

Understanding emerging consumer roles as tools for value co-creation in the metaverse

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Authors:

Ryan Ellis

Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, United Kingdom.

Dr Nick Yip

Brunel University of London, United Kingdom

Dr Jonathan Wilson

Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, United Kingdom.

Prof Robert Jones

Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, United Kingdom.

Contact Details:

Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom, NR4 7TJ,
Ryan.Ellis@uea.ac.uk

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Summary:

This paper explores how emerging consumer roles interact with metaverse features to co-create value within Final Fantasy XIV's virtual world. Using an interpretivist approach combining netnography and semi-structured interviews, the research identifies three motivational drivers (emotional, social, and consumptive) that influence participation in metaverse environments. Six distinct metaverse feature categories are analysed: communication tools, personalization tools, accessibility tools, economic tools, environmental tools, and safety tools. From these interactions, nine consumer roles emerge: Market Specialists, Housing Designers, Glamour Enthusiasts, Content Experience Collectors, Social Event Organisers, Performers, Virtual Photographers, Insiders, and Outsiders. Each role contributes uniquely to value co-creation processes. The findings challenge traditional views of digital communication by demonstrating that metaverse environments can foster meaningful connections comparable to physical relationships. The research contributes to service-dominant logic by providing empirical evidence of how consumers function as central co-creators of value and offers practical insights for developers, businesses, and community managers seeking to foster positive value co-creation in virtual environments.

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Introduction

The metaverse uses digital technologies including virtual reality, cloud, 5G, non-fungible tokens and blockchain to construct a world beyond the physical reality that offers consumers an identity, an economy, creation opportunities, immersion, tele-presence and new world views (Hwang, et al, 2023). The Metaverse blurs the boundaries between the physical world and the digital world creating new realities. Due to limited exploration of value co-creation within virtual worlds, there is an opportunity to further understanding into how and why consumers engage with the implemented systems within the metaverse.

However, to further understand how and why different people engage with these systems, research should first explore the different emerging roles that consumers adopt within the metaverse to consider their motivators and develop an understanding of the consumers' respective value co-creative behaviours. This study focuses on exploring emerging consumer roles and their value cocreation with implemented metaverse features, developers and other community members in the FFXIV virtual world through analysing value-in-use and value-in-context.

There has been a significant surge in public interest towards the metaverse following the Covid-19 pandemic. 60% of consumers demonstrated excitement and anticipation towards the future prospect of virtual living and this had driven to an increase of metaverse related business income which had surged from \$10,000 billion to over \$120 billion between 2021 and 2022. (McKinsey & Company, 2022). There are opportunities for academics to help brands make sense of how they can engage with consumers and encourage value co-creation behaviours within metaverse environments so that brands can access new markets and create shared virtual experiences for consumers.

This paper identifies different types of emerging consumer roles the FFXIV massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) and explores how the emerging consumer roles contribute to value co-creation within the metaverse. The aim of this research is to provide brands and academics with an understanding of the various consumer roles that emerge within the metaverse, to understand their distinct motivations and how to leverage co-produced metaverse features (systems) to encourage voluntary value co-creation participation within the metaverse environment.

Background for research context

The metaverse has been adopted and evolved throughout multiple generations within the gaming industry (Hackl, et al, 2022; ICAEW UK, 2022; Gaia Online 2022). Now, the metaverse provides homes to gaming communities within massively multiplayer online (MMO) video games such as FFXIV through artificial environments that allow members of their communities to live, play and work within (Başar, et al, 2018). The metaverse provides an ethnographic environment where communities form and consumers adopt emerging consumer roles where their behaviours co-create value for other users. The metaverse also implements metaverse features which provide value-in-use to consumers. The derived value can shift dependent on contextual factors such as the roles adopted by the consumers engaging with them.

Mishbakhudin & Aisyah (2021) identified how the Shariah markets had shifted during the Covid-19 pandemic to cater for the Muslim market. Their findings suggested that consumers are less invested in where they consume products and services online but care more about the perceived value they receive during the consumptive process through their online services, products, and promotions and the benefits associated with them. The study found that consumers weighed the perceived value from the consumptive experience against the financial cost of consumption. The FFXIV Metaverse provides consumers with value-in-use such as convenience, ease of accessibility, perceived ownership, and shared accountability.

Hassan, et al (2021) recognised that having a sense of community influenced value co-creation between small businesses and consumers. Their research explored social commerce communities and focussed on the positive values that a sense of community can provide both sellers and buyers. Morgan & Hunt (1994) found that engagement within the metaverse can provide businesses with the opportunity to incorporate a two-way collaborative relationship to leverage relational value at the point of consumption. Their combined research suggests that providing a sense of community within the metaverse can influence value co-creation.

This research bridges the gap between the three studies exploring how the FFXIV metaverse environment provides a place for co-produced metaverse features, and emerging consumer roles to assist in value co-creation for consumers and developers. The research explores individual consumer drivers to provide developers with an understanding on how they can influence outsiders to enter and navigate the metaverse. Furthermore, this research provides a contextual framework on how consumers voluntarily opt-in and engage within value co-creative processes.

Literature Review

Digital marketing has evolved from Web 1.0's one-way communication to Web 3.0's intelligent, personalised experiences (Nath, 2022). Metaverse technologies like blockchain and non-fungible tokens (NFTs) provide transparent ownership records and enable consumers to earn, own, and use digital items with real-world money (Hackl et al., 2022; Terry and Keeney, 2022). The metaverse represents the next evolution, blurring online and offline experiences through virtual worlds where consumers live, shop, and socialise. These spaces provide platforms for community formation where members share values, identities, and moral codes (Jones and Vogl, 2020; Coombes and Jones, 2020). The metaverse economy offers new avenues for businesses to publish content, implement marketing practices, and source revenue streams (Hackl et al., 2022).

Statista (2023) highlights a generational shift toward metaverse engagement, with younger demographics increasingly likely to participate in virtual worlds. McKinsey & Company (2022) estimates that by 2028, 4.7% of Gen Z and Millennial populations in the US will spend an average of 4.7 hours daily in the metaverse. This generational rise in metaverse engagement makes it increasingly important for businesses and community managers to recognise and cultivate meaningful consumer participation in metaverse contexts as consumers continue to shift their social lives, and consumption habits towards virtual environments.

Virtual worlds enable users to create extended selves through avatars (Belk, 2016), allowing them to escape physical limitations such as disabilities preventing individuals from having access to social events in the physical world and enable consumers to express their identities differently online through the embodiment of avatars. Yee (2014) describes this as the

"Proteus effect," where avatar characteristics influence user behaviour both online and offline. Park et al. (2020) discovered links between avatar-self congruence and flow, while Barhorst et al. (2021) noted that immersive technologies mediate flow through engaging interactions. This stresses the importance for developers and community managers to make sense of the technological affordances that metaverse features (integrated systems) provide consumers through value-in-use.

Consumer roles within communities significantly impact value co-creation. Healy and McDonagh (2013) identified consumer behavioural roles including voice, loyalty, exit, twist, entry, non-entry, and re-entry, each contributing differently to community dynamics. These behavioural roles emerge as consumers navigate belonging within communities, seeking support, connection, recognition, and acceptance (Jones and Vogl, 2020). Therefore, exploring value-in-context can measure how different emerging consumers roles can provide unique value towards developers, the consumers themselves and the wider community. This proves increasingly important as other research recognises that value co-creation occurs through collective engagement within digital ecosystems (Ramaswamy and Kerimcan, 2014).

Motivations for participation include information seeking, self-related goals, rewards, social connections, hedonistic pursuits, and technological interest (Zhao and Chen, 2022). Yi and Gong (2013) argue that participative behaviours—information seeking/sharing, responsible behaviour, and personal interaction—are essential components of value co-creation. However, consumers must voluntarily opt-in to value co-creation processes (Jones & Vogl, 2020). This is important to recognise as value co-creation processes can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. While it deepens trust and relationships, enhances innovation, and provides personalised experiences (Ramaswamy and Kerimcan, 2014), it can also result in exploitation if consumers feel like unpaid employees (Fuchs and Mosco, 2016). Echevarri and Skålén (2011) note that where co-production enhances work intensity and stress, value co-destruction can occur, meaning developers need to consider how to choose to engage with consumers to leverage their talent without them feeling like employees.

Priharsari & Abedin (2021) identify four co-producing actors in online value co-creation: the organisation, individual members, social influences, and technological systems. Understanding how these elements interact is crucial for community managers seeking to encourage positive value co-creation and discourage negative co-creative behaviours. However, while existing literature provides valuable insights into consumer identity construction, behavioural roles, and value co-creation within digital and immersive environments, there remains a lack of empirical understanding of how these dynamics specifically unfold within metaverse platforms such as Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV). Most prior studies focus on general virtual or online communities without adequately addressing the unique, persistent, and immersive nature of metaverse environments. Moreover, the interplay between consumer behavioural roles, technological affordances, and community-driven value co-creation (particularly within game-based metaverses) remains underexplored. This gap is especially critical given the growing generational engagement with these platforms.

This research aims to address this research gap by making sense of how and why consumer roles emerge and evolve within metaverse environments, particularly in FFXIV. By understanding the interplay between emerging consumer roles, implemented metaverse features in the FFXIV virtual world, and value co-creation processes, community managers can better cater to consumer needs and develop value-focused strategies that align with McKinsey & Company's (2022) recommendation to connect meaningfully with users in the metaverse space.

Methodology Summary:

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm to investigate emerging consumer roles and the influence of metaverse features on value co-creation in Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV). Interpretivism, which centres on understanding subjective meanings and socially constructed realities, is particularly appropriate for studying value co-creation as a phenomenon shaped by ongoing interactions and shared cultural norms (Turyahikayo, 2021; Rechberg, 2018). This approach enables deeper insight into how users navigate identity, community, and value in complex virtual environments.

Research Design and Time Horizon:

Data collection occurred over a seven-month period, that enabled identification of contexts, systems, and insider groups within the FFXIV community from April to October 2024. This extended timeframe supported the researcher's engagement with evolving community dynamics, allowing for the observation of behavioural patterns and the development of contextual understanding. All data were recorded, organised, and systematically coded using NVivo software, facilitating simultaneous recording and analysis that streamlined the research process. Codes were initially open codes that were inductively coded rather than reliant on existing theory to support the grounded theory, interpretivist approach. These open codes were then clustered together through selective coding to identify drivers, metaverse features and emerging consumer roles. Axial coding was then used to establish relationships between the clustered codes for each theme to identify value-in-use provided by metaverse features and value-in-context provided from consumer roles to make sense of how emerging consumer roles and system affordances can shape experience within the metaverse and play a role in value co-creation.

Data Collection Methods

The study employed a multimethod qualitative approach combining netnography notes recorded in an immersion journal, social media data and in-depth interviews to explore emerging consumer role behaviour and motivators within FFXIV's virtual world, Eorzea.

Netnography

Netnography was chosen as it observes "How members behave naturally within the metaverse" (Kozinets, 2021). This method examined how community members interact, the attitudes they share, and patterns in engagement motivators to discover why different members participate in value co-creation with different implemented systems, developers and other members (Polus & Carr, 2023). Data were collected from public FFXIV community pages on social media platforms including X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram, as well as through participative observation within the virtual world itself. Kozinets (1997) notes that researcher membership in a community can facilitate trust and participant recruitment. During data collection, the lead researcher found that their role as an active member within the FFXIV community helped with participant recruitment and establishing trusting relationships throughout the interviewing process with selected participants due to a shared-identity, shared language and the ability to share similar experiences which often prompted respondents to reveal further insider knowledge.

Semi Structured In-depth Interviews

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with strategically selected participants from different insider groups including content creators, erotic role-players and high-end raiders. As Dörnyei (2007:13) notes, interviews represent a "natural and socially acceptable way of collecting information," providing "unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences, and opinions" (Kvale, 2008:9). The researcher supports this notion as insider experiences from participants helped develop their understanding of the motivator values participants held which were used to distinguish new emerging consumer roles.

Purposive sampling was employed, targeting leaders of different insider groups as representatives who could provide deeper insights into motivations, values, and behaviours that might be difficult to observe directly (Campbell et al., 2020). The researcher employed an interview guide to ensure key topics were addressed while maintaining flexibility to explore relevant emergent themes exploring motivators that encourage value co-creative participation, metaverse features looking specifically at how the different systems within the virtual world uniquely provide value to consumers through co-creative processes and emerging consumer roles to understand how members adopt different co-creative behaviours based on their motivators (Taderdoost).

Reflective Practice

To address potential bias stemming from the researcher's dual role as a community member and researcher, reflective notes were maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process. This practice allowed the researcher to hold themselves accountable and maintain researcher integrity (Johnson et al, 2020) while also creating an opportunity to better understand perspectives within the community that differed from their own.

Analysis Method

The study employed grounded theory, which Flick (2019) describes as an approach where "researchers adopt minimal preconceptions about the issues being studied, and researchers simultaneously adopt data collection and analysis using interpretations that aim at constructing new theory." While Glaser and Strauss (1967) advocate immediate immersion in the research context without any literature-driven preconceptions, this study aligns with Bryant's (2019) view that literature can provide valuable framing ideas provided researchers remain open-minded and was used to create a semi-structured interview guide which was referred to throughout the interview process to prompt question development based on responses.

Thematic coding identified categories within the collected data. Each data was initially coded using descriptive coding which were then clustered into themes and then separated within subthemes to differentiate emerging thematic phenomena using axial coding to draw connections between codes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Limitations

Key limitations included ethical concerns regarding participant identification, time constraints necessitating strategic sampling decisions, and potential bias due to the researcher's community membership. To mitigate these challenges, the researcher employed reflective practice, carefully selected participants until data saturation, and leveraged NVivo for concurrent data collection and analysis.

Methodological Contributions:

The study demonstrates how NVivo can effectively integrate longitudinal netnography with interview data, enhancing analytic depth and transparency. The study also applies grounded theory within a metaverse context, illustrating how participative experience can yield robust, emergent insights. It highlights how insider positionality, when reflexively managed, can enrich data access and interpretation, especially in tightly knit virtual communities, and establish trust with participants within metaverse communities.

Finding and Analysis

This chapter explores how emerging consumer roles and metaverse features function as tools for value co-creation within the FFXIV virtual world. The research employs netnography, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and social media data analysis to address four core research questions concerning how and why consumers adopt different roles, engage in value co-creation, interact with metaverse features, and how these roles influence value co-creation processes.

Drivers for Metaverse Engagement

Three primary motivational clusters emerged from the data: emotional, social, and consumptive motivators, which drive player behaviour and engagement within the virtual world.

Theme 1: Emotional Drivers

Emotional motivators represent deep-seated psychological drivers that influence behaviour within the metaverse. The research identified four key emotional motivators:

Belongingness emerged as a fundamental need for security and shared purpose. A sense of belonging can emerge through the emotional attachment amongst social relationships, and towards place. Players often join virtual worlds based on influence from existing networks or to find communities with shared values. As one participant noted: *"Getting to play with my friend as it was something different to what we usually did, and we were wanting to try an MMORPG as it seemed fun."* The data revealed that virtual relationships can develop significant emotional depth, sometimes crossing into physical reality as players forge meaningful connections.

Emotional Support manifests through connections with other players who provide comfort, humour, and understanding. The research found that emotional attachment to online communities can be powerful, with one participant describing how community dissolution can feel *"like if there was a funeral"* to affected members. Players often connect through shared trauma or experiences, finding support in virtual communities that may not be available in their physical lives.

Escapism allows players to create alternate realities and narratives, temporarily leaving behind real-world constraints. Players use the virtual world to construct stories, adopt different personalities, and engage in behaviours they might not express in physical settings. One participant described using their avatar to create *"stupid storylines"* and *"stupid looking glammers"* they wouldn't attempt with other avatars, highlighting how avatar choice influences behaviour and self-expression.

Freedom represents players' desire for autonomy and creative expression without real-world consequences. The research found that players value the ability to choose when and how they engage with the virtual world, with one participant appreciating that in FFXIV *"You can go*

away from it for like a month and not really be behind" compared to other MMOs with more demanding engagement requirements.

Theme 2: Social Drivers

Social motivators consider the players' desire to form connections and exchange information within the virtual world.

Social Connectedness drives players to seek meaningful interactions and relationships. The research revealed that even introverted individuals who might find physical social interactions taxing often seek social connections in virtual spaces. One participant explained that raid groups formed through consistent membership (statics) create deeper connections: *"I think the whole kind of point in a static is that you should advance faster because everyone should be kind on the same page."*

Information Sharing encompasses knowledge exchange and storytelling between community members. Players regularly source information from other community members rather than directly from developers, creating information networks that help navigate the virtual world's complexities. Trust between community members facilitates deeper information sharing, as evidenced during research interviews where participants shared insider knowledge based on established rapport.

Theme 3: Consumption Drivers

Consumption motivators relate to how players interact with and consume content within the virtual world.

Information Seeking drives players to actively pursue knowledge needed to navigate the virtual environment. The research found that lack of information can significantly hamper player experiences, with one participant admitting they *"Didn't experience a lot of what the game had to offer"* due to not knowing about fundamental game systems.

Achievement Hunting motivates players through perceived progress and reward systems. Different players are driven by different rewards, from collecting mounts to completing challenging content. As one participant expressed: *"Challenge, completionism, the sense of camaraderie... there's tremendous satisfaction from completing difficult content."*

Autonomy represents players' ability to control their virtual experiences. The research found this particularly important for players with disabilities who may have limited freedom in physical settings, with one participant explaining how their chronic illness limits real-world socialisation but *"n this game... I kinda want to be (social). I want to hang out with my friends every single day and I can do it for hours without actually exhausting me."*

Metaverse Features:

Six distinct types of metaverse features were identified that facilitate value co-creation through player engagement: communication tools, personalisation tools, accessibility tools, economic tools, environmental tools, and safety tools. These tools provide unique value-use as explored below.

Communication Tools

FFXIV offers various communication systems including in-game chat, the novice network, free-company messaging, linkshells, mogmail, emotes, adventurer plates, free company organisation, and party finder. These tools facilitate information exchange and social

connection. For example, the novice network connects experienced players (mentors) with newcomers (sprouts), creating value through knowledge sharing and community building.

The study found that communication effectiveness depends on alignment between tool design and player needs. When tools fail to meet expectations, players often resort to third-party solutions like Discord for voice communication, creating potential safety concerns that developers cannot monitor.

Personalisation Tools

Personalisation features allow players to customise their experience through avatars, non-fungible assets, job classes, housing, and hotbars. These tools enable player self-expression and identity formation within the virtual world.

Avatars serve as extensions of players' identities, with one participant explaining: *"I think it personified what I wanted to be more like... I felt like I had a bit more freedom because it's all online and in a way it's kind of like anonymous."* The research found that avatar choice influences behaviour, with certain races like Lalafell encouraging playful interactions due to their child-like appearance. Furthermore, for some players, avatars enable players to escape from reality choosing to adopt personas and avatar appearances that differ from their own.

Housing systems provide spaces for creative expression and community building, with many players using these spaces to host events and create immersive experiences for others. Job class selection impacts how players engage with content, with different roles providing varied experiences and purposes within group activities.

Accessibility Tools

While FFXIV provides accessibility features, the research identified several barriers that can exclude players with specific needs. The user interface design was criticised for being overly complex, potentially alienating players with disabilities or those unfamiliar with MMO conventions.

Players with conditions affecting reaction times reported difficulties participating in high-level content, though community members often suggested workarounds and adaptive strategies. The research found that players frequently use third-party tools (mods) to enhance accessibility despite violating terms of service, highlighting a gap between official accessibility provisions and player needs.

Economic Tools

Economic systems in FFXIV include currencies, the online store, player-led markets, subscription models, and companion applications. These features create frameworks for resource management and exchange between players.

The player-led market board enables complex economic interactions, with market specialists manipulating supply and demand to influence prices. As one participant described: *"Sometimes I will get a little frustrated when... somebody will put [an item] on there for like 14,000 instead of coming down by maybe 10 or 50, they'll come down by a massive chunk."*

The research found that players generally appreciate FFXIV's monetisation approach, which avoids predatory practices like loot boxes while still offering cosmetic items for purchase. One participant praised the game's economic systems: *"We pay a subscription for... £8.99 a month, which is nothing really in the grand scheme of things, but we get so much out of that."*

Environmental Tools

Environmental features create immersion through players and NPCs, weather systems, time systems, and landscape design. These elements work together to create a coherent, believable world that facilitates storytelling and player engagement.

The research found that inconsistencies in world design can disrupt immersion, with players noting issues like architectural inconsistencies between connected areas or empty-feeling zones. Weather and time systems enhance immersion when aligned with narrative elements but can create dissonance when they clash with story beats.

Safety Tools

Safety features include reporting systems, in-game jail for rule violators, two-factor authentication, and measures to address addiction concerns. These tools aim to create a secure environment for all players.

The research identified video game addiction as a significant concern, with one participant acknowledging: *"Videogames are a catalyst. They unlock the dopamine that we seek to find. It's very, very, very... Dangerous."* This participant implemented personal boundaries like turning off devices at specific times to maintain balance between virtual and physical life.

Emerging Consumer Roles:

The research identified several distinct consumer roles that emerge through player engagement with the virtual world, each contributing to value co-creation in unique ways:

Market Specialists focus on economic systems, developing expertise in manipulating supply and demand. These players track price trends, arbitrage between servers, and sometimes use spreadsheets or third-party tools to maximise profits. They include both suppliers (crafters and gatherers) and consumers who may negotiate prices directly or manipulate markets through strategic purchasing.

Housing Designers create immersive environments using housing instances and furniture assets. Personal housing designers focus on their own creative vision, while entrepreneurial designers create spaces for communities or clients based on negotiated requirements and budgets.

Glamour Enthusiasts collect rare outfits and accessories to create unique character designs. They often share designs to inspire others and participate in fashion-related events within the virtual world.

Content Experience Collectors systematically experience game content, tracking achievements and collecting items. They often use third-party tools to optimise efficiency and may adapt their approach based on content design, with some preferring casual engagement while others pursue intensive grinding strategies.

Social Event Organisers create and host in-game social experiences using housing, non-fungible assets, and communication tools. These players bring communities together through structured activities and events.

Performers create immersive experiences for themselves and others through activities like music performance, roleplay, or raid leadership. They engage with various game systems to craft experiences that entertain and connect players.

Virtual Photographers capture in-game moments using the g-pose system, sometimes employing third-party tools to create more complex compositions. They document events,

achievements, and social gatherings, preserving memories and creating visual content for the community.

Insiders possess knowledge and experience they can share with newcomers, functioning as gatekeepers to information. They often engage in helping behaviours, sharing expertise through in-game channels like the novice network or third-party platforms like Discord.

Outsiders lack established knowledge and must engage with systems and other players to integrate into communities. All players begin as outsiders and undergo voluntary initiation processes to join insider groups, with some communities like erotic role-players having formal application and testing procedures conducted through third-party platforms.

Dependent on the emerging role, different value-in-context was co-created through engagement with systems, developers and the wider community as illustrated below in a table that explores how different emerging consumer roles can provide unique communication-driven value based on their engagement with communication tools and in relevant cases with other tools such as economic tools to communicate information such as pricing (see Appendix A, Table 1).

Findings Summary

This research demonstrates that value co-creation within the FFXIV metaverse emerges through complex interactions between player motivations, metaverse features, and emerging consumer roles. Players engage with virtual environments based on emotional, social, and consumptive drivers, using available features to fulfil their needs while simultaneously creating value for others through their emerging roles. Furthermore, consumers can adopt multiple emerging consumer roles simultaneously. For example, an insider within the raiding community may have little knowledge and experience within role-play and therefore also be considered an outsider from that insider group.

The findings reveal both strengths and limitations in current metaverse design, highlighting opportunities for developers to better align features with user needs and for community members to bridge gaps through collective action. By understanding the dynamic relationship between consumer roles and metaverse features, developers and community leaders can foster more inclusive, engaging virtual environments that facilitate positive value co-creation.

Discussion

This study explored how emerging consumer roles interact with metaverse features to co-create value within FFXIV's virtual world. The findings reveal a complex ecosystem where players' emotional, social, and consumptive motivators drive engagement with various metaverse features, resulting in distinct consumer roles that contribute to value co-creation processes.

Motivational Foundations of Value Co-Creation

The tripartite motivational framework identified in this research—emotional, social, and consumptive motivators—extends existing understanding of value co-creation in virtual environments. While previous research has focused predominantly on social networking sites rather than virtual worlds (Abbassi, 2023; Weber, 2009), our findings demonstrate that metaverse environments enable deeper immersion through embodied avatars, environmental storytelling, and complex economic systems that facilitate multi-dimensional value creation.

The emotional motivators of belongingness, emotional support, escapism, and freedom align with Holbrook's (2021) perspective on consumer value as an interpreted experience based on individualised preferences. Players create meaningful, emotional connections that often transcend virtual boundaries into physical relationships, supporting Belk's (2016) concept of extended self in digital contexts. This challenges Jones and Vogl's (2020) assertion that digital communication creates weaker social ties, suggesting instead that metaverse environments can foster deeper emotional connections between members comparable to physical relationships when appropriate features support these interactions.

The Role of Systems in Facilitating Value Co-Creation

Our findings highlight how metaverse features function as co-production platforms for value co-creation, supporting Etgar's (2007) conceptualisation of co-production as preceding co-creation. Communication tools, personalisation systems, and economic frameworks provide the necessary infrastructure for players to engage in value co-creation behaviours. However, our research also reveals significant discrepancies between developers' intended use of these systems and actual player engagement patterns for example, players crowdsourced the possible routes to complete variant dungeons which have multiple paths and provides a mount reward for completion reducing the longevity of the content.

This disconnect exemplifies the theoretical gap identified by Pié (2017) and Wang et al. (2020) regarding the complex and dynamic nature of value co-creation processes that can result in both positive and negative outcomes. When metaverse features align with player motivations, they facilitate positive value co-creation; when misaligned, they can lead to value co-destruction or drive players toward third-party solutions outside developer control.

Emergent Consumer Roles as Value Co-Creation Mechanisms

The consumer roles identified in this study—Market Specialists, Housing Designers, Glamour Enthusiasts, Content Experience Collectors, Social Event Organisers, Performers, Virtual Photographers, Insiders, and Outsiders—represent novel theoretical constructs that extend beyond Healy and McDonagh's (2013) framework of co-creative behaviours. These roles emerge through the interplay of player motivations and metaverse features, creating diverse value co-creation pathways.

These findings support Beverland et al.'s (2023) assertion that co-created educational journeys require participants to adopt various roles (educator, student, peer), as exemplified by the knowledge exchange between Insiders and Outsiders. However, our research extends this understanding by demonstrating how these roles operate within a complex ecosystem where players may simultaneously occupy multiple roles or transition between them as their motivations evolve.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research contributes to service-dominant logic discourse (Vargo and Lusch, 2008) by providing empirical evidence of how consumers function as central co-creators of value within metaverse environments. The findings challenge simplistic views of co-creation by demonstrating how discovered emerging consumer roles contribute differently to value formation processes, supporting Echevarri and Skålén's (2011) contention that co-production can enhance enjoyment but also potentially destroy value when misaligned with consumer needs.

For practitioners, this research highlights the importance of understanding motivational drivers and emergent consumer roles when designing metaverse features. The disconnect

between intended and actual use of systems suggests developers should adopt more collaborative approaches to feature design, potentially involving representatives of different consumer roles in co-innovation processes.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into value co-creation processes within FFXIV, further research across different metaverse platforms would enhance generalisability. Studying these diverse platforms would help determine which findings are unique to FFXIV and which represent broader patterns in metaverse engagement. This comparative approach would strengthen the theoretical contributions by identifying which consumer roles and value co-creation mechanisms transcend specific platforms versus those that are context dependent. Future studies could explore how consumer roles evolve over time, how transitions between roles occur, and how developers might better leverage various roles in co-innovation initiatives.

Additionally, quantitative examination of the prevalence of different roles and their economic impact would provide valuable complementary data to the qualitative insights presented here. Such mixed-methods approaches could further enrich our understanding of how emerging consumer roles and metaverse features function as tools for value co-creation in increasingly significant virtual worlds.

Conclusion

This research has explored the complex interplay between emerging consumer roles and metaverse features within FFXIV's virtual world. The research illuminates how value co-creation emerges through dynamic interactions between players, systems, and communities. The findings reveal a sophisticated ecosystem where emotional, social, and consumption drivers influence engagement with various metaverse features, resulting in distinct consumer roles that contribute uniquely to value co-creation processes.

The study identified nine emergent consumer roles each perform distinct patterns of engagement with metaverse features to illicit unique value-in context. These roles serve as frameworks through which consumers navigate virtual environments, create value for themselves and others, and form identity-based communities.

We found that metaverse features act as co-production platforms that enable value co-creation when aligned with consumer motivations. Communication tools facilitate knowledge exchange and community building. Personalisation systems enable self-expression and identity formation. Economic frameworks create spaces for resource exchange and market behaviours. Environmental features foster immersion and storytelling. Safety tools provide security necessary for meaningful engagement.

Significantly, this research reveals that value co-creation in metaverse environments is fundamentally different from traditional physical markets or even social networking platforms. The embodied nature of avatar-mediated interaction, the complexity of environmental systems, and the freedom of identity expression create conditions for deeper, more multi-dimensional value creation than previously understood in digital contexts.

Our findings challenge Jones and Vogl's (2020) assertion that digital communication creates weaker social ties, suggesting instead that metaverse environments can foster emotional connections comparable to physical relationships when appropriate features support these interactions. The research also extends Healy and McDonagh's (2013) framework of co-

creative behaviours by identifying specific roles through which these behaviours manifest in virtual environments.

For practitioners, this research offers several important implications. First, developers must recognise the disconnect between intended and actual use of metaverse features, adopting more collaborative approaches to feature design that involve representatives of different consumer roles. Secondly, businesses entering metaverse spaces should identify which consumer roles are most relevant to their offerings and design experiences that leverage the motivational drivers of those roles. Third, community managers should facilitate knowledge exchange between Insiders and Outsiders to support smooth transitions between roles and foster inclusive environments.

For policymakers and regulatory bodies, this research highlights the need for frameworks that address safety concerns while preserving the creative freedom that drives value co-creation. The finding that players often resort to third-party tools despite violating terms of service suggests a need for more flexible approaches to platform governance that acknowledge legitimate user needs because third-party tools could pose risks unintended by the developers such as harassment through external platforms.

This study contributes to service-dominant logic discourse by demonstrating how consumers function as central co-creators of value within metaverse environments, challenging simplistic views of co-creation by showing how distinct emerging consumer roles contribute differently to value formation processes. It extends existing understanding of virtual community dynamics by identifying specific roles that emerge through interaction with metaverse features.

Future research should explore how these consumer roles manifest across different metaverse platforms, how transitions between roles occur over time, and how organisations might better leverage various roles in co-innovation initiatives. Quantitative studies examining the prevalence of different roles, and their economic impact would complement these qualitative insights.

As metaverse environments continue to evolve and attract investment, understanding the mechanisms of value co-creation within these spaces becomes increasingly important. This research provides a foundation for such understanding by illuminating the complex relationships between consumer motivations, emerging roles, and metaverse features that drive value co-creation in virtual worlds.

Appendices:

Appendix A: Table 1 -A table illustrating how emerging consumer roles can provide different value-in-context for tools than their initial value-in-use intent.

Communication Tools	Value-In-Use	Emerging Consumer Role:	Primary communication tools	Value in Context
	facilitate information exchange and social connection.	Outsiders	Party Finder, in-game chat channels, Novice Network, forums, social networking sites, third-party tools such as Discord, linkshells, free companies	Provide fresh perspectives to challenge norms, surface usability / access issues, recognises issues faced by new users entering metaverse, and provides feedback to co-innovate integrated systems and the new player experience.
		Market Specialists	Market boards (to communicate price), adventurer plates, third party tools such as Discord, cross-world linkshells.	Add economic value, facilitate trade networks, share pricing knowledge, control player driven inflation and value exchange.
		Housing Designers	Screenshots, Social networks, third-party tools such as Discord, forums, party finder.	Inspire creativity, self-expression, entrepreneurship, create immersive experiences, establish a sense of belonging and a “home” identity through an emotional attachment to place.
		Glamour Enthusiasts	Public chat channels, linkshells, sharing screenshots using gpose, emotes, forums, market board and third-party tools such as addons, free	Influence fashion norms, self-expression to communicate identity to self and others, fashion competitions, establish immersion through embodied avatar and storytelling. Achievement hunting (acquiring specific

			company messaging.	glamour pieces for outfits from unique content and/or the market board). Glamour-related knowledge transference. Feedback.
		Content Experience Collectors	Linkshells, emotes, party finder, third party tools including addons and discord, free company messaging.	Organising shared experiences, achievement hunting, shared accountability in content such as high-difficulty raiding, knowledge transference. Feedback.
		Social Event Organisers	Party finder, linkshells, free company chat, third party tools such as discord and social networking sites.	Organising shared experiences, shared accountability, event management, social connectedness, establish a sense of belongingness.
		Performers	In-game instruments, emotes, glamour, in-game chat, linkshells, party finder, third party tools such as discord, social media tools, adventurer plates, forums, free company chat.	Organising shared experiences, create immersive experiences through avatar embodiment and the use of environmental, and communication tools. Creative freedom. Self-expression through engagement with metaverse features.
		Virtual Photographers	Gpose screenshots, emotes, third party tools such as shaders, social media, forums.	Capture and share creativity and immersive experiences. Create shared - experiences. Shape external and internal perceptions of the world.
		Insiders	All metaverse systems, especially in-	Knowledge exchange, gatekeeping, rule/ritual

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			game mentor tools such as the novice network and external tools such as social networking sites and forums	enforcement, experience-based feedback, bridge subcultures between insider groups. Establish initiation rituals for outsiders.
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