

Domestic Violence in the Metaverse: Legal Challenges of Virtual Harassment Between Intimate Partners

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Abstract— The rapid advent of the metaverse has transformed the nature of communication through the creation of immersive virtual worlds in which participants use avatars to communicate using virtual reality and extended reality technologies. While such platforms offer users numerous opportunities for socializing, entertainment, learning, and cooperation, the advent of the metaverse has opened up a number of new avenues for committing virtual harassment and domestic violence facilitated by advanced technologies. For example, intimate partners may commit domestic violence by engaging in cyberstalking, avatar-based sexual harassment, coercive control, verbal harassment, surveillance, emotional manipulation, and public humiliation. The borderless and immersive nature of the metaverse creates significant ethical and legal challenges related to privacy, consent, jurisdiction, collecting evidence, regulating platforms, and protecting the victims. Hence, this paper explores the problem of domestic violence in the metaverse through analysis of the latest academic publications in the field, cyber law theory and framework, and intimate partner violence conducted through technology.

Keywords— Metaverse, domestic violence, virtual harassment, cyber law, intimate partner abuse, digital safety

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technologies has significantly altered the way people communicate, socialize, and engage in relationships around the globe. Some of the most impressive advances in recent years relate to the creation of the metaverse, defined as a network of immersive virtual worlds based on various digital technologies like virtual reality, augmented

reality, artificial intelligence, blockchain, and digital communication systems. In metaverse platforms, users interact using avatars in specially designed spaces used for entertainment, learning, gaming, business collaboration, and socializing. Given the significant investments made by major technology firms in creating immersive virtual ecosystems, it seems likely that the metaverse will play a critical role in people's lives in the coming decades.

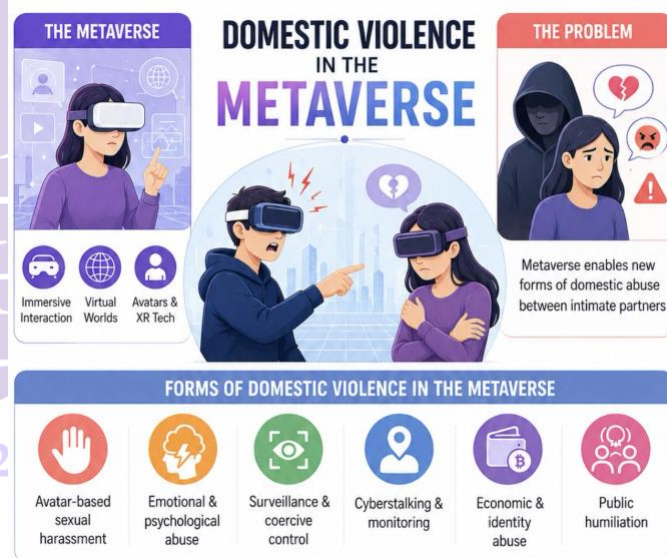


Fig. 1. Domestic Violence in the Metaverse

As virtual interaction becomes more engaging, so does the possibility of forming relationships in digital environments. Relationships between romantic partners, friends, and social groups are now established through digital communication

channels, immersive games, and virtual worlds. As new possibilities emerge, the potential for online abuse, cyberstalking, and digital coercion has increased. Cases of avatar-based sexual harassment, verbal harassment, digital surveillance, and emotional manipulation have caused significant concerns related to the safety of users in virtual environments.

In addition to physical and cyber-related domestic violence, there is a possibility of experiencing domestic violence in the metaverse environment. Virtual domestic violence may involve any type of abuse in immersive virtual environments such as harassment, threats of violence, unwanted virtual contact, emotional manipulation, digital surveillance of behaviors, and public humiliation using avatars or other digital technologies. The metaverse may create an entirely new way to experience emotional, psychological, and reputational trauma through digital means. However, current laws against domestic violence and cybercrime were created to regulate physical and traditional forms of online activities, which may prove ineffective.

The increase in cases of virtual harassment requires urgent actions and measures to ensure proper regulation and digital safety governance in immersive virtual environments. Issues related to consent, jurisdiction, identification of users, collecting evidence, platform liability, and victim protection in the metaverse have become important topics for scholars and lawyers who are interested in studying technology-facilitated intimate partner abuse.

Research Objectives

1. Explore the notion of domestic violence in virtual environments and metaverse platforms
2. Identify legal issues involved in the process of virtual harassment of intimate partners
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of current cyber laws regarding abuse in the metaverse and digital safety



Fig. 2. Research Objectives

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly research linking domestic violence, intimate partners, and the metaverse is still scarce. Nevertheless, there are several areas of academic studies relevant to the problem in question, namely technology-facilitated intimate partner violence, cyber dating abuse, and sexual harassment in the metaverse. A systematic review conducted by Kim and Ferraresso demonstrates that technology-facilitated domestic violence includes cyberstalking, impersonation, image-based abuse, threats, and coercive control. Technology has become a powerful tool used by abusers to maintain their dominant position rather than just a communication channel. Similarly, Rogers et al. argue that online abuse in relationships may amplify existing power imbalance in the relationship but never replaces it as another form of violence.

Recent empirical studies have supported this idea. According to the findings provided by Storey et al., after analyzing 4,501 cases of cyber-abuse, it became clear that some cases included technology-facilitated domestic violence in the form of cyberstalking, image-based abuse, harassment, and surveillance. Boxall et al. define TFIPV as the use of digital technologies like phones, GPS, and social media to control current or former intimate partners. Importantly, these findings demonstrate that technology-facilitated domestic violence could be applied in the metaverse since the new environment provides avatar embodiment, voice interaction, and proximity as well.

Regarding legal issues involved in metaverse violence, McGlynn and Rigotti introduce the term "meta-rape" in their 2025 publication in the Oxford Journal of Legal Studies and argue that traditional criminal law definitions of rape fail to account for virtual sexual violence and harassment since such crimes lack a physical contact element. Likewise, in Karapatakis' 2025 publication, fraud and sexual assault in the metaverse are compared to each other, and it becomes evident that existing frameworks tend to better deal with property-related crimes than sexual violence. In addition, Chawki et al. note that virtual reality and metaverse technologies present special problems regarding anonymity, evidence collection, platform responsibility, and victim protection.

Finally, domestic violence in the metaverse is characterized by specific features. For instance, intimate partners may conduct domestic violence by forcing avatars to interact, humiliating users publicly, conducting cyberstalking, making threats, conducting non-consensual sexual acts, recording the interaction between avatars, or continuing coercive control after separation. However, one must acknowledge that current laws against domestic violence are often oriented at physical assaults, domestic violence committed against the person residing in the same building or premises, and electronic

communications. Since metaverse-related harassment may involve avatars, pseudonymous profiles, cross-border server usage, and platform-verified evidence.

Recent studies support the importance of this aspect. For example, Dong et al. present the results of a systematic review conducted in 2026 of virtual reality harassment based on 85 scholarly works published between 2017 and 2025. The researchers identify common virtual reality-related harms including sexual harassment, verbal harassment, and spatial invasion. Gkioka examines how the obligations outlined by the EU Digital Services Act can be used to address gender-based harms in the metaverse. Similarly, UN Women's work focuses on violence and misogyny facilitated by virtual reality and the metaverse.

Overall, it is important to realize that domestic violence committed in the metaverse environment is a part of technology-facilitated coercive control in a relationship. Nevertheless, there is room for conducting empirical research that would specifically address domestic violence between intimate partners in the metaverse. Future scholars and lawyers should focus on the interplay between domestic violence laws, cyber laws, laws against sexual harassment, platform responsibilities, and victim protection.

Table 1: Summary of Existing Literature on Virtual Harassment and Metaverse Abuse

Author(s) & Year	Study Focus	Key Findings	Relevance to Present Study
Kim & Ferraresso (2023)	Technology-facilitated intimate partner violence	Identified cyberstalking, coercive control, and digital abuse	Explains digital abuse patterns relevant to metaverse relationships
Rogers et al.	Online abuse in intimate relationships	Digital abuse strengthens existing power imbalance	Connects online abuse with domestic violence behavior
Storey et al.	Analysis of cyber-abuse cases	Found widespread cyberstalking and surveillance	Supports existence of technology-based partner abuse
McGlynn & Rigotti (2025)	Sexual violence in the metaverse	Introduced concept of "metarape"	Highlights legal gaps in virtual sexual harassment
Karapatakis (2025)	Metaverse crimes and legal responses	Existing laws better address financial crimes than virtual assault	Demonstrates legal inadequacy in immersive abuse cases
Dong et al. (2026)	Systematic review of VR harassment	Identified verbal abuse, spatial invasion, and harassment	Supports psychological harm in immersive environments

III. TYPES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE METAVERSE

1. Virtual Sexual Harassment

Virtual sexual harassment is one of the common problems observed in metaverse-related contexts. In such spaces, interactions between people happen via avatars and consist of gestures, speech, movements, and even physical actions in immersive environments. Numerous cases have been documented in which someone was subject to unwelcome avatar contact, sexually explicit actions, verbal harassment, and invasion of one's personal virtual space. Despite the fact that these events occur virtually, many people claim feeling the same psychological effects of harassment in these immersive worlds.

As an act of coercion and emotional abuse, sexual harassment can be used within intimate relationships. One's partner can regularly initiate unwanted contact between avatars, make another person engage in virtual sexual activities, and humiliate a victim sexually in public virtual spaces. At the moment, there are no clear definitions of the terms of consent and bodily autonomy in the virtual world, making the problem very challenging for authorities and police.

Existing sexual harassment laws have been mostly created for dealing with acts of abuse in the physical world and may not cover avatar-based sexual harassment issues.

2. Emotional and Psychological Abuse

Metaverse technology offers ways of abusing people in their emotional and psychological states. Emotional abuse can take the form of sending threatening and intimidating messages, humiliating and manipulating the victim, gaslighting them, and continually monitoring their digital activity. Within immersive virtual worlds, abusers can socially isolate their victims, preventing them from communicating and moving freely.

Emotional abuse in the metaverse can be especially traumatic since such environments offer highly immersive experiences that make people emotionally engaged and more vulnerable. Thus, abusive partners may continuously threaten their victims, instilling fear in them through regular contacts and manipulations performed via simulated environments. Additionally, one may use digital surveillance to continuously observe and spy on his/her partner's activities in virtual spaces.

3. Economic and Identity Abuse

Financial abuse can manifest itself as the appropriation of a victim's digital belongings, such as virtual currencies, NFTs, gaming assets, and other valuable virtual things. With the development of virtual economies, digital property becomes increasingly valuable, and abusive people can use it as an

instrument for inflicting emotional or financial harm on their victims. Economic and identity abuse may also involve taking over a partner's digital accounts and stealing important information.

One can also steal a digital identity from another person, impersonating their avatar to humiliate them, manipulate others' attitudes towards this person, and engage in various kinds of fraud. As an instrument of power, identity abuse might be used after breaking off the relationship for blackmail or humiliation purposes. Since metaverse platforms offer global and anonymous environments for users, there may be significant issues in holding the offender accountable for these acts.

4. Stalking and Monitoring

Another form of domestic abuse involves virtual stalking and continuous digital monitoring. Using metaverse technology, one can follow the location and activities of a victim within the virtual space in real-time and obtain a large amount of behavioral information from them. Cyberstalking may be carried out through virtual reality technology, applications for social interaction, wearable devices, and other digital communication channels.

IV. LEGAL CHALLENGES OF ADDRESSING VIRTUAL HARASSMENT

1. Problems with Jurisdiction

Firstly, the main legal challenge in solving the issue of domestic violence and virtual harassment is associated with jurisdiction. Immersive digital environments are hosted by companies from different countries, and people from diverse jurisdictions interact in virtual spaces together. In a case of intimate-partner abuse, all parties involved, such as the victim, the offender, the server's location, and valuable digital property, might be from different countries, causing confusion for the relevant authorities.

Cyber crimes are rather complicated to regulate in accordance with internet laws since they are cross-border activities; thus, dealing with domestic violence and virtual harassment issues in metaverse becomes even more challenging. The victim can receive real-time harassment in an environment of a platform located in another country in which cyberharassment or domestic-violence laws are different from those in his/her homeland. Each platform uses its own governance policy and offers different guidelines for handling abuse.

2. Ambiguity in Legal Definitions

Moreover, lack of exact legal definitions is another legal problem connected with domestic violence cases in immersive virtual worlds. Most of the laws concerning domestic violence have been created to regulate physical abuse, verbal threat, coercion, and harassment that are delivered through the internet and mobile communication devices. It becomes challenging to define some specific types of abuse in the virtual world because of the unique nature of metaverse spaces.

For instance, it might be problematic to identify whether the actions in a virtual environment, such as unwanted avatar contact, simulated sexual acts, virtual stalking, and continued psychological intimidation, should be regarded as sexual harassment or domestic violence according to the current definitions.

3. Difficulties with Collecting Evidence

Additionally, collecting evidence in these cases might be rather challenging for legal authorities. In the metaverse, interactions take place in a rather dynamic form and involve the use of various digital elements and tools for communication. In order to collect evidence in such cases, law enforcement officers would require the help of the host company and cooperation of the victim who might find it rather difficult to prove what happened.

Furthermore, the information collected could not be enough since most communications occur dynamically through avatars, and it may be impossible to save the record of interaction for future use. Moreover, avatar-based harassment could require identifying a particular user, which would be a rather complex task since people usually use pseudonymous or anonymous digital identity in virtual environments.

4. Issues Related to Privacy

The high degree of immersion provided by these platforms involves gathering a lot of sensitive personal data to provide users with better experiences. This means that intimate partners could potentially use these technologies and methods to constantly track victims' actions in virtual worlds, violating their right to privacy. On the other hand, the investigation process could involve collecting information from the metaverse companies as well.

This poses certain concerns for both users and governmental institutions as they will need to carefully consider the extent to which the authorities may violate the users' right to privacy for solving a problem in question. This implies the necessity of developing adequate laws and regulations governing this process.

5. Platform Liability

Lastly, platform liability is another issue in the context of this topic. At present, most metaverse companies try to deal with harassment problems through self-regulation, using community guidelines, reporting mechanism, banning offenders temporarily, and other measures. However, some experts argue that such policies cannot be sufficient in case of the high level of psychological and emotional impact that such abuses can cause.

Thus, questions arise whether metaverse service providers should be held accountable for failing to prevent harassment and other related crimes, providing the necessary evidence, verifying users' identity, and banning repeat offenders. These companies have full control over user behavior since they create the entire environment in which the user operates. However, platform liability should be considered cautiously. Ethical and Social Implications

Domestic violence and virtual harassment are associated with considerable ethical issues that transcend technical regulation. One of the critical implications refers to mental well-being. Immersive VR technologies trigger an impression of realism, thus making victims feel afraid, humiliated, embarrassed, depressed, anxious, psychologically distressed, or experiencing emotional trauma. Regular exposure to online abuse may result in compromised social or psychological well-being. It means that metaverse-based harassment has real consequences for mental well-being that deserve attention.

Another critical issue pertains to the problem of gendered violence in metaverse platforms. Gender-based domestic violence is one of the most significant social issues of our time. In this regard, women and minority populations tend to experience sexual harassment, bullying, stalking, or other forms of online abuse. Online anonymity and the inability to monitor activities in virtual reality increase the likelihood of cyber violence against disadvantaged groups and promote existing social inequalities.

Users' privacy and confidentiality represent another social implication since individuals disclose extensive personal, behavioral, and biometric information to platforms operating immersive technologies. Digital tracking in metaverse environments involves monitoring voice patterns, movement, facial expression, eye tracking, and other sensitive data, which makes users highly vulnerable to privacy and identity issues. In addition, individuals lacking proper digital literacy skills may find themselves at additional risk due to ignorance concerning privacy controls and other security measures.

Finally, it is critical to consider minors' safety and welfare in relation to metaverse technologies. Young people and children tend to spend much time playing virtual games and interacting online. As a result, there is a risk of exposing minors to bullying, grooming, identity theft, or any other online abuse. Insufficient age verification and poor moderation in digital spaces pose additional threats for minors who require comprehensive legal protection.

V. DISCUSSION AND KEY FINDINGS

Analyzing relevant literature and legislation related to domestic violence and cybercrime reveals several important findings in relation to the use of immersive technologies. First, the rapid expansion of the metaverse challenges existing domestic violence and cyber crime regulation, making it ineffective in many cases. Many countries' legislation was designed specifically to regulate internet-based communications, which means that laws may not cover avatar-based violence and other forms of virtual domestic abuse.

Second, virtual abuse is capable of producing serious emotional, social, or even psychological consequences regardless of the fact that it does not involve any physical interaction between participants. According to the analysis conducted, victims of domestic violence in the metaverse are more likely to suffer from various psychological problems, including anxiety, depression, and emotional distress because of immersive experiences in virtual reality.

Third, the lack of international legal standards pertaining to virtual abuse represents another crucial aspect in relation to metaverse domestic violence. Cross-cultural and cross-border aspects of online interaction raise numerous questions about cyber law and jurisdictional authority. In addition, the use of pseudonyms poses an additional difficulty for law enforcement and the implementation of adequate penalties in cases involving online domestic violence.

Finally, one of the key aspects of virtual domestic violence pertains to the role of technology companies involved in the creation of immersive VR environments. Since technology providers control user behavior, identity, moderation processes, and virtual environment management, they need to take responsibility for ensuring virtual users' safety and well-being. Thus, platform accountability and safety issues are extremely important in the context of the metaverse.

Table 3: Recommended Regulatory Measures for Safer Metaverse Environments

Area	Suggested Measure
User Safety	Real-time reporting and moderation systems
Identity Protection	Strong avatar verification mechanisms

Legal Framework	International cyber law cooperation
Evidence Preservation	Mandatory storage of abuse-related interaction logs
Child Protection	Age verification and parental controls
Platform Governance	Clear accountability policies for metaverse providers

Thus, there is an immediate need for new regulatory and legislative frameworks to respond to the evolution of technological tools. Technology companies, governments, and international regulatory agencies should work together to define new legal terms and ensure platform accountability in order to protect users' right to psychological well-being, privacy, and safety.

VI. CONCLUSION

Virtual reality creates immersive digital environments in which all social, professional, and personal interactions are conducted using avatar technology. In addition, novel forms of domestic abuse have emerged in virtual environments. Intimate partner violence in the metaverse may include different forms of sexual and psychological abuse in virtual environments, including cyberstalking, virtual sexual assault, identity-based manipulation, and so forth. While virtual domestic violence takes place in a digital world, its consequences can be rather serious.

In particular, it is important to recognize virtual domestic violence as a critical ethical, social, and legal challenge rather than dismiss it as an online activity. Current domestic violence legislation tends to be outdated because laws were developed before the emergence of new technologies. In addition, issues like legal uncertainty, the need to verify avatar's identity, privacy concerns, and jurisdiction raise a number of difficulties in enforcing relevant laws.

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