LATIN AMERICA IN THE ROBLOX METAVERSE: UGC, CITY BRANDING AND SOFT POWER

PAVEL SIDORENKO BAUTISTA [1]

[1] Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Spain

KEYWORDS

Metaverse
City branding
Place branding
Gen Alpha
Roblox
Latin America
Virtual Marketing

ABSTRACT

This study explores how Latin American territories leverage the metaverse, particularly the Roblox platform, to enhance their visibility and appeal to Generation Alpha. Through a case study of specific actors and their strategies, this study investigated the virtual marketing efforts employed by these territories. The theoretical framework distinguishes between immersive and semi-immersive metaverse experiences, highlighting the differences between centralized and decentralized virtual environments. The millennial generation, which has the greatest resources to invest in digital assets, is currently the most active user group in the metaverse. However, the engagement of Centennials and Alphas, the digital natives, is becoming increasingly apparent. Despite substantial investment in the metaverse, the lack of interoperability remains a primary technical challenge. This study aims to shed light on how Latin American territories navigate this evolving digital landscape to assert their identity and compete for attention on a global stage.

1. Introduction

I n the context of commerce and business, the notion of a brand pertains to the identification and image of a company or product, which necessitates the presence of distinct values and a unique, differentiated, and well-defined personality to connect with and influence the public (Heilbrunn, 2006; Kapferer, 2007). However, this term also encompasses various territory dimensions such as countries, cities, and different types of places.

The establishment and promotion of a brand at the regional level are accomplished through various methods, including territorial marketing (Aranda & Combariza, 2007), place branding (Anholt, 2003), and city branding (Kavaratizis & Ashworth, 2005; Kolb, 2006). These approaches involve communication and negotiation efforts to reinforce the distinctiveness of a specific location. The ultimate objectives of these strategies are to benefit the economic, productive, and tourism sectors, and enhance political influence.

In this context, it is evident that the activities and interests of the various locations intersect. An illustration of this is the concept of "city branding," which acknowledges a country's unique traits and virtues beyond its borders. Simultaneously, it adopts a lateral approach toward the image of its diverse regions, cities, and places (Garrido et al., 2016).

As cities are concerned, their sense of identity is shaped and enhanced by various factors, including global economic and communication patterns and the decentralization of governmental powers. Consequently, cities can act independently and gain recognition on the international stage (Calvento & Colombo, 2009).

According to Manfredi (2020), the local political agenda tends to prioritize and advance significant, even privileged, economic scenarios that develop across various productive spheres. Therefore, it is reasonable to propose a model of urban cosmopolitanism rooted in a narrative of global cities that actively addresses intricate issues, such as climate change and human rights. The author posits that cities are increasingly striving to become prominent players on the global stage, leading them to invest substantial energy and resources to reinforce their image, not only domestically but also internationally, particularly in the economic domain (Taylor, 2012).

In this globalizing context, where new digital actors burst in, virtuality becomes increasingly relevant, and generative artificial intelligence is incorporated into human activity, cities pursue their relevance through the metaverse. This research focuses on how these instances work in their image and marketing and how they compete and seek to stand out, especially in the face of Generation Alpha, which is composed of today's children and adolescents.

Although this is a process in which Asia seems to have a greater advantage (Sidorenko et al., 2024), Latin America also stands out for claiming greater visibility through Roblox, a platform initially considered a video game platform, but which has become a digital socialization channel for these young audiences.

How do the territories in question work in virtual marketing? which specific actors can we identify? What does this work consist of?

2. Theorical framework

2.1. Virtuality through the metaverse

In their respective works, Park and Kim (2022) and Simon (2023) present different perspectives on the nature of the metaverse. Park and Kim describe it as "a three-dimensional virtual world where avatars engage in political, economic, social, and cultural activities." (p. 4210) Still, Simon argues that it is a network of interconnected virtual spaces where the boundaries between physical reality and digital virtuality blur. Although the concept may represent either an updated version of the Internet or a new development for immersive video games, according to Simon (2023), Changhee (2021) explains that the

term "metaverse" is derived from the combination of the prefix "meta," which signifies transcendence, and the word "verse," referring to the universe.

In a study conducted by Castronova (2001), it is argued that not all virtual environments can be classified as metaverses. To meet the criteria of a metaverse user, three key requirements must be fulfilled: real-time interactivity, the presence of an avatar through which the user is embodied, and persistence. In this context, metaverse refers to any digital platform that provides space for interaction and an immersive experience. Users are free to utilize various resources and tools, as noted by Sidorenko & Herranz (2023).

Metaverse, which comprises various virtual experiences (Sidorenko & Cabezuelo, 2022), can be either immersive or semi-immersive. Immersive experiences typically necessitate the utilization of virtual reality headsets, whereas semi-immersive experiences can be accessed through a computer, mobile device, or even a video game console. The genesis of the metaverse can be traced back to gamified platforms such as Roblox and Second Life, both of which emerged in the early 21st century (Simon, 2023).

Metaverse encompasses a variety of virtual environments, some of which are more contemporary than others. Notable among these are Fortnite, Minecraft, Animal Crossing: New Horizons, Decentraland, Horizon Worlds, and Spatial, among others. It is essential to differentiate between centralized virtual environments, such as Horizon Worlds (Meta) or Animal Crossing (Nintendo), and decentralized ones based on blockchain technology, such as Decentraland or The Sandbox.

The latter suggests that users, rather than a group of engineers or a company's executive team, such as Elon Musk and former Twitter, now "X," govern the environment's performance, growth, and behavior. The millennial generation, which witnessed the emergence of Second Life or the first generation of Roblox, currently comprises the most active user group in the metaverse world. This demographic has the greatest resources to invest in digital assets such as NFTs or cryptocurrencies (YPulse, 2022).

The engagement of Centennials and Alphas[1], who are the digital natives, is increasingly apparent, particularly in experiences such as Fortnite, which involves digital interactions through streaming or mobile communication and interconnection (McCrindle & Fell, 2021; Turner, 2015). Substantial interest has been expressed in developing and consolidating the metaverse into a digital future since 2022.

According to JP Morgan (2022), investments in the metaverse have already reached over 54 billion dollars, and projections suggest that this number will continue to grow over the past decade. However, the primary technical challenge facing the current metaverse is the lack of interoperability, which means that a user cannot seamlessly move through different metaverses using a single avatar.

Currently, these virtual worlds operate independently with unique graphic proposals, action commands, and narratives.

2.2. Marketing, branding, and Soft Power of cities

Place branding is a marketing strategy that involves applying branding techniques to a location, such as a town, city, region, or country, to promote social, political, and economic development (Anholt, 2003). According to Hankinson (2004), developing this type of branding requires coordinated effort between various stakeholders, including institutions, companies, commerce, politicians, non-governmental organizations, and civil society. This process is crucial for economic development (Fan, 2006).

Place branding is typically classified into two categories. The first is determined by geographical boundaries, including country branding (Andrade, 2016; Fan, 2006; Olins, 2000), national branding

---

[1] Centennials or Generation Z are those born between 1996 and 2010, and Generation Alpha corresponds to all those born after 2010, until a new age categorization is determined. Based on them, today's children and adolescents correspond to the latter generation.

(Anholt, 2007), regional branding (Bruwer & Johnson, 2010), and city branding (Ashworth, 2009; Kavaratizis & Ashworth, 2006; Kolb, 2006).

The second category refers to the context in which a particular place branding occurs, such as destination branding (Morgan et al., 2004), which is closely linked to country and city branding but with a more specific focus on economic activities such as tourism (Pike, 2005). Overall, combining the discipline with the geographical entity helps build a successful place-branding strategy (Blain et al., 2005).

City branding, for example, involves constructing a city's identity and image. However, the key to success lies in engaging and linking various stakeholders such as civil society, businesses, politicians, NGOs, and commerce (Hankinson, 2004; Karavatzis & Ashworth, 2005). If these stakeholders are united in their goals, the city brand will be competitive, sustainable, and successful (Pashkaleva-Shapira 2007).

The goal of brand identity is to connect the public with a brand and its products by considering their requirements and expectations (Florek et al., 2006). In this context, cities have become significant players, especially in global commerce, and can develop various identities based on the profiles and interests of their residents, visitors, and investors (Leffel & Acuto, 2018; Manfredi, 2020; Owen, 2015).

For instance, a city can be known for its commercial and financial prowess, as well as its cultural or culinary offerings (Cervantes & Muñiz, 2010). However, the lines between commercial interests, urban projects, and investments are becoming increasingly blurred, leading some to view cities as mere branches of larger conglomerates rather than autonomous and genuine entities (Kolotouhckina & Seisdedos, 2017, p. 122).

It is becoming more common to observe cities being treated as political actors on a global stage, particularly in discussions surrounding social and migration issues. They are also regarded as cultural, scientific, or innovative references and as active participants in confronting climate change. This situation creates an imbalance in the realm of actions and capabilities between cities and other actors (Barder, 2019).

Industrial and business lobbies, which have both environmental and socioeconomic effects, now travel directly to cities without involving national authorities (Herranz et al., 2017). Issues such as climate change lend city moral authority to political actors (Bulkeley, 2013). In summary, we are witnessing a hybrid model in which cities and countries confront shared problems and challenges, creating joint and individual agendas, actions, and offers at an international level. In this model, the actions and decisions of these actors align (Latour, 2013; Manfredi, 2020; Vanolo, 2017).

Accordingly, Manfredi's (2021) consideration of city diplomacy has emerged as a significant trend in the development of soft power. As cities confront daily political issues stemming from globalization, such as mass tourism, migration, climate change, and the commodification of culture, they demand a reinterpretation of sovereignty that is oriented toward solving problems rather than competing with national governments. Global cities establish their own rules that influence international legal development and practice, even in the absence of traditional legal foundations such as sovereignty, monopoly on violence, and legal exclusivity. The growth of these "superstar cities" comes at the expense of other cities, which miss opportunities to develop and benefit from globalization. This increasing interurban inequality feeds populism and poses a risk to global political stability. In the future, cities are likely to become middle powers in global political organizations, and the political economy will shed light on how power and values operate at the urban level.

2.3. Roblox, a gamified metaverse with high social power

Roblox is recognized as a prominent example of a metaverse platform, a virtual space where users can interact, create, and experience a wide range of activities in a three-dimensional environment (Cheng, 2023; Rinaldi & Purnamasari, 2023).

The origin of this platform officially dates to 2006. According to Roblox Wiki (see https://roblox.fandom.com/wiki/History_of_Roblox), as you might expect, the development process

predates this date. Roblox was first developed in 2003 by David Baszucki and Erik Cassel. Initially, the platform was called GoBlocks and DynaBlocks, but Roblox was eventually chosen in January 2004. The platform is also briefly known as Roblox v.10, as indicated by the DomainTools screenshots. Roblox was officially launched on September 1, 2006, after it emerged from beta testing.

Studies have shown that Roblox's metaverse capabilities are utilized for various purposes, including educational applications such as creating virtual art museums (Kang et al., 2022) and music concerts (Rinaldi & Purnamasari, 2023), as well as collaborative learning experiences (Jovanović & Milosavljević, 2022). Moreover, the platform's impact on younger audiences and its potential for brand marketing, as demonstrated by the Nike–Roblox case study, highlight the diverse applications of Roblox within the metaverse concept (Hollensen et al., 2022; Huang, 2023).

Roblox is a platform that has experienced rapid growth and development, blurring the distinction between the virtual and real worlds, particularly for young audiences. The platform's evolution is evident in its focus on strategic thinking for future development, which includes enhancing the game screen's finesse, offering personalized game recommendations, and expanding the ecosystem (Huang, 2023).

Roblox has become a privileged space for brands, companies, and other actors to increase their reach interactively and organically, reflecting the broader context of the impact of digital marketing on the gaming industry, as discussed by Singh and Pillai (2022). In this context, digital marketing is described as a transformative force that has brought the gaming industry to the attention of billions of people worldwide. We Are Social and Meltwater's (2023, p.29) annual study of digital activity around the world noted that the metaverse and platforms such as Roblox itself were trending as communication options for brands and companies and constituted the path to the metaverse.

For the same reasons, there are concerns about the appropriateness of the content for this young user base and the potential commodification of their data beyond the persecution to which they may be subjected (Syas & Yahsy, 2023). Furthermore, the architecture of the platform and its user experience are crucial to its effectiveness as an educational tool and to ensure a positive player experience (Samarnggoon et al., 2023).

However, these are outstanding challenges, as current platform managers have indicated their intention to implement some changes and to accompany the growth of part of that user base. In the words of its CEO, "more than 55% of the platform's users are over 13 years old", and the fastest growing segment is in the centennial group (specifically between 17 and 24 years old) which already represents 22% (Baszucki, 2023).

In conclusion, it is a virtual environment whose audience is increasingly heterogeneous, although many Alphas' still prevail. However, it is necessary to point out that although according to the criteria of Castronova (2001) and the founder Baszucki (2023), the platform is considered a metaverse, many users and people in general refer to it as a video game, as is also the case with Fortnite or Minecraft.

For all these reasons, the present research aims to show how city branding, and even Hispanic American place branding, works on the Roblox platform. As the secondary objectives were established, SO1. To delimit the narrative and operational aspects of virtual experiences associated with Hispanic American cities and places in Roblox, SO2. To delimit and determine the intentionality of these virtual experiences, the SO3. The values highlighted in Roblox experiences are associated with the marketing of Hispanic American cities and places.

3. Methodology

The present study corresponds to an exploratory study of qualitative characteristics through a case study (Remenyi, 2012; Yin, 2018) based on virtual experiences in the Roblox platform.

The main research questions were as follows.

Q1. Is there a place for city branding on a playful platform, such as Roblox?

Q2. How is the marketing of cities and places articulated by this platform?

Q3. Is the work of city branding Roblox-positive?

The sample survey was carried out using Roblox's internal search engine with an initial direct reference to the main Latin American cities, especially the capital cities, until July 31, 2024. Through this procedure, attention was paid to the content suggested by the platform algorithm. It should be noted that it did not discriminate between official content (made by certified actors of a commercial or political nature) and content corresponding to the user community and individuals.

Finally, of all the results obtained, the following ten virtual experiences were considered:

- City of Monterrey (Mexico)
- Nuevo Laredo City (Mexico)
- Chihuahua City (Mexico)
- City of Caracas (Venezuela)
- City of Caracas, El Paraíso area (Venezuela)
- City of Medellín (Colombia)
- City of Bogota (Colombia)
- City of Buenos Aires (Argentina)
- City of Buenos Aires (Argentina)
- City of Tegucigalpa (Honduras)

There is a huge amount of content about Mexico, presumably because the community of users on the platform associated with this country is quite notable (no official figures or reports have been found that allow us to ensure this with data, so it is merely speculative), but also influenced by the drug situation and cartels. Much of the content is associated with war experiences —and therefore action— on this issue. Therefore, this country has a greater presence in the sample.

The main criterion for this selection was that all cases could be executed in the entire ecosystem of devices that the platform allows (mobile, computer, video console, and VR viewers), since in some cases there are restrictions, and they cannot be executed through these gadgets.

As already specified, the sample has been worked through the case study technique, consolidating the information according to established categories in a summary table. In turn, these results have been subjected to comparative analysis to determine possible coincidences and technical and operational particularities in each of the cases, which will allow us to approach a resolution of the established research questions and objectives.

The basic information obtained on each profile or virtual experience has been consolidated according to the following parameters: country of correspondence, city identification, name or identifier of the virtual experience and access web link, type of content creator (Official or User Generated Content - UGC), type of image transmitted, and values it reinforces.

Table 1. Example of results analysis table

Country	City	Experience name and link	Type of content creator	Image it conveys	Values it reinforces

Source: own elaboration.

For the last two categories, the characteristics of the analyzed content were consolidated according to the following nomenclature: In the case of the image transmitted, this will be determined as "Positive." - POS and "Negative" - NEG. In terms of the values that reinforce these experiences: "Tourism". - TUR, "Branding" - BRD, "Violence" - VLC, "Study opportunities" - STD, "Business opportunities" - BOP, "Action" - ACT, "Fun" – FUN.

4. Results

From the virtual experiences that make up the study sample (see Table 2), heterogeneity is evident in terms of the intentionality of the content (objectives, calls to action, user possibilities) as well as the origin of the experiences, as some come from individual users, and others that correspond to formal communication strategies, resulting in an image that is possibly not the one initially desired.

Table 2. Content analysis in Roblox to communicate and promote cities until July 31, 2024.

Country	City	Experience name and link	Type of content creator	Image it conveys	Values it reinforces
Mexico	Monterrey	Monterrey RP - https://www.roblox.com/games/12015492087/MONTERREY-RP-XBOX	UGC	NEG	VLC ACT FUN
Mexico	Nuevo Laredo	New Cars Nuevo Laredo Tamaulipas - https://www.roblox.com/games/17333357466/NEW-CARS-Nuevo-Laredo-Tamaulipas	UGC	NEG	VLC ACT FUN
Mexico	Chihuahua	Ciudad Chihuahua - https://www.roblox.com/games/12482093134/Ciudad-Chihuahua-M-xicohttps://www.roblox.com/games/12482093134/Ciudad-Chihuahua-M-xico	Official	POS	BRD TUR
Venezuela	Caracas	Caracas, Venezuela - https://www.roblox.com/games/8531305705/Caracas-Venezuela	Official	NEG	BRD TUR ACT VLC FUN
Venzezuela	Caracas	El Paraíso, Venezuela - https://www.roblox.com/games/16467851378/El-Para-so-Venezuela	Official	NEG	BRD TUR ACT VLC FUN
Colombia	Medellín	Medellín RP - https://www.roblox.com/games/9589257099/Medell-n-RP	UGC	NEG	BRD TUR ACT VLC FUN
Colombia	Bogota	Bogotá Distrito Capital BETA - https://www.roblox.com/games/17197552962/B	UGC	POS	BRD TUR

		ogot-Distrito-Capital-BETA			
Argentina	Buenos Aires	Buenos Aires CABA - https://www.roblox.com/games/14045293807/Buenos-Aires-CABA	UGC	POS	BRD TUR
Argentina	Buenos Aires	Buenos Aires - https://www.roblox.com/games/292743358/Buenos-Aires	UGC	POS	BRD TUR
Honduras	Tegucigalpa	Tegucigalpa, Honduras - https://www.roblox.com/games/12233638114/Tegucigalpa-Honduras	UGC	POS	BRD TUR

Source: own elaboration.

Referring to particularities, about the "Monterrey RP" content, this is an attempt at a virtual replica of the city of Monterrey, in "open world" mode, allowing users to move around freely. It proposes different roles for users associated with security forces with weapons, uniforms, and official vehicles available. In terms of marketing, a negative image of the city is cast, as the references allude to insecurity and violence.

For this reason, the perceived values conveyed are primarily violence, action, and, yes, fun, if approached from the perspective of a video game of this genre, as Table 1 shows.

This appreciation is reaffirmed by the community of users, who have left comments such as the one from @dardyu_213: "It's not like before Monterrey Mexico, but I think they let me down this time"(July 30, 2024). This comment is ambiguous because, taken out of context, one might quickly think that it refers to the city, but everything seems to indicate that his disagreement is true with the virtual content.

For his part, @Minienencelo2 said on July 24, 2024, that "They should add sports cars to the ministers and their Charger patrol cars and not Spawn kill and add clothes and tiger shirts, plus jobs as a bricklayer, it would be cool if they added barbecue sales".

In this request, made through the comments board to the person responsible for the experience, explicit reference is made to the inclusion of a sports brand such as Club Tigres of the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, a team that plays in the First Division of Mexican professional men's football.

Although the sample was taken into consideration until July 30, 2024, a comment from @SAKURITA on August 14 reaffirms the violent tone of the proposal by stating, "Please, I want navy uniforms and all the cars to be armored and posters of the Zetas del Sinaloa to appear on all of them, not all, but please implement turrets on military cars". In other words, direct references to drug cartels are required, in addition to more military equipment.

Likewise, in the quest to replicate the city in question as faithfully as possible, the designer has included innumerable commercial references to national and transnational companies and brands such as Bodega Aurrera, Elektra, Banco Azteca, Hemsa, Oxxo, Telmex, CFE, Little Caesars, and Pollo Matón. The avatar is allowed in the open world to uncork Coca-Cola cans indefinitely.

Figure 1. Open world view in Monterrey RP

Source: Roblox (2024)

Something like the previous case occurs with the 'New Cars Nuevo Laredo Tamaulipas' experience: the narrative is warlike from the first moment you access it since by default you must indicate which group you want to belong to, regardless of whether it is a security force or a criminal gang.

Figure 2. Welcome screen in the New Cars Nuevo Laredo Tamaulipas experience

Source: Roblox (2024)

At all times, there are incentives to acquire weapons and ammunition upgrades. The dynamic invites teamwork, but as already indicated, in a violent proposal. Therefore, in terms of the categories of analysis, the results are similar: an experience that gives a negative image of the place, extolling violence, action, and fun from the perspective of a video game with these characteristics.

The example is repeated with 'Medellín RP,' allowing users to assume official roles associated with security forces, but also as members of criminal organizations such as the drug cartels of Medellín and Cali, or the FARC guerrillas.

Unfortunately, as in the previous cases, indirectly there are also references to brands and companies such as Frisby, Terpel, La Rebaja, Carulla, Éxito, Pintuco, Subway, Claro, Bancolombia, WOM, Oxxo and Homecenter, many of which have a national reach, but others are regional or transnational.

Figure 3. Driving through the virtual streets of Medellín in Roblox with an armored Special Forces vehicle.

Source: Roblox (2024)

Ciudad Chihuahua, however, attempted to recreate this urban enclave through the aesthetics and narrative of Roblox, with a special focus on the theme of citizen security. It is the official content offered by the developers of the city, and as an experience of this platform, it must allow a constant Call to Action (CTA), in which case it offers roles, as in the previous cases, from that of a simple citizen with the ability to freely roam the virtual world to functions related to the police or the army.

Unlike the other two, in this case, the war narrative is not imposed, and the representations of the official vehicles (replicas) hint at an important criminality problem. Likewise, as in the case of Monterrey, due to the intention to replicate the enclave in question, other brands and companies see their branding reinforced, as in the case of Banco Santander, PEMEX service stations, Cedrhaui supermarkets, Farmacias Similar, and even local commerce, as in the case of the furniture shop El Zorrillo.

It is interesting to see comments from users, very positive about it, as in the case of @Arinanna, who wrote on September 9, 2022; 'I love this game I say*experience* I love how they make the city of me state #### is beautiful and it's like in real life good game I say*experience*', while several cheers to the country are seen by various users.

Figure 4 - Virtual experience of Chihuahua City in Roblox

Source: Roblox (2024)

In the same tone and intention is the 'Caracas, Venezuela' experience, of an official nature, to reinforce the city brand, in this case of the Venezuelan capital, extolling emblematic places in the city such as Avenida Urdaneta (which provides road access to the Presidential Palace), the San Bernardino area, the Central Park, the central area of La Candelaria, or the popular area of San Agustín.

It is striking that the CTA offered, as in the Mexican cases, also focuses on the issue of national security, making explicit reference to the possibility of assuming the role of a member of the scientific police, the National Guard, the National Police, and even the political police, known as the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (SEBIN - Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia). Even more striking, however, is the

fact that it praises paramilitary groups associated with kidnapping, extortion, drug trafficking, and other crimes such as Tupamaros[2].

Another detail that deserves attention is that after the electoral fraud of July 28, 2024, this experience was marked as private, preventing access to it through the platform on any device, something that has happened in the same way with the experience 'El Paraíso, Venezuela,' which, apart from wanting to extol one of the most neuralgic areas of the western zone of the city of Caracas, from its presentation image with the letters of the popular video game GTA, already allows inferring the narrative associated with violence and action, although it is also intended to reinforce the branding erroneously.

Figure 5 - Presentation of "El Paraíso, Caracas" on the Roblox website, categorized for users aged nine years and over.
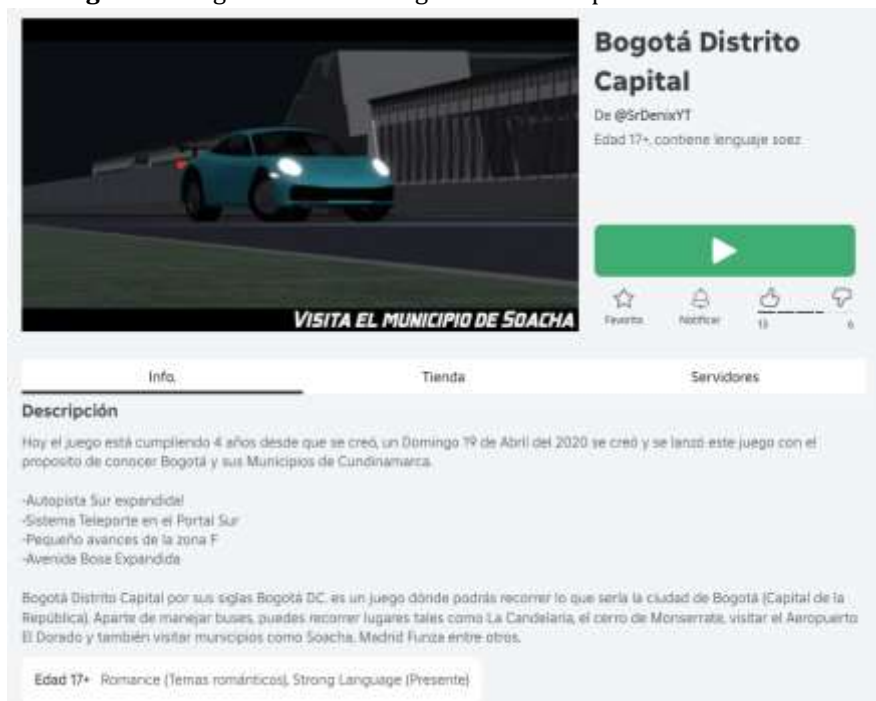

Source: Roblox (2024)

Unlike these, 'Bogotá Distrito Capital BETA' has a clear urban branding intention, without necessarily resorting to violent CTAs. However, to access this experience, an identity check is required through the Persona tool, as it is suitable for those over 17 years of age owing to its foul language.

---

[2] The Tupamaros group is a paramilitary group that operates throughout the country, but mainly in the city of Caracas, more specifically in the historic center of the city.

Figure 6 - Login screen for "Bogotá Distrito Capital BETA" in Roblox

Source: Roblox (2024)

In the case of "Buenos Aires – CABA", despite the replica of the city with Roblox's graphic particularity, there does not seem to be a defined CTA. The user finds himself in an open world where he can move to other emblematic scenarios, such as Plaza de Mayo, by taxi only. As in other cases, companies such as BBVA, Mostaza, Kentucky, and McDonald's gain visibility and were incorporated into the urban 3D context.

Finally, the experience alluding to the city of Tegucigalpa (Honduras) reveals the precariousness of the place (at least from the perspective of its creator) where even Red Cross assistance camps can be seen, such as those set up in places with natural disasters or severe social contingencies. The only church recreated in detail allows us to understand the religious affiliation of a place. In other words, with this evidence, it would be possible to determine that we are dealing with a settlement of social inequalities, little growth, and Catholic devotion.

It is interesting to note how users capture their environment and try to replicate it to allow others to experience sensations like their own, albeit from a virtual point of view (POV).

**Figure 7.** Overview of the experience "Tegucigalpa – Honduras" on the Roblox platform

Source: Roblox (2024)

5. Discussion

The problem of citizen security is notable when it comes to seeing Mexico portrayed on the Roblox platform. Apart from the content alluded to in this study, most of the experiences found in different cities in the country explicitly alluded to the possibilities of experiencing scenarios of action based on violence between official armed groups and criminal gangs associated with drug trafficking (see Figure 4).

Figure 8. Sample results based on the search term 'Mexico' on the Roblox platform.
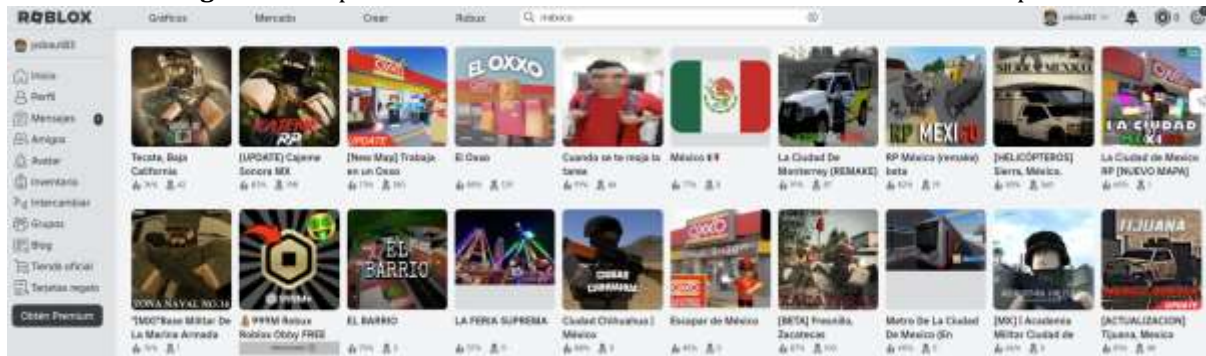
Source: Roblox (2024)

Regarding the access limitations imposed on Venezuelan experiences, it should be noted that in the virtual world 'Brookhaven' (see https://www.roblox.com/en/games/4924922222/Brookhaven-RP) on July 31, 2024, several Venezuelan users protested against electoral fraud committed in the Venezuelan presidential elections two days earlier. Although this is not the first example of political activism on this platform, it has been reported in different international media, which echoed the event, highlighting the involvement of young audiences with highly complex political and social issues, such as the case in question (Argudo, 2024; Barrera, 2024).

Presumably, given this precedent, those responsible for the Venezuelan experiences addressed in the sample studied changed the conditions of access to prevent these virtual protests from being transferred to official content, which would deepen the image crisis that the Venezuelan regime has experienced through different Internet channels.

It is of great concern that the Venezuelan regime, as part of its marketing strategy for the city of Caracas, tries to connect especially with the Alphas through references such as SEBIN (Bolivarian Intelligence Service) or the paramilitary group Tupamaros, downgrading their negative image and associating them as action entities corresponding to a video game with no apparent additional implications, when in reality they are coercive groups that function to maintain social control in that country.

From a positive perspective, there is the case of the city of Chihuahua, which, despite also having this narrative associated with citizen security, attempts to highlight its commercial and economic possibilities by making explicit reference to the different business agents that make life in the region, as well as the architecture and road possibilities, although a greater degree of interaction should be sought, since, as in the case of Monterrey, most of these allusions are simply ornamentation to provide a better context and real reference to the content.

And it is not that the simple fact of alluding to certain shops, banks, or restaurants implies an apology for the commercial or economic possibilities of the city, but rather that the narrative or interactive proposal should accompany this intentionality. In the case of 'Monterrey RP' or 'Medellín RP' it is evident that many brands are mentioned, but in this case, they are only used as a context linked to reality. Trying to procure an experience closely related to the real physical space.

It would even be necessary to study the type of association that the user establishes with these brands and the proposed war experience in terms of an eventual association of a negative nature. Likewise, it would be worth knowing whether the brands or companies in question are aware of their

mention of this platform, or whether, on the contrary, it is a misappropriation of their image, which is not considered in their corporate communication, branding, and marketing strategies, nor its real consequences and scope.

Figure 9. Interior of a McDonalds shop in the 'Buenos Aires - CABA' experience in Roblox

Source: Roblox (2024)

Based on the research questions and case studies, it is possible to first positively indicate that Roblox is an ideal platform to undertake branding and marketing strategies for cities and places if the CTA is well-defined. Users perform roles and actions, and they must be of interest to the user community.

Hence, in many cases, the 'easy way out' seems to be an action directly associated with violence, which calls into question the quality of the image conveyed, at least in the examples studied here. That said, in response to the second research question on how cities are currently carrying out their promotional strategies through Roblox, it is worth noting that most of the examples found refer to user-generated content; that is, they do not correspond to formal communication strategies, except for the Venezuelan case.

Therefore, Roblox is still a rather unexplored platform in this sense, with a very important potential to connect with the youngest and emerging audiences in the digital sphere.

This statement allows us to address the third and final research question on whether the marketing and branding work of cities is positive through Roblox. Based on the sample studied, this is possible, although the current results indicate that the image is negative because it is mostly related to violence.

The promotion and direct involvement of users with their proposals constitute a way of articulating soft power as they become a reference point, be it for commerce, tourism, or even as a scenario for illegal transactions. One only must-read Naim (2006) understands that much of today's global economic livelihood unfortunately corresponds to illicit operations.

It is important to note that most of the reviewed cases correspond to user-generated content. In other words, it is the platform participants themselves who voluntarily dedicate hours of creativity and design to create these virtual experiences, without corresponding to formal communication strategies, although there are specific cases such as Vans, Nike, and many other brands and companies that dedicate a lot of time to improving these types of channels with their target and potential audiences. The Venezuelan cases mentioned here show a greater formality in terms of the creator and the way the content is described, which gives the idea of being part of a group of concrete actions to connect with children and adolescents and sell them a certain image of the country, as mentioned above.

6. Conclusions

Cities must explore new formulas to gain notoriety, especially in emerging segments that, despite being digital, are not so in the conventional terms in which digital marketing is currently developed and to which many user age segments respond.

Creativity and innovation in this context involve understanding how Generation Alpha specifically relates to and interacts with virtual environments.

Metaverses of a playful and gamified nature, such as Fortnite, Minecraft and, in the case of this study, Roblox, highlight the complexity of providing an attractive call to action without necessarily hurting the image that is intended to be presented, specifically of the cities and places that they are trying to promote.

This type of study is lacking in depth; for example, if these users are indeed influenced by a negative perception, or if the simple fact that there are direct relations with irregular groups or that the serious problems of citizen security are highlighted through a violent and warlike narrative is simply related to an entertaining experience that has little to do with reality. It would also be pertinent to explore an alternative line of analysis associated with the possibility that the attention and visibility given to these scourges would involve young people more in thinking and devising solutions and alternatives, thus preventing them from becoming apathetic and indifferent to the problems that plague certain societies in a continent with significant social gaps.

In these cases, it would be worthwhile to carry out processes of participant observation over long periods to fine-tune the sample and the assessments that could be collected.

However, it is now clear that Roblox is an important platform that private and official actors use to increase their reach and exert influence. In this way, many cities and places see their brands reinforced, perhaps with the least appropriate or orthodox elements or references according to marketing and communication practices and considerations applied to other segments.

Undoubtedly, we face creative and disruptive proposals that take digital messages at a higher level and interact. They achieved greater and constant involvement of users with the proposed content.

Perhaps we are facing a deepening of the digital paradigm shift that has been experienced because of the rapid changes produced, especially in the technological field, as well as in the behavior of users and their relationship with devices and digital content.

Governments at all levels of influence should begin by understanding how these digital dynamics are unfolding. They cannot be underestimated or undervalued. Moreover, even if they pertain to very specific segments, they deserve special attention because of the asymmetric context that the Internet provides for their use, specifically regarding younger and more dynamic audiences on the Internet.

References

Andrade Y., D. A. (2016). Estrategias de marketing digital en la promoción de marca ciudad. *Revista Escuela de Administración de Negocios*, *80*, 59-72. https://doi.org/d46d

Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive identity – the new brand management for nations, cities, and regions*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Anholt, S. (2003). Branding places and nations. In Clifton, R. & Simmons, J. (eds*.) Brands and branding* (pp. 213-226). Profile Books Ltd

Aranda, Y. & Combariza, J. (2007). Las marcas territoriales como alternativa para la diferenciación de productos rurales. *Agronomía Colombiana*, *25*(2), 367-37. https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=180320296021

Argudo G., K. (2024, July 31). *Venezuela en crisis: las protestas llegan a Roblox*. Expreso. https://www.expreso.ec/ciencia-y-tecnologia/venezuela-crisis-protestas-llegan-roblox-208711.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawE-twlleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHQEfTcG-lTwNg_rTt1W52dmRyPVqtY-guUVWGrcyvZylRFQxyzzNI6dbLQ_aem_1i_o0O74kjyymet-g3hQyg

Ashworth, G. (2009). The instruments of place branding how it is done? *European Spatial Research and Policy*, *16*(1), 9-22. https://doi.org/bw9ffj

Barder, B. (2019). Diplomacy, ethics, and the national interest: what are diplomats for? *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, *5*(3), 289–297. https://doi.org/cjvv6q

Barrera, B. (2024, July 31). Gamers se unen a las protestas en Venezuela a través de Roblox. *El Sol de México*. https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/doble-via/jovenes-se-unen-a-las-protestas-en-venezuela-a-traves-de-la-plataforma-de-videojuegos-roblox-12325142.html

Baszucki, D. (2023, May 17). Our Vision of All Ages. *Blog of Roblox*. https://corp.roblox.com/newsroom/2023/05/our-vision-for-all-ages

Blain, C., Levy, S. & Brent, J. (2005). Destination branding: insights and practices from destination management organizations. *Journal of Travel Research*, *43*(4), 328-338. https://doi.org/bt2twg

Bruwer, J. & Johnson, R. (2010). Place-based marketing and regional branding strategy perspectives in the California wineindustry. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *27*(1), 5-16. https://doi.org/dg6mgq

Bulkeley, H. (2013). *Cities and Climate Change*. Routledge. https://doi.org/fgtn

Calvento, M., & Colombo, S. (2009). La marca-ciudad como herramienta de promoción turística ¿instrumento de inserción nacional e internacional? *Estudios y perspectivas en turismo*, *18*(3), 262-284. http://hdl.handle.net/11336/113855

Castronova, E. (2001). Virtual Worlds; a first-hand account of market and society of the cyberian frontier*. CESinfo WorkingPapers*, *618*,1-40.

Cervantes, M. & Muñiz, N. (2010). Marketing de ciudades y "Place branding". *Pecvnia, Revista de la Facultadde Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales*, 123-149. https://doi.org/10.18002/pec.v0i2010.767

Changhee, K. (2021). Smart City-based Metaverse Study on the solution of urban problems. *Journal Chosun Natural Science*, *14*(1), 21-26.

Cheng, S. (2023). *Metaverse. Concept, Content, and Context*. Springer

Fan, Y. (2006). Branding the nation: what is being branded? *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, *12*(1), 5-14. https://doi.org/bpw2p3

Florek, M., Insch, A. & Gnoth, J. (2006). City council websites as a means of place brand identity communication. *Place Brand Public Diplomacy*, *2*(4), 276-296. https://doi.org/cwn68k

Garrido, P., Estupiñán, O. & Gómez, P. J. (2016). Estrategias publicitarias para la promoción de la marca ciudad. In E. Camarero Calandria y J. Rodríguez Terceño (coords.) *Estrategias en comunicación y su evolución en los discursos* (pp. 261-270). Madrid: McGrawHill Interamericana de España.

Hankinson, G. (2004). Relational network brands: towards a conceptual model of place brands. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, *10*(2), 109-121. https://doi.org/c84dgs

Heilbruun, B. (2006). Brave new brands. In J. Schroeder & M. Salzer-Morling (eds.) *Brand culture* (pp. 103-117). Routledge

Herranz, J. M., Sidorenko, P. & Cantero, J. I. (2017). Rutinas comunicativas y lobbies en el sector medioambiental. In M. T. Mercado-Sáez (ed.), *El debate energético en los medios* (pp. 127-143). Ediciones UOC

Hollensen, S., Opresnik, M. O., & Kotler, P. (2022). Metaverse – the new marketing universe. In *Journal of Business Strategy*, *44*(3), 119–125. https://doi.org/10.1108/jbs-01-2022-0014

Huang, J. (2023). Analysis on the Young Age of Roblox Platform Audience Targeting. *Highlights in Business, Economics and Management*, *11*, 112–117. https://doi.org/10.54097/hbem.v11i.7954

Jovanović, A. & Milosavljević, A. (2022). VoRtex Metaverse Platform for Gamified Collaborative Learning. *Electronics, 11*(317), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.3390/electronics11030317

JPMorgan Chase Bank (2022). Opportunities in the metaverse how businesses can explore the metaverse and navigate the hype vs. reality. Retrieved from www.jpmorgan.com/content/dam/jpm/treasury-services/documents/opportu-nities-in-the-metaverse.pdf

Kang, D., Choi, H., & Nam, S. (2022). Learning Cultural Spaces: A Collaborative Creation of a Virtual Art Museum Using Roblox. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (iJET)*, *17*(22), 232–245. https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v17i22.33023

Kapferer, J. (2007). *Strategic brand management*. Kogan Page for Les Éditions d'Organisation.

Kavaratizis, M., & Ashworth, G. (2005). City branding an effective assertion of identity or a transitory marketing trick? *Place Brand Public Dipl*, *2*, 183-194. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990056

Kolb, B. (2006). *Tourism marketing for cities and towns*. Elsevier. https://doi.org/fgtq

Kolotouhckina, O. & Seisdedos, G. (2017). Place branding strategies in the context of new smartcities: Songdo IBD, Masdar, and Skolkovo. *Place branding and Public Diplomacy*, *14*, 115-124. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-017-0078-2

Latour, B. (2013). *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence.* Harvard University Press

Leffel, B., & Acuto, M. (2018). Economic Power Foundations of Cities in Global Governance. *Global Society*, *32*(3), 281-301. https://doi.org/d4zh

Manfredi S., J. L. (2021). The political economy of city diplomacy. *Economic and Political Studies*, *10*(2), 228–249. https://doi.org/10.1080/20954816.2021.1899622

Manfredi S., J. L. (2020). El cosmopolitismo urbano: la ciudad ante el orden postliberal. Relaciones Internacionales, *44*, 29-43. https://doi.org/d4zg

McCrindle, M. & Fell, A. (2021). *Generation Alpha*. Hachette.

Morgan, N., Pritchard, A. & Pride, R. (2004). *Destination branding: creating the unique destination proposition*. Elsevier.

Naim, M. (2006). *Ilícito*. Debate

Olins, W. (2000). Why companies and countries are taking on each other's roles. *Corporate Reputation Review*, *3*(3), 254-265. https://doi.org/crwg9x

Owen, T. (2015). *Disruptive power: The crisis of the state in the digital age*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/ggb6jv

Park, S. M & Kim, Y. G. (2022). A Metaverse: Taxonomy, Components, Applications, and Open Challenges. *IEEE Access*, *10*, 4209-4251. https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2021.3140175

Pashkaleva-Shapira, K. (2007). New paradigms in city tourism management: rede阴椀ning destination promotion. *Journal of Travel Research*, *46*(1), 108-114. https://doi.org/bw54vz

Pike, S. (2005). Tourism destination branding complexity. *Journal of Product Brand Management*,*14*(4), 258-259. https://doi.org/dkn5c7

Remenyi, D. (2012). *Case Study Research.* Academic Publishing International

Rinaldi, A. R. & Purnamasari, S. D. (2023). Simulasi Metaverse Konser Music Virtual Berbasis Roblox. *Crakawala*, *6*(2), 988-1002. https://doi.org/10.52851/cakrawala.v6i2.296

Samarnggoon, K., Wongta, N., Grudpan, S., & Klaynak, K. (2023). Developing a Virtual World for an Open-House Event: A Metaverse Approach. *Future Internet*, *15*(4), 124. https://doi.org/10.3390/fi15040124

Sidorenko B., P., Herranz, J. M. & Cabezuelo L., F. (2024). Comunicación, Globalidad e Influencia en el Metaverso: El Caso Asiático. *Barataria, Revista Castellanomanchega de Ciencias Sociales*, *35*, 39-58. https://doi.org/10.20932/barataria.v0i35.686

Sidorenko & Cabezuelo (2022). Tecnología, comunicación digital y discursos urbanos: las ciudades del metaversi. In. M. J. Ufarte & L. M. Calvo (coords.). *Ciudades globales. Diplomacia, sostenibilidad y estrategias de comunicación* (pp. 151-172). Comunicación Social

Sidorenko B., P. y Herranz, J. M. (2023, January 5). El metaverso: pasado, presente yfuturo. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/el-metaverso-pasado-presente-y-futuro-197064

Simon, J. P. (2023). The Metaverse: Updating the Internet (Web 3.0) or Just a New Development for Immersive Video Games?. Profesional de la Información, *32*(3), e320317. https://doi-org/10.3145/epi.2023.may.17

Singh, D., & Pillai, S. (2022). *Implementation of digital marketing strategy in the Gaming industry*. Institute of electrical electronics engineers. https://doi.org/10.1109/dasa54658.2022.9765259

Syas, M., & Yahsy, U. S. (2023). Komodifikasi Users pada Platform Game Online Roblox. *Jurnal InterAct*, *11*(2), 98–109. https://doi.org/10.25170/interact.v11i2.3748

Taylor, P. (2012). The challenge facing word city network analysis. *GaWC Research Bulletin*, 409.

Turner, A. (2015). Generation Z: technology and social interest. *The Journal of Individual Psychology*, *71*(2), 103-113

Vanolo, A. (2017). *City branding: The ghostly politics of representation in globalising cities*. Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/fgtr

We Are Social & Meltwater (2023). Digital 2023 Global Overview Report. https://wearesocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Digital-2023-Global-Overview-Report.pdf

YPulse (2022, March 15). *Here's what Gen Z & Millennials are buying in the metaverse*. https://bit.ly/36Arrws

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study: Research and Applications.* SAGE Publications.