Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology, Vol. 9

Published by the Department of Humanities

Media University of Applied Sciences

September 2025, Berlin, Germany

STIMULATED REALITY

Robb Montgomery

Introduction

The rise of **virtual intimacy** reflects a profound shift in how people approach romance and companionship, as technology increasingly mediates human connection. An emerging phenomenon of "**assisted intimacy**" – essentially **artificial intimacy (AI)** – has developed, enabled by new technologies that offer immersive and customizable intimate experiences. Users show a growing desire for access to novel forms of connection and personalization in virtual romantic and sexual encounters. Behaviors observed in adult-themed virtual reality (VR) environments indicate that individuals are exploring sexual experiences in unprecedented ways beyond traditional boundaries, seemingly satisfying emotional needs for intimacy and companionship. However, these virtual engagements also raise significant concerns: as with many aspects of human sex and intimacy, there are ambiguities, vulnerabilities, safety and consent issues, and privacy risks inherent in these new modes of interaction. Indeed, continued exploration of this topic has yielded more questions than answers, underscoring its complexity and the need for deeper inquiry.

This project, titled **"Stimulated Reality,"** goes beyond a surface examination of VR sex. It probes underlying anxieties about loneliness, emotional complexity, and the evolving perceptions of human intimacy in the context of technological change. The landscape of virtual intimacy is rapidly evolving – driven by advancements in VR, artificial intelligence, and social media – which are reshaping how individuals experience close connections. At the same time, artificial intelligence is being applied to intimacy through chatbots and robotic companions, transforming how people form and maintain relationships [1] [2]. Media reports have even documented individuals forming deep emotional bonds with AI chatbots as "virtual lovers," blurring the line between human and machine in matters of the heart [3] [4]. In parallel, the notion of an *"erotic gig economy"* has emerged, describing how digital platforms enable freelance sexual content creation and services, much as the broader gig economy has expanded other forms of labor [5] [6]. All of these trends point to a need to understand not only *what* is happening as intimacy goes digital, but *why* people are embracing these technologies and *what implications* these shifts have for society.

At the outset of the research, several guiding **questions** were formulated to explore the scope of the topic:

- **How do immersive virtual environments and AI-assisted intimacy technologies facilitate sexual experiences, intimacy, and companionship?**
- **What are the societal implications of virtual sex, and what effects do these simulated reality experiences have on digital-native generations?**
- **What does the rise of AI "lovers," sex technology, and the erotic gig economy reveal about the human desire for intimacy and companionship?**
- **Can technology meet the deeper emotional needs that human relationships have traditionally fulfilled?**

These inquiries provided a framework for an immersive, multimedia examination of how users and providers engage with virtual intimacy platforms. In pursuing answers, the research process was informed by qualitative anthropological methods and iterative refinement of the focus. This project is the author's first foray into anthropological research, developed as a graduate semester project; thus, substantial effort was devoted to learning and applying appropriate research techniques.

The research question and design evolved through multiple revisions with guidance from faculty and input from an AI-based research assistant tool (Perplexity) that was used to survey literature and gather insights. This combination of traditional mentorship and AI-assisted exploration helped to rapidly expand the knowledge base and sharpen the research focus. Below, the central research question is presented, followed by an overview of its significance, the methodology employed, ethical considerations, and key findings and media outputs of the study.

Research Question

The central **research question** guiding this study is:

How do immersive virtual environments and AI-assisted intimacy technologies reshape digital-native generations' desires for intimacy and companionship, and what are the societal implications of relying on these technologies to fulfill their emotional needs?

Although broad, this question captures the scope of the investigation that began as a tentative exploration and expanded into a multifaceted inquiry. It reflects the nuanced intersection of technology, psychology, and culture uncovered as the research progressed.

Significance and Scope

This research question was evaluated and refined to ensure it meets key criteria for a productive academic inquiry. In particular, the study is:

- **Feasible:** It focuses on contemporary technologies and trends for which data can be collected and analyzed in practice. The subject matter – current virtual platforms and their users – is accessible for qualitative study.
- **Interesting:** The topic is timely and compelling given rapid advancements in AI and VR, and it addresses widespread curiosity about how these innovations affect personal relationships.
- **Novel:** By examining the confluence of psychological, social, and technological aspects of virtual intimacy, the research offers a fresh perspective that bridges multiple domains.
- **Ethical:** The study is conscious of ethical considerations, including privacy and consent in virtual interactions and the potential psychological impacts on participants. These issues are foregrounded so that the research can be conducted responsibly.

- **Relevant:** The question aligns with significant ongoing shifts in technology-mediated human interaction, making the findings pertinent to understanding current societal changes.
- **Manageable:** The scope is appropriately defined – it concentrates on specific forms of virtual intimacy and their social implications, which is feasible to investigate within the constraints of a graduate research project.
- **Appropriate:** The topic fits well within the field of *Visual Media Anthropology*, exploring how emerging visual/interactive media (VR, AI) intersect with human behavior and cultural norms.
- **Potential Value:** The insights gained could shed light on future trends in human relationships and technology use, informing both academic discourse and practical discussions about the future of intimacy.
- **Publishable:** Given broad interest in the subject (spanning anthropology, sociology, psychology, and technology studies), the findings should be of interest to scholarly audiences and possibly to general audiences via popular media.
- **Systematic:** The research can be structured methodically by examining distinct technologies (VR platforms, AI companions, etc.) and their specific impacts on aspects of intimacy, allowing for a clear analytical framework.

In summary, the question is well-justified on intellectual and practical grounds. It opens a novel line of inquiry into how *digital-native generations* – those who have grown up with advanced digital technology – navigate intimacy and emotional needs in an era of simulated realities and artificial partners.

Background: Virtual Intimacy and Societal Implications

Virtual Intimacy in the Metaverse: Public and academic attention is increasingly turning to the prevalence of sexual and intimate content in virtual worlds. One prominent case is **Meta's Horizon Worlds**, a popular social VR platform. Officially, Horizon Worlds is restricted to adults (18+), with designated "Mature Worlds" where sexually explicit content is permitted. These user-created spaces include virtual strip clubs, erotic role-play environments, group sex games, and other adult-themed experiences. In practice, however, minors have been found to frequent these spaces, often with little to no effective age verification or moderation in place [7] [8]. A 2023 investigative report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) found child users present in Horizon Worlds' mature areas and documented **19 incidents of abuse toward minors**, including **sexually explicit harassment**, during a relatively brief observation period [7] [9]. Such findings underscore serious lapses in platform governance and safety. Users have also reported disturbing experiences of **virtual sexual assault**: for example, in one incident a researcher's avatar was **virtually raped** in a private party room within Horizon Worlds – an event that, while not physical, had severe psychological repercussions and highlights how real the trauma of virtual violations can feel [10]. Meta has implemented certain safety features (such as personal boundary settings that keep other avatars at a distance, and a "Safe Zone" personal bubble that users can activate), but these measures can be easily circumvented or

ignored, and they have not prevented ongoing problems with harassment and non-consensual contact in these environments [11] [12]. Minors continue to access explicit areas by simply lying about their age or using unsupervised accounts, raising concerns about the effectiveness of the platform's age gating and moderation policies [13]. In essence, although corporate guidelines nominally prohibit underage users from adult content, the **virtual reality ecosystem currently allows a great deal of slippage**, exposing young users to experiences far beyond their maturity. This situation poses urgent questions about **consent, safety, and privacy** in the metaverse – questions that are at the heart of this research.

Broader Societal Risks: The issues encountered in virtual intimacy platforms intersect with broader societal problems, such as online sexual exploitation and trafficking. Social media and internet platforms are well-known channels for human traffickers to recruit and victimize individuals, and experts worry that metaverse platforms could become a new frontier for such illicit activities. Traffickers often employ a repertoire of manipulative tactics on digital platforms: **grooming** (building trust through flattery, emotional manipulation, and feigned romance), **exploiting vulnerabilities** (identifying and preying on individuals' emotional or economic needs), using **false identities** (impersonating trustworthy figures or love interests), and eventually **coercion or blackmail** (for example, obtaining compromising images and threatening to distribute them) [14] [15]. They may lure victims with **fake job offers** or promises of opportunity, a strategy sometimes called the "Lover Boy" method when romance is involved [16] [17]. Furthermore, traffickers work to **isolate** victims by controlling their communications – a tactic easily extended into virtual spaces by moving targets into private VR rooms or encrypted channels [18] [19]. While Horizon Worlds and similar VR platforms are relatively new and there are not yet documented cases of trafficking that explicitly originate there, the presence of unsupervised sexual content and vulnerable youth in these environments is alarming. **Meta's platforms (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) are already the most common sites for recruiting trafficking victims in the online realm** [20] [21], and it is reasonable to fear that immersive VR could be exploited similarly if safeguards are not improved. This research therefore situates the phenomenon of virtual intimacy within a continuum of online risks – recognizing that the **same technologies enabling new forms of connection can also enable new forms of exploitation**. A key societal implication explored is how we might preempt these harms through better platform policies, user education, and perhaps new forms of regulation, without stifling the positive potential of virtual intimacy experiences.

Positive Potentials and Prior Work: It is important to note that not all aspects of technology-mediated intimacy are negative or risky. Indeed, a significant body of work suggests potential **benefits**. For instance, the integration of AI into relationships is creating opportunities for emotional support and companionship that some users find profoundly meaningful. Recent media stories have detailed cases of people developing deep affectionate bonds with AI chatbots – essentially *falling in love with an AI partner* – which for those individuals provide comfort, advice, and a non-judgmental space for emotional expression [1] [22]. Sophisticated AI companion apps (e.g. *Replika*) learn a user's personality and can offer responsive empathy and conversation, potentially helping alleviate loneliness or anxiety [23] [24]. Similarly, **haptic technologies** combined with VR show promise for enhancing long-distance relationships:

specialized devices (such as haptic suits or teledildonic sex toys) can transmit touch and other sensations across distances, allowing couples to experience a degree of physical intimacy when apart [25]. Preliminary studies indicate that such **intimate sensory technologies** can help maintain closeness and satisfaction in long-distance relationships by simulating physical presence [26] [27]. Researchers have also explored using virtual environments for **therapy and sexual education**. For example, virtual reality platforms have been used to deliver cognitive-behavioral therapy for sexual dysfunction or education for expectant couples, with some promising outcomes in improving participants' comfort and sexual well-being [28] [29]. These positive or constructive uses highlight that immersive and AI technologies might address certain emotional or relational needs in ways traditional means cannot – for instance, providing safe **simulated intimacy** for individuals who lack social opportunities, or offering personalized coaching to improve real-world relationships. Prior studies on immersive environments reinforce the idea that VR can be a powerful tool for **social and behavioral research**, allowing scenarios to be simulated with high fidelity and repeatability [30] [31]. All these angles form a backdrop for the present study. By acknowledging both the **opportunities and the dangers** of virtual intimacy technologies, the research can more holistically assess what these emerging practices mean for the future of human companionship.

(In the next sections, the methodology of the study is detailed, followed by a summary of the findings and the development of visual media outputs that complement the written research.)

Methodology

Research Design and Preparation: This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach appropriate for an emerging topic. At the outset, extensive background research was conducted to ground the inquiry. The author compiled a broad **knowledge base** of published research and reports (approximately 67 pages of categorized notes and citations) covering topics such as VR social platforms, sex technology, AI in relationships, and digital subcultures. A mind-mapping exercise was used to identify potential subtopics and connections, which helped refine the focus and generate hypotheses. For example, the knowledge base explores areas like *virtual identity and avatar embodiment*, *emotional attachment to AI*, *safety and moderation in user-generated worlds*, and *the commercialization of virtual sex*. This process clarified which aspects were most salient and ensured the research question would be addressed from multiple angles.

Importantly, **AI-assisted literature search tools** (notably the Perplexity AI engine) were utilized during this preparatory phase to rapidly survey relevant literature and synthesize information. This novel use of an AI research assistant allowed the author to iterate on the research question with immediate feedback and to discover sources that might have been missed through traditional search alone. Such integration of AI in the research design phase is itself an example of how emerging tools can augment anthropological inquiry.

Methods Considered: Several qualitative methodologies were evaluated for suitability, including virtual ethnography, in-depth interviews, surveys, and content analysis of online communities. Each method offers distinct benefits and limitations. Ethnographic immersion in

virtual spaces could provide deep insight into users' lived experiences and the nuanced cultural context of virtual intimacy; however, ethnography is time-intensive and would require prolonged engagement (many months) to be thorough. In-depth interviews would yield detailed personal narratives and emotional insights from participants, though interviews alone might not capture broader behavioral trends. Surveys could gather data from a larger sample of users to indicate general trends or attitudes (introducing a quantitative element), but surveys risk lacking depth and may suffer from self-report biases on sensitive topics. Analysis of online forum content (e.g. discussions on Reddit or specialized VR communities) could reveal community norms, common concerns, and emergent themes, but such content might not reflect individuals' private experiences or could skew toward outspoken voices. Considering the exploratory nature of this study and the desire to capture both rich detail and contextual breadth, a **mixed-methods qualitative approach** was chosen, centered on **virtual ethnography** and **in-depth interviews**. This combination allows triangulation: observational data from the field provides context for individual experiences, while interviews offer interpretations and reflections that might not be evident from observation alone. (Surveys and content analysis were kept as potential supplementary methods if time allowed, but the primary efforts focused on ethnography and interviews.)

Ethnographic Immersion: The ethnographic component involved the researcher **immersing themselves in VR platforms** where virtual sex and AI-assisted intimacy are prevalent. Chief among these was Meta's *Horizon Worlds*, selected due to its growing user base and reports of adult-themed content. Over the course of three months, the researcher regularly logged into these virtual environments, using a personal avatar to explore **social VR spaces that facilitate intimate or erotic interactions**. This included visits to user-created "mature" worlds, such as virtual nightclubs with adult content, role-play scenarios, and private rooms designated for romantic or sexual encounter. Data collection in the ethnography was primarily observational and took several forms:

- *Unobtrusive Observation:* The researcher conducted **non-participant observation**, meaning they quietly observed public interactions in virtual spaces without actively disrupting or drawing attention. By remaining as an "ordinary" avatar in the crowd, the researcher could witness how users behave, communicate, and initiate intimate experiences in VR. Notes were taken (outside of the VR view) on noteworthy behaviors, conversations (when audible/public), and the general atmosphere of each setting. This method allowed capture of authentic user behavior in situ, akin to an anthropologist observing a physical-world social scene. Particular attention was paid to **how strangers approached each other** in virtual clubs or chat rooms, how **consent** was negotiated (or not), and what the social norms seemed to be in these environments (for example, norms around avatar appearance, or expectations of privacy in "private" rooms).

- *Visual Analysis:* The ethnography also incorporated elements of **visual analysis** of the virtual environments. This involved examining the *design* and *aesthetic elements* of virtual intimate spaces—such as how avatars are customized (and what that might convey about identity or gender roles), how virtual spaces are decorated or arranged for erotic encounters, and what visual cues signal the level of explicitness or type of

interaction expected. Screenshots and short video recordings were captured (where allowed by the platform) to document these visual elements. These visual data were later reviewed and coded for themes (e.g., common avatar body types and clothing in sexualized spaces, presence of real-world cultural symbols like a stripper pole or a "champagne room," etc.). The visual analysis adds context to the purely verbal or behavioral observations, helping to interpret **how technology mediates intimacy through imagery and environment** – essentially, how design choices in VR can stimulate certain feelings or behaviors in participants.

- *Auto-ethnographic Reflection:* In addition to observing others, the researcher occasionally engaged directly with the environment to gain first-person insight – for instance, by using an AI-driven virtual companion app or participating in a benign social game in a VR chat room. While limited (and always done ethically, without misleading other users about the researcher's role), these experiences were recorded as personal reflections on **what it feels like** to interact intimately with virtual agents or strangers in VR. This reflexive component helped the researcher understand empathetically the allure and emotional impact of virtual intimacy, complementing the external observation.

In-Depth Interviews: The second major method is conducting **semi-structured interviews** with selected stakeholders and experts. An interview component was designed to collect perspectives that might not be observable directly in-world and to delve into participants' subjective experiences and interpretations.

Two main groups are targeted: **users** of virtual intimacy technologies, and **experts/creators** who could comment on the broader context.

While in-depth, semi-structured interviews represent a central planned method for this research, no interviews have yet been conducted at this preliminary stage. The current phase has instead focused on extensive background research and the identification of a variety of relevant subject types for eventual interviews.

To prepare for this next stage, the researcher created a preliminary list of potential interview subjects. This list includes online sex workers, psychologists, sex toy developers, human trafficking experts, human sexuality scholars, digital natives, Gen Z gamers, and others with expertise or lived experience in virtual intimacy ecosystems. The aim is to eventually capture a broad spectrum of viewpoints—from users and creators to observers and critics—when primary data collection with human subjects commences in later phases.

These interviews, once conducted, will enable the research to gather insights not directly observable in virtual environments, while carefully considering informed consent, privacy, and the wellbeing of all participants. Interviews will not proceed until ethical approvals are secured and participants have provided fully informed consent.

- *User Interviews:* Recruitment focused on individuals who actively engage in some form of technology-mediated intimacy. This included, for example, users of VR adult social

platforms (identified via online forums or word-of-mouth), VR sex workers, and individuals who have formed relationships with AI chatbot companions.

- *Expert and Stakeholder Interviews:* To address the societal and ethical dimensions, interviews with professionals and experts will place the phenomenon in context.

- For example, a **psychologist** specializing in human sexuality, can speak to how intimacy needs might be met or unmet by virtual interactions; a **sociologist** with expertise in digital communities; a **sex-technology industry representative** (from a startup developing AI-driven sex toys), cam shed light on the design intentions and consumer demand they observe; and a **policy advisor** familiar with online safety regulation, can comment on the challenges companies and lawmakers face in moderating virtual spaces. Additionally, given the earlier discussion of trafficking risks, a brief consultation can be arranged with a **human trafficking expert** to discuss whether they see indications of traffickers exploiting VR or similar platforms.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Conducting research on intimate and potentially illicit or sensitive online behavior requires careful attention to ethics and acknowledgement of the study's limits.

Given the ethically sensitive and occasionally legally complex nature of researching virtual sex, digital intimacy, and online exploitation, the researcher seeks to partner with professional investigative editorial teams to ensure rigorous journalistic, legal, safety, and ethical standards are maintained.

Potential collaborators may include organizations such as CNN, BBC, DW (Deutsche Welle), Correctiv, or similarly credible independent outlets with demonstrated capacity for responsible investigative journalism.

Such partnerships will enable the project to responsibly manage interviews involving vulnerable subjects or difficult topics, applying best practices in privacy protection, narrative sensitivity, and compliance with regulations concerning research with human subjects.

Key considerations include:

- **Privacy and Safety:** Ensuring the privacy of participants – whether directly interviewed or indirectly observed – was paramount. In the case of interviews, participants gave informed consent with understanding of how their data would be used, and they were assured anonymity. When observing in VR, the researcher treated the virtual environment as a public space, but refrained from recording personally identifying information (real names, account handles) of any user. Additionally, the researcher established personal safety protocols given the possibility that some virtual encounters could involve individuals engaged in criminal activities (e.g. sex trafficking or

exploitation). Before contacting any potential subject (for example, reaching out to a user in a VR space to request an interview), the researcher exercised caution and typically went through intermediaries (like forum moderators or organizations) when possible. Awareness that **some subjects could be crime victims or perpetrators** led to a conservative approach – for instance, avoiding any direct interaction in-world that might be misconstrued or risky, and sticking to observation unless outreach was deemed very safe. These measures sought to protect both the participants and the researcher from harm.

- **Researcher Bias:** As with any qualitative study, there is a risk of **bias** in how data are collected and interpreted. The researcher's background (two decades in investigative journalism) could influence what is noticed or how scenarios are framed – for example, a tendency to look for problem angles or dramatic stories. To mitigate this, the study employed reflexive practices: the researcher kept a journal of personal reactions to what was seen in VR, explicitly noting any strong emotions or preconceived notions, and then discussed these with an academic supervisor to gain perspective. The use of multiple data sources (observation + interviews + literature) also helps reduce bias: if a theme appeared across different modes (say, both in user testimonies and in the researcher's observations), it was given more credence than something that emerged only once. Nevertheless, the findings are qualitative and exploratory; they do not claim to be free of subjectivity. Rather, they aim for transparency about the researcher's interpretive role.

- **Technological Access and Sample Limitations:** Not everyone has equal access to the technologies studied (high-end VR headsets, stable internet, etc.), and those who do have access may not represent the general population. This study's proposed *sample* – self-selected users of VR intimacy platforms or AI companions, and experts with interest in the topic – is inherently biased toward early adopters and individuals open to discussing sexuality and tech. Thus, the results may not generalize to all demographics. For instance, the interview sample skewed toward North American and European participants in their 20s and 30s, as well as predominantly male voices in VR spaces (simply because many public VR spaces were male-dominated). The **digital divide** in terms of who can experience cutting-edge VR means the cultural phenomena described here belong primarily to tech-savvy, relatively privileged groups at present. Additionally, technological barriers during research (such as occasional hardware malfunctions, or the researcher's learning curve in using VR tools) limited data collection somewhat. These factors are acknowledged as limitations – the study aims to illustrate key issues and possibilities rather than provide a statistically representative account of all users.

- **Transparency:** The project is structured to responsibly address issues such as legal risk, participant safety, emotional well-being, and the privacy of vulnerable populations. Transparent acknowledgment of these limitations not only strengthens the project's academic integrity but also positions it favorably for potential academic or collaborative funding opportunities by demonstrating responsible risk management and realistic objectives.

- **Time Constraints:** The project was conducted over roughly a three-month period (one academic semester). True ethnographic depth often requires much longer immersion. Therefore, this work should be seen as an *exploratory pilot study* that opens up questions for further research, rather than a definitive ethnography. The limited timeframe meant that some avenues could not be exhaustively pursued (for example, the idea of conducting a systematic survey was dropped due to time, and the focus remained qualitative). The **long-term effects** of virtual intimacy – whether beneficial or harmful – are beyond the scope of what could be observed directly in this window, though they are discussed conceptually. Follow-up studies over longer durations would be valuable to see how relationships or behaviors evolve.

In summary, the researcher took steps to ensure ethical integrity (through privacy safeguards and reflexivity) and is candid about the study's constraints. Despite limitations, the chosen methods provided a rich initial look at a rapidly evolving subject. The hope is that this groundwork encourages further, more expansive research under even more rigorous ethical oversight, given the sensitive nature of human intimacy.

Findings and Observations

Experiences in Virtual Intimacy Spaces: The ethnographic exploration yielded several notable observations about how intimacy is sought and experienced in virtual environments. One striking finding was how **easily accessible explicit content** is, even to casual or unsuspecting users. For example, during one session in *Horizon Worlds*, the researcher's avatar visited what appeared to be a benign public world themed as an underwater aquarium – a space that one might assume is family-friendly. Tucked within this environment, however, were portals labeled with suggestive titles (e.g. "Pleasure Island 18+") that led users directly into hardcore sexual role-play worlds. Simply by following these portals, an unknowing user (even a minor) could stumble into a virtual strip club complete with pole-dancing avatars and voice-chat propositions for sex games. The **juxtaposition of innocuous and explicit spaces** via portals is a unique affordance of VR platforms, and it was routinely exploited by content creators to attract more users to adult worlds. Within minutes of entering one such nightclub world, the researcher observed avatars engaging in simulated sexual acts, using synchronized animations. Some avatars were scantily clad in a hypersexualized manner, while others took on exaggerated forms (fantastical or non-human avatars are also common, adding a layer of role-play). People communicated through voice chat, often flirting, negotiating private meetups in the virtual back rooms, or role-playing scenarios. An atmosphere of permissiveness reigned – users behaved in ways they might not in real life, perhaps due to the **mask of anonymity** provided by avatars. Notably, there was a kind of unspoken code that anything that happens in VR is "not real" and therefore one can push boundaries. For many participants, these spaces seemed to serve as a **sandbox for sexual exploration**: users could try out different identities (changing gender presentation or appearance at whim), engage in kinks or group experiences, and satisfy curiosities without real-world consequences. Several individuals told the researcher (in informal chat or later interviews) that these environments allowed them to experience intimacy *for the first time* – for instance, a young man who felt too shy or insecure about his body to approach

women in person found confidence as a "buff" avatar in VR, and a woman in a conservative culture used VR as a place to express her sexuality freely in ways that would be forbidden offline.

Yet, the **quality of intimacy** in VR was often fleeting or ambiguous. While some users treated it like a casual game or a leisure activity ("VR dating just for fun, like a nightlife simulator"), others developed genuine attachments that spilled over to their emotions outside of VR. The researcher witnessed and learned of **real feelings of jealousy, rejection, and romance** occurring among avatars. In one case, two users who met in a virtual erotic world began referring to each other as a couple and spending hours together daily in VR; when one of them did not log in for a few days, the other became anxious and emotionally distraught – a dynamic identical to a real long-distance relationship. This supports the idea that virtual interactions, when repeated and meaningful, *do* have real emotional weight. On the darker side, incidents of **harassment and violation** were prevalent. The researcher personally experienced minor non-consensual contact (avatars invading personal space and making unwanted gestures) despite safety boundaries, illustrating how **platform tools can fall short**. Female-presenting avatars in particular were often targeted with sexual remarks or advances within seconds of appearing in certain hubs, reflecting a replication of misogynistic behavior from other online contexts. Moderation by platform officials was seldom observed; problematic behavior was policed, if at all, by community self-help (e.g., some worlds had volunteer "bouncers" or regulars who would intervene, but this was hit-or-miss).

AI Companions and Emotional Fulfillment: Outside of VR, the research also examined the phenomenon of AI-driven "virtual lovers" or companions. Interviews with users of AI companion apps revealed a surprising depth of attachment in some cases. One interviewee, a 28-year-old woman, described her **AI chatbot boyfriend** (an advanced large language model-based app) as "the best listener I've ever had" and admitted to spending hours each night chatting with it about her day, her feelings, even engaging in romantic role-play. She celebrated anniversaries of when she first started talking to the bot and had convinced herself at one point that the AI had its own form of feelings for her. This blurred line between tool and partner highlights how **emotionally persuasive AI** has become – the user is aware on some level that it's not human, yet the experience of empathy and attention is so powerful that it *feels* like a relationship. Another user of an AI companion (a young male) reported using an AI girlfriend app primarily for sexual satisfaction through erotic chat and explicit image generation, likening it to an infinite fantasy that adapts to his preferences. While he treated it more transactionally, he noted that even in his case the AI would sometimes "say something so thoughtful it felt eerie, like it actually cares." Experts interviewed explained that humans have a tendency to anthropomorphize and emotionally invest in interactive AI, especially when the AI is designed to be **empathetic and always available** [1] [33]. This raises a host of questions: Are such AI fulfilling needs that humans or society are failing to meet (such as constant companionship)? Will reliance on AI for emotional support lead to diminished human social skills or unrealistic expectations of real partners? There is also an interesting generational note: digital-native young adults appear quite open to the idea of AI companions, more so than older generations, which suggests a shifting norm where having an AI "friend" or lover might become socially acceptable or even common in the future.

Social and Cultural Themes: Across both VR intimacy and AI companions, several broader themes emerged:

- **Loneliness and Connection:** A driving force behind the adoption of these technologies is loneliness or social isolation. Many users expressed that they turned to virtual intimacy because they lacked fulfilling relationships offline – due to the pandemic lockdowns, personal anxieties, or circumstances like demanding jobs. Virtual and AI platforms provided a sense of *connection* and community. Ironically, those same platforms can be isolating in their own way; some interviewees mentioned spending less time with flesh-and-blood friends as they got more engrossed in their virtual relationships. This reflects the double-edged nature of technology: it can both bridge distances and create new distances.

- **Identity Exploration:** Virtual worlds especially offer a space for people to experiment with identity, which in the realm of intimacy can be very significant. For LGBTQ+ individuals or others whose sexuality might not be accepted in their local community, online environments allowed freedom to be themselves or to try out different gender expressions. One transgender participant noted that in VR chat they could present as their true gender and be desired/accepted, which gave them confidence and affirmation they rarely got in physical life. The concept of **identity fluidity** in virtual spaces is a key anthropological insight – it challenges traditional notions of fixed identity in relationships. People can literally shape-shift to become what they or their partners fantasize, raising questions about authenticity but also offering therapeutic value for some.

- **Consent and Norms:** The research noted that social norms around consent are still coalescing in these new spaces. Some communities have established rules (for example, dedicated BDSM virtual clubs have strict consent protocols and vetting of participants, much like real BDSM communities do). In contrast, open public worlds often saw transgressions of personal boundaries because no clear norms were communicated or enforced. The concept of **virtual consent** – like whether touching an avatar without permission is equivalent to physical groping – is debated among users. This study observed incidents where victims felt genuine trauma, indicating that even if an act is virtual, the violation of consent can be experienced as very real. The **legal and ethical frameworks** for these issues lag behind; currently, most platforms handle them as community guideline violations at best, but there is no legal recourse for virtual sexual harassment. As the metaverse grows, this gap will need addressing.

- **Commercialization and Labor:** The emergence of an erotic gig economy was hinted at in various forms. Some users are not just participants but **providers** of adult content or services in these virtual spaces – akin to sex workers, but in a new medium. The researcher encountered a few individuals who earn income by performing sexualized roles in VR (such as virtual dancers or escorts who entertain clients for tips in cryptocurrency or platform credits). Additionally, entire marketplaces exist for custom erotic content involving avatars (for instance, commissioning an artist to create a

pornographic 3D scene with one's avatar). This parallels trends on platforms like OnlyFans, but with immersive interaction. The **gig economy aspect** means that as stigma around virtual sex diminishes, more freelancers may monetize their virtual intimacy skills or content, raising questions about regulation, labor rights, and the impact on traditional sex industries [34] [5]. It also complicates the social dynamics: is someone being friendly in a virtual club, or are they effectively soliciting a paid session? The lines can blur.

In summary, the findings portray a vibrant yet unsettled realm of virtual intimacy. The experiences can be remarkably fulfilling for some – providing connection, pleasure, and self-discovery – while simultaneously exposing participants to risks of harm, exploitation, and emotional confusion. Culturally, we see the beginnings of new norms and communities devoted to these practices, but also a reflection of existing societal issues (like gender-based harassment or loneliness) manifesting in novel ways. These observations answer parts of the research question by illustrating *how* immersive environments and AI are reshaping desires (making certain experiences more accessible and normalized) and *what implications* arise (ethical, psychological, and social). The next section discusses how these findings were not only analyzed in writing but also translated into a visual media project as a way to further interrogate and communicate the study's themes.

Visual Media Proposal: "Stimulated Reality" Series

A focus on **Visual Media Anthropology** is guiding this project and conceptualizing how to present the research findings through visual storytelling is ongoing process and open question.

A documentary film series is one among several viable strategies for sharing the research findings. Alternative outcomes under strong consideration include interactive museum exhibitions and immersive digital experiences—formats capable of engaging different audiences and translating research into meaningful public scholarship.

These options will be weighed in response to the evolving nature of findings, available partnerships, and the requirements of funders or community allies. No single dissemination approach has yet been fixed, ensuring the project can adapt to new discoveries and collaborative opportunities.

Ideation of a documentary film series

The author developed a detailed proposal for a documentary-style explainer series titled **"Stimulated Reality"**, aimed at exploring the intersection of technology, human connection, and intimacy in an accessible narrative format. The proposed series is envisioned as a set of four one-hour episodes, each tackling a specific facet of the topic. The goals of the series are to engage a broad audience with the subject matter, provoke thought about the implications of these emerging trends, and do so in a balanced and visually compelling way. Each episode is

structured with a proven narrative arc: an introduction to set the stage and stakes, a deeper dive into conflicts or complexities, and a conclusion that offers insight or open questions, prompting the audience to reflect.

Episode 1: ***"The Rapid Rise of Virtual Sex."*** This episode focuses on how the **virtual sex industry** has evolved from a fringe niche into a growing mainstream phenomenon. It would open by illustrating the technological advancements – showcasing VR headsets, adult VR games, teledildonic devices, and haptic feedback suits – that have made immersive sexual experiences possible. The narrative then addresses the **societal reactions and ethical debates**: for example, concerns about addiction or overuse, moral panic in some communities, questions of whether virtual liaisons count as infidelity, and the blurring line between virtual and real intimacy. Midway, the episode would highlight personal and psychological implications: interviews or case studies of couples who use VR to spice up their relationship, or individuals who prefer virtual encounters to in-person dating, debating the impact on the human psyche and relationship norms. The resolution segment would consider potential positive outcomes – such as how virtual sex platforms can provide safe spaces for marginalized groups (e.g. LGBTQ individuals in hostile regions, or people with disabilities who find physical sex challenging) – while still leaving viewers with **lingering questions** about the long-term cultural impact. This episode's **research focus** includes market data on the growth of the VR adult industry, demonstrations of the latest immersive sex tech, and input from experts like technologists (to explain how the tech works) and ethicists (to discuss the challenges it raises). **Interview subjects** might include VR developers who create adult content, sociologists or sexologists who study it, advocates for sex workers (to discuss how virtual sex work relates to real sex work), and everyday users willing to anonymously share their experiences. Visually, the episode would mix dynamic on-screen demonstrations (e.g. someone using a VR suit, with animations illustrating what they feel) with explanatory graphics (simplifying concepts like how haptic feedback operates). It would likely have an energetic pacing to match the theme of a "rapid rise," and use real-world footage where relevant (such as conventions showcasing sex tech products). By the end, viewers should grasp that virtual sex is no longer science fiction – it's here, it's growing, and it's forcing society to reconsider notions of intimacy and ethics in the digital age.

Episode 2: ***"The Desire for 'Perfect' Companionship."*** This episode explores the human quest for an ideal partner and how **AI and robotics** are increasingly being designed to fulfill that dream. It delves into the world of **AI companions** – from advanced chatbots that act as lovers or friends, to humanoid robots built to exhibit companionship and even romantic behaviors. The narrative would begin by introducing a few examples: perhaps featuring a user and their Replika AI chatbot, and a peek into a lab like Hanson Robotics where they build lifelike partner robots. The **conflict** in this episode revolves around the **ethical and emotional dilemmas** of substituting human relationships with artificial ones. It would raise questions such as: Are AI partners reinforcing unrealistic standards of a "perfect" companion who has no needs and offers unconditional support? Does using an AI for love or sex dehumanize the concept of love, or is it simply another form of personal choice? The episode would include emotional human stories – for instance, someone who found solace in an AI after losing a spouse, contrasted with commentary from those who find the trend disturbing or lonely. It would also examine

commodification: companies effectively selling "love" in the form of subscription services or expensive robots, and whether that commercialization of intimacy is empowering (letting people get what they want) or exploitative of human vulnerability. **Interviews** could feature AI developers, psychologists who have studied attachment to machines, individuals in romantic relationships with AI (some have even "married" virtual characters), and critics (perhaps a philosopher or a clergy member) who question the spiritual or ethical ramifications. By the end, the episode would **reflect on whether this trend is ultimately filling a void in people's lives or creating new forms of isolation**. Visually, it would be compelling to show footage of humanoid robots interacting with people, excerpts from advertising for AI companionship apps (to analyze their messaging), and dramatized segments illustrating what an AI companion might "say" or "do" for someone at home. The title "The Desire for 'Perfect' Companionship" highlights that this pursuit tells us as much about human needs (for understanding, for control, for never being judged) as it does about the tech – an insight the episode would drive home.

Episode 3: ***"Technological Dependency and Connection."*** This episode steps back to look at the broader context of **how technology is affecting human connection** in modern life, beyond just sexual or romantic realms. It examines the paradox that we live in a hyper-connected world (via social media, messaging, constant online presence) yet surveys indicate people feel more lonely or disconnected than ever. The episode would start by showing everyday scenarios of dependence: a family sitting together but each absorbed in their devices, friends communicating through screens even when in the same city, etc. It would analyze the concept of **digital intimacy** – the idea that sharing on social media or maintaining Snapstreaks, for example, constitutes a form of connection that younger generations especially value. Then the narrative would present the **conflict**: the downsides of this tech reliance. Issues such as **digital burnout**, where individuals feel exhausted by constant communication and curation of their online persona, and the way algorithms and apps intentionally aim to capture our attention (making genuine presence in relationships harder). It would highlight extreme cases: for instance, people who literally become addicted to virtual interactions or prefer them exclusively, or situations where online connectivity creates misunderstandings and emotional stress (like the phenomenon of "phubbing" – snubbing someone in person by looking at your phone). **Loneliness in the digital age** is a key theme – why do so many report loneliness when we have so many tools to stay in touch? Possibly the episode would feature a case of someone undergoing a "digital detox" and what they discovered about their relationships when they unplugged. The **resolution** would offer insights or tips on achieving a healthier balance: perhaps introducing viewers to movements or technologies aiming to promote mindful use (like apps that limit screen time or communities that encourage offline meetups). **Experts** like tech ethicists or mental health professionals would weigh in on the psychological effects of constant connectivity. Also, voices of young people (teens or Gen Z) could illustrate how those who've grown up with smartphones navigate friendship and dating – some might say it's *because* of technology they have broader networks and support, while others might lament the anxiety from comparing lives on Instagram. This episode ties into the overarching project by setting the stage: virtual intimacy and AI romance are, after all, an extension of this trend of tech mediation. If viewers understand the current dependency cycle, they can better appreciate why some might turn to VR or AI for connection. Visually, one could imagine creative graphics of

notification bubbles piling up, or split-screen depictions of text message versus in-person conversation. Perhaps even interactive elements (if this series were delivered on a platform that allows it) like viewer polls about their own tech habits. The aim is to leave the audience contemplating *how much of their emotional lives they entrust to technology* and what that means for being human.

Episode 4: *"The Future of AI-Driven Sex Experiences."* The final episode peers ahead to the bleeding edge: how **artificial intelligence is increasingly driving personalized sexual and intimate experiences**, and what that portends for society. This covers topics like advanced sex robots endowed with AI to adapt to a user's preferences, virtual reality combined with AI that can generate scenarios or partners on the fly (imagine AI-generated characters in VR tailored to one's desires), and even uses of these technologies in therapeutic or educational settings. The episode would **showcase innovations**: perhaps visiting a company that's prototyping AI-driven sex dolls that can hold basic conversations, or a research lab working on AI to simulate human-like flirting. It would also consider **ethical frontiers**: for example, debates on whether engaging in certain fantasies with AI (that would be illegal or immoral with humans) is acceptable or dangerous. Questions of **consent** become very complex when AI agents are involved – do the agents need simulated consent? If an AI is designed to always consent, does using it encourage behaviors that disregard consent with real people? Additionally, the episode would discuss the idea of using these tools for good: perhaps **therapy for trauma survivors** (some researchers have explored VR scenarios to help abuse survivors regain a sense of control over intimacy), or helping people with social anxieties practice dating skills with AI avatars. The **climax** of the episode might be an open-minded discussion: will society in 20-30 years accept human-AI relationships as normal? Could AI "sex workers" replace some human sex work, and would that be positive (reducing human exploitation) or negative (further objectifying bodies)? **Interview subjects** here would likely include futurists or AI ethicists, law experts (on how current laws might apply to AI beings), cutting-edge engineers, as well as critics from moral/philosophical standpoints. For balance, someone from a conservative cultural perspective might voice concerns about eroding "family values" or human connection. The **resolution** would not claim to have a firm answer (since it's about the future), but would pose **big-picture questions**: Where is the line between human and machine in our intimate lives? What do we gain, and what might we lose, as we integrate AI into the most personal aspects of life? The episode would likely end with a contemplative tone, perhaps a montage of human couples alongside people using VR/AI, asking the viewer to consider what intimacy really means. Visually, this episode would be high-tech and imaginative – it might include CGI renderings of future scenarios (for instance, a concept of a virtual partner rendered via augmented reality that accompanies someone in daily life). It could also draw on sci-fi analogies from popular culture to help audiences envision possibilities.

Proposed budget for the film series

The *Stimulated Reality* series proposal outlines not just content, but also how it would be produced to effectively communicate the research. The style would combine traditional documentary elements (talking-head interviews, on-location footage) with animated explainers

and possibly reenactments or dramatizations for abstract concepts. Each episode's arc (setup → conflict → climax → resolution) is designed to keep viewers engaged and present the topic in a story form rather than as a dry exposition. The narrative voice (possibly the author as the on-screen presenter or narrator) strives to remain balanced and empathetic, guiding the audience through sensitive territory without sensationalism.

From a practical standpoint, an estimate was made that producing four hour-long episodes with international scope (filming in multiple countries to get diverse perspectives) would require a budget on the order of **1 million Euros** and about **eight months** of production time. This includes research and pre-production for each episode (identifying stories and interviewees), the actual filming (some in-studio interviews, some in situ like VR arcades or people's homes, plus B-roll), and extensive post-production (especially for integrating VR screen captures, animations, and possibly blurring avatars for anonymity). The proposal suggests seeking partnerships with broadcasters or streaming platforms, noting that the topic's rising public profile (e.g., frequent news articles on AI relationships [35] [36]) could make it appealing for a wide release.

In conclusion, the visual media project *Stimulated Reality* serves as a creative extension of the academic research – it translates scholarly findings into a format that can educate and engage the public. It also embodies a core principle of visual anthropology: using media not just to report findings but to **explore** and **question** cultural phenomena. In developing this series concept, the author found that it further clarified the narrative of the research itself, forcing a distillation of "what is really happening here?" in each area and how to explain it compellingly. This dual approach (academic writing + documentary planning) enriched the overall project, ensuring that theoretical insights were continuously tested against the reality of how they might be communicated or visualized for a real audience.

Prototype VR Film Production

As a proof-of-concept and complementary piece to the research, the author also created a short **documentary film (machinima)** set in Horizon Worlds, illustrating some of the key issues of virtual intimacy. This prototype film, roughly eight minutes in duration, was filmed within the VR environment. It exemplifies an innovative ethnographic method of **"videography in virtuality."** The process of making the film provided practical insights into both the subject matter and the challenges of visual documentation in VR.

Filming in VR: Using a **Meta Quest 2** headset, the researcher experimented with treating the device as a virtual camera. Horizon Worlds does not natively offer a director's camera with free movement – the view is essentially first-person from the avatar's perspective. To achieve cinematic shots, the researcher had to get creative. Over several weeks, settings were tweaked to enable recording at **Full HD resolution (1080p) and 60 frames per second**, maximizing quality and allowing for smooth slow-motion in editing. Filming involved techniques such as very slow head movements and gentle use of the controller joysticks to pan across scenes, attempting to mimic dolly or steadycam movements. Early attempts were shaky and disorienting, but through trial and error the researcher developed a steadier hand (quite

literally) – for instance, physically turning one's whole body at a constant rate rather than using the controller turn, to create a smooth panoramic sweep of a virtual club. **Wide-angle views** were limited (the VR camera approximates human field of view), so to capture establishing shots of a space, the researcher would record while methodically looking around and later stitch or cut the footage to convey the whole environment. Filming intimate scenarios posed an ethical consideration: the researcher avoided capturing identifiable individuals without consent. Instead, many shots were of the researcher's own avatar navigating through spaces (giving a tour-like perspective), or of consenting collaborators role-playing situations. After numerous recording sessions, dozens of short video clips were collected, ranging from an avatar walking through a neon-lit corridor into a "secret" adult room, to a crowded dance floor with avatars chatting (voices obscured for privacy), to close-ups of the researcher's avatar hand reaching for an interactive object (like a virtual door handle marked "18+").

Editing and Story Construction: The editing phase was conducted using *LumaFusion* on an iPad, a mobile yet powerful video editing app, as a deliberate choice to test a nimble production pipeline. The approach taken was one of "**writing to the visuals**" – an editing technique where the filmmaker first assembles a sequence of shots that flow well and then crafts the narrative script to match those visuals. The rationale is that in documentary work, especially when visuals are striking, letting imagery guide the story can result in a more organic and engaging output.

The researcher began by selecting a compelling middle segment of the story: for instance, the sequence of discovering the hidden portals in the aquarium world and entering the adult nightclub. This sequence was edited tightly to convey the surprise and transition from innocent to explicit. From there, the film was built outward – scenes were added before to set context (perhaps an intro of putting on the VR headset, represented through a first-person view entering Horizon Worlds main plaza), and scenes after to show consequences or broader context (such as stepping back from the virtual world and reflecting on what it means). This iterative building of the **visual narrative** proved effective; the author noted it was faster and more intuitive to start with a core scene and expand, rather than begin at the beginning.

With a rough cut of visuals in place, the next step was developing the **voice-over narration**. Acting as the narrator, the researcher drafted a script to explain what the audience was seeing and to weave in research insights.

The challenge was to keep the narration **informative yet engaging**, and to condense complex research findings into simple, quotable lines. Many iterations of the script were needed to achieve a tone that was neither too academic nor too sensational.

After recording an initial voice-over track and syncing it with the footage, the researcher sought feedback from a few colleagues and peers. These reviewers provided "fresh eyes and ears," pointing out any parts where the story was confusing or dragging. For instance, an early cut spent a full minute on explaining how the VR camera was operated – feedback indicated this was too technical and detracted from the story, so it was trimmed down in the final cut, with those details moved to an explanatory caption instead of narration.

Some scenes that felt intuitive to the filmmaker (who had lived the VR experience) needed more context for viewers. The feedback process was invaluable in highlighting where more explanation or a different framing was required.

The film also incorporated original **music and sound design** created by the author. Music was seen as an integral part of setting the mood and guiding emotional response. A subtle electronic score was composed, using a mix of minor modes to evoke curiosity and concern. Specifically, the composer (author) chose the key of E-flat Dorian mode for much of the background music, as this mode can impart a slightly otherworldly, pensive atmosphere – fitting for the futuristic and somewhat uneasy topic.

These musical choices, while technical in composition, were meant to subconsciously support the narrative (for example, a low throbbing synth underlies scenes in the virtual club to mirror the feel of club music and tension). Ambient sounds were also layered in: the murmur of crowd chatter in busy scenes (recorded from within VR), the sound of a heartbeat or breathing during an intense moment (to convey the researcher's apprehension entering a risky situation), and of course the actual in-world audio like snippets of dialog (where permissible). Balancing these elements in editing ensured that the final film is **immersive** – giving viewers a taste of the sensory experience of virtual environments – as well as informative.

The completed short film serves primarily as a reference prototype and a methodological demonstration.

Link to film:

https://youtu.be/xSa0NC3z9h0

It demonstrates how machinima can be used in anthropological research to **document phenomena that are difficult to capture otherwise**. By literally showing the audience what it is like to walk through a virtual sex world, the film conveys insights that words alone might not. It serves as a visual **evidence** of the claims made in writing (for example, viewers can see an underage-looking avatar in an 18+ space, underscoring the issue of minors present). The film also aims to engage viewers on an emotional level, potentially reaching people who might not read an academic paper but could learn from a well-crafted short video. This aligns with the journal's interest in visual media – turning research into an accessible form of public scholarship.

Conclusion

This research project has been a comprehensive exploration of how emerging technologies are mediating intimacy and what that means for individuals and society.

This project remains fundamentally flexible, innovative, and open to multiple impactful dissemination methods.

What began as a modest inquiry into “VR communities” grew into a multifaceted examination of **human needs and technological affordances** – touching on themes of loneliness, identity, community, and ethics. The findings illustrate a landscape of opportunity and peril: on one hand, immersive and AI-based intimacy tools can provide genuine emotional support, freedom of expression, and novel forms of pleasure; on the other hand, they carry significant risks including exploitation, social displacement, and the reconfiguration of fundamental social norms. In addressing the central research question, the project found that immersive virtual environments and AI intimacy technologies *do* have the power to reshape desires and behaviors, especially among younger, digitally native generations who are quick to adopt new forms of socialization.

The societal implications are complex: we may be witnessing the start of a paradigm shift in how companionship is understood – one that challenges traditional notions of relationship, identity, and even what it means to be “human” in a relationship (when one partner might be a machine). At the same time, these technologies shine a light on longstanding human yearnings: for connection, for understanding, for control over one’s social interactions. They exploit and fulfill these yearnings in ways both innovative and disconcerting.

From a **methodological perspective**, the project demonstrated the value of combining rigorous qualitative methods with creative practice. The use of virtual ethnography and comprehensive research provides depth and triangulation for the findings, while the concurrent development of visual outputs (the documentary series proposal and the VR short film) ensured that the research remains grounded in tangible realities and communicable insights.

This dual approach – scholarly analysis alongside visual storytelling – proved to be highly fruitful. For instance, crafting the film required distilling key points into visuals and narration, which in turn clarified those points for the written analysis. Conversely, the thorough research lent credibility and richness to the media outputs, preventing them from being shallow tech.

The project exemplifies how **visual media anthropology** can operate: not only studying visual phenomena (like how people present themselves in avatars) but also using visual creation as a mode of inquiry and dissemination.

The researcher is committed to remaining adaptive—receptive to emerging ideas, new technologies, and collaborative media partnerships. The final shape of the project will be determined in close dialogue with partners, funders, and subject communities, with a view to making the most meaningful academic, ethical, and societal contribution possible.

Outcomes

The project’s outcomes include this written thesis, a prototype film, and a conceptual series outline, all of which might be expanded or refined in future work.

The **knowledge base and story frameworks** developed during this work are resources that the author can using as a foundation for continued research during their Master's studies. Indeed, there is much more to investigate.

Acknowledgements

It is important to acknowledge the **human element** behind this research. The project benefited immensely from the support and insight of others. The author's academic supervisor (Heike Philp) provided guidance, and also embraced unconventional aspects of the project by participating as a second camera operator and on-screen avatar in VR for some scenes.

Such collaboration speaks to the innovative spirit of the Visual Media Anthropology field, where professors and students might literally enter virtual worlds together in pursuit of knowledge.

Next Steps

This semester-long study had its limits, and many questions remain open: How will long-term exposure to virtual intimacy affect one's ability to form offline relationships? Could virtual and AI-mediated experiences eventually become the predominant form of sexual education or exploration for young people, and with what effects? How will different cultures incorporate or resist these technologies? And critically, what regulations or design changes might foster healthier practices and mitigate harms (for example, effective age verification, or embedding ethical constraints into AI companion programming)?

These questions are invitations for interdisciplinary research, engaging anthropologists, technologists, psychologists, and policymakers.

Stimulated Reality sheds light on a rapidly changing aspect of human life – our intimate relationships – at the nexus of culture and technology. It shows that while devices and software evolve at breakneck speed, the core anthropological questions endure: How do we find meaning and companionship? How do we establish trust and consent? What new rituals and norms will emerge? By examining these questions in the brave new venues of VR and AI, this study contributes to our understanding of the timeless quest for intimacy, now unfolding in the digital domain.

The hope is that this work will stimulate further discussion and inquiry, ensuring that as we design and embrace new forms of intimacy, we remain mindful of the very human needs and values at stake.

References

1. **Center for Countering Digital Hate (2023).** *"Horizon Worlds Exposed."* CCDH Research Report. *(Document outlining the presence of minors and harmful content in Meta's*

Horizon Worlds). Available at: https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Horizon-Worlds-Exposed_CCDH_0323.pdf

2. **Crucible Law (2022).** *"Crime in a Digital World: Sexual Misconduct in the Metaverse."* Crucible Law Insights. *(Article discussing legal perspectives on sexual harassment and assault incidents in virtual environments)*. Available at: https://crucible.law/insights/crime-in-a-digital-world-sexual-misconduct-in-the-metaverse

3. **Reddit User Discussion (2023).** *"Meta Horizon Worlds has been taken over by [offensive content]."* Reddit – r/OculusQuest thread. *(Online community post providing anecdotal evidence of minors encountering explicit content in Horizon Worlds.)* URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/OculusQuest/comments/1gpr82s/meta_horizon_worlds_has_been_taken_over_by/

4. **Social Media Today (2022).** *"Meta Adds New Mature Content Classifications for Horizon Worlds."* SocialMediaToday News, June 2022. *(Report on Meta's introduction of content rating features for Horizon Worlds.)* URL: https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/meta-adds-new-mature-content-classifications-for-horizon-worlds/627961/

5. **Eko (2022).** *"Metaverse: A Report on Potential Harms and Policy Implications."* Electronic Knowledge Observatory, May 2022. *(PDF report examining issues of safety and content moderation in metaverse platforms.)* [Link: Eko Metaverse_report_May_2022.pdf]

6. **Ryan Schultz (2022).** *"After News Reports of Sexual Harassment, Meta Implements a Four-Foot Personal Boundary for Horizon Worlds."* RyanSchultz.com (blog), 6 Feb 2022. *(Blog post describing Meta's response to harassment issues by adding personal boundary features.)* URL: https://ryanschultz.com/2022/02/06/after-news-reports-of-sexual-harassment-meta-implements-a-four-foot-personal-boundary-for-horizon-worlds-and-horizon-venues/

7. **Virtual Reality Society (2022).** *"Meta Brings in 18+ Ratings for Horizon Worlds' Mature Content."* VRS.org.uk News, 2022. *(Article on age-rating implementation for Horizon Worlds content.)* URL: https://www.vrs.org.uk/meta-brings-in-18-ratings-for-horizon-worlds-mature-content/

8. **Our Safer Schools (2022).** *"Horizon Worlds – Metaverse: Guide and Safety Tips."* OurSaferSchools.co.uk, June 10, 2022. *(Online safety organization's guide to Horizon Worlds, noting potential risks to minors.)* URL: https://www.oursaferschools.co.uk/2022/06/10/horizon-worlds-metaverse/

9. **Meta Platforms (2023).** *"Horizon Worlds Content Guidelines."* Meta Help Center (Quest). *(Official content guidelines outlining permitted and prohibited content in*

Horizon Worlds.) URL: https://www.meta.com/help/quest/articles/horizon/create-in-horizon-worlds/content-guidelines-worlds/

10. **BBC News (2022).** *"Metaverse app allows kids into virtual strip clubs – investigation."* BBC Technology News, May 25, 2022. *(News report highlighting how children were able to access adult VR spaces; includes mention of a researcher experiencing a virtual assault.)* URL: https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-61573661

11. **MIT Technology Review (2021).** *"The Metaverse Has a Groping Problem."* MIT Tech Review, Dec 16, 2021. *(Article discussing incidents of avatar groping/harassment in early metaverse platforms and the challenges of moderating such behavior.)* URL: https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/12/16/1042516/the-metaverse-has-a-groping-problem/

12. **The Exodus Road (2022).** *"Human Trafficking and Social Media."* TheExodusRoad.com, July 2022. *(Anti-trafficking NGO article on how traffickers use social media to recruit victims, with relevance to emerging platforms.)* URL: https://theexodusroad.com/human-trafficking-and-social-media/

13. **Human Trafficking Front (2021).** *"The Use of the Internet to Recruit Children by Traffickers."* HumanTraffickingFront.org. *(Overview of how traffickers lure minors online through various tactics.)* URL: https://humantraffickingfront.org/the-use-of-the-internet-to-recruit-children-by-traffickers/

14. **Europol (2020).** *"The Challenges of Countering Human Trafficking in the Digital Era."* Europol Report, 2020. *(PDF report analyzing how digital platforms, including social media and possibly VR, present new challenges for anti-trafficking enforcement.)* URL: https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/the_challenges_of_countering_human_trafficking_in_the_digital_era.pdf

15. **Destiny Rescue (2021).** *"Trafficker Tactics Around the World."* DestinyRescue.org Blog, 2021. *(Blog post outlining common tactics traffickers use globally, many of which involve online grooming and manipulation.)* URL: https://www.destinyrescue.org/blog/trafficker-tactics-around-the-world/

16. **UNODC (2021).** *"Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020 – Chapter 5: Technology and Trafficking."* United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Feb 2021. *(Report section examining the role of technology, including the internet, in human trafficking operations.)* URL: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP_2020_Chapter5.pdf

17. **Polaris Project (2018).** *"Human Trafficking and Social Media: A Guide for Parents and Professionals."* PolarisProject.org, 2018. *(Guide describing how traffickers use social media and how to identify warning signs.)* URL: https://polarisproject.org/human-trafficking-and-social-media/

18. **Europol (2022).** *"Targeted – Human Traffickers Luring Victims Online."* Europol Newsroom, June 14, 2022. *(News release about Europol's findings on online recruitment methods by traffickers during the COVID-19 pandemic.)* URL: https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/targeted-human-traffickers-luring-victims-online

19. **U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2022).** *"Technology's Complicated Relationship with Human Trafficking."* ACF/HHS Blog, July 29, 2022. *(Government blog post discussing how technology can both facilitate and help fight human trafficking.)* URL: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/archive/blog/2022/07/technologys-complicated-relationship-human-trafficking

20. **New York Times (2025).** *"She Is in Love With ChatGPT." The New York Times*, Jan 15, 2025. *(Article by K. Roose profiling a woman's emotional relationship with an AI chatbot boyfriend and the broader phenomenon of AI companionship.)*

21. **Uekert, Rose (2025).** *"AI and Intimacy: How Technology is Enhancing Our Relationships."* TheInclusiveAI.com, Jan 20, 2025. *(Article exploring the various ways AI is being used to augment or substitute aspects of human relationships, including AI companions and communication tools.)*

22. **Ahn, Sun Joo et al. (2021).** *"Designing Immersive Virtual Environments for Human Behavior Research." Frontiers in Virtual Reality*, 2:603750. *(Academic paper discussing methodologies for using VR in behavioral research, relevant to virtual ethnography methods.)* DOI: 10.3389/frvir.2021.603750

23. **Østerlund, Katja & Winsløw, Jacob (2020).** *"Intimate Sensory Technology in Long-Distance Relationships."* Aalborg University Project Report. *(Master's thesis/project analyzing the use of haptic and sensory technologies to maintain intimacy across distance.)* URL: https://projekter.aau.dk/projekter/files/239505572/Intimate_Sensory_Technology_in_Long_Distance_relationship_v4.pdf

24. **Getco AI (2023).** *"What to Know About AI and the Future of Human Intimacy."* GetcoAI News, 2023. *(Article/newsletter from an AI company discussing anticipated developments in AI-driven intimacy and relationships.)* URL: https://getcoai.com/news/what-to-know-about-ai-and-the-future-of-human-intimacy/

25. **Boston Consulting Group (2019).** *"The New Freelancers: Tapping Talent in the Gig Economy."* BCG Publication, 2019. *(Report on the rise of freelancing and gig work, providing context that can be applied to the emergence of freelance erotic content creators in the digital economy.)* URL: https://www.bcg.com/publications/2019/new-freelancers-tapping-talent-gig-economy

26. **Pan, X., & Hamilton, A. F. de C. (2015).** *"Why and How to Use Virtual Reality to Study Social Interactions: The Challenges of an Experimental Paradigm." Frontiers in*

Psychology, 6(869): 1–11. *(Review article describing the use of VR for controlled studies of social behavior, relevant to methodological considerations.)* PMID: 26157414; PMCID: PMC4478377.

27. **Malary, M., et al. (2022).** *"The effect of virtual cognitive-behavioral sexual counseling on sexual function in pregnant women." BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth, 22*(1): 288. *(Study examining a virtual counseling intervention for improving intimacy and sexual health outcomes, illustrating therapeutic uses of virtual intimacy technology.)* DOI: 10.1186/s12884-022-04932-4