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### EDITED BY

Patricia Núñez-Gómez,  
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

### REVIEWED BY

M. Dolores Méndez-Aparicio,  
Independent Researcher, Madrid, Spain  
Nela Filimon,  
University of Girona, Spain

### \*CORRESPONDENCE

Sylvia Albert-Vogl  
✉ s.albert-vogl0720201@arts.ac.uk

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# Brandscapes reimaged: semiotic structures in branded virtual environments

Sylvia Albert-Vogl\*

University of the Arts London, London, United Kingdom

The rapid integration of Virtual Reality (VR) into the digital ecosystem is transforming brands from passive content delivery into a powerful spatial entertainment. Within them, global brands are designing complex, themed virtual brandscapes to secure deep user engagement. This article adopts a critical, qualitative semiotic analysis to investigate the multimodal sign systems (visual, spatial, auditory, and interactive) within three distinct branded VR worlds: Gucci Town, IKEA's Co-Worker Game, and NIKELand. The analysis synthesizes classical semiotic theory with Sherry's brandscape theory. Results illustrate how a curated architecture of meaning can emulate brand worlds virtually, manage user attention, and spatial orientation through curated zones. This semiotic infrastructure functions as an enticing virtual entertainment, encoding brand attributes as gamified rewards and interactive cues designed to initiate specific consumption behaviors. The conceptual advancement demonstrates how VR environments translate semiotic systems into motivational constructs that transform users into participants within a choreographed brand narrative. Within these persuasive spatial presences, lines are blurred between entertainment, sociality, and branding, establishing a strong mechanism of influence. The article concludes by arguing that strategically designed VR brandscapes have the potential to foster addictive and exploitative user engagement.

### KEYWORDS

branded environments, brandscape, semiotics, spatial presence, virtual reality

## Introduction

In 2003, Second Life launched as a 3D virtual world (Parmentier and Rolland, 2009) where brands began experimenting with virtual brand expansion and engagement (Boa Ventura and Zagalo, 2010). This early wave of virtual brand experimentation laid the groundwork for the emergence of the metaverse—a concept that, while often used as a buzzword (Liu, 2022, p. 1907) has multiple scholarly interpretations. Liu (2022) describes the metaverse as an immersive and interactive virtual environment where the boundary between physical and digital realities becomes blurred. Jafar et al. (2023) emphasize its basis in technological convergence, enabling social interaction and economic participation through novel shopping experiences. Kim and Kim (2024, p. 2) define it as “a virtual shared universe where people can engage in social, economic, and cultural activities.” Drawing on these definitions, the metaverse can be summarized as a broader conceptual and technological ecosystem comprising persistent, interconnected, and often user-generated virtual environments. Within this evolving framework, brands are increasingly leveraging immersive platforms to experiment with spatial storytelling, consumer engagement, and virtual commerce. Notably, companies have begun to establish 3D branded

environments or “stores” within these digital worlds, including Adidas on Sandbox, Forever21 on Decentraland, and Nike on Roblox (Hennig-Thurau and Ognibeni, 2022, p. 46). These brands aim to activate social interaction, enable users to try on virtual clothing, and engage them through gaming activities (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Hence, this article argues that these practices reflect a significant shift in branding strategies. Branding now moves beyond static product promotion toward dynamic, participatory environments. In these spaces, consumers help create meaning through interaction and immersion. Understanding how brands design and use such virtual spaces is essential for examining the role of presence, spatial storytelling, and user agency in shaping consumer experience. This study explores how branded VR environments on platforms such as Roblox function as semiotic and experiential systems. Roblox launched in 2006 as a gaming and content creation platform where users can virtually socialize, play games or enter virtual experiences (Heo, 2025). The name is derived from “roboter” and “blocks” and is stylistically similar to Lego blocks. Roblox combines elements known from other platforms and offers friend lists and chats, so is a combination of gaming and social platform. This study demonstrates that it is utilized by brands to leverage virtual engagement in a more immersive way.

## Virtual reality as an Interface for branded immersion

Virtual Reality (VR) is often understood as a medium that facilitates social interaction, economic activity, and digital embodiment across platforms (Rauschnabel et al., 2022). While VR can operate independently from the metaverse, such as in training simulations or entertainment settings, it also serves as a core interface within metaversal environments. It supports immersive features such as spatial presence, avatar-based identity, and multisensory engagement (Liu, 2022). In this capacity, VR functions as a technological subset of the metaverse that delivers on many of its experiential and social affordances.

Conceptually and empirically, VR is distinct from Augmented Reality (AR) and Mixed Reality (MR). Scholars argue that these modalities differ in both technological capabilities and user experiences (Daling and Schlittmeier, 2022; Rauschnabel et al., 2022). Unlike AR or MR, VR immerses users in fully computer-generated three-dimensional environments that exclude the physical world (Flavián et al., 2019). This highlights that in VR, the physical world is substituted by a virtual one that maps or reimagines reality. Craig et al. (2009) identify two foundational components of VR experiences: immersion, the system’s technical ability to isolate users from the physical world, and presence, the psychological experience of being situated within the virtual space. Within presence theory, VR enables three interrelated dimensions. First, spatial presence refers to the user’s perceived location in the virtual environment. Second, telepresence describes the sense of operating remotely within that space, as originally framed by Minsky (1980) and further developed by Steuer (1992). Third, social presence involves the perception of other entities in the environment as socially or emotionally significant. These experiential layers are crucial in branding contexts, where presence often supports emotional engagement, decision-making, and identity construction.

## Telepresence, vividness, and interactivity

The literature on presence further connects to related concepts such as immersion (Lombard and Ditton, 1997, in Kuksa and Childs, 2014), embodiment (Biocca, 1997), and telepresence (Biocca, 1997). Steuer (1992) identified vividness and interactivity as critical factors shaping the sense of presence. Vividness refers to the sensory richness and resolution of the environment (Steuer, 1992, p. 81), with studies showing it can suppress external stimuli and enhance immersion (Cummings and Bailenson, 2016). Interactivity involves the degree to which users can influence content, a capability that has grown with advanced VR systems. In branding, this allows for emotionally resonant and multisensory user experiences (Batat, 2024), which in turn may enhance purchase intent. While this study focuses on experiential branded worlds, it is important to acknowledge that goal-driven virtual environments, such as video games, may also facilitate problematic behaviors including addiction and harassment. However, in this study, vividness and interaction are primarily examined in terms of how they are coded through semiotic elements such as signs, colors, sounds, and navigation cues. Goal-driven components are present, particularly in the form of branded virtual gaming competitions, and therefore may also contribute to the risk of addictive behavior.

Telepresence is increasingly explored through holistic frameworks such as experience mapping. Vernuccio et al. (2015) link telepresence and social presence to brand avatars, demonstrating how these qualities affect brand anthropomorphism and consumer-brand relationships. Their study of 349 Generation Z users on Roblox found that telepresence and avatar-based social presence positively influence brand anthropomorphism, which fosters brand love (Vernuccio et al., 2025, p. 1). Anthropomorphism, framed as the attribution of human-like traits to non-human entities, can strengthen emotional connection and trigger impulsive behavior (Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014; Kang et al., 2020). Hence, such effects are moderated by individual attitudes toward VR. More importantly, van Esch et al. (2019, p. 36) argues that “brand characters and endowing them with emotions, faces, names, and other human characteristics” is essential if brands aim to anthropomorphize and build emotional connections with consumers. This highlights the strategic role of human-like features in manipulating brand affinity through avatars and interactive narratives.

## Spatial presence

In virtual brand environments, vividness and interactivity function not only as technological affordances but also as strategic design choices that shape the user experience. High levels of sensory realism and interactive responsiveness enhance spatial presence and promote user engagement (Bayro et al., 2023). These features are essential to immersive branding strategies that aim to foster consumer involvement and facilitate identity alignment with the brand (Rauschnabel et al., 2022). This relates to the use of semiotic design in constructing spatial presence, which is defined as the user’s subjective sense of being physically located within a digitally mediated space (Lee, 2006; Hartmann and Fox, 2020). Hartmann et al. (2016) conceptualize spatial presence as distinct from narrative transportation or social presence, focusing instead on the perceived spatial realism of the

environment. Complementary terms, such as physical presence (Lee, 2006) and telepresence (Draper et al., 1998), reflect similar phenomena, while Rauschnabel et al. (2022) propose a continuum from spatial presence in VR to local presence in AR, highlighting differences in technological immersion and user perception.

Crucially, these immersive features intersect with the previously mentioned concept of anthropomorphism. Telepresence is especially relevant in immersive VR environments where users interact with personalized, responsive brand avatars. Further, individual differences play a moderating role. For example, Ansara et al. (2025) find that users with higher self-expansion tendencies perform better in spatial navigation tasks, reinforcing the idea that presence and interaction outcomes are co-shaped by both system design and user characteristics.

## Social presence and brand interaction

Social presence refers to the user's perception of coexisting with others in a shared space (Biocca et al., 2003), shaped by the quantity and quality of transmitted social cues (Short et al., 1976). VR environments are capable of fostering high levels of social presence (Oh et al., 2018; Wedel et al., 2020), which can evoke experiences comparable to physical-world gatherings (Smith and Neff, 2018). This presence aligns with constructs like relational closeness, or the perception of shared emotional intimacy. Platforms like Roblox and Fortnite offer avatars the ability to navigate 3D social spaces, establishing themselves as metaversal social environments (Hollensen et al., 2022). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2023, p. 907) emphasize that branded products and environments within these platforms, such as NIKELand, will play a central role in shaping consumer behavior. However, this analysis argues that transforming brands into a lived, immersive experience fundamentally redefines social presence itself. The brand ceases to be a passive backdrop for interaction and instead becomes an active, anthropomorphized social entity. Users, therefore, do not merely feel co-present with other users *within* a brandscape; they perceive a sense of co-presence *with the brand itself*, forging a powerful and direct relational bond.

## Gamification and branded play

Gamification is understood in this study as the strategic use of game design elements in non-game contexts to shape user motivation and behavior (Deterding et al., 2011; Huotari and Hamari, 2012). In branded environments, gamification typically involves points, badges, leaderboards and task-based progression, but also more subtle mechanics such as quests, achievements and social competition (Hamari et al., 2014). These features are not merely decorative. Rather, they function as persuasive structures that scaffold user engagement over time and translate brand objectives into playful challenges.

In VR brandscapes such as NIKELand, Gucci Town and the IKEA Co-Worker Game, gamification is tightly interwoven with semiotic design. Game mechanics are attached to specific signs, zones and avatar roles, turning visual, spatial and interactive codes into incentives. The analysis therefore treats gamification as a key component of the semiotic system. Gamified tasks and competitions are used to

mobilize presence, anthropomorphism, and spatial storytelling, encouraging repeated interaction and deepening brand attachment.

## Study focus and case selection

This study investigates how selected brands construct immersive presence and brand meaning in virtual worlds. Specifically, it explores the use of semiotic systems and brandscapes in three branded VR environments: Gucci Town, NIKELand, and IKEA's The Co-Worker Game. These cases were chosen based on the fashion sector's early adoption of the metaverse and its academic prominence in virtual branding research. Each example combines VR-style 3D design, social platform integration, and links to real-world brand rewards. This study aims to decode the visual, spatial, interactive, and avatar-based signs through which brands seek to establish presence and engage consumers.

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is built upon two complementary pillars: the analysis of meaning-making through semiotics and the understanding of spatial and symbolic organization through Berry's brandscape concept. This integration aims to provide a robust, two-tiered lens for deconstructing the strategic communication embedded within branded Virtual Reality (VR) environments. VR is defined here as a fully immersive digital medium within the Extended Reality (XR) spectrum, where the physical world is replaced by a synthetic one (Craig et al., 2009). The two broad key experiential features addressed for this study are immersion (the objective technical capability of the system) and presence (the subjective psychological state of being there) (Slater, 2009). Both are investigated through semiotic elements applied by the brands. This study argues that VR's capacity for heightened presence elevates the impact of symbolic communication, making brands both ambient (ubiquitous in the environment) and embodied (experienced through the user's avatar and actions).

## The semiotic lens: deconstructing multimodal meaning

The core analytical lens is semiotics, the study of signs and sign-using behavior, examining the underlying structures and processes that facilitate meaning-making. Classical semiotic theories from Saussure (1916) and Eco (1976) offer the foundation for analyzing all types of sign systems beyond language, demonstrating how every asset functions as a sign within a structured system of codes. Roland Barthes (1967) focused on popular culture, revealing how cultural codes are structured through denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (associated cultural meaning). In parallel, semiotics emerged as a discipline concerned with the exploration of signs and symbols and how they carry meaning across various communication modes. Manning's (2010, p. 36) semiotic account of brands underscores that branding is about systems of signs, symbolic linkage, and cultural circulation more than about products' physical attributes. Barricelli et al. (2016) analyze semiotics of virtual

reality as a communication process. By applying semiotics to branded VR worlds, this study decodes how brand meaning is constructed, navigated and inhabited in immersive digital spaces. This bridges semiotic theory, branded experience and virtual environments.

Building on Barthes' (1972) theory of myth, widely used in contemporary marketing semiotics (Berger, 2025), branded VR environments can be understood as cultural systems that naturalize consumer–brand relationships. These virtual brandscapes function as arenas where signs such as avatar realism, spatial layout, and ritualized tasks communicate not just product identity but deeper symbolic meaning (Berthelot-Guiet, 2004). For example, as Utama (2022) shows in the case of Gucci branding, semiotic strategies can transform fashion objects into signs of status and belonging. In immersive digital contexts, this logic extends to avatar customization, spatial aesthetics, and interactive affordances that encode cultural cues and brand mythologies. In this study, semiotics and the concept of brandscape are applied to branded virtual environments to decode how brands construct immersive meaning through spatial layouts, visual elements, sound cues, and avatar interactions. By treating branded VR worlds as semiotic systems, the analysis explores how brand identity is embedded and experienced through mediated spaces, not merely as static imagery but as navigated compilation.

Manning's (2010) work on the semiotics of consumption provides an applied bridge between the abstract theory of Saussure and Barthes and the commercial reality of the brandscape. This study draws on Manning's framework to analyze the practical execution of brand meaning in VR for three specific reasons. First, the analysis of consumption rituals is vital to understanding the virtual emplaced brandscape as a site of enactment. Manning's (2010) focus on how products are used and consumed as signs allows to interpret the user's interaction with a digital good. Further, actions such as donning a virtual sneaker or navigating a brand's spatial layout are conceptualized not merely as functional, but as symbolic performances that reinforce brand identity. Second, Manning's insistence on code consistency is central to establishing credibility in VR. His work posits that the visual, interactive, and spatial codes used in the virtual environment (the architectural lighting, the interface, the aesthetic style) must semiotically align with the brand's established real-world codes. This consistency is essential to the study's argument that VR enables a heightened state of presence and coherence, grounding the brand narrative in a recognizable system of signs. Most critically, Manning's lens offers a framework for decoding value encoding. In the metaverse, digital assets and virtual clothing are pure signs, where scarcity and status are entirely constructed. Manning's framework allows the study to systematically analyze what specific values and status markers are being encoded and sustains the user's attention within the branded virtual ecology. Oswald (2012, p. 6) connects the structure of meaning in advertising to that of culture. In virtual reality, this concept is amplified: users do not merely observe a brand; they enact it. Here, semiotic systems translate attention into spatial practice.

## The brandscape

A crucial concept for bridging semiotic theory with the spatial nature of VR is that of the Brandscape. The term was introduced by marketing anthropologist Sherry in 1987 to describe the symbolic, cultural, and experiential consumption spaces that brands create. The concept of the brandscape is a neologism that merges “brand” with “landscape”, referring to consumer environments shaped by semiotic

visual coding designed to evoke reassurance and familiarity through branded product ranges (Wood and Ball, 2013, p. 47). These spaces possess an inherently experiential quality and function as foundational structures within the emerging affective economy. In a key text, Sherry (2001) explores the deep relationship between brands and places, arguing that brands can transform physical locations into rich narrative environments. The term “scape” here refers to both real and abstract views or scenes and in a marketing context. Further “brandscape” describes consumer environments designed to promote consumption, shape experience, or meet specific desires (Julier, 2005). Brandscapes rely on the semiotic coding and recoding of space to construct meaning-rich environments. These spaces are experientially oriented and communicate a system of signs that are uniquely aligned with the brand's identity, values, and cultural narrative.

This study proposes that branded VR worlds can be understood as an evolution what Sherry (1988) called Emplaced Brandscape. In this context, the environment is an immersive 3D digital space, but it is “emplaced” by being digitally anchored to the brand's unique history, culture, and narrative geography. In a virtual brandscape, this study argues that every spatial detail and interactive element is laden with meaning and works to convey and reinforce the brand's narrative.

## Research problem, question, and objectives

The proliferation of these branded VR worlds presents a new set of challenges and opportunities for communication scholars. While much of the discourse has focused on the technological capabilities or the marketing potential, there has been less critical attention paid to the how of their communicative power. How, precisely, are these multi-sensory environments engineered to produce specific feelings, convey brand values, and encourage particular behaviors? This study is therefore guided by two central research question:

- 1) How do brands mobilize semiotics within VR environments to produce distinct brand identities?
- 2) How is consumer engagement mediated in branded VR environments?

The objective of this study is therefore threefold. First it aims to investigate the semiotic relationship between the immersive design of these environments and the articulation of a coherent brand identity. Second, it examines the convergence mechanisms that brands employ to blend physical reality with virtual experiences, thereby expanding their narrative frontiers. Third, to analyze how these branded virtual worlds function to foster genuine participatory culture.

## A qualitative semiotic approach

To address the research questions, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology. A qualitative semiotic analysis is conducted to investigate the branded VR worlds as a complex cultural text. It aims to uncover the subtle ways in which its various sign systems work together to produce a coherent brand identity and guide the user experience.

The study focuses on the three previously introduced brands: Gucci Town, IKEA's Virtual Experiences, and NIKELand. These cases were selected for their diversity in industry sectors, sportswear, luxury fashion, and home furnishings. By comparing these examples, the study can identify both common strategies and brand-specific adaptations in the design of virtual brandscapes.

## Data collection and the analytical process

Interpretations of the semiotic indicators were informed by established semiotic and visual communication scholarship (Barthes, 1967; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Manning, 2010; Oswald, 2012), combined with brand- and platform-specific documentation (for example, Roblox experience descriptions and brand press materials). These sources underpin the meanings attributed to colors, spatial layouts, soundscapes, and interaction patterns in the tables that follow. The primary method of data collection was immersive exploration conducted using a Meta Quest 3 VR headset and WebXR on a Laptop. This approach aligns with emerging virtual reality-assisted qualitative research methods, which enable researchers to experience spatial, interactive, and sensory features of digital environments directly (Pink, 2021). Such immersion allows the researcher to observe how branded spaces function as lived, affective, and semiotically rich environments. The analytical process followed a multi-stage procedure. First, detailed observational notes were taken within each virtual world, focusing on environmental design and the deployment of signs, symbols, color schemes, auditory cues, and interactive objects. Second, key locations and interactions were captured using screenshots to support iterative visual analysis. Third, all elements were catalogued and coded using an Excel spreadsheet structured around the analytical categories outlined in the case study section.

A semiotic framework was applied to identify how meaning is encoded through visual, spatial, and interactive cues. This allowed for the decoding of multimodal brand messages across the environments. Special attention was given to identifying social, gamified, and trans-media elements that connect to physical assets, events, or events which often function as critical nodes in the user's navigational and affective engagement with the brandscape.

Throughout the research process, reflexivity was maintained to critically assess the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and interpretive decisions. A reflexive journal was used to document methodological choices, such as whether teleporting to a flashing brand icon like the Gucci monogram might distract or guide user decision-making. Attention was also given to recognizing and minimizing personal biases and emotional responses shaped by the researcher's cultural background, ensuring greater analytical rigor and transparency. This aligns with best practices in social science and media research, which view reflexivity as essential to the integrity and transparency of qualitative inquiry (Henwood, 2011; Pink, 2021).

## Embodying performance in a gamified Brandscape—NIKELand

NIKELand functions as a stylized digital replica of Nike's headquarters in Oregon and serves as a branded virtual space where

avatars can freely explore, train, compete, and socialize (Hollensen et al., 2022). It operates as a coherent brandscape (Sherry, 1987), where meaning is orchestrated through spatial design, ritualized activities, and symbolic object placement. The space leverages semiotic systems to represent Nike's core brand values of performance, innovation, and community (see Table 1). The virtual environment opens with a lobby area, serving as a meeting point before users explore the store or navigate directly to key locations, including the football field, basketball court, and showroom. The visual identity of NIKELand is constructed through a bold, high-saturation color palette that includes electric blue, neon green, infrared red, and hyper pink. These colors symbolize energy, movement, and creativity. Within NIKELand their "Swoosh" logo appears persistently on digital surfaces such as flags, banners, interactive buttons, portals, clothing, and the central arena floor, functioning as a signifier of brand authority and continuity.

Navigation within the environment is guided by glowing floor arrows, animated direction signs, and teleportation pads marked with rotating Nike logos. Flashing signals guide players to mini-games or competitions, such as the Nike Cup Clash. These elements serve as spatial signs that cue movement and participation, aligning with semiotic principles of framing and salience (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996).

The user's active participation is facilitated through customizable avatars, which are dressed in digital Nike gear, including Air Max sneakers, Dri-FIT tops, and branded accessories. This clothing is not merely decorative, it rather functions to signal status and identity (Manning, 2010, p. 36), thereby reinforcing the social presence of the brand. The avatar itself, therefore, acts as a semiotic medium that embodies user identification and aspirational alignment with Nike's ethos (Vernuccio et al., 2025, p.8). Consequently, this embodiment is leveraged through gamification, where the avatar becomes actively engaged in the experience. This engagement involves participation in sport-related mini-games, training challenges, and collaborative competitions. Furthermore, users are permitted to create their own mini-games. As an additional reinforcement, physical movements, such as jumping or sprinting, can be tracked via device motion sensors (accelerators) and translated into virtual gameplay. This needs additional device and therefore this physical interaction component is not scope of this study. However, a demonstration video revealed its capacity to support embodied interaction. This relates to Wirth et al. (2007) concept of telepresence and spatial presence through physical engagement in the virtual environment.

Auditory cues further deepen the immersion. Uplifting soundtracks play in training areas, cheering effects accompany tournament victories, and branded audio clips such as "Just Do It" are triggered during achievements. These sound elements can be interpreted as motivational signs to reinforce the emotional and performative dimensions of Nike's branding strategy. Connected to this is a reward system that includes digital badges, collectible tokens, and glowing trophies. These are distributed for task completion, providing a semiotic reinforcement of success and progression. Further, these elements encourage user loyalty and continuous engagement by linking achievement to brand visibility. In this way, NIKELand systematically appeals to a competitive, performance-driven self-image, encouraging users to inhabit the role of the ever-striving athlete.

In NIKELand, every sign—from color codes to interactive symbols and avatar gear—functions within a larger semiotic system that structures attention and constructs brand meaning. The experience combines visual, spatial, auditory, and kinetic codes to produce a branded environment that is not only visited but inhabited. Through these

TABLE 1 Semiotic codes in NIKELand.

Analytical dimension	Semiotic indicator	Example and semiotic function	Sources
Visual signs	Bold red and neon accent colors in key zones	Example: Accents in training modules. Function: Conveys dynamism, energy and a futuristic, performance-oriented mood.	Roblox Fandom NIKELand, <a href="http://bit.ly/3KUH5av">http://bit.ly/3KUH5av</a>
Spatial structure	Dedicated arenas for social competition and events	Example: The Nike Cup Clash tournament space with photobooths. Function: Structures the experience around community events and social performance.	Nike Cup Clash, <a href="https://bit.ly/492YNR4">https://bit.ly/492YNR4</a>
Audio elements	Motivational music and distinctive branded audio cue	Example: A Nike sound plays after completing a task. Function: Reinforces achievement with positive, branded feedback and maintains an energetic atmosphere.	NIKELand Ghost Hunt, <a href="https://bit.ly/4s9SpAg">https://bit.ly/4s9SpAg</a>
Interaction gestures	Device-motion controls translating real-world movement into the game	Example: Physical long jumps and speed runs control the avatar. Function: Creates embodied interaction, directly linking physical athleticism to the virtual brand experience.	Nike Avatar Demonstration, <a href="https://bit.ly/4qjWobJ">https://bit.ly/4qjWobJ</a>
Navigation	Gamified user interface (UI) with objective markers for competitions	Example: Game-like menus for joining tournaments. Function: Frames the brand experience as playful competition and enhances narrative immersion.	NIKELand UX Design, <a href="https://bit.ly/4s7dICj">https://bit.ly/4s7dICj</a>
Brand continuity	Direct link between physical action and virtual performance	Example: User-created games based on sports materials. Function: Bridges the virtual and physical, reinforcing the core brand identity centred on real-world movement and creativity.	Branded World Demonstration, <a href="https://bit.ly/3Y3KVkz">https://bit.ly/3Y3KVkz</a>

semiotic strategies, Nike transforms virtual participation into brand embodiment, making the brand not just visible but experientially lived.

## Gucci Town—translating heritage

Gucci Town translates a luxury heritage brand into the playful environment of Roblox by prioritizing atmosphere, discovery, and aesthetic engagement (Ryder, 2022). The semiotic architecture is built upon the brand's iconic visual signs, with the green-red stripe and GG monogram signifying luxury (see Table 2). When entering Gucci Town, users see a structure Virtual Emplaced Brandscape (Sherry, 1987) that is strategically organized into seven distinct zones. These zones include the Power-up Place, the Selfie Way, the Creative Corner, Vault Plaza, Mini Game Heights, and the Gucci shop. They are translated into brand values into spatial practice and semiotic engagement. Each zone functions as a node in the system, managing attention and communicating specific brand narratives through its unique affordances and design. The connection to Gucci's Vault concept, this space acts as an exhibition and archive. By allowing users to examine bags and read about their history, this area uses indexical signs to link the brand's past to its present, lending authenticity and heritage to the virtual environment. The heritage domination can be interpreted as an archive which is utilized to evoke power through nostalgia (MacRury, 2009, p. 231).

In contrast, a younger generation is addressed and the experience is gamified through interactive mini-games such as *Tile Takeover* or *Flashlight Tag* where users can earn points called GG Gems. The gamified elements such as point-based mini-games and avatar interactions further increase engagement while anchoring users within the virtual brandscape. Gucci's virtual environment places strong emphasis on brand heritage while simultaneously

promoting contemporary product releases. This is achieved through the exhibition of vintage Gucci bags and archival items, often accompanied by historical context that reinforces the brand's legacy. From the outset, the virtual store has foregrounded scarcity as a core branding strategy. For instance, in 2022, Gucci initiated weekly releases of the limited-edition Blondie bag. Additionally, a designated area within the virtual space is devoted to artistic expression, encouraging user participation in the brand's creative narrative. This feature not only fosters engagement but also raises critical questions regarding user-generated content and the implications of digital labor. Gucci Town thus activates an aspirational self that equates virtual participation and display with luxury, exclusivity and cultural capital.

Telepresence is evoked through the user's embodied navigation and interaction with branded content, including the inspection of virtual fashion items, which simulates tactile engagement despite its digital mediation (Minsky, 1980; Steuer, 1992). This interactivity supports not only spatial but also social presence, as framed by Oh et al. (2018), particularly through mechanisms such as a zone with a selfie stations and avatar-based socialisation at Gucci-themed locations. This zone is designed to encourage user-generated content and brand visibility across social platforms. To elevate the luxury ambiance, the environment employs an atmospheric audio soundscape that reinforces a mood of sophistication. This sensory backdrop is closely aligned with intentional interaction gestures, such as the deliberate examination of virtual products, which simulate the tactile rituals of high-end retail.

The virtual presentation illustrates how digital fashion can exceed the perceived value of physical goods, exemplified by the case of the Gucci Dionysus Bag (Berger, 2025). The fashion items offered are frequently exclusive, limited-edition digital pieces designed specifically for virtual settings (Berger, 2025). A minimalist navigation system complements the high-fashion aesthetic by reducing interface distractions, while brand continuity is maintained through a point-based reward system. This mechanism

TABLE 2 Semiotics in Gucci Town.

Analytical dimension	Semiotic indicator	Example and semiotic function	Sources
Visual signs	Iconic green-red stripe and GG monogram pattern	Example: GG monogram on floors and virtual items. Function: Conveys brand heritage, authenticity and luxury; acts as a powerful brand anchor.	Gucci Town Places, <a href="https://bit.ly/49m16zT">https://bit.ly/49m16zT</a>
Spatial structure	Designated zones for exploration and social performance	Example: Gucci orientation spots designed for taking selfie screenshots. Function: Encourages leisurely exploration and the social sharing of branded moments.	Spatial Design, <a href="https://tinyurl.com/mr2954y5">https://tinyurl.com/mr2954y5</a>
Audio elements	Sophisticated atmospheric music and subtle branded audio stings	Example: A chic sound plays upon entering a new zone. Function: Establishes a mood of elegance and exclusivity.	
Interaction gestures	Goal-oriented play through brand-themed mini-games	Example: Playing interactive games to earn points. Function: Drives sustained engagement through a gamified reward loop aligned with the brand.	Gucci Town Game, <a href="https://tinyurl.com/muw7sf3">https://tinyurl.com/muw7sf3</a>
Navigation	Elegant, minimalist and non-intrusive user interface (UI)	Example: Sleek integrated menus. Function: Reinforces the brand's high-fashion aesthetic and prioritises visual immersion.	Brand Worlds, <a href="https://tinyurl.com/3j69r2j3">https://tinyurl.com/3j69r2j3</a>
Brand continuity	Reward system that bridges gameplay to virtual product ownership	Example: Redeeming points for exclusive virtual collection items. Function: Creates desire for the brand's products by linking them directly to in-world achievement.	

allows users to exchange in-game achievements for exclusive branded content, forging a seamless connection between user interaction and brand consumption.

## Embodying brand ethos through virtual work—the IKEA Co-Worker Game

The IKEA Co-Worker Game, by contrast, centers a functional, work-oriented self that aligns satisfaction and belonging with efficient, collaborative labor in a branded environment. It immerses users in the brand's identity as virtual employees. The experience is built upon a semiotic architecture that translates IKEA's core values of functionality and collaboration into a spatial performance of gamified work (see Table 3). The visual signs are dominated by IKEA's blue and yellow, used in branded ID style avatars that create a strong sense of corporate identity. In parallel this demonstrates what some scholars call similarity identification (Oh et al., 2018). The spatial structure meticulously recreates an IKEA store, including a dedicated assembly arena for timed build-and-optimize tasks. These interaction gestures of virtual work are the core gamification loop. Users engage in 3D product interaction with modular shelving and are rewarded for efficiency. A clear, task-based navigation system guides users through their "workday." The most powerful element of brand continuity is the reward system, which bridges virtual performance to real-world perks. Users can redeem gamified rewards for exclusive staff benefits, such as early access to new product lines, creating a compelling link between virtual engagement and tangible consumer value.

The IKEA Co-Worker Game reveals a distinctive conceptualization of the avatar as an instrument of corporate identity performance. Unlike traditional VR experiences where avatars enable individual expression or fantasy projection, this environment imposes a uniform identity. The user's entry into the space triggers a semiotic transformation: by donning the branded uniform, the avatar ceases to be an

extension of the self and instead becomes a symbolic embodiment of the ideal IKEA employee.

The analysis identifies this transformation as a form of corporate socialization within a gamified environment. The avatar performs routine tasks (e.g., stocking shelves, serving food, navigating store layouts) all within a branded logic that equates collaboration with satisfaction. The gamification of these activities reframes labor as play, masking the otherwise mundane or repetitive nature of retail work. In this way, the platform functions as a simulated indoctrination space, cultivating brand loyalty not through external persuasion but through internalized, performative alignment.

Drawing on Barthes' (1972) theory of myth, the uniform and tasks are read as carriers of a deeper narrative: the "Myth of the Happy Worker." This myth is not presented as a critique but rather as an immersive framework in which the user is invited to participate. The avatar becomes the medium through which this myth is enacted, making the user complicit in its reproduction. The avatar is forced into the role of the 'Model Player', whose actions reinforce the brand's preferred self-image: efficient, customer-friendly, and community-oriented. This constrained interactivity highlights the persuasive architecture of the brandscape, where choice is illusionary and identity is tightly choreographed. Ultimately, the avatar in the IKEA Co-Worker Game serves not as a reflection of the user's identity, but as a temporary vessel for the brand's cultural script. It facilitates a mode of embodied participation in which the player rehearses a desirable corporate self. The value exchange is asymmetrical: while users receive entertainment and belonging, the brand gains emotional alignment, behavioral modeling, and symbolic reinforcement of its market positioning.

## Business implications of VR brandscapes

The application of semiotics and the framework of brandscapes across the three case studies of NIKELand, Gucci Town, and IKEA reveals a set of three recurring core principles that underpin the

TABLE 3 Semiotics in the IKEA Co-Worker Game.

Analytical dimension	Semiotic indicator	Example and semiotic function	Sources
Visual signs	Branded, customizable “Co-Worker” ID-style avatar	Example: Avatar wears blue and yellow uniform. Function: Creates a strong sense of social and corporate identity, positioning the user as a brand insider.	The Co-Worker Avatar, <a href="https://shorturl.at/Ki85b">https://shorturl.at/Ki85b</a>
Spatial structure	Dedicated “Assembly Arena” for gamified tasks	Example: Specific zone for timed build challenges. Function: Structures the experience around a core gamified loop that embodies the brand’s DIY ethos.	Work Zones, <a href="https://tinyurl.com/2jbdyf7b">https://tinyurl.com/2jbdyf7b</a>
Audio elements	Minimalist ambient sounds and clear functional audio cues	Example: Confirmation sound when a task is completed correctly. Function: Reinforces the brand’s ethos of practicality and efficiency.	Ikea Mother London “The Co Worker”, <a href="https://tinyurl.com/u9r7jn5r">https://tinyurl.com/u9r7jn5r</a>
Interaction gestures	Hands-on 3D product interaction and assembly tasks	Example: Assembling virtual modular shelving against the clock. Function: Gamifies flat-pack design and embodies the IKEA ethos of functional problem-solving.	Showrooms & Tasks, <a href="https://tinyurl.com/ye265zyz">https://tinyurl.com/ye265zyz</a>
Navigation	Clear, objective-based UI directing user tasks	Example: On-screen prompt to “Serve meatballs to 3 customers.” Function: Structures the experience as a series of achievable goals, reinforcing the narrative of productive work.	Design & Navigation, <a href="https://tinyurl.com/2hpkvfze">https://tinyurl.com/2hpkvfze</a>
Brand continuity	Reward system bridging virtual work to real-world benefits	Example: Redeeming points for “exclusive staff benefits” such as early product access. Function: Fosters loyalty by providing tangible value in exchange for virtual engagement.	Branded Showrooms, <a href="https://www.thecoworker.co.uk/">https://www.thecoworker.co.uk/</a>

construction of VR worlds. First, it refers to entanglement, which pertains to the architectural deployment and compositional structure of brand-oriented obfuscation within the virtual environment. Second, brands created promotional concealment, which highlights the integration of promotional mechanics directly within the game or socializing zones to obfuscate their promotion narrative. Third, seamless transactions through highlighted navigational cues denote the conflation of virtualized and physical assets, thereby complicating the user’s perception of value. These findings highlight a sophisticated and highly intentional architecture of persuasion, where visual, spatial, auditory, and haptic signs are layered to create a totalizing brand experience. A foundational principle is the meticulous management of the user’s spatial journey. The experience of all three brands on Roblox is controlled from the outset, with every user assigned a specific entry avatar position (x, y, z) and facing orientation that frames their first impression. This curated orientation is maintained through continuous dynamic re-anchoring, a technical process that ensures seamless spatial alignment and prevents the kind of disorientation that could break the immersive illusion. The user’s journey is further structured through proximity to clearly defined “zones” (e.g., a Lobby, Virtual Café, Product Gallery, or Sport Arena). This architectural curation is transformed from a mere environment into a meaningful “place” with a deliberate narrative flow.

All VR worlds analyzed are framed within a spatial framework where each zone is heavily “tagged” with a dense layer of multimodal semiotic codes. Brand attributes are encoded not just in explicit logos, but in the connotative meanings of color palettes, the emotional tenor of ambient sound, and overarching storytelling themes. This demonstrates a sophisticated application of semiotics where the brand’s identity is made ambient and experiential. Furthermore, the zone transitions are themselves semiotic events, designed to trigger

contextual actions such as the fade-in of a branded soundtrack or the prominent display of a key product. This dynamic layering of signs accumulates to a hallmark of branded content. This can be seen as an example of “where the brand is in creative, editorial control throughout” (Hardy, 2021, p. 137). In this context, seamlessly persuasive environments blur the line between entertainment, gaming, and branding, making the brand message feel like a natural part of the experience rather than an overt interruption.

Finally, these brandscapes achieve a powerful sense of embodiment by bridging the virtual and the physical. Real-world movements are mapped into avatar locomotion, often via phones or other motion-tracking devices, creating a direct kinetic link between the user’s physical self and their digital presence users’ sense of being in the presence of another aware or responsive being (Lee, 2004). Each brand focuses on a different subject position. Gucci offers an aspirational self, where luxury fashion and prestige are mediated through custom skins. Nike focuses on a competitive self, where athletic performance and gear are combined to exercise and take part in sports games such as football or basketball. Ikea focuses on a functional worker who wears a uniform and is part of a collective team. All individual subjects can feel connected through reinforced haptic feedback through controller vibrations, which provide tactile confirmation for actions. These sensory inputs function as tactile signifiers, grounding the virtual experience in physical sensation. From a critical perspective, these techniques are crucial for enhancing the psychological state of “presence” (Craig et al., 2009). By making the brand interaction feel more tangible and less mediated, the user’s critical guard is lowered. This may make the brand’s narrative feel more authentic and its persuasive elements more natural and deeply felt. Roblox itself gets criticized to encourage consumer behavior of its young users. For instance, a virtual Gucci bag was sold for 350.000 Robux (4.115 US\$) and was 3.400 US\$ in a real

store (Liu, 2022, p. 1910). This highlights how value perception can be intensified in virtual environments through strategic semiotic and experiential cues.

## From early virtual worlds to brand architectures

The analysis confirms and extends earlier work on virtual worlds, telepresence and gamification by demonstrating how these concepts are reconfigured in contemporary metaverse-style brand environments. Classic concerns about avatars, virtual identity and telepresence (Minsky, 1980; Steuer, 1992; Biocca, 1997) are here embedded within branded persuasion architectures that organize users' movements, choices and rewards at a granular level. Likewise, established gamification principles (Deterding et al., 2011; Hamari et al., 2014) are repurposed as mechanisms for encoding and reinforcing brand narratives through challenge structures, progression systems and reward loops. In contrast to earlier studies of virtual worlds and branded spaces that often emphasized experimentation and novelty (Parmentier and Rolland, 2009; Sherry, 2001), the three case studies suggest a more mature, commercially integrated phase in which immersive brandscapes function as operational environments for ongoing engagement, data collection and value extraction.

These findings therefore contribute three main insights. First, they show how semiotic systems and gamified mechanics are combined to construct persistent brand presences that blur the boundaries between play, work and consumption. Second, they illustrate how VR brandscapes mobilize different subject positions—competitive, aspirational and functional selves—to align users' identities with brand values. Third, they highlight how immersive environments intensify longstanding issues in critical media and marketing research, including unequal value exchange, the normalization of promotional logics and the potential for addictive or exploitative engagement (Steinnes, 2024). In doing so, the study situates contemporary VR brandscapes within a broader socio-economic context in which immersive technologies are increasingly central to platform-based marketing and data-driven consumer governance.

Across my time in Roblox's Nikeland, Gucci Town, and IKEA's "The Co-Worker", I did not experience these spaces as neutral "brand extensions" but as environments that actively steered how I should act and understand myself in relation to the brand. The semiotic work was immediate and tangible, expressed through branded outfits and curated aesthetics. These role scripts did not merely decorate my avatar. They progressively reframed it from a representation of "me" into a branded figure I was expected to perform, an athletic achiever in Nikeland, a stylized tastemaker in Gucci Town, and an ideal service worker in IKEA. At the same time, my engagement was mediated through the platform's varied interaction logics, particularly Nikeland's athletic challenges. These mechanics made certain behaviors feel natural and worthwhile, such as collecting, completing, displaying, and complying, while making alternative modes of participation harder to sustain. This produced a persistent ambivalence in my experience. The VR worlds could be playful and aesthetically compelling, yet the play often felt conditional. Creativity and exploration were encouraged insofar as they aligned with what the environment measured and rewarded. In that sense, what appeared as "authentic" participation on a Gen Z dominant platform also registered, at moments, as a managed form of persuasion.

## Limitations and future research

While this study offers meaningful insights into the semiotic construction of branded virtual environments, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses on a small number of case studies—Gucci Town, NIKEland, and IKEA's The Co-Worker Game—within a single platform, Roblox. This limited scope may not fully capture the range of semiotics used across other virtual platforms such as Decentraland, Sandbox, or Meta Horizon Worlds. Second, the immersive data collection method enabled detailed observational insights but also introduced subjectivity. The researcher's sensory perceptions and interpretive decisions shaped the analysis. Although reflexive journaling and systematic coding were used to enhance transparency and reduce bias, the interpretive nature of semiotic analysis limits its replicability and generalizability. Third, technical constraints such as occasional platform lags during movement on Roblox, when accessed via VR headset or web browser, may have affected the depth of observation. Given the rapid evolution of virtual environments, the findings should be understood as a snapshot of a specific moment in time. Through virtuality and AI, media and marketing become increasingly blurred and more platform centric (Hardy, 2021). A similar notion is illustrated by Steinnes (2024, p. 347) regarding to in-games where transactions are intertwined with economies and get blurred. Fourth, the study does not include user perspectives or behavioral data beyond the researcher's own immersive engagement. As a result, it does not account for the diverse ways users from different demographics may experience or interpret the branded environments. Future research could build on this study in several directions. Comparative studies across platforms and brand sectors would provide a broader understanding of virtual branding practices. Incorporating user perspectives through interviews, surveys, or immersive ethnography could offer more nuanced insights into how semiotic cues are received and interpreted. Further, longitudinal research might track changes in branded environments over time, especially as technological features and user expectations evolve. However, these findings underscore the growing importance of semiotic and spatial strategies in virtual branding, offering a foundation for future research into how immersive technologies redefine consumer engagement.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

SA-V: Funding acquisition, Supervision, Project administration, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Formal analysis, Data curation, Visualization, Resources, Conceptualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation.

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