

# Metaverse and the Global South: Bridging the Digital Divide

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By Guest Author

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*By Nidhi Singh*

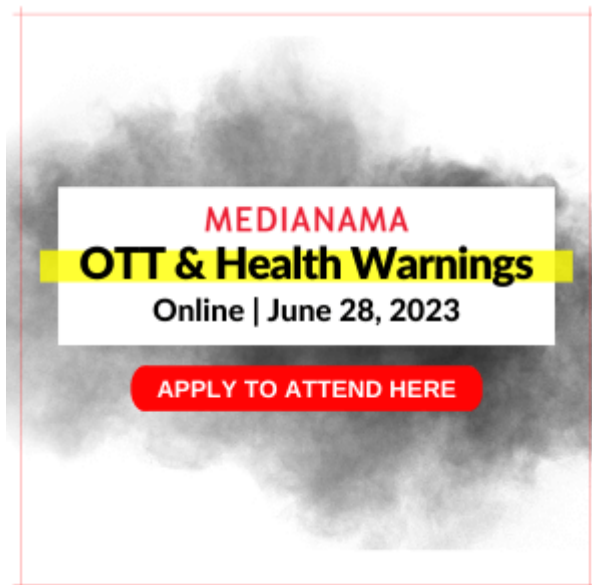
The buzz surrounding the creation of the virtual world is not new. Science fiction has long promised a concept of a shared virtual world, starting from the novel *Snow Crash* and moving on to more recent examples like *Ready Player One*. In addition, as more interactions moved online during the pandemic, the idea of a shared virtual world, or the 'Metaverse' gained traction from companies and states around the world. Metaverse technologies are projected to generate as much as 5 trillion USD by 2030, and more and more companies and states are investing in this technology.

However, as the conversations around the use and potential of the Metaverse grow, specifically in the Global North, it is important to consider the implications of the use of this technology for Global South. The use of this technology could further exacerbate the digital divide, and the high cost of entry associated with setting up the metaverse could push away historically marginalised communities. It is important to consider ways to set up an inclusive Metaverse which can be used for the benefit of all users and states around the world.

## **What is the Metaverse?**

In simple terms, the most commonly known concept of the Metaverse today is a 3D model of the internet, envisioned as the next step in the development of information interaction online. In its original conception, it was ideally accessible through a single gateway, and as it develops, it would be equivalent to the real world and become the “the next evolution in social technology”. The idea of the Metaverse is however still in development, and while it appears that it may include some components of Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies, its difficult to say how this definition will evolve over time.

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### How does the Metaverse work?

In current times, the basic function of an immersive online world is that it allows for a digital economy, where users can create, buy, and sell goods that already exist in certain video games. While games like Worlds of Warcraft allow users to create and sell digital goods inside the game, others like Fortnite have previously introduced some immersive experiences like concerts and installations within the game, providing a brief look into what the Metaverse could look like. The current conception of the Metaverse is expected to be more expansive than this, where everyone would be able to log into a shared online space.

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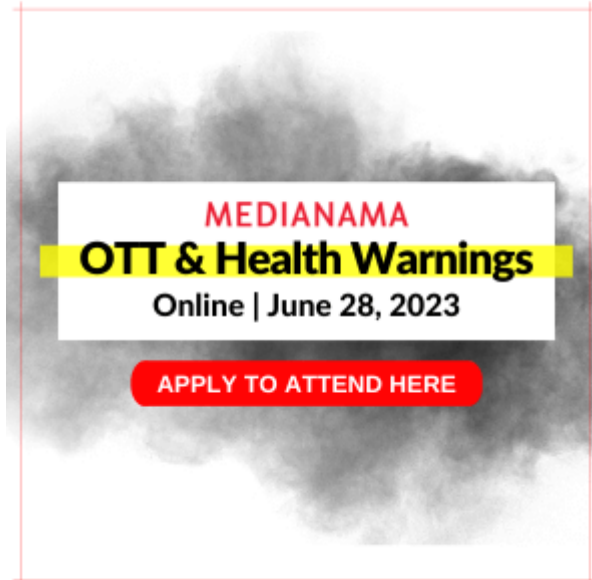
### Operationalising the Metaverse—challenges for the Global South

So when can we expect to be part of this new shared virtual online world? While some experts believe that a large portion of the population will have some access to the Metaverse by 2030, some basic challenges must be addressed before this technology

can be operationalised, particularly in Global South countries.

### **Cost of entry**

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A fundamental problem with the widespread implementation of the Metaverse in India is likely to stem from the cost of entry, including the cost of VR hardware and other technology which may be needed to operate the Metaverse. Additionally, the use of these technologies would also require higher computing power than what is currently available, and an almost 1000 time increase in computational efficiency. While a large portion of the country is now connected to the internet through their smartphones owing to lower cost of data, the technologies required to implement Metaverse are still out of reach for a vast majority. This coupled with the lack of access to infrastructure such as fast internet and systems with high-computing power, will pose considerable challenges – hindering people from participating in the virtual world and participating in the Metaverse.

### **Exclusive design**

Another considerable barrier to access is the design of the Metaverse. The current conversation around the design and implementation of the Metaverse is dominated by the Global North, and much of the virtual world, which is currently being envisaged, will likely be dominated by English language content and experiences, majorly designed for the Western world. This would make it difficult for audiences from the Global South to fully engage in the new technology.

In addition, countries like South Korea intend to build a parallel state on the metaverse, which citizens can use to avail welfare services, contact municipal administrative departments, and attend town halls and other community-building events. These efforts are capital-intensive and require a high degree of technical expertise on the part of the state, which many global south states still lack. Implementing this kind of a 'digital twin' in

the metaverse would be difficult for most Global South countries, creating further barriers to access, which prevents these states from being able to derive equal benefits from the use of the metaverse.

## Bias

There are also concerns about how this technology could result in further deepening the digital divide. There is a risk that the Metaverse will exacerbate existing inequalities by creating a virtual space where only those with access to technology and the resources to participate are able to engage. This would widen the digital divide between the Global North and the South, where the technology would cater predominantly to those who have easier access to it.

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In addition, AI is poised to play a huge role in the development and evolution of the metaverse, and the introduction of AI will bring its own challenges of bias with it. AI systems are typically designed and trained in the global north, and are not contextualised for global south countries. It is, therefore, likely that the algorithms underpinning the metaverse may be more likely to discriminate against users from the global south and may have an adverse effect on them.

## Data Protection

Finally, the Metaverse also raises questions about data protection and privacy of users in the virtual world. In the absence of a cohesive legal and regulatory framework around data collection, use, and protection, users are at risk while engaging with the Metaverse. This is exacerbated in Global South countries, many of which are still in the process of formulating their data protection laws and do not have adequate legal and regulatory protections for data governance.

Addressing these challenges would require a collaborative effort between governments, businesses, and communities in the Global South. By working together, it may be possible to ensure that the benefits of the Metaverse are more widely distributed and that everyone has an opportunity to participate. This would require substantial changes to the current conversations around the Metaverse, which lack inclusivity in design and deployment.

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