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# Woman recalls 'gang rape' in metaverse; concerns grow over making VR platforms safe from sexual predators



By Amrita Das | Feb 08, 2022, 08:31 AM IST (Published)

## Mini

As sexual offences rise in metaverse, London-based Nina Jane Patel recalls the 'rape horror' she faced recently and underscores the need to make virtual reality platforms safer. CNBC-TV18 also spoke to Meta and sectoral experts to dig deeper into legal and other related aspects



Within 60 seconds of joining Meta's (Facebook) metaverse platform Horizon

London-based Nina Jane Patel said some of these four systems

venues, London-based Nina Jane Patel said a gang of three-four avatars sexually harassed her. "They essentially, but virtually, gang-raped my avatar and took photos as I tried to get away," Patel, co-founder and vice-president of metaverse research Kabuni Ventures, wrote in a post on Medium.com.

She added that virtual reality had been designed so that the mind and body can't differentiate virtual/digital experiences from the real world.

"My physiological and psychological response was as though it happened in reality," she recalled.

### Patel looks back on her experience



Nina Jane Patel, co-founder and vice-president of metaverse research at Kabuni Ventures. (Photo by Craig Hibbert via Nina Jane Patel)

In an email interview with CNBC-TV18, Patel said she froze as things got out of

her hand fast.

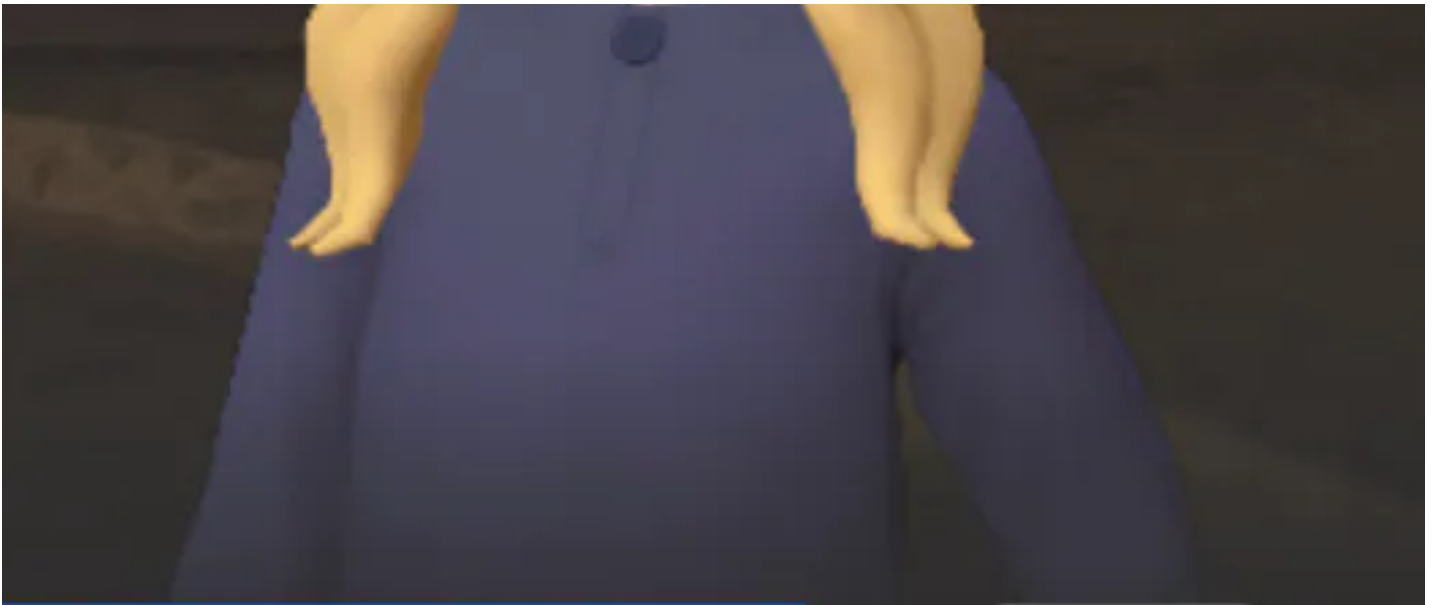
"I fumbled with the controllers to try to use the safety features, i.e. block and report. But as I was asking them to 'stop', 'go away', I realised I needed to end this as their verbal harassment and sexual innuendos were getting increasingly aggressive."

Patel pulled off the virtual reality headset, but she could still hear her attackers' laughter and voices coming through, saying, "don't pretend you didn't like it".

She finally had to hit the power button off on the side of the headset to end the ordeal.

"I didn't see any other avatars in the venue other than the attackers. I don't know their identities or the avatars' names, so I cannot go back and report or block."





Nina Jane Patel's avatar on Horizon Venues. (Photo by Nina Jane Patel)

"I am not accustomed to being spoken to in such derogatory ways, maybe back in 1996, but certainly not now. The comments on my post were a plethora of opinions from - 'don't choose a female avatar, it's a simple fix', to 'don't be stupid, it wasn't real', 'a pathetic cry for attention', 'avatars don't have lower bodies to assault', 'you've obviously never played Fortnite', 'I'm truly sorry you had to experience this', and 'this must stop!'"

Patel is a doctoral researcher on the psychological and physiological impact of the metaverse.

"I return to the metaverse to continue considering ways to create a safer metaverse for children, as part of my work with Kabuni," she told CNBC-TV18. Now, she is unsure if she could let her children visit such platforms, even with supervision, unless the companies make them safer.

### **What is metaverse?**

Metaverse, which means 'beyond universe' or 'parallel universe', is an immersive virtual world where you can socialise through your virtual avatar. The term became popular after Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg changed the company's name to Meta in October 2021. He had then said that privacy and safety need to be built into the metaverse from day one.

Virtual reality headsets worn over the eyes are used to interact with others on

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metaverse. Users can create avatars by changing apparel, gender, hairstyle, facial and bodily features. They can shop by using cryptocurrencies and even take part in events such as music concerts and games.

Horizon Venues, launched by Facebook in 2020, is accessible for Oculus Quest 2 users. Oculus' website says, "Your Facebook login is an all-access pass to concerts, sports, comedy, and more".

### **Dangers shadow \$800-billion opportunity**

The global meta universe, whose revenue opportunity could approach \$800 billion in 2024, is facing growing criticism about its misuse.

On the Oculus website, a user named janet.woodville said: "Someone kept following me around last night. I went into Venues this morning, and I am running into too many perverts. I can't go back in until Oculus cleans it out of all the perverts and bullies."

StarWillpower, another user, said: "Most of the times I've come to watch a show or fight, there were either kids being obnoxious or someone following me around being inappropriate. I know they are avatars but trying to kiss my avatar... is completely out of hand. I couldn't even get to the menu to report him or get out of there because his avatar was in the way."

Another one wrote: "If you're looking for a safe place for you kids to hang out... hard pass here! I'd suggest adults staying clear, too."

Patel refrained from discussing companies' policies on making virtual reality spaces safer for users. Still, she said it was imperative that the entry point into the metaverse is secure and that the user guidelines are clearly set out.

"Once a child is in the metaverse environment, it is important (as we are building within Kabuni) that age-appropriate interactions are ring-fenced, that there are reporting and logging functions for inappropriate behaviour, as well as inbuilt parental and teacher supervision and controls etc.," she said.





Personal Boundary won't be visible like you see in the screenshot. (Photo by Meta)

### **Meta's response**

Commenting on Patel's experience, a Meta spokesperson told CNBC-TV18 over email: "We are sorry to hear this happened. We want everyone in Horizon Venues to have a positive experience, easily find the safety tools that can help in a situation like this, and help us investigate and take action. Horizon Venues should be safe, and we are committed to building it that way."

The company said several tools - like block and report - are already in place to help keep people safe while in VR. They also noted that a feature, 'Safe Zone', allows a user to instantly transport into a separate space that gives them a break from their surroundings and quick access to safety tools.

"We will continue to make improvements as we learn more about how people interact in these spaces, especially when it comes to helping people report things easily and reliably," the spokesperson said.

### **'Need for amendment in laws'**

With 3D internet space evolving, firms are building products to bring a physical touch to social virtual reality experiences. EmERGE, a social virtual

physical touch to social virtual reality experiences. Emmerge, a social virtual company, for example, recently announced the launch of their first product to enable immersive 'bare-hands' tactile experiences in the metaverse.

Experts fear the space could become a haunt for sex offenders and say governments will have to amend laws quickly.

Huzefa Tavawalla, head of the disruptive technologies practice group at law firm Nishith Desai Associates, told CNBC-TV18 over the phone that it would be up to the organisations to roll out safety programmes. But fixing criminal liability in the meta universe, Tavawalla said, would be difficult.

In India, online harassment victims have recourse to many laws - Indian Penal Code (IPC) Sections 354A, 354D, 499, 507, 508, etc., and Information Technology Act Sections 66C, 66D, 66E, 67, and 67A, among others. But finding who to reprimand for a meta avatar harassment would be difficult in the meta world.

"An avatar can be made to look like anyone. I can be made to look like a child or a superhero. Also, how do the platforms or third parties validate that the user is who they are claiming to be unless there is an onboarding and verification process. But in the near future, that is unlikely to happen for all virtual reality platforms," he said.

The interplay of virtual and real is another interesting bit.

"In IPC, most sections on sexual offences/hurt refer to a man, woman, human body, and bodily injury. So, to what extent it can be attributed to an avatar is far-fetched. At present, it is difficult to argue that digital avatar harassment would be equated with the same consequences as that of a human body/natural person."

So, the onus would be a lot on the platforms to build specific features where the moment a user's avatar feels threatened or is being made vulnerable or compromised, a safety feature comes into play, he said.

"Another filter is definitely at a user level till there is more and more jurisprudence on these matters."

## What next, for now?

Meta told CNBC-TV18 that the company has introduced 'Personal Boundary' for Horizon Worlds and Horizon Venues. Personal Boundary prevents avatars from coming within a set distance of each other, "making it easier to avoid unwanted interactions".

Meta said Personal Boundary began rolling out from February 4 everywhere inside of Horizon Worlds and Horizon Venues, and will make it feel like there is almost a four-foot distance between avatars.

"If someone tries to enter your Personal Boundary, the system will halt their forward movement as they reach the boundary. We are intentionally rolling out Personal Boundary as always-on, by default," Meta said.

According to a [World Economic Forum post](#), civil society organisations such as [Access Now](#) and [EFF](#) are calling for governments and other stakeholders to address human rights in the context of virtual and augmented reality.

Patel underscored the industry needs to come together to put in place better security controls and safety measures on metaverse harassment.

"This will continue to be problematic for men and women as our world moves from the 2D internet - into the 3D internet space. The more damaging lens will be on our still maturing children who will start to use such platforms more and more in the coming years."

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