



FROM THE RESEARCH BENCH

Brand polarization in virtual worlds

A revised web edition of a 2023 Roblox netnography examines how brand integration, player value and audience expectations shape divergent reactions.

Sinan Isoglu, MBA (Quantic)

Commercial growth leader, lecturer and doctoral researcher

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MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

This article is an edited web edition of my 2023 bachelor thesis on branded Roblox spaces. It revisits seven selected experiences observed over ten weeks and explains how public discussions, reviews, game descriptions and user-generated material were read through four themes: brand integration, identity fit, perceived interaction value and audience expectations. The study offers a bounded qualitative account, not a platform-wide sentiment estimate or a causal test. It also corrects its original use of brand polarization: divergent reactions are visible in the material, but the formal construct was not measured with a validated scale or demographic groups.

Keywords: Roblox · Virtual worlds · Netnography · Brand polarization · Branded experiences

Branded spaces on Roblox did not produce one uniform reaction in my 2023 netnographic study. The more defensible finding is narrower: in the selected cases, users appeared to judge a branded experience through the relationship between the brand, the activity and the expectation they brought with them. A logo could attract attention, but attention alone did not make the brand feel entitled to occupy the experience.

This article is the long-form flagship edition of that study. It preserves the original research question, historical fieldwork and case material, while revising the terminology, structure, literature context and privacy treatment for publication on the web. The companion commentary, *The branded game has to earn its place*, extracts a decision tool from the study. This article is the study itself, cleaned up and bounded as carefully as the evidence allows.

Publication note: The original thesis was submitted to FH Münster on 25 September 2023. This web edition is not a peer-reviewed journal article and does not contain new Roblox fieldwork. The 2021 and 2024 research cited below was added to clarify the interpretation of the historical material. It does not change the original dataset.

What was the research objective and scope of the Roblox brand polarization study?

Virtual worlds give brands unusual control over the setting and unusually little control over what users do with it. This study examines how divergent brand reactions appeared in selected branded Roblox experiences and which features seemed to shape those reactions. I conducted a ten-week qualitative netnographic observation of seven branded spaces: Vans World, NikeLand, Squishmallows, Hot Wheels Open World, Nerf Strike, Gucci Garden and Amazon's Trip Around the Blox. The material comprised publicly accessible discussions and reviews associated with the spaces, game descriptions, profiles and user-generated content. Private or semi-private material, including in-game chat, was excluded, and no demographic sample was collected.

An inductive thematic reading identified four recurring interpretive themes: the way the brand was integrated into the activity, the fit between brand identity and game experience, the value users could obtain from interacting with the brand, and the match between the experience and audience expectations. More favourable reactions tended to appear where the brand felt connected to the activity and the interaction offered a recognizable payoff. More critical reactions appeared where the brand seemed to displace gameplay, narrow the experience to promotion or conflict with what users expected from the space.

The study makes a bounded contribution. It does not estimate Roblox-wide sentiment, establish causality or demonstrate the formal construct of brand polarization. The original label is best treated as a sensitizing concept for divergent reactions. The study's strongest result is a set of candidate relationships for future research: brand presence is interpreted through the experience it helps create.

Why revisit a foundational bachelor thesis on virtual world brand polarization?

Most academic work has a short public life. A thesis is submitted, graded and placed in a folder that is technically preserved but practically unread. I am revisiting this one because it was my first substantial piece of original research and because the question has outlasted the moment that made it fashionable. Brands have continued to enter game-like spaces, but the basic problem has not changed: a branded experience is received by people who came for an activity, not by a panel that has already agreed to call the activity marketing.

Revisiting the work also makes its weaknesses visible. The original thesis sometimes used polarization to mean that positive and negative reactions appeared at the same time. That is broader than the formal construct now used in brand-polarization research. The original methodology described a qualitative and iterative process, but the codebook also shows that keyword mapping assisted the coding and that ambiguous or conflicting material was not resolved through an independent coding comparison. A publication-quality version should not hide either fact.

The purpose of this edition is therefore not to make the thesis sound more impressive. It is to make the argument more accurate, the method more legible and the limits harder to miss.

What conceptual framework guides the analysis of brand polarization in virtual worlds?

The original research question was:

How does brand polarization manifest in the virtual world of Roblox, and what underlying factors contribute to the phenomenon?

That question contained two different tasks. The first asked whether divergent reactions could be seen in branded spaces. The second asked what might help explain them. The study could address the first task descriptively and explore the second through themes. It could not measure polarization as a population construct.

That distinction matters because the term has become more precise. Osuna Ramírez, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas describe brand polarization as a simultaneous split involving strong positive and negative passionate responses, together with group dimensions such as identification and opposition. Their 2024 paper develops a 23-item measure across four dimensions. The Roblox study did not use that measure, recruit opposing groups, collect demographic data or test whether passionate identification and opposition were present.

I therefore use divergent reactions for the findings in this edition. The original title is retained because it identifies the historical study and its intellectual starting point. The title should not be read as a claim that the formal construct was established in Roblox. The distinction is not cosmetic. A set of positive and negative public comments can show that a space was interpreted in different ways. It cannot, without a defined sample and construct measurement, show the size, structure or consequences of brand polarization.

The study used virtual worlds in a practical rather than metaphysical sense: user-generated digital spaces in which people could move through an environment, play, create, interact and encounter brands as part of the experience. Roblox was an appropriate site for the question because branded spaces, game mechanics, user re-

views and surrounding community discourse could be examined together. The platform was the setting of the study, not a proxy for every virtual world.

Which netnographic methodology captured player interactions across Roblox brand activations?

Research design and case selection

The study used a qualitative netnographic design with observational immersion in selected Roblox experiences and analysis of naturally occurring public material. The fieldwork lasted ten weeks. The cases were selected for visibility and relevance to the research question, not through a random sample of all branded Roblox spaces.

The seven focal experiences were:

Table 1 Seven branded spaces and their study role

Branded space	Role in the study
Vans World	A skatepark experience in which street-culture identity and activity could be read together
NikeLand	A branded space centred on customization, interaction and virtual product cues
Squishmallows	A warm, comfort-oriented experience that made audience fit especially visible
Hot Wheels Open World	A free-roaming racing experience built around a thrill-seeking brand identity
Nerf Strike	An action-oriented experience using branded blasters as part of play
Gucci Garden	A high-fashion presentation whose aesthetic and setting tested expectation fit
Amazon’s Trip Around the Blox	A brand-centred tour whose educational and promotional purposes competed for attention

Author’s synthesis from the submitted 2023 thesis and its public-material archive.

The cases are examples, not a league table. The study did not rank the brands, assess commercial performance or determine which experience was objectively better. It asked what kinds of interpretation became visible around each space.

Data sources and boundaries

The material included public discussions associated with Roblox experiences, publicly visible user reviews, game descriptions, profiles and user-generated content. The source archive also contained public forum material from Reddit and related pages used to contextualize the experiences. I used the spaces themselves as the primary setting for observation and the surrounding public discourse as a record of how users described, evaluated and discussed them.

Several boundaries were deliberate:

- The observation period was ten weeks.
- The study covered one platform and seven selected branded spaces.
- No survey, interview or demographic sample was collected.
- Private and semi-private material was not used.
- In-game chat was excluded, both because it was often disabled and because much of the visible material was promotional or personal rather than suitable for this study.
- Usernames, direct identifiers and other traceable details are not reproduced in this edition.

These boundaries are not administrative footnotes. They define the population the study can speak about. The material can show how public reactions were expressed around selected spaces during a defined period. It cannot show what Roblox users generally believed, how opinions changed over time or what any specific demographic group would have said.

Coding and interpretation

The analysis began with a full reading of the collected material, followed by thematic coding around brand experience, brand identity, perceived interaction, social interaction and user reaction. The codebook included keyword orientations and was used with MaxQDA's keyword-mapping function. Themes were refined as the analysis progressed.

That description needs one important qualification. Keyword matches were an aid to locating material, not a validated sentiment classifier. The codebook records a single-step mapping procedure and says that ambiguous or conflicting material was not considered in the final coding. There was no second coder and no reported inter-coder agreement. The forum-level validation described in the thesis was contextual: the prevailing mood in discussions was used to help interpret the coded material. It was not an independent validation sample.

The proper status of the findings is therefore interpretive and exploratory. They are not frequency estimates generated by a representative corpus. The themes identify relationships that future research could test more systematically.

Ethics

Public availability is not the same thing as unlimited ethical permission. Roblox has a large younger user base, and the material in the surrounding communities could be connected to pseudonymous individuals. The study therefore limited itself to publicly accessible material, excluded private and semi-private exchanges, anonymized the collected material and avoided reproducing identifiers here.

This web edition goes further than the submitted thesis in one respect: it paraphrases the user-level material instead of republishing old quotations. The cases matter as patterns of interpretation, not as an invitation to locate or re-identify the people who expressed them.

What did netnographic observation reveal about passionate brand defense and opposition?

The findings are organized around four themes. They should be read as recurring interpretive patterns in the selected material, not as four independent variables with measured effects.

1. Integration was judged through the activity

The most consistent pattern concerned the way the brand entered the experience. A brand was more readily accepted when its presence appeared connected to what the player was doing. A skatepark made Vans legible through movement, style and place. A racing world made Hot Wheels legible through speed, vehicles and exploration. A blaster game made Nerf legible through action.

The important distinction was not between high and low visibility. It was between a brand presence that gave the activity a reason to exist and a brand presence that sat on top of an otherwise interchangeable game. In the latter case, the player could describe the world as promotional even when the graphics were polished.

Vans World was useful because it contained both readings. Some public reactions treated the skatepark as a credible translation of Vans' street-culture identity. Other reactions focused on the feeling that the brand occupied more space than the gameplay deserved. The same branded presence could therefore be read as atmosphere by one user and as commercial weight by another.

NikeLand made the same tension visible through customization and interaction. Some users valued the ability to configure spaces, play activities and obtain branded items. Other public reactions described the experience as too close to an advertisement. The difference was not whether Nike was present. It was whether the interaction made the presence worthwhile.

2. Identity fit required more than visual similarity

The cases also suggested that brand identity was experienced through the rules and affordances of the space, not only through colours, logos or product models. Hot Wheels Open World was positively associated with a sense of freedom and thrill because the activity itself carried part of the brand's meaning. The identity was not merely displayed. It was enacted.

Gucci Garden tested the opposite risk. A high-fashion, gallery-like presentation could be read as ambitious and distinctive, but it could also conflict with expectations about what a Roblox game should let a player do. The problem was not that the brand was too premium in the abstract. The problem was the possible gap between the brand's aesthetic presentation, the platform's participatory culture and the user's expectation of play.

This is why visual consistency is a weak test of brand fit. A world can use the correct palette and still fail to translate the reason people value the brand. Conversely, a world can use a simpler visual language and feel more authentic if the mechanic expresses the brand's promise.

3. Interaction value gave the brand permission to be present

Users did not encounter a brand only as an image. They encountered it through what the space let them do, obtain, customize or discover. Perceived interaction value became a third theme.

Squishmallows showed how an aesthetic and emotional quality could itself be experienced as value. The warm, comforting presentation resonated with users who recognized the brand's appeal. Nerf Strike made the product category part of the action, which gave fans a direct reason to enter the world. NikeLand made customization and branded items part of the interaction rather than leaving the logo as a passive backdrop.

The inverse pattern appeared when the branded layer seemed to add little to the activity. In Nerf Strike, positive recognition of the brand's action orientation coexisted with criticism of limited depth. In Hot Wheels Open World, the freedom to drive and explore coexisted with concerns about the in-game economy and the range of vehicles. A branded object can be attractive and still leave the larger experience underdeveloped.

The relevant question is not whether users can touch a brand asset. It is whether the interaction creates a payoff that the player would miss if the asset were removed.

4. Audience expectations turned fit into a social judgement

The same experience can feel affirming to one audience and alienating to another. Squishmallows made that boundary especially clear. Its warmth and comfort cues matched the expectations of users who wanted that kind of world. Other reactions treated the experience as too young or too far from their own identity.

Amazon's Trip Around the Blox exposed a different expectation gap. A tour of a fulfilment centre could offer educational or behind-the-scenes value, but some public reactions expected a game and experienced the brand-centred presentation as promotional instead. The issue was not simply that Amazon had a brand presence. It was that the reason to visit the space did not appear to match the reason some users had entered Roblox.

Audience fit was not measured demographically in this study. It was inferred from the language and context of public reactions. That makes it a theme to investigate, not a finding about the actual age, location or identity of any commenter.

The case pattern in one view

Table 2 The case pattern in one view

Space	What some public material valued	What other material resisted	Interpretive theme
Vans World	Brand identity expressed through a skate-park and movement	Branding perceived as outweighing gameplay	Integration
NikeLand	Customization, interaction and branded rewards	A feeling that the space resembled an advertisement	Interaction value
Squishmallows	Warmth and comfort consistent with the product world	A perceived mismatch with some users' age or identity expectations	Audience fit
Hot Wheels Open World	Free-roaming speed and thrill	Concerns about economy and brand-limited variety	Identity and value
Nerf Strike	Action and recognizable product play	Concerns about limited depth	Identity and value
Gucci Garden	Distinctive, ambitious fashion presentation	A mismatch with expectations of Roblox play	Identity and expectation
Amazon's Trip Around the Blox	Possible educational or behind-the-scenes interest	Overt promotion and insufficient gameplay value	Expectation and integration

Author's synthesis from the submitted 2023 thesis and its public-material archive.

The table does not count sentiment. It makes the analytical move visible: the reaction was attached to a perceived relationship between brand, activity and expectation.

How do virtual world community dynamics reshape modern brand polarization theory?

What the study supports

The strongest supported conclusion is not that branded spaces are accepted when they are subtle or rejected when they are obvious. The cases are more useful than that binary. They suggest that users evaluate the brand through the experience the brand helps construct.

That interpretation produces four candidate relationships:

- 1 Brand integration: the brand is more credible when its meaning is expressed through the activity, not only placed around it.
- 2 Identity fit: brand identity is experienced through mechanics, rules and affordances as well as visual presentation.
- 3 Interaction value: a branded object or activity needs to create a payoff for the player.
- 4 Audience expectation: acceptance depends on the fit between the experience and the social identity or expectation the user brings to the platform.

These are not causal findings. They are a compact account of what the public material made visible when read across seven selected cases.

What current research adds

The 2023 study becomes more precise when read beside later research. A 2021 meta-analysis by van Berlo, van Reijmersdal and Eisend combined 38 data sets on advergame effects. Its integrated results were positive for ad attitude, persuasion and choice behaviour, with reported effect sizes of .20, .11 and .16, while memory and persuasion knowledge showed negative integrated effects of -.16 and -.18. The pattern is a warning against treating enjoyment, memory, persuasion and choice as one outcome. It also does not establish what happens in Roblox, with a social world or over time.

A second 2021 study compared branded and non-branded versions of a chocolate tangram game in an HMD-VR experiment with 81 young adults. Virtual product appeal moderated brand attitude, and emotional response mediated effects on brand attitude and purchase intention. The study gives a useful mechanism question: does the branded object become appealing inside the experience? It does not turn a small controlled VR experiment into evidence about seven historical Roblox cases.

The 2024 brand-polarization paper supplies the most important conceptual correction. Strong positive and negative reactions are not sufficient to demonstrate polarization in the formal sense. A future Roblox study that wanted to make that claim would need to define the construct, sample the relevant groups, measure identification and opposition, and report how the measure performed. The original thesis did none of those things.

The current sources therefore do not replace the thesis. They sharpen what it can contribute. The thesis supplies a bounded, case-level account of how brand presence was interpreted. The later research supplies distinctions among attitude, memory, persuasion, appeal and formal polarization. Together they support a research agenda, not a platform-wide conclusion.

Practical implications

For a brand team, the study suggests that a branded world should be reviewed as an experience before it is reviewed as a media unit. Four questions follow:

- Would the core activity remain worth doing if the logo disappeared?
- Does the brand change the mechanic, rules, rewards or social meaning, rather than only the skin?
- What payoff does the player receive that a generic game could not provide as well?
- Which audience expectation is the experience meeting, and which expectation might it violate?

These questions are not a validated scale and should not be averaged into a launch score. They are an operating translation of the study. A team that wants an advergame may choose that format deliberately. The point is to measure an ad as an ad. A team that wants to call the unit a world needs evidence that the world gives players a reason to stay beyond exposure.

For researchers, the implication is different. The four themes offer a candidate coding frame for a stronger follow-up study. A future design could sample branded spaces systematically, preregister case selection, preserve contradictory material, use at least two coders, report agreement or adjudication, collect demographic and identity measures ethically, and pair observation with interviews or experiments. It could then test whether integration, interaction value and audience expectation predict the formal polarization construct or merely explain ordinary variation in experience evaluations.

What are the methodological and temporal limitations of the ten-week Roblox study?

The study's limits are part of its result.

First, it examined one platform. Roblox has a specific architecture, culture, audience mix and relationship between creation and play. The findings cannot be generalized to other virtual worlds without comparative evidence.

Second, the fieldwork lasted ten weeks. A short observation window can reveal patterns in public discourse while missing how spaces change, how novelty fades or how a community responds after a launch cycle.

Third, the seven cases were selected purposively. They were not a representative sample of branded Roblox experiences, and the study does not report a denominator from which a prevalence claim could be calculated.

Fourth, the study did not collect demographic data. Statements about age, audience or identity remain interpretations of public language and cannot be treated as measured group differences.

Fifth, the coding procedure was qualitative and keyword-assisted, without independent inter-coder reliability. Ambiguous or conflicting material was not systematically adjudicated. This makes the study useful for generating themes, not for estimating sentiment or testing a stable classification model.

Sixth, the data were public and naturally occurring. That preserves the context of ordinary discourse but also means that the people who posted were self-selecting, that silent users are invisible and that the surrounding platforms shape what becomes legible.

Finally, the study is historical. It describes material gathered in 2023, not the current state of Roblox or the current status of any branded space. A later reader should treat it as a dated case study and a starting point for replication.

What strategic principles emerge for enterprise brands entering persistent gaming platforms?

The original thesis asked how brand polarization manifested in Roblox. After a stricter rereading, the answer is more modest and more useful. The selected public material showed divergent reactions to branded spaces, but it did not measure the formal polarization construct. What it did show was how those reactions were connected to four perceived relationships: how the brand entered the activity, whether the activity expressed the brand's identity, what value the player received and whether the experience fit the expectations attached to the space.

That is the contribution I would now carry forward. A brand does not earn a role in a virtual world by appearing there. It earns the role when the activity becomes more meaningful, useful or distinctive because the brand is part of it. The claim is a design hypothesis, not a universal law. The thesis gives future research a bounded place to test it.

I hold this study in a special place because it was my first attempt to turn a live digital culture into a defensible research object. Giving it a second life means resisting the temptation to make it bigger than it was. Its value is not that it predicted Roblox. Its value is that, when read honestly, it still asks a question worth testing.

For the commercial translation, continue with The branded game has to earn its place. The terminology correction is isolated in Mixed Reactions Are Not Brand Polarization, and the first design translation appears in Brand Fit Is a Mechanic, Not a Mood Board.

Where are the analytical boundaries of netnographic virtual world research?

Boundary. The Roblox study is a bounded 2023 public-corpus interpretation, not a current or representative platform audit. Replicate the cases, coder and platform before making a present-tense claim.

Evidence base. The analytical frame also draws on these additional sources: Osuna Ramírez et al. 2024; van Berlo et al. 2021a; van Berlo et al. 2021b. The links identify the exact works; they support the mechanisms and boundary conditions discussed here, not every claim in isolation.

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END OF ESSAY

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Sinan Isoglu, MBA (Quantic)
Commercial growth leader, lecturer and doctoral researcher