Thumbnail Image:

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Exploring the Metaverse and Its Implications for Digital Diplomacy [1]

With the arrival of the Metaverse, avatars and digital humans have the potential to fundamentally alter the way we think about visual representation in digital diplomacy. In virtual environments, avatars allow individuals to create and inhabit digital bodies that can be designed and customized in ways that are not possible in the physical world. By embracing the power of avatars and digital humans, diplomats can challenge traditional notions of representation and open up new possibilities for digital engagement and collaboration. However, to effectively utilize avatars in the Metaverse, diplomats need to understand the opportunities and risks involved, which the current discussion aims to explain.

Let's start by clarifying the key terms. *The Metaverse* refers to a network of three-dimensional virtual worlds (Meta Horizon Worlds, Decentraland, Sandbox, Roblox, Axie Infinity and more) not yet fully interconnected, where avatars engage in political, economic, social and cultural activities. In simple terms, the metaverse can be seen as an extension of the physical reality

in which any number of users can experience the virtual world simultaneously, with each of them having their own sense of reality that is, their own 'virtual life.'

The metaverse has long been a realm for online gaming, but recent technological advancements have prompted countries such as Japan, Korea, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to begin devising plans for constructing their own national metaverses. *Avatars* and *Digital Humans*, on the other hand, are the digital counterparts of users, acting as their alter egos in the virtual world. These digital representations can be in the form of a 3D model or a 2D icon and can be <u>customized</u> to reflect the user's individuality and preferences. The major distinction between an avatar and a digital human is their level of realism, where the latter is a highly realistic computer-generated representation of an actual person, as demonstrated in this <u>example</u>.

In conclusion, avatars represent a new form of visual representation in digital diplomacy with unique characteristics and the potential to have a significant impact.

Avatars offer a new way of visual representation by incorporating *non-verbal communication* cues such as facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. These elements are crucial in conveying *emotions,* and they can do it more effectively than on social media or Zoom. Avatars also project *3D spatiality* and allow for *multiple perspectives*, including first-person or third-person views. Additionally, the *movement* of avatars can be carefully designed to enhance accessibility and create a more dynamic environment for engagement. As a novel form of visual representation, Avatars & Digital are likely to stimulate exciting processes of meaning creation.

According to constructivist theories of <u>visual perception</u>, our understanding of visual information is not simply a matter of passively receiving and processing it, but of actively constructing meaning from it. Given that the visual information we receive from our surroundings is often incomplete, unclear and conflicting, our minds rely on our past experiences, knowledge and beliefs to make sense of this information and form a coherent perception of the world. Avatars with their nonverbal and emotional cues, 3D spatiality, ability to show different perspectives and dynamic modes of interaction are well equipped to create new patterns of visual perception and enhance the process of meaning-making in the Metaverse.

Avatars can thus play a significant role in digital diplomacy by producing more engaging visual narratives thorough different tactics of meaning-making. Personalization allows avatars to be designed with customized facial expressions, body language and tone of voice that enhance the audience's sense of self-identification through alignment with their expectations and prior experiences, thus creating a more meaningful and engaging interaction. Another aspect to consider is creating an immersive experience for the audience. Digital activities can incorporate interactive elements where the avatar can engage the audience, increasing the feeling of authenticity and creating a deeper emotional connection with the underlying narrative. Finally, avatars can be used to enable project co-participation and co-creation with

the audience. This allows them to explore, interact with and create their own stories and initiatives, which they can then share with others in the metaverse or on social media. Sharjahverse, the world's first government-backed metaverse city funded by UAE to be made available to the public in 2023, is a promising example of how personalized avatars, immersive experiences and potential co-participation could be applied in the metaverse for public diplomacy purposes. Whereas Sharjah is widely known as the cultural and historical heart of the UAE, Sharjahverse, its digital counterpart, is touted as the next era of metaverse tourism for the UAE, with plans to expand to 80 additional locations in the emirate by 2024.

Unfortunately, the same features that would enable avatars to constructively contribute to building understanding and relationships through digital diplomacy could be also used to disrupt relations and project hostility between groups in the Metaverse through disinformation and propaganda. This can occur through the impersonation of public figures, amplification of disinformation through automation and creation of multiple accounts or through tailored manipulation using realistic digital humans capable of establishing fraudulent relationships with members of the digital public. To mitigate the effects of avatar-enhanced disinformation, new measures will be required aimed at enhancing transparency, facilitating identification, improving moderation, providing digital education and enforcing regulations.

In conclusion, avatars represent a new form of visual representation in digital diplomacy with unique characteristics and the potential to have a significant impact. Their ability to provide nonverbal and emotional cues, project 3D spatiality, reflect on issues from multiple perspectives and facilitate dynamic modes of interaction could make them an effective tool for creating new meaning in the Metaverse and building strong relationships online. However, this new form of communication also presents the potential to open the door to the "dark side" of enhanced disinformation and propaganda. As we navigate this exciting new frontier of visual representation, it is therefore crucial to approach avatars in digital diplomacy with a mindful and strategic lens.