adapt to this changing environment and how can they use the metaverse as an instrument for public diplomacy? There are ways in which governments can utilize the metaverse, though its use necessitates strategy in managing control, data privacy and online regulation. All of these require amounts of work that have yet to be finalized, causing a conundrum for policymakers. However, the business sector is one step ahead. This time, the government should learn from their example.

Kwangya as A Space Creator

South Korea has been heralded as the top nation in utilizing its technology primacy and cultural nexus. This benefits not only its commercial sector but also boosts its soft power globally. The Korean government's policy has greatly aided culture in establishing a connection between the physical and digital worlds. Digitized Korea employs the metaverse in its simple yet powerful function: by creating a "venue for interaction."

An example of the use of the metaverse as a venue has been displayed by the K-pop industry. SM's successful metaverse development, particularly Aespa's universe called "Kwangya," championed this move. Kwangya is a specific space dedicated to AESPA fan base. It is the first step toward sharing stories in a new way and using the metaverse platform to interact with fans on days when physical meetings are impossible. By using Kwangya as a call sign, Aespa was able to increase interest in the group. Fans were inquisitive about what it was and rapidly started to identify Kwangya with Aespa. It is a metaverse that is (re)produced by both fans and the original creators.

This Aespa model suggests that a company's performance is determined by the number of fans and purchases, whether digital or analog. Although the metaverse is frequently portrayed as a utopian future, the concept is actually an effort by private enterprises to govern the laws

of reality. The capacity to create a persistent, all-encompassing environment is in the hands of businesses. However, the utilization is not confined to commercialization and is applicable to public diplomacy activities.

Aespa's Kwangya model is supportive due to its ability to create a venue of interaction between public diplomacy wielders and its recipients. The metaverse is not bound by physical space and time constraints. Thus, it is able to readily amass public attention on certain issues. The (re)production of content implies dialogue. More importantly, the metaverse generates shared identification by creating a 'fan base.' If used insightfully, it is able to create a strong and loyal 'fan base' to support certain causes, foreign policy goals or individual leaders.

What Next to be Considered?

AESPA's success in creating this space can be mimicked by the governments and leaders in public diplomacy, however, a few insights must be considered.

First, the new public diplomacy conception argues that in order for digital public diplomacy to work, it requires a dialogue. Bjola's identification of digital diplomacy seconds this by arguing that success is achieved when dialogue takes place between the wielder and the recipients of public diplomacy. However, creating dialogue is not an easy feat. One of the profound criticisms regarding the employability of digital public diplomacy rests heavily on the failure of dialogue creation. Thus, for the metaverse to be able to be used in public diplomacy goes back to its wielder availability to create dialogues.

Second, public-private partnership is essential in developing the metaverse for diplomatic purposes. Borrowing the Aespa Kwangya 'space' model is one option. Last year, on the 60th anniversary of their bilateral relations, in collaboration with a Korean company, VRillAR, Israel opened its first metaverse embassy to Korea. This was not the only initiative to create a metaverse embassy. Working with Decentraland, Barbados' government built the first metaverse embassy in 2021.

Third, will the metaverse be able to replace reality? Israeli ambassador to ROK, H.E Akiva Tor, stated that the metaverse is "the way forward...the embassy metaverse will become the essential standard, just as websites became the essential standard ... and SNS channels are now." However, real people-to-people interaction is still desirable. It's difficult to distinguish between immersive virtual reality and reality. Gradually, it will haze over and hybridize. There are highlights in the real world, but the metaverse also has some advantages.

Metaverse may be a term we hear frequently, but we haven't yet realized how significant it is. The border between physical and virtual worlds will eventually disappear. As a result, a new living style, with new economic, political and social configurations will emerge. The inconceivable metaverse allows for a human to exist in a new world and calls for new forms of control. Therefore, the government must design its public diplomacy strategy to capitalize on the connection between the physical and digital worlds to fully benefit from the metaverse.
