



FROM THE RESEARCH BENCH

Mixed reactions are not brand polarization

A split in Roblox reactions can be worth studying without becoming proof of brand polarization, and the distinction changes what evidence comes next.

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MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Two users can disagree about a branded game without forming polarized groups, and a public mix of praise and criticism is not a measurement of the formal brand-polarization construct. I use the 2023 Roblox study and the later measurement work by Osuna Ramírez, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas to separate three evidentiary levels: divergent reactions, polarized audiences and measured polarization. The distinction is practical. It tells a researcher when to describe what was visible, when to sample groups and when to use a validated measure. It also keeps a historical qualitative case from being presented as a population finding.

Keywords: Brand polarization · Roblox · Qualitative research · Evidence quality

Two people can disagree about a branded game without belonging to opposing brand tribes. That sounds obvious, but research writing often compresses the difference. A positive comment and a negative comment become “polarization,” a visible split becomes a group structure and a case study becomes a population claim.

The distinction matters in my flagship Roblox study. The public material contained divergent reactions to selected branded spaces. It did not measure whether those reactions came from stable groups with strong identification and opposition. The stronger and more accurate sentence is therefore not “Roblox users were polarized.” It is “the selected public material contained different readings of branded experiences.”

That is not a retreat from the finding. It is the finding at the right resolution.

Why is the brand polarization label frequently misapplied to ordinary mixed consumer sentiment?

The original thesis used brand polarization as a broad frame for positive and negative reactions. That was understandable in 2023, when the word helped name the tension the study was trying to observe. It was also too broad for the claim the method could support.

A public reaction is an observation. A pattern across reactions is an interpretation. A measured construct is a research result with a defined sample, instrument and analysis. These are not three ways of saying the same thing.

The later work by Osuna Ramírez, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas gives the formal term a sharper edge. Their 2024 paper treats brand polarization as a split involving strong positive and negative passionate responses, together with group dimensions such as identification and opposition. It develops a 23-item measure across four dimensions. The Roblox study did not use that measure, sample opposing groups or test whether users identified with one side against another.

The title of the flagship keeps the original term because it identifies the historical work. The findings use divergent reactions because that is what the evidence can carry.

Which three distinct evidentiary levels separate polarization from mere dispersion?

The difference becomes easier to use when the levels are placed beside one another.

Table 1 Three evidentiary levels for brand reaction

Level	What is visible	What it can support	What it cannot support
Divergent reactions	Praise, criticism, ambivalence or different readings in public material	A bounded account of how an experience was interpreted	A group structure, prevalence estimate or causal effect
Polarized audience	Coherent groups with strong positive and negative positions, plus evidence of identification or opposition	A claim that reactions are organized socially, if sampling and definitions are clear	A validated construct score without measurement
Measured polarization	A defined sample, validated instrument, reported dimensions and analysis	A claim about the measured construct in the studied population	Automatic transfer to another platform, period or audience

Author's synthesis from the 2023 Roblox study and Osuna Ramírez, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas (2024).

This is not a hierarchy of importance. Divergent reactions can be exactly what a qualitative study is designed to understand. The error is treating them as if they had already answered the next question.

What did netnographic observation in Roblox reveal regarding passionate user divergence?

The study examined seven selected branded Roblox spaces over ten weeks. It used public discussions, reviews, descriptions, profiles and user-generated material. It excluded private and semi-private content, including in-game chat, and did not collect a demographic sample.

Across the cases, the same brand could be read through different aspects of the experience. Vans World could feel like a credible translation of street culture and, in another reading, like branding that occupied too much of the game. NikeLand could offer useful customization while still feeling too close to an advertisement. Squishmallows could create warmth for users who recognized the brand's world and a mismatch for users who did not identify with its audience cues.

Those observations are valuable because they preserve context. They show what the reactions were attached to: movement, customization, warmth, age expectations, game depth or commercial framing. They do not show how many Roblox users held each view. Silent users are outside the record. The people who posted were self-selecting. The cases were selected for visibility, not sampled to represent the platform.

The correct conclusion is therefore about meaning before it is about magnitude.

What necessary conditions does the formal academic construct of brand polarization add?

A formal construct changes the research task in three ways.

First, it requires a definition that can be applied consistently. “Positive and negative” is not enough. The researcher needs to specify whether passion, identification, opposition, community division or another dimension is part of the construct.

Second, it requires a sample that can support the claim. A forum thread can show language. It cannot tell us whether the people who posted are a stable group, whether other groups were absent or whether the visible split would survive a broader sample.

Third, it requires measurement and analysis. If the question is whether brand polarization predicts advocacy, rejection, loyalty or purchase, those outcomes need their own definitions and evidence. A qualitative observation can generate the hypotheses. It cannot silently supply the missing measurement.

This is why the later paper is useful even though it is not a Roblox study. It gives the old question a sharper next step. It does not retrofit a scale into the 2023 data.

How does confusing mild controversy with brand polarization distort marketing strategy?

A label is not neutral once it enters a decision.

If a team hears “polarization,” it may assume there are passionate advocates and detractors to target, a conflict to manage or a community split to exploit. If the evidence is only a mixture of public comments, that strategy is built on an untested structure.

The same problem appears in research. A future study may choose a sample, instrument and analysis because the earlier article implied that the groups already existed. The label has moved from description to design without showing its work.

A more disciplined sequence is:

- 1 Describe the reactions that are visible.
- 2 Identify the experience features those reactions refer to.
- 3 Form a question about whether reactions are socially organized.
- 4 Define and measure the construct in a new study.
- 5 Test outcomes separately rather than treating the label as an outcome.

The sequence is slower than calling every split polarization. It is also more generative. It leaves the next researcher with a question that can be answered.

How can commercial practitioners describe controversial audience reactions with defensibility?

A brand team does not need a psychometric scale to learn from mixed reactions. It does need to avoid making the reactions larger than they are.

The practical statement can be:

Public responses to the selected experience were mixed, and the reasons users gave point to integration, player value and audience expectation as questions for further testing.

That sentence is enough to trigger a design review. It asks whether the experience works, for whom and under what conditions. It does not pretend that a few visible comments have revealed the platform's social structure.

This is also why the meta-commentary uses four questions rather than a polarization score. A score would hide the difference between independent play value, brand fit, player payoff and audience expectation. The worksheet keeps those questions separate.

What diagnostic protocol corrects organizational misdiagnoses of brand polarization?

The best correction to the thesis is not to abandon the word polarization or to apologize for using it. It is to make the word carry the methodological burden it deserves.

The 2023 study gives us a bounded record of divergent interpretations around seven branded spaces. The 2024 paper gives us a formal construct that would require stronger evidence. Between the two is a productive research agenda: sample the groups, measure the dimensions, and test whether the experience features identified in the case study help explain the result.

Until that work exists, mixed reactions are enough. They are not less interesting because they are not yet polarization. They are the evidence from which the better question begins.

The next design step is Brand Fit Is a Mechanic, Not a Mood Board. The method and time boundaries sit in A Public Forum Is Not a Market Survey and What a Ten-Week Roblox Study Can and Cannot Tell Us.

Where are the empirical boundaries of consumer brand polarization theory?

Boundary. Mixed reactions are evidence of divergence, not formal polarization. Apply the construct measure or a stated coding rule before using the stronger term.

REFERENCES

Osuna Ramírez, S. A., Veloutsou, C., & Morgan-Thomas, A. (2024). On the antipodes of love and hate: The conception and measurement of brand polarization. *Journal of Business Research*, 179, 114687. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114687>

END OF ESSAY

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