
The Paradox of Authenticity: A Strategy for Building Brand Credibility Among Generation Z in the Metaverse

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study aims to evaluate marketing strategies that overcome the "authenticity paradox" – the fundamental conflict between Generation Z's demand for authenticity and the commercialised nature of the metaverse. Given the growing importance of virtual worlds as a key marketing channel, this paper aims to identify and compare the dominant strategic models through which brands effectively build credibility and trust among this sceptical, digitally savvy demographic, while avoiding being perceived as intruders in virtual social spaces.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The article is theoretical and review-based. A systematic literature review (SLR) methodology was used to synthesise existing research on brand authenticity, Generation Z consumer behaviour and marketing in the metaverse. The theoretical analysis was embedded in the concepts of value co-creation, transmedia marketing, and the extended-self theory. This methodology was supplemented by a comparative analysis of case studies of leading brands and events on two leading platforms: Roblox, as an example of a user-generated content ecosystem (the "Nikeland" and "Gucci Town" initiatives), and Fortnite, as an example of a centrally managed platform (Travis Scott and Ariana Grande concerts).

Findings: The analysis shows that the authenticity paradox is resolved through two distinct strategic models, the choice of which depends on the platform's architecture and culture. The first, the "Persistent World" paradigm, observed on the Roblox platform, involves creating permanent, interactive spaces. It builds authenticity by empowering users to co-create value and self-express through avatars, transforming the brand into a facilitator of community and creativity. The second, the "Event-Spectacle" paradigm, illustrated by Fortnite, focuses on creating mass, time-limited cultural moments. It generates authenticity by providing unique entertainment value that goes beyond traditional advertising, making the commercial aspect secondary to the experience users seek.

Practical implications: The study's results provide the marketing and business industry with a framework for choosing the right strategy in the metaverse. For brands seeking to build a long-term, integrated community, the "Persistent World" model is recommended, requiring investment in platforms that support user creativity. For brands that are seeking to generate mass awareness and viral publicity, the "Event-Spectacle" model is a powerful tool. The key recommendation is a fundamental shift from "push" marketing to a "pull" strategy that delivers real value.

Originality/Value: The work contributes to marketing theory by conceptualising and defining the "authenticity paradox" in the specific context of the metaverse. Its originality

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lies in identifying, describing and comparing two main strategic models ("Persistent World" and "Event-Spectacle") as ways of overcoming it. The proposed typology offers a new, structured analytical framework for researchers and practitioners, enabling a better understanding and planning of effective strategies for building brand credibility in virtual worlds.

Keywords: Metaverse, Generation Z, brand authenticity, authenticity paradox, value co-creation, transmedia marketing, Roblox, Fortnite.

JEL codes: M31, L86, D91.

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1. Introduction

The dynamic development of immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) has led to the emergence of a new space for social and economic interaction, referred to as the metaverse (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2022). This concept, derived from science fiction literature, has evolved into a realistic vision of the next iteration of the internet - a network of three-dimensional, shared, and persistent virtual worlds where users, represented by avatars, can interact in real time (Hadi *et al.*, 2023).

The metaverse is no longer seen as a niche technology but is becoming a strategic field of expansion for global brands, as confirmed by market forecasts predicting exponential growth. It is estimated that by 2030, the value of but is becoming a strategic field of expansion for global brands, as confirmed by market forecasts predicting this market could reach as much as \$5 trillion, making it one of the most important and promising areas of interest in contemporary marketing (Dwivedi, Hughes, Baabdullah, *et al.*, 2022).

Generation Z (people born after 1995) is vital in this new ecosystem. As the first generation of "digital natives" for whom the boundary between the physical and digital worlds is naturally fluid, it forms the core of users of precursor platforms for the metaverse, such as Roblox and Fortnite (Ameen *et al.*, 2021; Kumar and Shankar, 2024).

However, this generation is not a passive recipient of marketing messages. It is characterised by a unique set of values and a high level of consumer awareness. Its

representatives are deeply sceptical of traditional, intrusive forms of advertising, valuing authenticity, transparency and brand engagement in social and environmental issues above all else (Ameen *et al.*, 2022). Sensitive to falsehood and inconsistency, they easily expose inauthentic and purely commercial messages, making it extremely difficult to reach them with traditional messaging (Kaur *et al.*, 2023).

This fundamental characteristic of Generation Z, when confronted with the nature of the metaverse, poses a key challenge for brands: the "authenticity paradox". It consists of a fundamental contradiction between the demand for authentic, unobtrusive and valuable interactions and the inherently artificial, created and commercialised nature of branded spaces in the virtual world (Spais *et al.*, 2024; Alexander *et al.*, 2024).

How can a brand whose primary goal is to generate profit build credibility and trust in an environment that is, by definition, a simulation, without being perceived as an intruder attempting to colonise the digital space of young people? This issue becomes a central strategic dilemma for marketers planning activities in the metaverse.

In response to this issue, this article poses the following research question: How do successful brands in the metaverse address the "authenticity paradox" to build credible relationships with Generation Z, which values authenticity?

The main objective of this study is to evaluate and compare the marketing strategies brands use to build credibility among Generation Z consumers in the metaverse. Based on the theoretical framework of authenticity marketing, value co-creation and transmedia marketing, the article argues that effective strategies do not consist of simply transferring advertisements from the physical to the virtual world. Instead, they require a fundamental paradigm shift from one-way communication to building platforms that enable users to express themselves, be creative and interact socially.

This work contributes to the disciplines of management and quality science by conceptualising the "authenticity paradox" and identifying and comparatively analysing two different strategic models that allow it to be overcome: the "Persistent World" paradigm, based on building a permanent, engaging presence (e.g., Roblox), and the "Event-Spectacle" paradigm, focused on creating mass, ephemeral cultural moments (e.g., Fortnite).

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Metaverse as a New Marketing Space

The metaverse is seen as the next evolution of the internet, moving from two-dimensional websites to three-dimensional, immersive spaces (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2022;

Adhini and Prasad, 2024). Its technological foundation is a confluence of many advanced technologies, including augmented (AR), virtual (VR), mixed (MR) and extended (XR) reality, as well as cloud and blockchain technologies (Adhini and Prasad, 2024).

At its core, the metaverse is characterised by three key dimensions: immersion, or the subjective sense of psychologically "being there" in a virtual environment; real-time interactivity, which allows for seamless interaction with the environment and other users; and social presence, realised through avatars, i.e. digital representations of users (Barrera and Shah, 2023).

For brands, the metaverse opens up completely new, revolutionary channels for reaching consumers that go beyond traditional e-commerce. It enables the creation of virtual stores that are not just replicas of physical outlets, but interactive, gamified spaces. It enables the organisation of mass global events, such as concerts or fashion shows, accessible to millions of users simultaneously.

A key element of the new virtual economy is also the offering of digital goods, often in the form of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2022). An NFT is a unique cryptographic asset based on blockchain technology that serves as proof of ownership of a digital item – this could be virtual clothing, a work of art or a ticket to a virtual event (Adhini and Prasad, 2024; Arya *et al.*, 2023).

Platforms such as Roblox, Fortnite and Decentraland already have hundreds of millions of active users, mainly from Generation Z, and serve as testing grounds for innovative marketing strategies (Peng *et al.*, 2024; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2022). Early brand initiatives show the enormous potential of this medium. Virtual concerts, such as Travis Scott's Fortnite performance, which attracted over 12 million live participants, have become global cultural phenomena (Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.*, 2025).

In turn, limited collections of digital clothing and accessories from luxury brands such as Gucci are fetching prices in virtual worlds that exceed their physical counterparts, demonstrating the existence of a fully functional digital economy and consumers' willingness to invest in their virtual identities (Hollensen *et al.*, 2022; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2022).

2.2 Generation Z and the Theoretical Framework for Building Credibility in the Metaverse

Understanding how brands can build credibility in the metaverse requires both an analysis of the psychology of the target consumer – Generation Z – and embedding this analysis within an appropriate theoretical framework. As the first fully digital generation, Generation Z exhibits unique consumer characteristics that pose a fundamental challenge to traditional marketing.

Growing up in an environment saturated with information and social media, members of this generation have developed advanced defences against intrusive advertising (Ameen *et al.*, 2023; Spais *et al.*, 2024). They value authenticity, which they define not as a marketing slogan, but as a tangible consistency between a brand's declared values and its actual actions (Ameen *et al.*, 2022).

They expect transparency, ethical conduct and genuine commitment to important social and environmental issues (Ameen *et al.*, 2023; Alexander *et al.*, 2024). Brands that try to fit into trends in an unnatural way or whose communication is perceived as false are quickly rejected (Kaur *et al.*, 2023).

The trust of Generation Z is not built through polished, idealistic campaigns, but through real action, open dialogue, and relationships built on shared values (Kaur *et al.*, 2023; Spais *et al.*, 2024). What is more, this generation prefers visual and interactive communication, and their average attention span is short, which forces brands to create content that is concise and engaging from the very first seconds (Ameen *et al.*, 2023).

It is this deeply rooted demand for authenticity that forms the theoretical core of the "authenticity paradox". Consumers perceive brand authenticity as a measure of whether a brand is true to itself and its values, and whether its actions are sincere and free of cynicism (del Barrio-García and Prados-Peña, 2019).

The paradox arises when the conscious and strategic pursuit of being perceived as authentic is itself an inauthentic act (Spais *et al.*, 2024). In the context of the metaverse, where everything is a digital creation, authenticity must be built not on the "truthfulness" of the product, but on the transparency of intentions and the consistency of the virtual experience with the brand's ethos.

The answer to this paradox, as the literature suggests, is to move away from traditional models toward participatory strategies. The key concept here is value co-creation, which assumes that value is not created solely by the company and delivered to the customer, but arises from interaction between the two (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

In the metaverse, this strategy takes on particular significance. Platforms such as Roblox and Fortnite, which rely on user participation, are a natural environment for co-creation. Instead of imposing ready-made experiences, brands can provide tools and resources that allow users to be creative and personalise, making them active participants rather than passive recipients.

This aligns with the concept of transmedia marketing, which assumes that a brand's narrative develops across multiple platforms and that user engagement is key to its expansion (Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.*, 2025). Users become "prosumers" – they not

only consume, but also create and disseminate content, strengthening emotional and social ties with the brand (Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.*, 2025).

The mechanism that drives co-creation in the metaverse is the user's digital identity, embodied in their avatar. The Extended Self theory (Belk, 2013) suggests that people perceive their possessions as part of their own identity. In the digital world, avatars and the virtual goods they possess become a key vehicle for this identity (Peng *et al.*, 2024).

An avatar is not just a pawn in a game, but a projection of the user's ideal or authentic self. When a user personalises their avatar with branded items – for example, digital Nike shoes in Nikeland – they are effectively integrating the brand into their digital sense of identity. This explains why users are willing to spend real money on intangible virtual goods – it is an act of building and signalling identity in a digital community.

Finally, all these interactions take place in a social context, which leads to the last key theoretical framework: community marketing. This strategy focuses on building and nurturing a community around a brand (Peng *et al.*, 2024; Alexander *et al.*, 2024).

The metaverse, as a social space by nature, is an ideal place to implement it. Instead of focusing on individual transactions, brands can create virtual meeting places that encourage interaction, the exchange of experiences, and the building of relationships between users (Peng *et al.*, 2024; Alexander *et al.*, 2024). The brand then becomes not only a product provider but also an integral part of its consumers' digital social life, evident in both permanent worlds, such as Gucci Town, and mass-shared experiences such as concerts in Fortnite.

3. Methodology

This study is theoretical and review-based, aiming to synthesise existing knowledge and analyse good practices in building brand credibility in the metaverse (Alexander *et al.*, 2024; Kumar and Shankar, 2024). The use of a qualitative and interpretative approach is justified due to the early stage of development of the phenomenon under study and the need for an in-depth understanding of complex psychological and social processes. Two primary research methods were used in this study.

The basic methodology is a systematic literature review. The research process involved defining keywords (including "metaverse", "Generation Z", "brand authenticity", "co-creation"), searching leading scientific databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCO), and then selecting and thematically analysing relevant articles to identify key concepts, models and strategies (Adhini and Prasad, 2024).

A comparative analysis of case studies complements the literature review. This method allows for an in-depth examination of specific, real-life examples to illustrate and understand complex phenomena. Two leading metaverse platforms were selected for analysis: Roblox and Fortnite. This choice was dictated by the fact that they represent two different strategic models and are the most frequently cited examples of successful marketing implementation in the metaverse in the literature.

The analysis examined the initiatives of the Nike ("Nikeland") and Gucci ("Gucci Town") brands on the Roblox platform and high-profile cultural events in Fortnite, such as concerts by Travis Scott and Ariana Grande (Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.*, 2025).

4. Research Results and Discussion

The analysis of the literature and case studies allows us to formulate the central thesis that the solution to the "authenticity paradox" in the metaverse is achieved through two distinct but equally effective strategic models, the choice of which is strictly dependent on the architecture and culture of a given platform. In both cases, the key is a strategic transition from a one-way communication model (broadcasting) to a user empowerment model, in which the brand becomes a facilitator rather than a dictator of experiences.

4.1 The "Persistent World" Paradigm: Community Building and Co-Creation in Roblox

The first strategic model, the "Persistent World" paradigm, is characteristic of platforms based on user-generated content (UGC), with Roblox being a prime example. This platform is not a single game, but a decentralised ecosystem of millions of separate "worlds" or "experiences" created by the players themselves using the tools provided.

This architecture promotes marketing strategies that build permanent virtual spaces that integrate with users' everyday digital lives, nurture community, and actively encourage co-creation. Instead of being an intruder, the brand becomes an integral part of the virtual landscape and a provider of tools for creativity.

The activities of Nike and Gucci are excellent illustrations of this model. Nikeland, a virtual world created by Nike, is not a digital store, but an extensive amusement park and community centre. Users can participate in sports mini-games, meet friends and personalise their avatars with virtual Nike products.

The key to its success, which has attracted over 21 million visitors, is its focus on gamification and community building (Kaur *et al.*, 2023). Nike provides a platform for fun and interaction, and the brand is a natural backdrop for these positive experiences. What's more, Nike regularly releases tools that allow users to create

their own mini-games, fully implementing its co-creation strategy and putting control in the hands of the community.

Similarly, Gucci, a luxury brand, has successfully transferred its image to the metaverse by creating the permanent space Gucci Town. The earlier temporary installation, Gucci Garden, was an immersive, artistic experience that attracted 19 million visitors in just two weeks (Alexander *et al.*, 2024). Users could not only purchase limited-edition virtual items (NFTs) but also participate in games and explore a world inspired by Gucci's aesthetic.

The brand's strategy is based on storytelling, digital scarcity, and the provision of tools for self-expression. Owning a virtual Gucci handbag, which can cost more than its physical counterpart, becomes a symbol of status and taste in the digital community, which is a powerful motivator for Generation Z and a perfect example of the "extended self" theory in action.

In both cases, brands solve the paradox of authenticity by not pretending to be "real" in an artificial world, but by becoming authentic providers of value – entertainment, tools for creativity and identity building.

4.2 The "Spectacle Event" Paradigm: Creating Cultural Moments in Fortnite

The second strategic model, the "Spectacle Event" paradigm, dominates centrally managed platforms, the best example of which is Fortnite. Unlike Roblox, Fortnite is primarily a battle royale game that has evolved into a global entertainment platform, fully controlled by its creators, Epic Games. This structure favours a strategy of organising massive, time-limited live events that become global cultural phenomena, generating enormous media buzz that extends far beyond the gaming community (Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.*, 2025).

The most spectacular examples of this model are virtual concerts. In April 2020, rapper Travis Scott's performance, entitled "Astronomical", became a landmark event. It was not passive streaming, but a fully immersive, interactive experience in which a giant avatar of the artist moved through a surreal, changing game world.

The event attracted a record 12.3 million live players at one point, with a total of over 45.8 million unique viewers attending the five shows (Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.*, 2025). The commercial success was equally impressive, with the artist estimated to have earned around \$20 million from the event, and Fortnite gaining unprecedented mainstream media coverage.

Building on this success, the "Rift Tour" featuring Ariana Grande was organised in 2021. This was an even more technically advanced event, offering players a series of interactive mini-games leading up to the final performance. In total, including broadcasts and replays, the event was viewed by over 78 million people, cementing

Fortnite's position as a leading stage for digital entertainment (Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.*, 2025).

In this model, the authenticity paradox is resolved differently. The brand (or artist) does not integrate into the everyday lives of players, but provides unique, spectacular value in the form of mass entertainment. Participation in a concert becomes a cultural experience, and the commercial aspect (e.g., the sale of avatar skins) is seen as a natural part of that experience, rather than intrusive advertising. Authenticity here comes from providing real, desired value, rather than attempting to "pretend" to be part of the community.

In summary, a comparative analysis of both platforms and the campaigns carried out on them clearly shows that there is no single, universal marketing strategy for the metaverse. The choice between the "Persistent World" and "Event-Spectacle" models is a strategic decision that must take into account the platforms' architecture, their culture, and the brand's overarching marketing goals – whether it is building a long-term, engaged community or generating mass, viral publicity.

5. Conclusions, Proposals, Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The analysis conducted in this article leads to the clear conclusion that effectively building brand credibility among Generation Z in the metaverse requires abandoning traditional, intrusive forms of marketing in favour of engaging strategies that put the user at the centre.

The central research problem, defined as the "authenticity paradox," is solved not by attempting to feign "truthfulness" in an artificial world, but by providing tangible value to the user. This value manifests as entertainment, tools for creativity and self-expression, and spaces for building social interactions and digital identity.

The study showed that success in the metaverse does not depend on the advertising volume but on the brand's ability to become an integral and desirable part of the virtual ecosystem. The key is to transition from the seller to a facilitator and partner in the consumer's digital life. A comparative analysis of the Roblox and Fortnite platforms identified two main strategic models that implement this transformation.

The "Persistent World" paradigm, successfully used on UGC-based platforms such as Roblox, involves creating persistent, engaging spaces that become part of users' everyday digital lives. Its strength lies in building communities and enabling the co-creation of value, directly responding to Generation Z's need for self-expression and creativity. In contrast, the "Event-Spectacle" paradigm, effective on centrally managed platforms such as Fortnite, focuses on creating mass, ephemeral cultural moments that provide unique entertainment and generate enormous reach.

The final choice between these models is a strategic decision that should depend on the brand's goals, its resources, and the nature and culture of the chosen virtual platform.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the analyses conducted, the following recommendations can be made for the marketing industry and businesses planning to enter or develop their presence in the metaverse.

First, it is essential to adopt the perspective of experience designers rather than traditional advertisers. Instead of replicating virtual stores that mimic a passive shopping experience, brands should focus on creating engaging, immersive worlds integrated with gamification elements such as goals, challenges and rewards (Arya *et al.*, 2023).

Secondly, strategic user empowerment through the provision of personalisation and co-creation tools is becoming crucial. Brand strategy should evolve to enable, rather than dictate, virtual experiences, fostering a sense of ownership and authenticity among consumers and allowing the brand to draw on its community's creativity.

Thirdly, community building should be prioritised. The brand space in the metaverse should function as a vibrant social hub, encouraging users' interaction by organising virtual events, creating meeting places and supporting user-generated content (Alexander *et al.*, 2024).

Fourthly, it is essential to remain consistent with brand values. Activities in the metaverse must be an authentic reflection of the brand's identity and ethos in the physical world, as any inconsistency will be immediately noticed and criticised by the sceptical Generation Z (Spais *et al.*, 2024).

Finally, given the early stage of the metaverse development, an experimental approach is recommended, involving testing different formats, gathering community feedback, and flexibly adjusting strategies based on analytical data (Alexander *et al.*, 2024).

5.3 Limitations and Directions for Further Research

As a review article, this paper has some inevitable limitations. The analysis focused on two leading platforms and several high-profile case studies, which means that the conclusions drawn may not be fully generalisable to the entire, extremely diverse and still fragmented metaverse environment. Furthermore, the field is developing at an extremely rapid pace, and today's best practices may become obsolete tomorrow in the face of new technologies and changing user behaviours.

These limitations also point to an urgent need for further in-depth research in the following areas. First and foremost, measuring return on investment (ROI) remains a key challenge. There is a lack of standardised metrics and models that would allow for a reliable measurement of the effectiveness of marketing activities in the metaverse, taking into account not only the sale of virtual goods, but also the long-term impact on loyalty, brand perception and purchases in the physical world (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, further cross-platform research is needed. Systematic comparative analyses of strategies on different platforms (e.g., Decentraland, The Sandbox) should be conducted to understand how the architecture (decentralised vs. centralised), economic model, and culture of a given virtual world influence the effectiveness of specific marketing activities.

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