



# City Branding and Place Branding in the Metaverse: How Real Cities Build their Virtual Image and How Virtual Cities Do It

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To cite this article: Bautista, P.D. (2022), City Branding and Place Branding in the Metaverse: How Real Cities Build their Virtual Image and How Virtual Cities Do It, *Fuori Luogo. Rivista di Sociologia del Territorio, Turismo, Tecnologia*, 13(3), 15 – 32. DOI: 10.6093/2723-9608/9200

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.6093/2723-9608/9200>



Submission date: 06/06/2022  
Revised: 16/11/2022  
Published: 23/12/2022

## ABSTRACT

### City Branding and Place Branding in the Metaverse: How Real Cities Build their Virtual Image and How Virtual Cities Do It

Although the concept of the Metaverse corresponds to the end of the 20th century and the first open platforms to the first decade of the 21st century with cases such as Second Life or Roblox, today it has gained much notoriety and transcended the media because of the structural changes of the now-defunct Facebook Corporation (now "Meta"), as well as Epic Games, parents of the popular Fortnite.

It is worth mentioning that the remarkable evolution of connections, mobile technologies, and greater digital literacy on a global scale have made this type of initiative more relevant today. The technological field has expressed its intention to move towards the development of virtual spaces that serve as a social, productive, and recreational extension of individuals, considering three fundamental elements: interactivity, corporeality, and persistence.

The initiatives are being very diverse, posing an important range of categories and options from closed environments, directly controlled by companies (as is the case today with the most popular social networks) and other decentralized and more open ones based on the blockchain. Regardless of their quality or category, these metaverses propose, as they have been doing since the first decade of the 21st century, a privileged space for creativity, and contact with new user segments, but, above all, for the evolution of dialogues in digital environments.

Since the early days of Second Life, it has been possible to see how brands, companies, institutions, and professionals of all kinds have carried out projects in which they have not only transferred real-life experiences but have raised others natively in these virtual scenarios, thus reaffirming an innovative attitude.

Like these actors, cities have expressed their intention to continue pushing and advancing in their public diplomacy processes by entering these platforms through functional replicas, where individuals not only relate to each other but can learn more about these cities, get in touch with them, with their services and heritage offer, in addition to offering activities and services native to the environment.

However, there has also been the phenomenon of the construction and development of "cities" or "settlements" of the Metaverse, with very particular aesthetics and synergies, especially in decentralized proposals on blockchain systems such as Decentraland or The Sandbox. Thus, this research aims to study how the concepts of 'place branding' and 'city branding' are approached with a focus on the Metaverse and from the Metaverse itself: differences, similarities, particularities, determining elements, and projections.

Through a comparative analysis, it will be possible to know how this incipient process is faced from the communication point of view, as well as the eventual rethinking of the concept of the city. The results point to few experiences now, where in some cases they try to develop digital thematic extensions of strategic areas of real cities, while others are erected natively in this virtual scenario.

## KEYWORDS

Metaverse  
Cities  
Place branding  
City branding  
Digital communication

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RIVISTA FUORI LUOGO

Special Issue Place Branding

# FUORI LUOGO

Rivista di Sociologia  
del Territorio, Turismo, Tecnologia

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ANNO VI - Volume 13 - Numero 3 - Dicembre 2022  
FedOA - Federico II University Press  
ISSN (online) 2723 - 9608 - ISSN (print) 2532 - 750X

## **EDITORE**



FedOA - Federico II University Press  
Centro di Ateneo per le Biblioteche "Roberto Pettorino"  
Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

## **Responsabilità editoriale**

Fedoa adotta e promuove specifiche linee guida in tema di responsabilità editoriale, e segue le COPE's Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors.

Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Napoli n. 59 del 20 dicembre 2016.

Direttore responsabile: Carmine Urcioli

ISSN 2723-9608 (pubblicazione on line)

ISSN 2532-750X (pubblicazione cartacea)

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# City Branding and Place Branding in the Metaverse: how real cities build their virtual image and how virtual cities do it<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The concept of a brand, from a business and commercial perspective, is associated with the identity, the image of an institution or a product, which implies the imperative existence of values and a unique, differentiated, and well-defined personality to connect and influence the public (Heilbrunn, 2006; Kapferer, 2007).

However, this term is also associated with territories in different dimensions: countries, cities, or places of different kinds. The brand at the territorial level is built and communicated through the «Marketing of territories» (Aranda, Combariza, 2007), «Place-branding» (Anholt, 2003), and «City-branding» (Ashworth, 2009; Kolb, 2006; Kavaratizis, Ashworth, 2006), i.e., communication and negotiation efforts that reinforce precisely that identity of a place.

In the end, the interests of this type of strategy and actions are focused on investments and the economic-productive sphere of business, industry, and tourism, as well as political influence.

In this dynamic, it is possible to see how the actions and interests of different places overlap. For example, "City branding" seeks the recognition of different characteristics and virtues of a nation outside its borders, while internally it has a transversal approach against the scope of the image of its different regions, cities, and places (Garrido, Estupiñán, Gómez, 2016).

In the specific case of cities, their identity is subordinated and promoted by macro processes such as the globalization of the economy and communication, as well as by the decentralization process of states (Calvento, Colombo, 2009), which allows them to become independent actors with an international scope.

Manfredi (2020) considers that the local political agenda favors and promotes important, even privileged, economic scenarios that evolve in different productive spheres. In this way, it is possible to speak of a model of urban cosmopolitanism based on a narrative of global cities that act in the face of problems as complex as climate change and human rights. The author argues that cities are increasingly seeking to become global players, which makes them invest more energy and resources in consolidating their image not only internally but also internationally, especially in the economic scenario (Taylor, 2012).

## 1. Place, City and Destination branding

When a branding strategy or any marketing method is applied to a place (regardless of its size: town, city, region, country) to promote greater social, political, and economic development, then we speak of «place branding» (Anholt, 2003).

The development of this type of branding according to Hankinson (2004) derives (should derive) from a coordinated process between institutions, companies, commerce, politicians, non-governmental organizations, and civil society. In short, it is an essential process in economic development (Fan, 2006).

However, place branding is identified or developed through two categories. The first is delimited by geographical space: "Country branding" (Andrade, 2016; Fan, 2006; Olins, 2000), "Nation branding" (Anholt, 2007; Fan, 2006), "Region branding" (Bruwer, Johnson, 2010) and "City branding" (Ashworth, 2009; Kolb, 2006; Kavaratizis, Ashworth, 2006). The second refers to the

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2 Received: 6/6/2022. Revised: 16/11/2022. Accepted: 30/11/2022

context to which a given “place branding” corresponds, i.e., it refers to more specific brands such as “Destination branding” (Morgan, Pritchard, Pride, 2004), which is closely related to “Country branding” and “City branding”, although with a more specific focus on economic activities such as tourism (Pike, 2005).

In short, it is possible to combine the discipline with the geographical entity to build a place branding strategy (Blain, Levy, Brent, 2005).

In the specific case of city branding, for example, it can be seen in the construction of a city's identity and image. However, what is most important is how the various stakeholders (civil society, business, commerce, politicians, and NGOs) are linked and engaged in this process (Hankinson, 2004; Karavatzis, Ashworth, 2006).

If these stakeholders are committed to common goals, the city brand will be successful, competitive, and sustainable (Pashkaleva-Shapira, 2007).

Brand identity seeks to relate the public consumer with the brand and the product, considering their needs and expectations (Florek, Insch, Gnoth, 2006). The city as an independent entity, beyond the state, becomes increasingly important, especially through international exchange processes, even developing multiple identities according to the profiles and interests of residents, visitors, and investors (Owen, 2015; Leffel, Acuto, 2018; Manfredi, 2020).

In other words, the same city can be a commercial and financial reference, and at the same time be a cultural or gastronomic reference (Cervantes, Muñiz, 2010). However, “the boundaries between investments, commercial interests, and urban projects are increasingly blurred, drawing the city more as a branch of a “big holding” than as an autonomous and authentic city” (Kolo-touhckina, Seiseddos, 2017, p. 122).

It is increasingly common to witness how cities are configured as scenarios and political actors on the international stage, in debates on social and migratory issues, to be a cultural, scientific, or innovative reference or as active agents in the face of the problem of climate change. All this causes a significant asymmetry in the field of actions and capacities between them (Barber, 2019). Industrial and business lobbies that have an environmental and socioeconomic impact today go directly to cities without referring to national actors (Herranz, Sidorenko, Cantero, 2017). Complex issues such as climate change assign moral force to cities as political actors (Bulkeley, 2013). In short, we are witnessing a hybrid model where cities and countries are facing the same problems and challenges for which agendas, actions, and offers are built, both jointly and individually at the international level, and where actions and decisions coincide between these actors (Lamour, 2013; Manfredi, 2020; Vanolo, 2017).

### *1.1 The Metaverse: what it is and who operates in it today*

The term metaverse comes from a composition of two words: “meta” which means transcendent, and “universe”, alluding to a virtual world where users interact and perform activities as they wish (Changhee, 2021).

In other words, it is a digital extension of any action of a social, ludic, or productive nature by human beings, or as Abbott (2017, p. 126) specifies, it is a world of a virtual nature where people adopt cyber identities.

Referring to the metaverse does not allude to a homogeneous environment, because it is quite the opposite. The metaverse is the sum of platforms and spaces not yet interconnected, with different levels of immersion and in many cases involving multi-screen access.

For Castronova (2001), to reach this category, the following basic conditions must be met: interactivity (real-time communication with individuals and their ability to alter the environment), corporeality (the connected individuals will be represented on the platforms by an avatar) and persistence (the metaverse continues its course despite the user being temporarily disconnected).

Therefore, it is worth noting that not just any virtual environment can be labeled as a “metaverse”. One can speak of the metaverse when digital platforms provide interactions and experiences in an open world, making tools and resources freely available to individuals. Users determine their progress and direction, seeking, according to their desires and possibilities, dialogues, commercial transactions, educational efforts, and entertainment (Barnes, Mattson, 2011). From the report “Technology Vision 2022”<sup>3</sup> Accenture has introduced the concept of the “metaverse continuum”, by virtue of its constant evolution and expansion since:

- It uses various technologies such as extended reality, smart objects, or edge computing.
- It increasingly encompasses the “vit-real”, i.e., experiences ranging from the purely virtual to those that combine physical worlds and elements with virtual ones
- Determines the reinvention and transformation of business models.

The current technological debate seems to focus on how the metaverse should be developed, i.e., whether it should be based on what is called the “replicated world” (digital twins of the real) (Accenture, 2022) or through native proposals that exploit and explore the disruptive resources of the virtual environment to the maximum. However, so far there does not seem to be any decisive keys or consensus in this regard.

It is possible to locate the first signs of the metaverse around 2003 with “Second Life” and then with Roblox in 2006. In both cases, millennials were actively involved, i.e., the same people who had previously witnessed the global expansion of the Internet and its product, playful, interactive, and socializing possibilities.

This is the same segment of users that migrated digitally to social networks, especially in 2007 with the global emergence of Facebook, making them a set of users with a strong digital culture, determined by the transmission of online broadcasts and videos through this type of platform (Lu, 2021).

Recently, this audience segment is associated with the acquisition and creation of digital goods for their home, and access to virtual events and cryptocurrencies (YPulse, 2022). However, other segments cohabit and intervene in this context, such as centennials and Alpha: the former noted as “digital natives” (Baysal, 2014; Prensky, 2001; Turner, 2015), and the latter, children and tweens defined by streaming and digital-mobile interaction (McCrinkle, Fell, 2021).

In both cases video games such as Fortnite or Minecraft have been determinant, allowing them to assume the acquisition and exchange of virtual goods and accessories as a habitual and even necessary activity. Not in vain, in 2021 investments of over 54 billion dollars were reported around the metaverse (JP Morgan, 2022).

In short, these are dynamics and scenarios that seem to determine the immediate future of the Internet as we know it today. The new “Alpha” generation (born after 2010) is investing more and more time and money in virtual activities and platforms, which automatically makes them the native audience in correspondence (Sidorenko, Herranz, 2021). It is possible to affirm, therefore, that for the metaverse, its most assiduous visitors are represented by the most digital, hyperconnected, and multiscreen audiences.

The main references of the metaverse refer any user to the first interactive and semi-immersive 3D platforms such as “Second Life” or The Sims, and more recently Animal Crossing New Horizon, Fortnite or Minecraft, although technological progress around virtual reality has allowed the development of immersive platforms such as Stageverse, Spatial, AltSpace VR, VR Chat, Population One, and Horizon Worlds, among others.

With the advancement of blockchain technology, it has also been possible to see the birth of decentralized metaverses, the most prominent, but not currently the only ones being: Decentraland, The Sandbox, Cryptovoxels, Somnium Space, Webaverse or Axie Infinity. Likewise, with a

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3 See [accntu.re/3m8g7fy](https://www.accenture.com/3m8g7fy)



more social network profile, projects such as FlickPlay «the first social platform of the metaverse in which the social value of NFTs is built» are emerging.

The most active players today in these interactive virtual environments are, on the one hand, brands and companies. Each one uses the environment that best suits its target audience and marketing strategies now.

To mention a few cases, Vans and Nike have opted for Roblox, since this platform is today a reference for the “Alpha” public and even younger. In this case, the strategy aims at a long-term image investment, becoming a reference and thus ensuring continuity and validity despite the generational turnover.

In the specific case of Vans, the approach is motivated by the fact that avatars do not look like their real-life users, but they look like their avatars, so they offer several virtual accessories that have their real replicas in correspondence. Gucci has been another that has launched exclusive accessories through such a scenario.

**Figure 1.** The Vans World web



Source: Vans [www.vans.es/roblox-vans-world.html](http://www.vans.es/roblox-vans-world.html)

In Decentraland we have seen Coca-Cola, Mahou, or Heineken, for example, organize events to better connect with their target audience and even increase their reach to the potential audience, carrying out different recreational activities with rewards in NFT. Atari on its side has set up a casino that operates with cryptocurrencies and digital assets.

In the case of Miller, the brand chose precisely this same scenario to broadcast exclusively in February 2022 its traditional ad during the Super Bowl, so for the first time, it rejected conventional television as an appropriate medium. The virtual environment allowed it not only to show the content in question but also to organize other types of activities to build customer loyalty and apply new inbound marketing techniques.

Companies such as HSBC, Carrefour, and Warner Music have acquired plots in Decentraland and The SandBox to take “virtual shares” in the short term.

Meanwhile, through Animal Crossing New Horizon, companies such as KFC, Hellmans, LEGO, Netflix, and Ben Sherman among many others, have innovated by venturing into a terrain that ensures them to increase their reach (Herranz, Sidorenko, 2021).



However, the music and entertainment industry have also made their presence felt: the band MUSE was chosen to inaugurate the Stageverse stadium with an exclusive concert, while Travis Scott, Ariana Grande, and Marshmellow organized massive events through Fortnite and Snoop Dog apart from “building himself a mansion” in The Sandbox, has chosen this scenario to launch an exclusive NFT collection.

For its part, the online music platform and podcast iHeart Radio has likewise bet on Fortnite in 2022 to present a concert by Charlie Puth, while users enjoy the possibility of carrying out various activities of a social and playful nature<sup>4</sup>.

The American hamburger chain, Wendy’s, established itself in Horizon World in early 2022 based on a gamified experience with a strong brand and product presence. In this way, the franchise seeks to reinforce contact with its target audience through virtual content and interactions that do not correspond to conventional, intrusive, and direct advertising strategies, but that reinforce branding and marketing efforts.

Another area involved in this process has been politics. It has been possible to see the Democratic Party innovate especially through Animal Crossing New Horizon, whether by creating campaign material or a specific island for the candidacies of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris in 2020, or Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez participating in a virtual “house-to-house” - or island-to-island - in the context of the tighter confines for Covid-19 in the same year.

**Figure 2.** Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez hosts a virtual “face-to-face” through Animal Crossing New Horizon in May 2020.



Source: Twitter

Finally, countries and regions have “made a move” in the same field. The island of Barbados, having completed its transition to the republican model at the end of 2021, thus leaving the Commonwealth, announced an agreement with Decentraland for the opening of a virtual embassy in this metaverse, becoming the first nation to carry out such a decision<sup>5</sup>.

As Manuel Pascual’s article (2021) in the newspaper El País shows, according to the minister of the newly independent nation, Decentraland constitutes an important forum through which the island intends to continue working with its traditional partners in the diplomatic arena, but which will also allow more in-depth innovations in the field of investment, tourism, cultural industries, as well as specific and disruptive socializing dynamic.

<sup>4</sup> See [bit.ly/3EB1rlx](https://bit.ly/3EB1rlx)

<sup>5</sup> See [bit.ly/3M6lxSG](https://bit.ly/3M6lxSG)

In early May 2022 it transpired that the Virtual Assets Regulatory Authority (VARA) of Dubai, was establishing an office in The SandBox: "MetaHQ", thus becoming the first crypto regulator in the world to establish its presence directly in the metaverse. However, as an important detail, the exact location of such an entity in this virtual environment is still unknown despite the official announcement through the social network Twitter<sup>6</sup>.

When accessing the domain [metaverso.navarra.es](https://metaverso.navarra.es) it indicates:

«You are about to access the metaverse of the Government of Navarra, a space that arises to stimulate innovation, bring digitalization closer and open new channels of communication more agile, direct and effective. This action responds to the Government of Navarra's clear commitment to digital transformation as a tool that unites and connects society, companies and the Administration».

The Government of Navarra (Spain) has developed an interactive virtual experience through which it offers a room with all the information related to the administration's current and future policies, an auditorium for events of various kinds, and four private spaces for civil servants where they can meet with other users more directly.

This initiative has been deployed through Spatial's metaverse, which can be accessed through Meta Quest virtual reality viewers in an immersive way, or through computers and mobile devices in a semi-immersive way.

## 2. Methodology

Given that the metaverse is currently in an incipient phase and, therefore, spread across a significant number of platforms that do not currently allow interoperability, the review, and analysis of those cases that have transcended to general, specialized, or niche media, through reports and news, has been considered here.

We established as a starting point for the review of the sample, all information related to the subject from April 13, 2021, when Epic Games announced that it reached the funding of 1 billion dollars for the construction of a metaverse, news that presumably accelerated Facebook's decision to take a step forward in this regard and be called Meta for its intention to build an interactive virtual universe.

The deadline for review through digital sources has been set for April 30, 2022, considering the first four months of that year.

The article "How cities are engaging in the metaverse" by Julia Glickman (2022), Senior Coordinator in National League of Cities Center for City Solutions, has also been taken as an important starting point.

All the sources consulted in the survey process have been contrasted in order to avoid referring to inaccurate data, taking into consideration the handicap that this is not a mainstream topic and that it is often addressed in a niche or specialized source in the field in question.

From the search carried out through different digital platforms and search engines, the following have finally been obtained as case studies of real cities in the metaverse (CR): Miami, Shanghai, Seoul, Dubai, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Sentosa, and Benidorm. For their part, the native virtual cities (VC) found, and therefore subjected to analysis, are Aetheria, Genesis City, and Mega City.

A priori an unequal sample is observed between both categories, however, the choice was to analyze all the cases found in the period already established according to the exposed search criteria. The evidence of the sample presupposes a current interest in the development of digital twins (virtual replicas of real cases, rather than native projects).

<sup>6</sup> See [bit.ly/3IYQRbj](https://bit.ly/3IYQRbj)

These references have allowed us to establish as research questions: is it relevant for a city to extend its image and influence to the metaverse? Are Place branding and City branding reinforced through this type of strategy? Does entering the metaverse imply any type of operational or communicational advantage for cities? Is the metaverse a new representation or extension of the concept of the city, or rather a new possibility to seek a closer and more relational communication?

For this reason, the starting hypotheses are:

H1. In this initial stage of the metaverse, few real cities use it as an innovative alternative in communication, and if they do, they replicate the communication, identity, and branding actions of real life, which does not represent any advantage.

H2. Native virtual cities are scarce, and poorly organized with little investment in communication.

H3. Real cities that are developing initiatives through the metaverse offer few differentiating elements concerning real-life experiences.

To answer and resolve these concerns, content analysis is proposed through a summary table that not only provides a vision of the operational and communicational elements of the cities that are currently participating in the metaverse but also allows a comparison between the cases found to determine more optimally what they offer, in what way and what are the advantages of this strategy in terms of their brand and identity.

Based on the sample obtained, and to proceed with the study, codes have been established to delimit the main categories of contents, proposals, and activities in the metaverse:

- (1) Interaction with the real environment enriched by virtual elements.
- (2) Resolution of challenges and activities
- (3) Gamified experience
- (4) Use of digital assets (NFT)
- (5) Ability to socialize with other avatars and perform a variety of recreational and productive activities
- (6) Replica of the real city in 3D
- (7) Experience that provides free will of the avatars (open world)
- (8) Possibility of boosting business and economic activities by the users.

Likewise, to indicate the intentionality that each city assigns to these virtual projects, the following codes have been established:

- (I) Administration and public services
- (II) Culture, arts, and education
- (III) Sustainability
- (IV) Tourism
- (V) Lobbying and commercial/economic agreements/activities
- (VI) Advertising
- (VII) Space for socialization

The main limitation is the difficulty of direct access to some of the virtual environments proposed for the study, so the data have been collected through the texts and news found.

Finally, the precise objectives of this research are as follows:

- Show through which concrete actions the concept of the virtual city is developed in the metaverse.
- Determine what elements make up the marketing process of cities (real or virtual native) through the metaverse.
- Determine the possible differentiating elements between a real city and its digital twin in the metaverse.

### 3. Results

The incipient moment that the metaverse is experiencing makes it possible to denote a variety of operational and structural proposals on the idea of the city based on virtual interpretation. As Table 1 shows, there is clear heterogeneity in terms of the platforms suitable for deploying these projects.

Likewise, the same study instrument allows us to observe that up to April 2022, few have ventured to try to replicate real cities in this new scenario, such as building “virtual settlements” in a native way, leaving a question mark whether it is a matter of mistrust, ignorance, or inconvenience, for example.

**Table 1.** Cities present in the metaverse either natively or as replicas of real cities until the first quarter of 2022

Nº	Year	City	City type	Platform (metaverse)	Access devices	Technology / narrative approach	Main activities or proposals	Intentionality
1	2018	Aetheria	CV	Decentraland	Mobile, PC	3D semi-immersive	4, 5, 7, 8	V, VII
2	2018	Genesis City	CV	Decentraland	Mobile, PC	3D semi-immersive	4, 5, 7, 8	V, VII
3	2020	Sentosa (Singapur)	RC	Animal Crossing New Horizons	Nintendo Switch (game console)	3D semi-immersive	3, 5, 6, 7	IV, VII
4	2021	Los Ángeles (Estados Unidos)	RC	FlickPlay	Mobile	Augmented reality	1, 2, 3, 4, 7	II, IV, VII
5	2022	Benidorm (España)	RC	SIX3D metaverse	Mobile, PC and VR headset	3D immersive/ semi-immersive	3, 4, 5, 6, 7	IV, V, VII
6	2021	Dubai (Emiratos Árabes Unidos)	RC	metaverse Dubai	Mobile, PC	2D and 3D semi-immersive	4, 7	V
7	2022	Mega City (Hong Kong)	CV	The SandBox	Mobile, PC	3D semi-immersive	4, 5, 7, 8	II, IV, VI, VII
8	2022?	Tokyo (Japón)	RC	Decentraland	Mobile, PC	3D semi-immersive	4, 5, 7, 8	II, IV, VI, VII

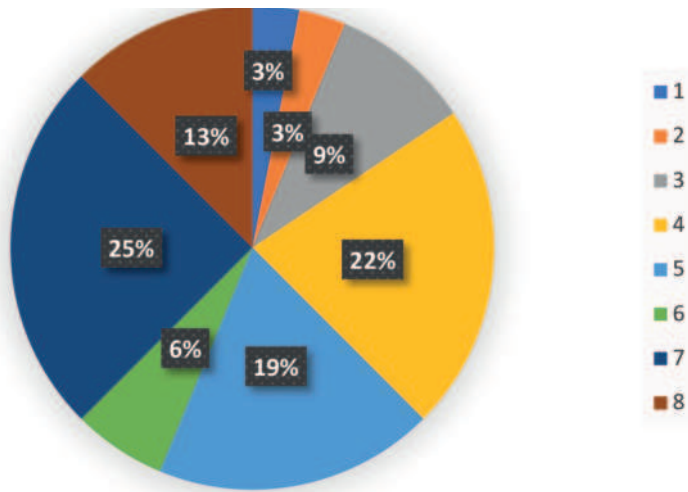
Source: own elaboration

The manifest heterogeneity of metaverses equally evidences a diversity of access devices that determine the typology of the experience, i.e., semi-immersive but with a demand for greater involvement of users with the emerging virtual elements, semi-immersive and even depersonalized through a screen, or immersive to transmit greater protagonism to the user.

The countries that have carried out proposals through these platforms are characterized by having better conditions in terms of access to new technologies, which is not the case in other territories where it costs more for a monetary issue, by impediment in terms of physical access or lack of stable and fast network connections.

However, most of the cases that make up the sample in Table 1 are flexible in terms of access devices, thus allowing for different possibilities.

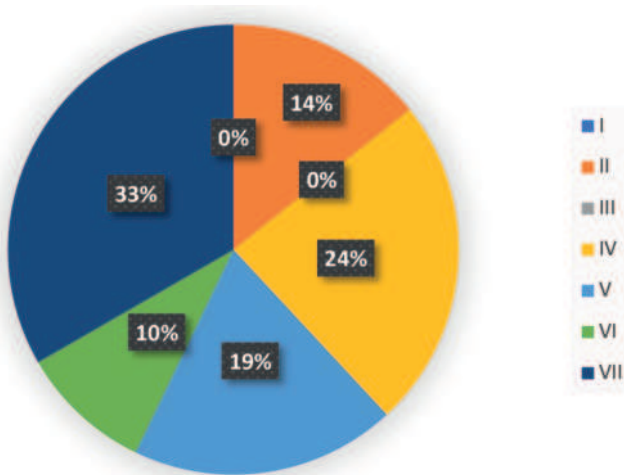
**Graphic 1.** Activities and proposals most used by cities in the metaverse (up to the first four months of 2022)



Source: own elaboration

From the experiences provided by these environments, as can be seen in Figure 2, most of the focus is on the idea of an open world where users, represented through an avatar, choose what to do and when according to the activities and interactive possibilities available.

**Graphic 2.** Intentionality of cities to go to the metaverse (up to the first four months of 2022)



Source: own elaboration

Figure 2 shows that most of the cases referenced here are inclined in the first place to socialize through the virtual medium. The reinforcement of tourism promotion is positioned as the second intention to carry out this type of initiative, while the reinforcement and development of new and alternative ways for commercial activities and investment incentives ranks in third place.

These three elements, according to the sample obtained, are on average the main motivations for carrying out a venture around the metaverse, although it should be noted that some specific cases focus on only one aspect.

The search process also revealed three additional cases, which are still in the pipeline and therefore could not be included in the analysis table (Table 1) since everything related to them is futuristic. These are the cities of Seoul, Shanghai, and Miami.

The case of Seoul refers to a digital twin that will be called “Metaverse Seoul” and is expected to become operational in 2023, within the framework of the smart cities project being developed by South Korea. Through this initiative, the city administration expects to optimize the processes of collection and procedures related to public services, tourism, and cultural and educational institutions, among others.

The Asian country has already made some concrete progress in the deployment of virtual content applied to administrative procedures, such as, for example, driving tests for the renewal of senior citizens’ licenses.

For its part, the Chinese city of Shanghai, as part of its five-year government plan<sup>7</sup> included in 2021 the need to promote the use of the metaverse in procedures related to public services, commercial offices, and social entertainment, among other areas.

In the last case, Miami is trying to get ahead as the first U.S. city to resort to the metaverse. It does so through an agreement with the Sister Cities International association, of which it is a member, and through the Wiami - Wilder World metaverse. This initiative seeks to energize the sister cities program through educational exchanges, “crypto-institutional” links, digital literacy, commercial exchange, and tourism promotion<sup>8</sup>.

#### 4. Discussion

From the data obtained in the results section, perhaps what is most striking at first glance is the case of virtual native cities (cases 1, 2, and 7 Table 1). If we understand that a city is determined by a group of people settled in a specific place, where they are mainly engaged in industrial and commercial activities, we can therefore affirm that these cases already represent an evolution of the concept.

In Aetheria (No. 1, Table 1), for example, there is a decalogue that establishes the regulations concerning public and private land, as well as an extensive report on the possibilities offered by each one. Through this document, the installation of online commerce is directly incentivized if the commitment to rent land and virtual infrastructure is accepted, with several locations depending on the proposal and strategic possibilities.<sup>9</sup> The final decisions are made by the governing council. Alluding to the theme of infrastructure, it is worth noting the fact that Aetheria defines its aesthetics according to the “Cyberpunk” subgenre, something that real cities cannot achieve. This more literary approach, while inevitably influenced by theories of urbanism, reaffirms the ideology of power around technological change and global capitalism as pervasive forces.

Authors such as Abbott (2007) argue that it is ultimately about the value of creating opportunities for spontaneous and informal social institutions by loosening building codes, providing low-rent commercial space, and obtaining ubiquitous and inexpensive informational infrastructures. This essence coincides with the Mega-City project (no. 7 Table 1), a vision of Hong Kong as the future product of the heterogeneous amalgam that makes up the developers of this city: politicians, entrepreneurs, actors, artists, and influencers of Hong Kong society, a mosaic of diverse talents and success stories that seek to represent enduring vitality, technological advancement, and vibrant culture.

In other words, Mega-City, and its new project Mega City 2, constitute digital and futuristic extensions of the real city, around cultural elements that allow for new avenues of investment and commercialization based on the socializing capacity that this type of space allows.

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7 See [cnb.cx/3irVOaM](http://cnb.cx/3irVOaM)

8 See [bit.ly/3tc7u7m](http://bit.ly/3tc7u7m)

9 See [aetheria.io/rentals/](http://aetheria.io/rentals/)

In contrast, the case of Genesis City, another of the native virtual cities, does not seek to adopt a distinctive image, but it does show its significant growth, not only in terms of the number of users involved but also in terms of the commercial operations carried out there through digital assets and virtual currency. A very striking fact is that currently, its extension is already the size of the city of Washington.

Already from the outset, it could be said that the second research hypothesis that native virtual cities are scarce, poorly organized, and with equally low investment in communication, is confirmed.

To find information about these cities you have to go to niche sources of information about video games or the virtual economy. You have to be very involved with the metaverses of Decentraland and The SandBox to end up learning a bit more about them organically.

However, the case of Aetheria makes it stand out as the only native virtual city with a website, which highlights various political, social, and economic data as if it were the website of any city council.

Of the eight cases that make up the sample reflected in Table 1, only two (No. 3 and 5) correspond to the concept of digital twins, i.e., they attempt to be exact or approximate virtual replicas of the real cases.

The island of Sentosa, despite not being considered an actual city, has been part of the sample of this study because of its small size (500 hectares). Located in Singapore, this territory offers a complete tropical experience. Its tourism authority has been concerned about building a high-end tourist experience with all possible amenities through the specific hotel offer of the place.

To promote themselves and try to increase the reach of their message, taking advantage of the phenomenon that constituted in 2020 the title *Animal Crossing New Horizons* on the Nintendo Switch video console (noted by TIME magazine as one of the best inventions of the year<sup>10</sup>), they created a virtual replica of the island, exploiting all the recreational activities that can be experienced.

To give visibility to the initiative, they created a specific website where they briefly explain how to proceed to carry out the virtual access, which was severely monitored<sup>11</sup>. This resource transcended over video game web portals, where presumably the target audience of the campaign was not present.

**Figure 3.** Example of user activities connected to “Virtual Sentosa” in *Animal Crossing New Horizons*



Source: Sentosa Island Official Website

<sup>10</sup> See [bit.ly/3nou3AO](https://bit.ly/3nou3AO)

<sup>11</sup> See [www.sentosa.com.sg/en/campaigns/virtualsentosa/](https://www.sentosa.com.sg/en/campaigns/virtualsentosa/)



As for “Benidorm Land”, it is specifically promoted through the tourist portal of the city (benidorm.org) where the mayor of the city in person states that “you can live adventures and experiences in Benidorm in an alternative reality without leaving home (...) an interesting option to inspire and be excited for future travel, know Benidorm before traveling to know how it is, explore our tourism products, walk its streets and even fly”.

The particularity of this metaverse is that it is available on the STEAM platform like any other video game, so it seems to have a very clear intention to target the “gamer community”, which is traditionally composed mostly of highly digitized young audiences. In other words, this branding work seems to be more focused on the potential audience, creating a referential image for the future.

The developers of this project (SIX3D) argue that the sum of all the experiences generated through this proposal is what will materialize the idea of metaverse<sup>12</sup>. However, from the outset, it is difficult to pinpoint any outstanding and differentiating element in real life.

**Figure 4.** Screenshot of the official promotional video “Benidorm, tourist destination also in the metaverse” alluding to “Benidorm Land”



Source: YouTube [youtu.be/71w9yIVLdt8](https://youtu.be/71w9yIVLdt8)

However, cases No. 4 and 8 (Table 1) do represent innovative experiences, especially because they focus on the idea of the city on the development of a specific area. In these examples, art and culture are determinants and the central axis of the social-virtual experience.

In the case of the Santa Monica district in the city of Los Angeles (No. 4, Table 1), the experience is based on the incorporation of augmented reality technology and not virtual as in all the cases referenced so far. This is done through the mobile app FlickPlay.

This app focuses on the real landscape surrounding the user, closing the gap between physical and digital spaces. It allows people to collect tokens (digital assets) to unlock and show videos through the app using their rare filter-like collectibles, most of which are in a limited quantity, although the user could always monetize their digital collectibles through challenges and actions.

The experience and aesthetics are very similar to the mobile video game Pokemon Go, although, in this one, elements such as the digital economy are promoted (the city can exploit this resource to the maximum and seek a new way of financing) and help to strengthen the relationship of citizens with their urban environment, forcing them to move and rediscover their city based on an incentive.

<sup>12</sup> See [bit.ly/3ahB2u0](https://bit.ly/3ahB2u0)

In the words of the founder of this platform, Pierina Merino, activating disused urban spaces with art helps reduce crime rates. There is no better incentive than building a metaverse ecosystem with solid values and purposes that have a direct impact on the world (Donato, 2021). In other words, the initiative aims to create a valuable experience that has a positive impact on users and the city at the same time. It is a different way to encourage the relationship of people with their real environment, which allows betting on interesting and attracting new segments of the public, especially those more digital and familiar with gamified dynamics, as in the case of the Alpha, for example.

**Figure 5.** District of Santa Monica (Los Angeles) through the social metaverse app FlickPlay.



Source: FlickPlay

Regarding case no. 8 (Table 1), although the city of Tokyo has been working since 2021 on the design of its global cultural city in the metaverse: "MetaTokyo", which is not yet fully available, this has not prevented them from developing some preliminary experiences to start having an active presence through this environment.

The virtual scenario chosen for this project has been the decentralized metaverse of Decentraland. From the official website of "MetaTokyo"<sup>13</sup> it is clear, on the one hand, that they have designed and put on sale a set of NFT ('MetaTokyo Pass' through OpenSea) to allow creditors privileged access to events, activities, access to restricted areas, cultural workshops among other benefits associated with the future "MetaTokyo".

While the "virtual works" are being developed, a pop-up museum has been momentarily installed on the corresponding Decentraland site, first exploited in 2021 by the "SPACE by MetaTokyo" project in collaboration with the Japanese musical duo AMIAYA.

In this, Street Snap magazine oversaw the real-life photo shoot of these artists who were then marketed as NFT through OpenSea and arranged at the same time in this virtual exhibition.

The collaboration with this musical duo was also reinforced under the banner of "MetaTokyo" in the "Fashion Week in the metaverse", creating a special collection of virtual clothing and accessories for avatars inspired by the aesthetics of these artists, which were then put on sale in the store of the metaverse itself. This strategy constitutes a disruptive vehicle for promoting contemporary Japanese culture<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> See [metatokyo.xyz/](https://metatokyo.xyz/)

<sup>14</sup> See [bit.ly/3NN4xC6](https://bit.ly/3NN4xC6)

**Figure 6.** Access to the pop-up museum installed by Street Snap on the grounds of MetaTokyo in Decentraland



### SPACE by MetaTokyo

NFTを活用したオープンメタバース「Decentraland」でMetaTokyoが所有の土地に建設した、ポップアップミュージアム「SPACE by MetaTokyo」（以下SPACE）を「AMIAYA x STREET」とのコラボ仕様にアップデートし、メタバースならではのイマーシブな写真展示を行います。

[View at Decentraland](#)

Source: MetaTokyo

A second outreach project in 2021 took equal advantage of the temporary and incipient infrastructure of “MetaTokyo”. In this other case FRUITS magazine commemorated its first 1997 photographic exhibition by Shoichi Aoki, with digitization and conversion of the snapshots to digital asset format. As in the previous case, the NFTs were offered for sale through OpenSea and exhibited in this virtual location, allowing transit between both platforms.

The official website of “MetaTokyo” does not specify a date for the official launch of the global cultural city, although they warn that “it could be at any time”.

However, these examples do represent an innovative and disruptive way, not only to promote a city or reinforce its image in the digital sphere but also to seek new scenarios and new activities, especially of a cultural nature, which determine the image of these cities in the minds of the most digital audiences and emerging segments of the public.

In any case, based on these two experiences it is not possible to verify the third hypothesis that the real cities that are developing initiatives through the metaverse offer few differentiating elements to real-life experiences, since there are important signs of differentiation, if not entirely in terms of experiences, then in the forms and themes.

The case of Dubai (No. 6 Table 1) is very particular and paradigmatic as the metaverse resource is reserved only as a way for the transaction of digital assets. The urbanistic narrative seems to be a simple pretext without a clear logic.

Its concept is based on a real-world map of Dubai’s most prestigious areas. It seeks to recreate its aesthetics, geometry, and topography. And although the map can be walked around with complete freedom, the only interaction allowed is the possibility of buying the plots of land that are still available.

Figura 7. Metaverse Dubai



Source: Metaverse Dubai

As an additional comment, it has been observed that most of these initiatives are promoted and maintain active and dynamic communication channels through Discord. This not only has an impact on the creation of a community but also constitutes a new way of resolving problems and doubts.

This is an aspect of great interest if it is understood that Discord is a social network currently widely used by the gamer community, it allows sharing content of any kind, it links very easily with Twitch broadcasts, so there is an evident willingness to expand the marketing work, from the cities to new segments of the public.

Charts 1 and 2 show that the ability to socialize is paramount in this process. Virtual spaces must allow for constant dialogue among participants and provide a collective but also participatory experience. That said, the first research hypothesis is not confirmed, because there are indeed disruptive communication experiences that attempt to connect with new audiences.

The use of prescribers to boost the promotional or advertising effect, if the term is appropriate, is noteworthy. However, in general terms, it is evident that dissemination strategies -and literacy- are scarce or precarious and this has an impact -and will continue to have an impact- on the scarce interest and demand for this type of initiative from a mainstream perspective.

## Conclusions

Although they start with a productive purpose, cities are places to live, foster social encounters, and develop culture and economy. The real cities of the 21st century face the challenge of the metaverse, while the virtual cities of the metaverse face the challenge of obtaining greater prominence through differentiated experiences. This metaverse does not allow users to physically move to a virtual environment, but it does allow them to reach new experiences through an avatar or enrich the ones they already have in the real world.

Undoubtedly, one of the most decisive elements of this process is the possibility of providing interactive and collective experiences of creation, thus allowing the construction of a digital community, as important today as traditional forms of coexistence have been in cities in the past.

We are not only facing a possible redefinition of the concept of the global city in terms of power and terms of social and economic relations but also the opportunity and challenge of creating new native scenarios in correspondence, which would imply a rethinking of governance nodes (Friedmann, 1986; Sassen, 1991).

While real cities highlight these scenarios as new avenues for tourism promotion and commercial exchange, native virtual cities have a greater challenge to be competitive and effectively offer novelty in this regard. Public diplomacy processes will also be further deepened. Just look at the initiatives in Navarre or Barbados. Politics and economics will have the pending task of developing dialogues and relations natively through these virtual scenarios.

However, while this development continues, it is possible to see novelties in the promotional channels. The new social networks, especially those that seek to strengthen the concept of the user community, are emerging as support and meeting channels for new audiences, deeply digitized, already accustomed to the digital economy, and with an idiosyncrasy especially marked by gamification. This is something that Yi and Grünberg (2022) point out in the Chinese case.

The debate and reflection are no longer about the relevance and usability of virtual environments for tourism marketing, public diplomacy, commercial lobbies, etc. The fact that the experience is now collective and involves the same active conversation that takes place in more conventional social networks, implies a new scenario in community building and the relational levels between issuers and the public, considering that the latter, is far from being passive, are prosumers.

The metaverse opens the possibility of exploiting the immersive format to reinforce especially the dialogue with new segments of users, seeking aspirational images from various commercial actors, and providing any participant with a new set of interactive resources, with the caveat that it is a technology that rarely becomes something of great global reach but that does represent an important way to increase the reach, in this particular case, of the identity message of the cities and their main stakeholders.

According to Young and Choukah (2022), the metaverse forces us to rethink physical cities: why make more parks or squares if people will increasingly seek to socialize online? Perhaps the first determination is not to try to replace the city on a virtual level, but to provide it with new functions and global alternatives that strengthen it.

As a final reflection that forces us to think about new communication strategies for the future, today it is difficult to access the real cases replicated in the metaverse (digital twins). This, according to the current "platformization" context, attempts against any attempt of "viralization" or popularity, that is to say, it prevents an increase in reach. As it happens in other technological fields, today prevails a technical advance that is not accompanied by corresponding communication strategies.

Similarly, and perhaps more dramatically, there is less public information about native virtual cities specifically. However, it must also be stated that the communication work is beginning to be done through alternative digital channels to the mainstream, perhaps with a focus on new audiences or more niche segments.

The advance of the metaverse will emphasize the need to accompany the technological development of digital literacy initiatives that allow most segments of the public to intervene in the process, otherwise, we would be facing a deepening of the social gap from the technological transformation.

We will have people displaced or isolated because they cannot understand what these changes consist of and what benefits or alternatives they offer.



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