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Is there limitless romance behind a “bunch of ones and zeros”? How Social VR shapes intimate interaction and its design implications

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Abstract: This study explores how romantic relationships and expressions of intimacy unfold within social virtual reality (SVR) environments such as VRChat. Drawing on virtual ethnography and 26 semi-structured interviews, it examines how embodiment, anonymity, and technological affordances shape trust, emotional intimacy, and sexual expression. While often framed as taboo, these dynamics are central to understanding relational practices in immersive environments. Findings show that intimacy is experienced as both emotionally authentic and technologically mediated, emerging through practices such as roleplay, virtual touch, and shared activities. The study highlights how anonymity simultaneously enables openness and introduces challenges around trust, consent, and safety. By adopting a reflexive qualitative approach, this paper positions SVR as a critical site for investigating and designing for taboo topics, emphasizing that considerations of trust, safety, and consent are essential when designing for intimate experiences in immersive spaces.

Keywords: Social virtual reality; sexuality; dating; intimacy; virtual ethnography

1. Introduction

Commercial social virtual reality (SVR) platforms have been proliferating at an increasing rate, especially since 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social VR refers to 3D multiuser virtual spaces where users can interact with one another using head-mounted displays or other VR-capable devices (McVeigh-Schultz et al., 2018, 2019; (Handley et al., 2022). In terms of software and user experience design, social VR spaces are similar to earlier online collaborative spaces like Second Life (Edd, 2021). However, social VR increases the sense of embodiment and presence due to the 3D immersive representation of virtual worlds, the use of avatars, as well as the options for full-body control (Kilteni et al., 2012). This sense of embodiment can enhance users' experiences of a virtual reality and virtual interpersonal connections similar to the physical world, which makes it suitable for the online dating landscape for contemporary societies. Anonymous self-representation through



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avatars further contributes to its novelty in interpersonal communication. This paper investigates these factors and their impact on a specific case of social interactions: online dating. As such, it aims to highlight how technological features and UX design elements contribute to establishing and maintaining romantic relationships in SVR.

We designed a qualitative research study, considering the technological specificities of SVR, such as user anonymity and SVR's democratic elements (Bakk et al., 2025; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). This methodology serves two objectives. First, we aim to provide empirical evidence concerning how the specificities of VR technology affect the dynamics of building trust and safe environments for romantic relationships in SVR. We analyse the media specificities of SVR, such as the sense of embodiment, agency, and the effects of these on social behaviors and sense of intimacy in romantic relationships. Second, we examine the nature of romantic relationships in anonymous contexts through the lenses of sexuality and intimacy, considering these as forms of taboo, and investigate the primary motivations for sustaining such relationships despite the absence of physical connections in virtual environments. By these, we aim to highlight how SVR's technological specificities define and facilitate role-playing in romantic and sexual relationships

In our paper, we use the question of taboos to explore how socially constrained or transgressive themes can inform user experience design. Drawing on Prochner's interpretation (2022) of Salarić and Pandey's work (2022), who frame taboos as context-dependent restrictions on activities, objects, people, places, or situations, we aim to argue for a safer yet still stimulating environment for expressing speculative fantasies and sexuality in SVR. We utilised participants' self-reported qualitative experiences to explore the phenomenon of romance in SVR and provide suggestions on how to improve user experience and safety. Although taboo is not explicitly addressed in earlier social VR literature, Schulenberg et al. (2023) suggest that personal resilience is a common strategy for coping with harassment, whether embodied or voice-based. Building on prior findings about consent ambiguity in digital contexts (Zytko et al., 2021, Zytko et al., 2022), the partial anonymity and reduced accountability of these environments encourage users to treat online signals of interest as implicit consent, making explicit consent negotiation feel taboo or unnecessary in subsequent face-to-face encounters. Another aspect is consent ambiguity in digital contexts (Zytko et al., 2025), where the partial anonymity of SVR fosters a taboo around explicit negotiation while enabling visual consent and consent-to-stimulus to supplant affirmative consent through implicit, technologically mediated cues. We also highlight that when designing for or with taboo, designers must consistently consider the contextual dimensions of trust and safety in the context of anonymity.

1.1 Virtual Intimacy and Sexuality as Taboo Topics

Technology has been a key factor in intimacy in the past two decades, mainly for offering an illusion of safety (Turkle, 2011). SVR spaces can facilitate interpersonal relationships in a similar manner to other digital devices. SVR-based social relations, according to Freeman & Acena (2021), may develop into strong and deep connections that can lead to intimate relationships. However, there is no sufficient knowledge about how real-time embodied communication in SVR affects remote/online romantic and sexual relationships and the sense of intimacy and safety.

We define an SVR romantic relationship as a human connection formed and maintained in a virtual environment that does not necessarily require the involved parties to have (immediate) plans to meet in person, but to have expectations regarding a certain level of exclusivity and sexual expressions toward each other. The expression of intimacy and sexuality in various forms is a defining feature of romantic relationships and can contribute to individuals’ mental and physical well-being, similar to traditional romances (Antony et al., 2025). However, in this context, although SVR can offer anonymity, discussing sexuality can still be considered taboo (Salaric & Pandey, 2022).

2. Background literature

2.1 Trust and Safety

The concept of ‘trust’ has various definitions across the literature. Some define it as “willingness to be vulnerable” (Mayer et al., 1995), or a strong belief “towards another’s intention and one’s willingness to act by following their words, expressions, decisions, or actions.” (Gupta et al., 2020). While the initial functions of SVR platforms like VRChat exclude online dating, they clearly afford building new connections between users previously unknown to each other through an avatar representation that might be different from their everyday selves. Anonymity may prompt negative behaviours, such as harassment (Blackwell et al., 2019). However, it can also have positive implications for specific populations (for example, the LGBT community) where anonymity can protect against harassment and can have beneficial effects on social lives (Freeman et al., 2022).

The goal of online dating is mainly to initiate a meeting with a prospective partner in face-to-face meetings. Many users tend to lie to their online dating partner in order to make themselves seem more attractive (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017). Deception is common in online dating prior to meeting someone in real life and in other online platforms, like chat rooms, where in-person meetings are less likely (Drouin et al., 2016).

According to Maloney et al. (2020), self-disclosure in SVR can help establish alliances with others and can be an important component of forming and maintaining social relationships. Some users do not have privacy concerns in disclosing information, which reveals contradicting attitudes. This is similar to in-person relationships, whereby disclosing personal information increases social closeness and encourages sharing of intimate information with the other members of the social interaction (Sykownik et al., 2022). In SVR, there are many disparities in self-disclosure, but this could be due to the broad range of cultural backgrounds and personalities among users. One study explains that “social VR provides access to authentic connections with others despite user scepticism and privacy concerns.” (Sykownik et al., 2022). However, Zytka and Chan (2023) note that consent mechanics should be designed based on a novel “conceptual lens for informing and assessing design for safety in social VR.”

2.2 Romantic Engagement, Sexuality, and Intimacy in SVR

Intimacy is a multidimensional concept with differing definitions across various fields. The term is well-studied in HCI-related fields for understanding how intimate activities can lead to further understanding of relatedness in technological contexts (see Freeman, 2016; Freeman et al., 2015; Hassenzahl et al., 2012; Rooney, 2014) including SVR (Freeman & Acena, 2021).

When studying why people build or maintain interpersonal relationships (e.g., friendships) in SVR, parallels between users' behaviors and motivations in the virtual and the physical worlds were observed (Freeman & Acena, 2021). They found that activities, such as going to sleep together, going to a virtual bar or theatre, or studying together, strengthen connections. However, many of these relationships are maintained by using third-party channels (phone, messaging apps) to extend virtual activities. The combination of these channels helps connect people, learning about each other's personalities and habits, and completing activities together in a similar way as in the physical world.

According to Krell and Wettmann (2023), rigid definitions of online interactions and cybersex, that lack openness to the embodied and sensory qualities of virtual experience, are inadequate for analyzing everyday life in SVR limitation that becomes especially evident in emerging typologies of virtual intimacy. Jindong (2025) defined three types of intimacy in social VR: conversational, embodied and hyperreal, where embodied intimacy which reflects on the "the ambivalences of unreal and more real than real" (Jindong, 2025).

This layered understanding of intimacy is also reflected in the emergence of platform-specific words or phrases language used to refer to sexual activities in SVR. A common slang term, 'erotic role play' (ERP) originated from early 2000s MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft, and has since been used interchangeably with broader notions of online/VR sexual interaction, including cybersex. In ERP, two or more individuals engage in virtual intimacy using sexually suggestive avatars within a private virtual space. A VR headset is typically required to achieve an immersive sexual experience, which can be further enhanced by the phantom sense, which is a pseudo-sensation that allows users to perceive physical sensations in response to virtual touch (see Bakk, 2025). Other studies analyzing Japan's social VR users pointed out that virtual sex is becoming a distinct cultural phenomenon, in which biological men tend to engage more frequently than women, and a notable portion of users experience sexual intimacy exclusively in virtual settings (高橋, 2025).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

All stages of this study, including recruitment and interview procedures, were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education and Psychology of Eötvös Loránd University. The list of interview questions went through several iterative rounds among the interdisciplinary team of researchers to filter out potentially sensitive items. While individual reactions cannot be fully predicted, the questions were designed to minimize risk. Interviewers were also trained in advance, monitored participants during interviews, and were instructed to skip questions if needed. Throughout three months we conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 participants who responded to questions about their

experience of using social VR platforms for social and romantic. Interview participants were recruited from relevant forums and community groups on sites such as Reddit and Facebook, as well as through advertisements on social VR dating applications such as Flirtual and Nevermet. After expressing interest, all participants received full information and time to ask the researcher any questions before self-consenting. Interviews lasted roughly 40–50 minutes (minimum 35 minutes, maximum 60 minutes) through text and audio chat on Google Hangouts. We applied virtual ethnography, using Flirtual and Nevermet, primarily to find participants who use the respective platform for chatting, engaging in intimate interactions, or playing games together.

During the three months of interviewing, we also conducted limited amount of visits in nature-simulation worlds like *Lost Valley Lake Retreat* and bar-simulation environments, such as *The Midnight Bar* in VRChat, to understand how users employ these spaces as potential sites for romantic activities. Our observations focused on interactions between users in public spaces, and these empirical insights informed our analysis. This observational data supported the arguments developed in the paper.

3.2 Participants

Data was collected from 26 participants, which is consistent with prior social VR studies (typically 15–30 participants) and is sufficient to reach thematic saturation in qualitative inquiry (Freeman and Acena, 2021; Deighan et al., 2023). One participant (P6) completed the full interview protocol but was removed at the data analysis phase as their data did not provide enough insight, given their health disposition on the day of the interview. As shown on Table 1, of the 26 participants, 13 were cis male, 10 were cis female, and three identified as non-binary. Participants were aged 18–32 ($M = 22.8$, $SD = 3.83$) and they had different amounts of experience with SVR spaces, ranging from 5 months to 8 years. Participants were predominantly using VRChat, RecRoom, and the then-discontinued AltSpaceVR, due to their accessibility and free entry. All participants had been in a romantic relationship that started in VR.

Table 1 Participants’ demographics and previous experience in VR.

Number	Age	Gender	Country	Time in VR	Frequency
P1	21	Male	US	2 years	3 times/week
P2	24	Male	US	7 months	Daily
P3	25	Female	US	1,5 years	Daily
P4	26	Male	AU	6 years	Daily
P5	25	Male	US	8 years	Daily
P6*	20	Male	US	1 year	Daily
P7	29	Male	US	3 years	Daily
P8	18	Female	US	1,5 years	Daily
P9	21	Non-binary	US	3 years	3 times/week
P10	22	Male	Saudi Arabia	5 years	2 times/week
P11	26	Male	US	n/a	Daily

Number	Age	Gender	Country	Time in VR	Frequency
P12	21	Female	Germany	3 years	Daily
P13	23	Male	US	5 years	Daily
P14	18	Non-binary	US	2 years	Daily
P15	19	Male	US	1 year	Daily
P16	32	Male	US	n/a	Daily
P17	22	Female	CA	n/a	Daily
P18	20	Female	US	5 years	3 times/week
P19	25	Female	MX	2 years	Daily
P20	30	Female	MX	1 year	2 times/week
P21	23	Female	MX	5 months	Daily
P22	21	Female	MX	5 months	3 times/week
P23	30	Male	BR	1 year	Daily
P24	20	Male	CA	2 years	Daily
P25	19	Non-binary	NL	5 years	Daily
P26	20	Female	US	n/a	Daily

a

*Excluded

3.3 Data analysis

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) on the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) protocol. RTA allows for identifying themes from the data, capturing participants' experience. This is a suitable approach for analyzing stakeholder's subjective experiences of engaging with emerging digital experiences and practices such as SVR. Each interview was read by one member of the research team (investigator 1), who coded it for important information related to the study's research aims. Codes that represented similar concepts across different interviews were synthesized into themes: the themes are representative of participants' needs and references in terms of intimacy in SVR-based romantic relationships and regarding the dimensions of overcoming taboos in virtual intimate situations in general. A second reviewer (investigator 2), blind to the themes generated by investigator 1, performed an inter-rater reliability analysis. A random sample of 20% of the data was reviewed, revealing 4 key themes. Investigators 1 and 2 met and compared themes, with any discrepancies being discussed and themes being relabelled or reconsidered. Based on this discussion, two themes and two sub-themes, agreed upon by both investigators, were finalized (see Section 4), and design recommendations were developed.

4. Findings

4.1 Theme 1: Differing levels of intimacy

4.1.1 Emotional Connection and Engagement

Participants identified many differences between engaging in a romantic relationship in SVR and the physical world. There were clear advantages and disadvantages to SVR relationships. According to P1, using VRChat in the right way can provide a sense of closeness similar to relationships in real life. P12 believes that emotional connection surpasses physical presence. This emphasis on communication as opposed to physical presence can also be detected in that some users do not plan to meet in person in the short term, as explained above, and also based on our observation on matchmaking platforms. P2 highlights that VR allows for a better understanding of one's real personality. P5 notes that VRChat removes limitations imposed by physical appearances when trying to make an impression, using an avatar boosts confidence, and VR-based interactions allow users to refine their communication skills. P21 acknowledges the vast possibilities VRChat offers, stating that one can express themselves and complete activities with their partners that would be challenging or impossible in real life, often due to financial, geographic, or physical/bodily constraints.

P12 remarked that they felt very emotionally connected to their VR romantic partner, highlighting that the lack of physical touch often leads to more in-depth emotional and personal engagement and communication: “the benefit of VR is that you can spend really quality time together, because being emotionally connected to a person is more than just their physical presence”. Also, positive affirmations such as verbal expressions of love or affection may come easier in VR: “people will say I love you easier” (P8). We observed that cuddling, saying “I love you,” and falling asleep together, as mentioned by P18, are also common and important to build up intimacy.

4.1.2 Expressing Intimacy with Imagination

The lack of physical touch and affection was remarked upon by many as a drawback of an SVR-based relationship. Oftentimes, this was a bigger barrier than the other person's actual physical appearance outside VR. We observed and many participants reported hugging as one of their favourite ways to be intimate with their partner in VR (P10, P14, P22). Hugging for them happened either only on a visual level, which still can have a strong sensorial effect if the user is subject to the phenomenon of phantom touch, or with the help of a haptic vest. Some participants reported ways of engaging in physical intimacy without physical touch, such as visiting erotic-themed VR worlds, partaking in roleplay, and using sex toys while engaging sexually with their partner without them physically being there. As P2 states, “you can technically have intercourse with each other in VR”.

Despite the lack of physical touch, body language is still key. As SVR can present an advantage compared to voice calls (as according to P3 “Body language is hard to do over the phone”), according to P9, body language in VRChat is “undertalked” as it can feel really personal, and those who use full-body tracking can communicate expressively. P5 also stated that he noticed his partner's affection through body language in VR, which he found especially surprising as there were no facial expressions.

ERP in VR emerges as a socially negotiated and co-authored practice where participants collectively shape the meanings and boundaries of intimacy. P13 described it as “more roleplaying than actual sex,” while P23 called “roleplay the master of intimacy in VRChat,” noting that deep connections often develop “through conversation” and should remain “a fun activity, for the two of you.” Moral interpretations vary widely. As P8 observed, many “treat it as very similar [to] real life relationships,” yet for some “it won’t be seen as cheating... because it’s just some pixels on the screen”. P15 reflected on the potential fatigue of constant virtual intimacy: “I realized how kind of weird it is... that’s basically all we do”, whereas P12 framed ERP as emotionally authentic, since “there are still real humans involved, with real feelings.”

Participants also highlighted the role of technology and avatars: specifically, P25 described using ‘dynamic penetration system’ avatars for ERP, which allow visual effects between avatars that mimic physical touch, and P26 mentioned using “tools that emulate physicality”. These are examples of participants using tools that facilitate both fantasy and consent. Together, these accounts show ERP as a collaborative design of intimacy, balancing play, ethics, and emotional realism within the affordances of virtual environments.

Participants described how virtual reality creates a distinct kind of closeness that both blurs and redefines the line between body and emotion. P5 noted that “VR is so well built to be able to separate your physicality from your fantasy,” suggesting that the technology allows for fluid self-representation and the expression of alternative identities. They also imagined that with “ultrasound for kisses,” VR will become “closer and closer to the human,” pointing toward a sensory merging of digital and physical affection. Similarly, P19 emphasized the importance of “invest[ing] in full body to have more phantom touch,” while P20 observed that gadgets make interactions “more real feeling.” This sense of embodied connection is not only technological but also emotional. As P10 explained, “I typically feel the warmth of a person, especially if they’re like in my personal space, less than a meter away.” Together, these reflections highlight how users experience intimacy in VR as both felt and constructed in a sense of a mediated presence that fuses emotional and physical dimensions.

4.2 *Theme 2: Maintaining Trust and Safety*

4.2.1 **Trust Across Distance**

The topic of trust in VR-based long-distance relationships also appears regarding the expectations of a relationship’s seriousness. Some participants expressed that they engage with romantic interests in SVR in a more casual manner than in physical relationships. Based on our field observations, the heightened sense of social presence in SVR (especially in bar-simulating worlds based on our observations) encourages a more adventurous behaviour and a more buoyant attitude. However, honest communication is of central importance to users: according to P15, “you can’t really express emotions very well, behind a bunch of ones and zeros,” meaning that users have to spend a lot of time together to understand each other. Similarly, P1 states that “to maintain [the] tremendous amount of trust, communication is needed.” Based on these, we can state that users who aim to be engaged in a romantic relationship tend to verbally formalize their relationship and agree on its terms.

4.2.2 Feeling Safe with Anonymity

Anonymity plays a crucial role in communication. As P11 explains, anonymity may prompt hurtful expressions. This reflects what we discussed above regarding anonymity leading to unfiltered expression of one’s thoughts, as we could also observe on SVR dating platforms and in VRChat. Correspondingly, some would find anonymity as a tool for being released from societal pressures that could affect other users negatively. For example, for P15, anonymity means that “very little have filter in VR, meaning there are no consequences” of what one says. Correspondingly, P24 expresses that “VR is a strange place, where people say weird stuff.” We noted an apparent difference across participants in expectations towards VR-based romantic relationships. In comparison to traditional relationships, where there are societally accepted behaviours or norms, this may not be the case with this form of dating, leading to possible differences in opinion or understanding across users. It is also important to note that many users started to date a person once they could build up trust after spending some time together.

Some of our respondents highlighted the relevance of age, especially referring to underaged users: for example, P4 mentions that there should be more ways to filter underaged users, “so then adults can sort of just go into these worlds and don’t have to worry about any kids’ stuff”. According to P16 many underaged users pretend to be over 18 years old, a problem that SVR space developers and designers should also address. During our observations of user behaviour on SVR platforms, it was noted that we could not distinguish users based on their age.

5. Discussion

In this section, we discuss how our findings contribute to existing literature on intimacy, trust, and user experience design in social virtual reality, with particular attention to the role of taboo.

5.1 Intimacy and Sexuality in SVR

Participants in this research emphasized that the lack of physical touch could often lead to more in-depth emotional and personal engagement and communication. Self-disclosure as a form of vulnerability can further enhance the sense of intimacy. In this sense, VR-based romantic relationships form in a similar manner as mobile app-based relationships: they may start through VR-based dating applications or by the partners engaging in common activities in virtual environments. Many of our participants agreed that after the initial stages, they want to meet their partners in real life, and they use other communication platforms as intermediaries for keeping in touch outside of SVR. However, as discussed above, forming trust first is crucial in order to meet in real life.

Based on our results, we identify two ways of using SVR for building and maintaining romantic relationships, depending on the engagement and expectations of the involved parties. First, SVR can be a terrain for meeting and could provide space for users to engage in long-distance romantic relationships. Second, SVR can also serve as a terrain for experimenting: many users perceive SVR as a possible platform to experiment with expressing identities and romantic feelings, and they enjoy the on-demand character of

social VR platforms. They experiment while maintaining the anonymity of the parties' physical life identities. If the parties do not agree on the nature of the relationship, one-sided experimentation can lead to an imbalance of expectations, vulnerability, and loss of trust.

In both cases, erotic role-play or virtual sexual encounters serve as important means through which users articulate and negotiate intimacy. While not all users are actively participating in virtual sexual activities, based on the interviews, we can establish that ERP in VR could be turned into a form of co-created intimacy, where users collaboratively construct the emotional and ethical parameters of connection through both play and negotiation, but especially speculative fantasies. The practice demonstrates how technological affordances such as avatars, haptic tools, and sensory feedback mediate not only virtual touch but also trust, consent, and emotional authenticity.

Participants' reflections reveal that intimacy in VR is simultaneously embodied and imagined, merging physical sensations with affective presence and the imagination. The strategy of role-play in VR offers new avenues of understanding how sexuality can be performed from this imagery perspective, and how much users can create new frameworks for intimacy. This leads to a reconfiguration of traditional understandings of sexuality and relationality, which transforms intimacy into a shared speculative and experiential process, that does not require real-life references or existing norms.

5.2 Building trust and virtual romance with safety in SVR

Trust is a critical component in VR relationships, and it often requires more effort to establish due to anonymity and physical absence. In VR-based dating, avatars serve as the first layer of contact and self-expression, and as a reflection of identity and anonymity. While avatar customization enables rich self-presentation on many SVR platforms, it is also constrained by platform design: limited gestures, facial expressions, and body language can hinder authentic emotional connection, and the cartoonish representation can make human connections shallow (Kukshinov et al., 2024; Szita, 2022). This dual role of avatars (simultaneously enabling expression and obscuring identity) directly shapes how anonymity is experienced within these environments.

Anonymity may contribute to users treating SVR platforms as games, where they can have a virtual life separate from their physical-world lives even with different romantic partners and friends. Those who consider their presence in SVR as a parallel life, often maintain anonymity, but this may make others who treat it as an important social platform intertwined with their physical lives becoming vulnerable to toxic behaviours, harassment, or even identity theft due to some users feeling a lack of accountability. Yet, as our findings show, the anonymity of users also nurtures open communication and the sense of intimacy and closeness (Maloney et al., 2020). Mutual friends and shared social circles can speed this process up, but trust is built over time by verbal communication and self-disclosure.

The safety aspect of SVR dating highlights that female users may prefer this over in-person dating: female participants claimed that it seems safer to meet new people in VR, than in real life. Anonymity on these SVR platforms is also likely to reduce negative social appraisals; therefore users might disappear or change identity, which can be experienced by others as irresponsible behaviours. In some cases, users can also manifest aggressive expressions too due to this lack of social norms to behave in a socially acceptable way. Due to virtual

embodiment and ERP’s speculative, fantasy-based nature, anonymity further enables users to explore desires that may be considered taboo, while simultaneously normalizing or obscuring these practices within the mediated context of SVR

5.3 Design-related recommendations

Based on our interviews and field observations we aim to draw on specific design recommendations and functional improvements that would benefit SVR platforms in terms of establishing and maintaining intimate relationships as taboos in anonymous context, which resulted in three considerations.

1. Designers could introduce graduated identity systems to maintain anonymity but to also raise the level of safety, for example, optional age-verified layers, world filters or mutual friend option. These could allow adults to safely enter erotic or romantic spaces without compromising anonymity. This supports user agency while addressing safety concerns around underage participation, as suggested by Freeman and Acena (Freeman & Acena, 2021). The latter function may also support trust and would overcome the need for using third-party communication applications.
2. As users emphasized emotional depth over physical proximity, designers could create tools that strengthen affective presence which could also offer a different experience of intimacy. These could be e.g. subtle cues of attention, warmth, or synchronized breathing feedback to communicate closeness without mimicking sex or touch directly, therefore for the users who feel more uncomfortable with ERP, intimacy could be achieved through alternative forms of virtual co-presence. Designing for emotional presence would help sustain connection while respecting comfort zones and physical boundaries. Designers should further look at specific SVR architectures (Han et al., 2025) and create e.g. integrated voice-emotion mapping that would enhance intimacy as well. Combining these with multimodal communication (chat, voice, gesture) would enable richer, more trustworthy intimate relationships that align emotional nuance with virtual embodiment and help release the sense of taboo around certain shared speculative fantasies and activities in SVR.
3. Similarly, the joint creation of memorabilia in social virtual spaces could also enhance the connection between users and their expression of need for intimacy. This allows users to collaboratively design and curate digital keepsakes that reflect their shared experiences. By preserving special moments and expressing their creativity together, couples can create new daily rituals.

6. Conclusion and Learnings for the Future of Intimacy-Related Design Research

This study employed ethnographic methods to uncover the underlying motivations of social VR users and how these can open new pathways for investigating taboo topics. We incorporated two key design research considerations of Lefèvre et al.'s list: stimulating critical reflection and learning about taboos for both researchers and participants and integrating reflective moments throughout the design process to ensure ethical engagement with sensitive subjects (Lefèvre et al., 2023). We aimed to look at the intimate situations in SVR unfolding in anonymous situations, how intimacy is related to feeling trust to others, and how it can be nurtured more in safe environments. As situating intimacy in relation to trust and safety is crucial when designing for and with taboo, these dimensions must be explicitly addressed, as taboo-related experiences are inseparable from the conditions that enable anonymity and emotional security.

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