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Innovative Communication for Masstige Brands: Leveraging the Metaverse to Connect with Generation Z

Filipa Figueiredo Castro

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Filipa Figueiredo Castro

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Supervised by
Prof. Dr. Amélia Maria Pinto da Cunha Brandão
Prof. Dr. Marta Olivia Rovedder de Oliveira

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Abstract

With the evolution of media and the rising expectations of new generations of consumers, there is a growing desire for immersive experiences that can truly capture their attention. However, it is important to understand their value for segments such as the masstige markets, which require a delicate balance between accessibility and exclusivity. This study investigates how these brands might leverage the metaverse to innovate their communication strategies in ways that appeal to Gen Z consumers, and how marketers expect this audience to perceive these initiatives. This research conducts a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with 26 professionals from Portuguese marketing agencies who are familiar with the concept of masstige brands. All interviews were transcribed and evaluated using a thematic content analysis. The findings indicate that metaverse-based communication can improve brand appeal and engagement in the masstige sector, but these outcomes depend heavily on how the experience is designed and perceived. This study advances understanding of how immersive communication can be strategically deployed by masstige brands, offering an integrated explanation of how metaverse experiences translate into consumer and brand outcomes.

Keywords: Masstige Brands, Innovative Communication, Immersive Experiences, Metaverse, Consumer Behaviour, Generation Z

Resumo

Com a evolução dos meios de comunicação e as crescentes expectativas das novas gerações de consumidores, verifica-se um desejo cada vez maior por experiências imersivas capazes de captar verdadeiramente a sua atenção. No entanto, é importante compreender o seu valor para segmentos como os mercados masstige, que exigem um equilíbrio delicado entre acessibilidade e exclusividade. Este estudo investiga de que forma estas marcas poderiam aproveitar o Metaverso para inovar suas estratégias de comunicação de modo a atrair os consumidores da Geração Z, e como os profissionais de marketing esperam que esse público perceba essas iniciativas. Esta pesquisa realiza um estudo qualitativo por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com 26 profissionais de agências de marketing portuguesas familiarizados com o conceito de marcas masstige. Todas as entrevistas foram transcritas e avaliadas por meio de uma metodologia de análise de conteúdo temático. Os resultados indicam que a comunicação através do Metaverso pode melhorar o apelo e os níveis de engagement de marcas Masstige, mas estes resultados dependem em grande medida da forma como a experiência é concebida e percebida. Este estudo aprofunda a compreensão de como a comunicação imersiva pode ser estrategicamente implementada pelas marcas Masstige, apresentando uma explicação integrada de como as experiências no Metaverso podem traduzir-se em resultados para o consumidor e para a marca.

Palavras-chave: Marcas Masstige, Comunicação Inovadora, Experiências Imersivas, Metaverso, Comportamento do Consumidor, Geração Z

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1. Introduction

Over the last few years, the world has witnessed significant growth in the middle class, despite challenges such as the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, trade tensions, and war. According to data from the World Economic Forum (2025), the middle and rich classes together exceed the number of individuals living in poverty. Nonetheless, this number is expected to continue rising over the next decade, with another billion people entering this class. This means that out of a total population of 8.7 billion people, 5.7 billion will be part of the middle class (World Economic Forum, 2025). The luxury sector is aware of these economic shifts. It has therefore begun to explore this new market opportunity by making luxury more accessible to the rising middle class, leading to the "democratization of luxury" (Shukla et al., 2022). This concept is defined (Shukla et al., 2022) as the decline in "distinctiveness, exclusivity, and self-differentiation" that luxury products offer as they become more widely available to the general public.

With the increasing economic power of the middle class and their desire for a better quality of life, many people are willing to spend more on products that deliver it (Michael J Silverstein, 2003). This led to the creation of a new market sector, masstige, in which high-end goods were made accessible to a broader public. Also known as "new luxury", these types of products engage with aspirational consumers, giving them a taste of a luxurious lifestyle (Michael J Silverstein, 2003). Masstige consumption is an effective strategy for entering growing markets where price sensitivity remains an issue (Roy et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, modern consumers have raised their standards for the kind of experience they expect from brands (Kalender & Guzmán, 2026), now seeking a holistic shopping experience in which all touchpoints are seamlessly interconnected, from online to offline (Chang & Li, 2022). Today's consumers want more immersive, engaging experiences that stimulate their senses and emotions in a dynamic way (Kalender & Guzmán, 2026). Inevitably, brands are dealing with the increasing expectations for innovative and engaging digital experiences. To tackle these types of consumers and remain relevant to competitors, brands must evolve at the same pace (Bogicevic et al., 2024). These expectations are especially prominent among digital-native generations, such as Gen Z, who place great value on online brand experiences to cultivate trust and connection (Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025).

More than ever, brands have been resorting to digital content as a means to catch consumers' interest and strengthen their relationship with the brand (Lapresta-Romero & Hernández-Ortega, 2025), especially since it has been established that consumers' favorable attitude towards the brand is correlated to consumer engagement (Santini et al., 2020).

In this complex scenario, masstige brands face an intricate challenge: balancing the illusion of luxury with accessibility through digital tools. Unlike traditional luxury brands, masstige brands have embraced digital marketing to engage with younger consumers, as research has shown that short-term content and value-based messages aren't mutually exclusive (Sedereviciute-Paciauskiene & Kamasauske, 2025). Digital technologies have become powerful tools for gaining competitive advantage (Athaide et al., 2025), especially since novelty has been shown to generate interest in brands' communication (Frasquet et al., 2024). This is particularly important in the modern world as consumers have adopted a "variety-seeking behavior", meaning they frequently switch between products and/or categories, even when they're satisfied, to avoid boredom (Zhang, 2022).

Masstige brands have been a topic of discussion for over two decades now, gradually becoming a field of interest after the concept was officially introduced by Michael J Silverstein (2003). However, it remains a domain of study with significant grey areas and most studies focus on industries like fashion (Sedereviciute-Paciauskiene & Kamasauske, 2025), food and beverages, electronics, and even automobiles (Kumar et al., 2020).

Nowadays, many consumers use internet regularly (Joy et al., 2022), especially those aged between 18 and 24 years old, to the point that it has become part of their daily routine. As people's social and economic lives become increasingly digitalized, the metaverse has emerged as a "technological megatrend" that meets the demand for new forms of interaction (Tang et al., 2025).

Previous studies have investigated the potential of the metaverse as an innovative tool, whether as an instrument to deliver deeply immersive experiences in a way no other technology can (Jiang et al., 2023), as a futuristic platform for brand engagement and virtual commerce (Payal et al., 2024), or as a fresh venue to be explored by digital marketing (Tang et al., 2025), with authors exploring their particular application to masstige brands (Joy et al., 2022). However, none have focused on how masstige brands can use this tool to innovate their communication strategies to appeal to digital-native consumers, such as Generation Z.

Representative references	Masstige	Metaverse / VR	Innovative communication / branding	Gen Z	Experience / S-O-R relevance	Focus of the study/studies
Paul (2018); Kumar et al. (2020); Shahid et al. (2024); Roy et al. (2025); Anning-Dorson & Tackie (2025); Al-Issa et al. (2024)	Yes	—	—	—	Partial	Masstige positioning, consumer motivations, perceived luxury value and consumption outcomes.
Bilro et al. (2022)	Yes	—	Yes	—	Yes	Masstige social-media strategies and their effects on consumer sentiments and brand attitudes.
Zha et al. (2023); Leban et al. (2020); Lee et al. (2025)	—	—	Yes	—	Yes	Digital communication, engagement, authenticity and loyalty in luxury-brand contexts.
Joy et al. (2022); Jiang et al. (2023); Kim & Bae (2024)	—	Yes	Partial	—	Yes	Luxury-brand experiences, digital fashion and brand attachment in the metaverse.
Jafar et al. (2023, 2024); Payal et al. (2024); Tang et al. (2025); Tao et al. (2025); Kaur et al. (2024); Roh et al. (2024)	—	Yes	Partial	—	Yes	Metaverse adoption, immersion, consumer experience and behavioural outcomes.
Chakraborty & Biswal (2024); Butcher & Sung (2024); Kalender & Guzmán (2026); Uysal et al. (2026)	—	Yes	Yes	—	Yes	Immersive brand communication, presence, interactivity and consumer-brand engagement.
Bogicevic et al. (2024); Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos (2025)	—	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Gen Z responses to immersive and newly launched technological brand experiences.
Erensoy et al. (2024)	—	Yes	—	—	Yes	S-O-R mechanisms explaining consumer behaviour in immersive VR retail environments.
Koohang et al. (2023); Lowry et al. (2025); Lu et al. (2026); Dia (2025); Jauhiainen (2024)	—	Yes	Partial	—	Partial	The metaverse as an innovation, business opportunity and emerging marketing environment.

Perez et al. (2026)	—	Yes	—	—	Yes	Consumer purchasing behaviour in virtual fashion markets based on blockchain transactions.
Innovative Communication for Masstige Brands: Leveraging the Metaverse to Connect with Generation Z	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Metaverse-based innovative communication for masstige brands seeking to connect with Generation Z.**

Table 1 - Comparison Between Prior Research and the Present Study

Source: Own Elaboration

Table 1 compares several previously conducted studies in the field of innovative communication for masstige brands and highlights the topics and correlations that remain unexplored. To address this literature gap, the present study seeks to answer the following questions:

Q1: How can masstige brands use the metaverse to innovate their communication strategies to appeal to Generation Z consumers?

Q2: How do marketing professionals expect Generation Z to respond to innovative metaverse-based communication initiatives from masstige brands?

2. Literature Review

This chapter begins by defining and explaining the concept of masstige brands, showing where they are positioned in relation to other market segments. The chapter traces the entire evolution of this concept, from its origins to what it is today, emphasizing its delicate nature, which seeks to balance prestige with affordability.

Afterwards, the concept of innovative communication is defined, outlining the qualities that currently characterize this type of communication and illustrating how technologies such as the metaverse fit perfectly into this definition. Finally, it evaluates the opportunities and challenges of this technology, drawing on theoretical research to analyze its potential as a tool for brands to engage with Generation Z.

2.1 Masstige Brands

2.1.1. Definition and Positioning of Masstige Brands

The concept of mass-market prestige brands was first introduced by Michael J Silverstein (2003), who explored how prestige goods were becoming more attainable and communicated to the masses. Often referred to as "new luxury", this sector focuses on creating an emotional connection with the consumer and satisfying their aspirational desires instead of just satisfying basic needs (Michael J Silverstein, 2003).

To better understand the position of masstige brands, Kumar et al. (2020) created a "mass-luxury continuum" that ranges from low-end brands that focus on fulfilling the necessities of the masses to luxury brands that aim to deliver far more than utilitarian goods. Masstige brands are perceived as inferior to luxury brands but hold a superior position when compared to mass-consumption brands. Therefore, they target aspirational middle-class consumers who seek prestigious goods at a realistic price point within this economic reality. While luxury consumers purchase luxury goods to maintain their reputation and lifestyle, masstige consumption stems from the desire to achieve social status through social validation (Kumar et al., 2020), often a consequence of newfound wealth (Roy et al., 2025). Simultaneously, it's essential to acknowledge that new luxury has altered the motivations behind high-end purchases, which are now seen as a

personal, meaningful experience that offers emotional gratification (Lee et al., 2025).

The "Masstige Theory", developed by Paul (2018), established that the strategy adopted by these brands can't rely solely on price; they also need to strategically address the other components of the marketing mix (product, promotion, and place). Each of these four elements must contribute to the development of a sense of prestige, even if only in a more accessible way (Paul, 2018).

In a broader sense, the prestige associated with a masstige brand doesn't come from product scarcity or the difficulty of access, as it does for luxury brands. It arises from its aesthetic, complementary, or new services, or simply from the energy the brand manifests (Shahid et al., 2024). This argument valid even in virtual environments where the boundaries between technology and human connection continue to be challenged. Although customers may indicate a certain preference for exclusive goods, their actions show otherwise. It appears that, even under these circumstances, ordinary products of easier access can surpass products deemed "unique" or "different" simply because of their aesthetic appeal (Perez et al., 2026). Certain aesthetic cues can create a visual stimulus that communicates premium positioning, making consumers believe the product is of higher value. These include symmetric packaging, as it conveys a perception of higher quality (Pombo & Velasco, 2021), a minimalist and refined appearance, which facilitates association with prestige, luxury, and high-end brands (Sedereviciute-Paciauskiene & Kamasauske, 2025), and a simple color scheme (Adam & Wen, 2026).

2.1.2. The Rise of Masstige Brands

This market category began to emerge due to the "trading up phenomenon", a trend rooted in a perpetually dissatisfied mobile society. As consumers' purchasing power increases, they are more willing to spend more money on products that hold greater significance for them (trade up). On the other hand, when they deem a product to be less important, consumers tend to spend less (trade down). This shows that spending habits are not directly correlated to income, highlighting the importance of creating emotional engagement between the consumer and the brand (Kumar et al., 2020).

With the widespread adoption of social media, brands began leveraging digital communication to implement mass-market strategies, conveying their value to a broader audience and building an

emotional connection with consumers without compromising their premium image. These emotional stimuli ultimately result in favorable brand behaviors and contribute to the mainstreaming of masstige products (Bilro et al., 2022).

While there is considerable concern about how digital platforms (such as the metaverse) democratize access to prestigious brands, it is important to emphasize that accessibility does not necessarily democratize prestige itself. As is well established, prestige brands are inextricably linked to their hedonic value. Therefore, if accessibility to these products allows consumers to exhibit digital possession, signal social status, or reinforce their sense of belonging within an exclusive community, the brand can profit significantly (Perez et al., 2026).

2.1.3. Antecedents and Consequences of Masstige Consumption

As previously mentioned, customers' desire to engage with the brand and participate in masstige consumption can arise from various reasons, which can be separated into extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. When it comes to extrinsic motivators, people buy these products to signal status and gain social approval, distinguishing themselves from regular consumers (Roy et al., 2025). Masstige brands market themselves as aspirational because buyers use them to display wealth, gain recognition, or reward themselves (Shahid et al., 2024).

With this in mind, as younger consumers, such as Generation Z, become more affluent, patterns of luxury consumption change to reflect their intrinsic traits, such as high digital literacy and a lack of brand loyalty. As a result, brands are harnessing social factors, such as the bandwagon effect, stemming from the fear of missing out (FOMO), to encourage consumption and generate engagement. The bandwagon effect occurs when demand for a product rises because it's considered trendy, and it has been previously studied by scholars who believed it to be an excellent strategy for market penetration and brand positioning, leading to the broad adoption of luxury goods (Anning-Dorson & Tackie, 2025).

As for intrinsic motivations, consumers purchase these products mainly for self-fulfillment reasons, choosing brands that reflect their core values and reflect similar ideals and convictions (Roy et al., 2025). Usually, this decision is the result of an effort to display one's personality and personal values. This is supported by Al-Issa et al. (2024), who have found that masstige consumers

tend to purchase from brands they identify with instead of buying them just because of the brand's reputation. As a matter of fact, today's consumers prefer products that are more discreet and avoid flashy logos or other brand marks. Overall, consumers prefer brands they feel connected to (Kalender & Guzmán, 2026) which reinforces the idea that masstige consumption can be driven by internal motivators, even though it often stems from a desire for social approval (Al-Issa et al., 2024).

Other characteristics that distinguish masstige consumers include an ongoing desire for enjoyable experiences, since they face consumption as a form of pleasure (Al-Issa et al., 2024) aas well as a deep appreciation for unique items (or perceived as such) (Anning-Dorson & Tackie, 2025). Pride has also been considered a strong motivator for masstige consumption. This feeling serves as a driver for consumption, regardless of its positive or negative connotation. Positive or "authentic" pride leads people to purchase products that make them feel confident and respected. In comparison, negative consumption stems from arrogance, leading people to buy products simply to feel superior to others. However, for masstige brands, appealing to positive pride is far more effective, and marketers frequently leverage this feeling to motivate buyers (Anning-Dorson & Tackie, 2025).

These motivators lead to desirable behavioral outcomes such as conspicuous consumption and brand engagement, indicating that masstige consumption extends far beyond transactions and carries symbolic and relational meaning (Anning-Dorson & Tackie, 2025).

2.2. Innovative Communication

2.2.1. Definition and Dimensions of Innovative Communication

In the area of marketing and communications, the most widely accepted definition of "innovation" is the one introduced by Rogers (2003, p. 11), who emphasizes its subjective nature. The author proposes that innovation is not about creating something entirely new but about creating something perceived as fresh and novel. Something innovative doesn't need to be something that was recently discovered; it can be something we've just become aware of or decided to start using in the present moment (Rogers, 2003). In the same book, (Rogers, 2003)

"communication" is defined as a process through which individuals generate and exchange information with the intention of achieving a shared understanding of the matter under discussion. That said, combining the two definitions yields the concept of innovative communication as the process of creating and exchanging information and ideas in a way perceived as novel by others.

Although the dimensions considered in discussions of innovative communication remain open, recent studies consistently identify three characteristics as the primary dimensions of innovative communication. These dimensions are technological novelty, immersion, and interactivity, as presented in Table 2.

Authors	Dimension of Innovation Communication	Justification
Chakraborty and Biswal (2024), Jung and Shegai (2023)	Technological Novelty	Nowadays, innovative communication is deeply intertwined with technological innovations.
Butcher and Sung (2024), (Liao et al., 2023)	Immersion	Immersion transforms communication into an experience, not just message delivery.
Chakraborty and Biswal (2024), Hayes (2025), Payal et al. (2024)	Interactivity	Two-way communication is the basis for innovative communication.

Table 2 - Dimensions of Innovative Communication

Source: Own Elaboration

Technological Novelty

The internet and social media have made everyday communication more digital (Dwivedi et al., 2021), prompting a discussion of the role of technological novelty in modern communication (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024) and the numerous opportunities they create for consumer-brand interactions (Santini et al., 2020). Innovative technologies inevitably drive changes in brand communication, underscoring the connection between these two fields (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024). Immersive technologies are becoming central to customer integration and value creation.

Technological innovations have gained popularity because they allow brands to overcome

various limitations. Most of these technologies briefly detach users from the real world to make them hyper-focused on the content being presented. Ultimately, the novelty of the experiences provided plays a central role when it comes to attracting and retaining consumer attention (Gonçalves et al., 2023).

Immersion

Immersion is a perceptual experience that occurs when a digital environment feels so convincing that users momentarily forget reality (Liao et al., 2023), and it depends on the quality of the surrounding environment. Essentially, it refers to the feeling of being physically present in a digital space (Butcher & Sung, 2024).

Available data suggests that this feeling boosts engagement by generating new sensory experiences, increasing the likelihood of offline encounters with the brand, and purchase intentions. However, the relationship between immersion and engagement is mediated by creativity, as consumers' decision to engage with the brand is based on the level of innovativeness associated with the immersive experience (Butcher & Sung, 2024).

Interactivity

There is consensus among scholars that interactivity is one of the main dimensions of innovative communication, changing the way advertising is done, as communication is no longer a brand's monologue. Interactivity marks the moment when this monologue becomes a dialogue between brand and consumers, carried out through channels such as social media. This concept is defined as an action where two (or more) people/agents communicate synchronously and in real time (Hayes, 2025).

It has been established that engagement depends on interactions with one another, with the brand, and with novel technological platforms. Therefore, to understand user behavior, it is essential to examine the full experience users have with technology (Payal et al., 2024).

2.2.2. The Evolution of Digital Communication and Its Impact on Consumer Behaviour

Turning to the present-day landscape, brand communication is an essential part of every

company's marketing strategy, with the primary purpose of boosting awareness and strengthening brand loyalty. This is important because, at the moment of purchase, consumers tend to choose items from brands that are top of mind, a direct response to exposure to the brand's communication (Zehir et al., 2011).

Traditional communication channels are losing their power as customers no longer depend on physical stores to purchase new products. Since then, brands have sought innovative ways to interact with customers, such as digital marketing strategies, which enable them to reach a global customer base (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

The evolution of technology has led to changes in how brands interact with their audiences, in the touchpoints available to them, and in what they can offer consumers. Compared to traditional channels, brands can provide faster responses and services, reach a wider audience, and generate higher levels of engagement, all of which have a stronger impact on customer behavior. More than ever, the affinity a person develops for a brand goes far beyond simply purchasing a product; we're talking about a much deeper relationship that develops as certain needs and expectations are met. (Kalender & Guzmán, 2026)

The advent of the digital has pushed businesses to reshape their marketing and communication strategies, permanently changing the relationship between brands and their consumers. This digital revolution is a direct consequence of increased accessibility to the internet and mobile devices, which has led to the widespread use of social media. As a natural progression, anyone can now create content ("democratization of content creation"), and customers are therefore more informed. For bands to remain competitive, they must adopt innovative communication strategies that prioritize engagement and customized experiences (Dutt et al., 2024).

In the past, the association between a brand and its premium image rested solely on the brand's marketing efforts. Nowadays, in the interactive world we live in, consumers play an active role in shaping a brand's identity. From how consumers interact with a brand to how they feel, every aspect influences the way a brand is perceived (Anning-Dorson & Tackie, 2025). When communication became a two-way street, integrated marketing communications had to evolve in response, and since then, it has become recognized as the most effective commercial strategy, widely used by brands to gain a competitive edge (ul Rehman et al., 2022).

Therefore, as digital technologies have continued to develop, the way brands communicate with their customers has undergone drastic changes, ushering in a new era in which human-technology interaction is increasingly significant. Alongside these changes, the metaverse emerged as an innovative way of communicating with tremendous potential to offer new experiences, increase engagement, and help people express themselves (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024). A brand's presence in the metaverse signals innovation to consumers, thereby creating expectations for novel and exciting experiences (Koohang et al., 2023).

2.3. Metaverse

2.3.1. Definition and Evolution of the Metaverse

The idea of the metaverse was first introduced in a science fiction book by Neal Stephenson, published in 1992, where he envisioned an "immersive virtual universe" that would appear after internet. As time passed, the progression of digital technologies and the rising popularity of VR led digital spaces to evolve toward greater "realism, ubiquity, interoperability, and scalability" (Dionisio et al., 2013). As a result, the isolated virtual environments we were familiar with became the basis for an interconnected digital ecosystem: the metaverse (Dionisio et al., 2013).

The metaverse is a fully immersive, online environment in which digital experiences are integrated with fundamental elements of the world (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024; Payal et al., 2024). In this space, people use digital avatars to interact with one another (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024), treating these virtual characters as extensions of themselves and their identities (Koohang et al., 2023). Another feature of the metaverse is that it is an ongoing environment, meaning that even when a user logs off, it doesn't pause or disappear; other users can continue to enjoy it, contributing to an immersive experience (Payal et al., 2024).

Although the conceptualization of the "metaverse" is still under development, this term refers to a shared online space that one can experience as if it were reality. Essentially, it is a compilation of platforms (e.g. Roblox, Decentraland, Sandbox, Fortnite, etc…) and technological tools required to achieve this futuristic vision of a fully connected online world (Kaur et al., 2024; Roh et al.,

2024).

The technology behind this digital universe includes Virtual Reality (VR), which enables individuals to be placed inside this made-up world, and Augmented Reality (AR), which offers "multisensory experiences" through imagery and information that one would typically encounter in real life (Kaur et al., 2024), virtual assistants and chatbots, novel payment methods, such as cryptocurrencies, and Web 3.0 tools to improve people's experiences in the digital space (Payal et al., 2024).

Even though enthusiasm for the metaverse significantly dropped after the early 2020s, this doesn't mean the metaverse will never live up to its potential. This setback follows a familiar pattern seen with other significant technological milestones, including the internet, portable computers, and smartphones. Recent stagnation is also a direct consequence of the rising interest in generative artificial intelligence, which has become a priority in the industry due to the advantages it offers. Bearing this in mind and recognizing that the metaverse is a technology that requires more sophisticated technological approaches, it is believed that in the future, the metaverse may once again become a tool of interest as software, telecommunications, and hardware advance (Lowry et al., 2025).

2.3.2. An Appealing Tool for Marketing

Chakraborty and Biswal (2024) claim that the metaverse has come to redefine human interactions as well as the way people exchange information by creating the impression that individuals, who are physically separated, are sharing the same space through videos, speech, or body language. Thus, this innovative, immersive space became highly appealing to the marketing field, not only due to its social and entertaining profile but also for its potential to reach a vast audience (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024). This conclusion; however, holds a salient nuance that marketers must consider when attempting to create a sense of immersion. This sensation is not solely dependent on the technology used, but on the quality of the user's subjective experience with that technology itself (Butcher & Sung, 2024). Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that in a context like the metaverse, the quality of the experience will inevitably be linked to the perceived quality of the brand (brand equity), which will significantly impact consumers' decision-making process and willingness to pay higher prices. When a brand communicates signs of excellence,

whether through storytelling, technology performance, or sensory elements, it reduces the psychological distance from the brand and triggers positive emotions (Kalender & Guzmán, 2026).

The metaverse appears to be heading in the direction of mainstream adoption as this immersive virtual environment is projected to skyrocket in the near future, with studies indicating that, by 2030, the metaverse will be composed of 2.6 billion users as it reaches a market value of 507.8 billion US dollars (Statista, 2024). These numbers are a direct consequence of people's growing desire to escape the struggles of everyday life through joyful and engaging experiences (Tao et al., 2025), which brands recognize and leverage to increase brand recognition. This essential factor leads to better engagement and increased purchase intentions (Payal et al., 2024). At the same time, the metaverse is highly effective at strengthening consumer attachment, which, over time, fosters favorable attitudes toward the brand, including higher levels of engagement, loyalty, and profitability (Payal et al., 2024). To benefit from the results, brands are rethinking their entire business strategies to flourish in this innovative digital environment (Koohang et al., 2023). In terms of marketing communications, this means carefully considering the opportunities and challenges that may arise.

The metaverse symbolizes a major transition from the consumer behaviour brands were accustomed to, representing a new digitally immersive era that brings us new experiences, opportunities for new interactions, and even the creation of purely digital products, also known as non-fungible tokens (NFTs) (Kaur et al., 2024), which constitute the leading revenue source in the metaverse economy (Koohang et al., 2023). As this technology matures and gains popularity, the line between online and in-store shopping will continue to blur (Payal et al., 2024).

Generation Z constitutes the primary demographic for the metaverse (Lowry et al., 2025). As tech-savvy consumers, they are showing considerable interest in this technology and are eager to experiment with it, especially when they are familiar with similar technologies, such as virtual reality gaming (Kaur et al., 2024). As a result, they become a very important group in the development of the metaverse itself. As an "influential group of early technology adopters," this technology will likely be developed around their preferences and expectations for this digital environment (Lowry et al., 2025).

In an effort to target this audience, brands have been investing in the metaverse, making it

easier for younger consumers to try their products and engage with the brand itself since they can do so entirely within this digital environment. Over time, they become loyal to the brand, not only within the metaverse but also in the real world, as they start to acquire tangible goods too (Payal et al., 2024).

As outlined before, immersive communication is an innovative way to increase consumer involvement with a brand, as metaverse interactions are more impactful than traditional (non-immersive) forms of communication. Such effects are observed because consumers are not just consuming content from brands but actually interacting with them (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024). The combination of immersiveness and interactivity, something inherent in the metaverse, generates a high level of engagement that scholars refer to as flow (Jafar et al., 2024).

Flow refers to a state of mind where someone is deeply absorbed in an activity. It is a "momentarily unconscious state" shaped by vividness, low self-consciousness, and intense concentration to the point where a person loses track of time (Jafar et al., 2024). This concept was originally introduced by Davis and Csikszentmihalyi (1977), who described it as a "merging of action and awareness, ego and environment", in which, momentarily, one is completely absorbed in what they're doing (Davis & Csikszentmihalyi, 1977) and any thoughts that aren't related to the task at hand disappear (Roh et al., 2024).

In contrast to immersion, which is a condition of the surroundings (Liao et al., 2023), flow is a psychological state that occurs when someone is fully engaged in the activity they're doing. Essentially, the flow experience results from immersion, and the more immersed a person is in the environment, the more likely they are to experience it. Moreover, it is worth emphasizing that if people's flow experience is enjoyable, they're more likely to want to repeat it (Roh et al., 2024).

Another behavioral outcome associated with immersive retail experiences is longer dwell time, which means consumers end up spending more time interacting with these digital platforms (Erensoy et al., 2024). Esta ação é reconhecida por ser um indicador

This line of reasoning highlights how innovative communication requires finding new ways to

connect with consumers beyond simply transmitting a message (Yi et al., 2022). In this context, the metaverse appears as a tool with significant potential, given its distinct communication style, which is extremely relevant for brands that sell a lifestyle in addition to a product, as is the case with masstige brands (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024).

2.3.3. Opportunities and Challenges

Regarding the opportunities that emerge, aside from the extraordinary interactive experience that connects the digital world with the real one to generate benefits for both parties, as mentioned before, marketers can use this tool to engage customers creatively, to build trust and promote connection with the brand (Koohang et al., 2023). This could involve creating live digital events that users can attend, forming strategic partnerships (Payal et al., 2024), or even asking consumers to participate in gamified activities, such as developing new or customized products (Koohang et al., 2023). metaverse makes customers feel truly present in that virtual space (telepresence) and enables them to engage with others in a way that feels natural and organic, as if it were real life. Telepresence yields favorable results in advertising efforts, especially when it offers a multisensory experience that engages all five senses (as opposed to being limited to vision and hearing, as in other forms of digital advertising) (Koohang et al., 2023).

Another opportunity of the metaverse is its ability to foster psychological ownership even when consumers don't legally or physically own a product or service. The immersive nature of this environment exposes users to the product. It allows them to interact with it for as long as they desire, which has been proven to increase a sense of psychological ownership. This feeling positively affects consumers' evaluations of the product and purchase-related responses, such as willingness to pay (Uysal et al., 2026).

Prior literature also highlights the challenges in adopting this cutting-edge technology. For instance, Kaur et al. (2024) mention in their work that the equipment needed to integrate with this virtual world can be expensive and may not be accessible to many consumers. Koohang et al. (2023) corroborate this idea by delving deeper into the subject and explaining how these challenges aren't limited to the consumer and can extend to companies. Since the metaverse is still in an initial phase of development, research addresses some of its current limitations, including its reliance on sound and vision, which can cause consumers to lose interest. Considering that the success of this

digital environment relies heavily on the consumer's perception of how similar this digital universe is to real-life experiences, this must be taken into account by companies venturing into the metaverse. Furthermore, since the metaverse is a complex virtual ecosystem comprising numerous platforms, each with its own specifications and distinctive features, adopting this innovative technology requires a considerable investment, which may be difficult for smaller companies to make (Koohang et al., 2023).

3. Empirical Study

This chapter will focus on the empirical study, designed to test the conceptual framework. It begins by outlining the study's objectives and research questions. Then, the conceptual model is developed, followed by clarification of the choice of population and methodology to be applied. Finally, it presents the questions that will be asked in the interviews, along with the interview procedure.

3.1 Objectives and Research Question

As mentioned throughout this paper, as competition intensifies and consumers' loyalty becomes more volatile, brands have turned to innovative communication strategies to ensure a competitive advantage (Zhang, 2022). Among them, the metaverse appears to be a potential tool for engaging digital-native consumers, such as Generation Z (Kaur et al., 2024). However, the metaverse is a relatively recent concept that is still in development, which means that the existing literature is very limited, specifically on how technological innovations (e.g., augmented reality, virtual reality, etc…) can be tackled by the marketing field to generate engaging experiences (Dutt et al., 2024).

Considering the above, the main objective of this study is to understand how masstige brands can use the metaverse as an innovative means of communication to engage Gen Z, generating favorable outcomes such as brand engagement and purchase behavior. By extension, this study also aims to understand how professionals expect Gen Z consumers to respond when masstige brands enter the metaverse in an attempt to connect with them. The connection among these factors remains unexplored; therefore, the present study addresses this gap in literature.

Thus, the following research questions were formulated:

Q1: How can masstige brands use the metaverse to innovate their communication strategies to appeal to Generation Z consumers?

Q2: How do marketing professionals expect Generation Z to respond to innovative metaverse-based communication initiatives from masstige brands?

To achieve these objectives and answer the previously established questions, the S-O-R framework was used to develop the conceptual model.

Mehrabian and Russell (1974) created the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, a model that explains the relationship between an individual's embedded environment and their actions, mediated by emotions elicited by external stimuli. The paradigm emphasizes that the environment can influence consumer behavior, but only if the climate elicits a response (emotional or cognitive), whether through an interaction, a physical item, or a situational event (Erensoy et al., 2024). This theoretical approach has been used to study consumer behaviour (Jafar et al., 2023) and is the preferred choice for scholars seeking to investigate its specific application in the metaverse (Erensoy et al., 2024; Jafar et al., 2024; Roh et al., 2024).

Guided by this framework, stimuli (S) are external factors influencing one's emotions, and the organism (O) refers to an individual's internal processes, which trigger a behavioral response (R) (Erensoy et al., 2024).

In the context of this study, the stimuli are separated into two categories: "Masstige Cues", which comprise premium aesthetics and social status signaling, and "Innovative Communication", which integrates the dimensions listed in the literature review (technological innovation, immersion, and interactivity). In the present study, "premium aesthetics" refers to the use of visual cues that communicate prestige, exclusivity, higher quality, and superior value (Pombo & Velasco, 2021), while "social status signaling" refers to the possibility of showing off one's wealth and positioning on the social ladder through the purchase of the product (Shukla et al., 2022).

As one's possible internal reactions are discussed, the study suggests that these stimuli may trigger emotional engagement (e.g., feelings of enjoyment, excitement, and pleasure), perceived innovation, and self-brand congruity. As for behavioural responses, the study seeks to understand how Gen Z consumers will respond both online (engagement, longer dwell time, and increased purchase intention) and offline (engagement and increased purchase intention).

Prior research has highlighted that while there are a variety of factors influencing consumers'

engagement with masstige brands, intrinsic motivators are more potent in shaping attitude towards the brand. In contrast, extrinsic motivators are more powerful in encouraging consumption. In light of this, to optimize the potential of their communication efforts, masstige brands must create campaigns that use extrinsic motivations as stimuli to trigger intrinsic motivations (Shahid et al., 2024). That's why, in the context of this research, elements such as "premium aesthetics" and "social status signaling" are used to elicit internal feelings such as "emotional engagement" and "self-brand congruity". The combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators enables a brand to generate positive behaviors (e.g. online/offline engagement, longer dwell time and increase purchase intention).

Simultaneously, the dimensions of innovative communication will be explored to understand the metaverse's potential to create emotional engagement and a sense of perceived innovation, as it is an essential mediator in motivating consumer engagement with a brand (Butcher & Sung, 2024).

The conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts the relationship among all variables in the S-O-R framework.

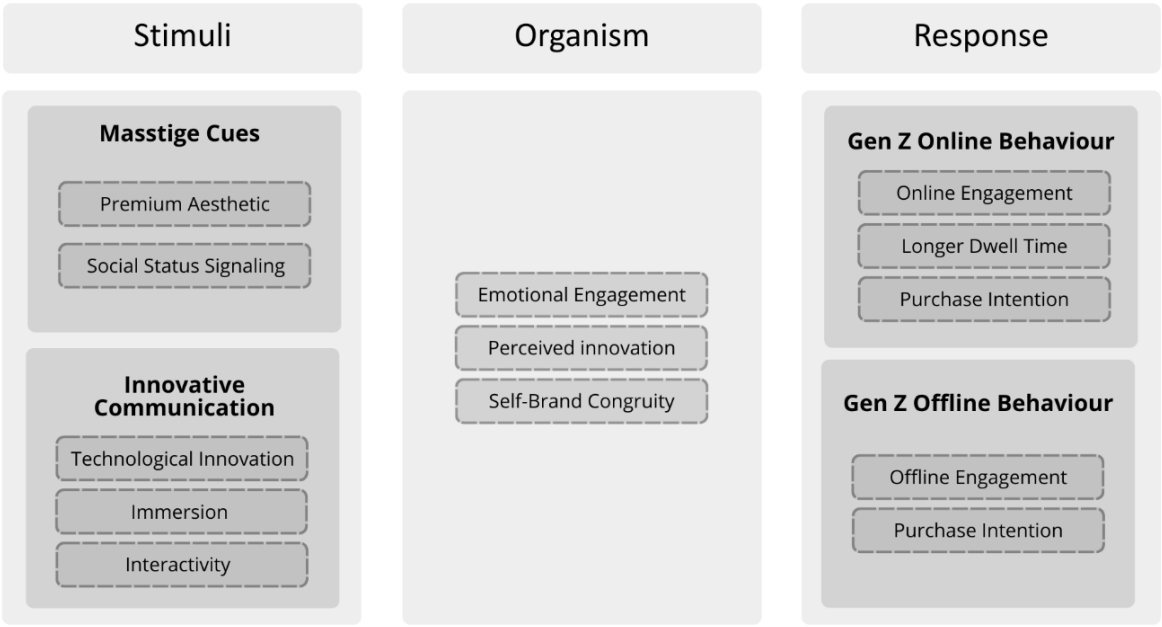


Figure 1 - Conceptual Model

Source: Own Elaboration

3.2. Methodological Approach

To answer these questions, this study will use a qualitative approach conducted in Portugal. The decision to study this country stems from the recognition that the adoption and effectiveness of innovations in communication may vary depending on the characteristics of the market in which they are introduced. Although the metaverse represents a global technological development, consumers' familiarity with emerging technologies and digital behaviors is shaped by their geographical context. Therefore, the experience of these professionals provides relevant contextual knowledge regarding local consumers, brand communication practices, and the perceived potential of this type of innovation.

This option enables a nuanced and well-grounded understanding of the stimuli intentionally presented to Generation Z consumers (S), their internal processes during the experience (O), and the behavioral response they elicit (R). A significant portion of the studies conducted on consumer behavior in the metaverse opt for a quantitative approach, encouraging future research to focus on qualitative methods to have a deeper understanding of the matter (e.g. (Jafar et al., 2024; Jafar et al., 2023)).

3.3. Interview Procedure – Questionnaire Development & Pilot Interviews

This study conducted semi-structured interviews, which were developed and implemented through several preparatory phases. Initially, the interview guide was drafted based on a literature review and the research objectives, and then the interview protocol was defined.

To encourage participants to explore the topic in their own way, the interviews included open-ended questions that did not restrict the knowledge presented to extremely specific areas. The interview guide used is divided into five parts. The first part is dedicated to collecting demographic information about the participants, while the second one focuses on the metaverse in a broader sense, in an effort to understand to what extent (and in what ways) the professionals believed the metaverse could be used as a strategic tool. In the third part of the interview, the focus shifts to the stimuli provided by the technology or, through it, by brands. In the fourth part, the interviewees shared their perspectives on the feelings and internal experiences that users have when they are inside this universe; and finally, in the last phase of the interview, they shared the reactions that

Generation Z is expected to have (or that are typically observed) following this experience.

Before the interviews were conducted for this study, two pilot interviews (March 2026) were held to gather feedback on the questions presented. The purpose of these pilot interviews was to ensure that all questions were clearly understood by the respondents and that they were able to provide answers pertinent to the study. After that, the interview period began and took place between April and June 2026. The interviews were undertaken online via video calls on Google Meet. All participants provided written consent to participate and gave their responses in their native language (Portuguese), which were carefully transcribed into English.

3.4 Interviewees Characterization

Given the objectives of this thesis, the selection of research subjects was intentional to ensure that all interviewees have a level of knowledge (or experience) relevant to the study in question, thereby guaranteeing the collection of rich and meaningful insights. The goal of this qualitative approach is to prioritize the depth of the responses obtained (Bouncken et al., 2026).

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, only professionals who work in marketing/communication agencies in Portugal were invited to participate. This decision is a result of their regular interaction with Gen Z-focused brands, which enables them to offer knowledgeable and experience-based perspectives. Prior to the interviews, all marketing experts confirmed they were familiar with masstige brands, as well as the metaverse, making them suitable for this study.

As presented in Table 3, there were a total of 26 participants in the study, including individuals of both genders aged between 22 and 49 years and with varying levels of education. The study also included some workers currently living in Portugal (originally from Brazil) who met all the aforementioned requirements. To guarantee a diverse range of responses, professionals from various agencies of different sizes with distinct client portfolios were interviewed.

Professionals	Age	Gender	Company	Position	Educational Level	Years of Professional Experience
Interview 01	33	Male	COMON	Director of Strategy	Master's Degree	10
Interview 02	47	Male	MESSAGE	CEO/Director	Master's Degree	20+
Interview 03	41	Male	Chão em Lava	CEO/Director	Bachelor's Degree	17
Interview 04	28	Male	CAETSU TWO	Brand Activation Executive	N.A.	2
Interview 05	27	Male	PHD Portugal	Digital Account	High School	7
Interview 06	29	Female	CAETSU TWO	Senior Account Executive	Postgraduate	9
Interview 07	41	Male	Loba	Head of Branding	Master's Degree	16
Interview 08	35	Female	Silver Lining	Co-founder	Master's Degree	13
Interview 09	25	Female	BrandTale	Digital Marketeer	High School	2
Interview 10	49	Female	Bastarda	Senior Account Manager	Master's Degree	20+
Interview 11	44	Female	PHD Portugal	Digital Account	N.A.	20+
Interview 12	29	Female	BBDO	Senior Social Media Manager	Postgraduate	5
Interview 13	25	Male	CAETSU TWO	Social Media Manager	Bachelor's Degree	7
Interview 14	29	Male	Weboost Agency	Paid Media Manager	Postgraduate	5
Interview 15	22	Male	WYperformance	Content Manager	Bachelor's Degree	1
Interview 16	30	Female	CAETSU TWO	Head of Social Media	Bachelor's Degree	10
Interview 17	43	Male	Coco Creative	CEO/Director	Master's Degree	15
Interview 18	31	Male	Foco Criativo	Marketing Manager	Bachelor's Degree	12
Interview 19	27	Female	Companhia das Soluções	Junior Account	Master's Degree	3
Interview 20	25	Female	Coco Creative	Project Manager	Master's Degree	2
Interview 21	31	Male	WYperformance	AI & Innovation Consultant	Postgraduate	12
Interview 22	37	Female	Adclick Group	Head of Strategic Engagement	Bachelor's Degree	14
Interview 23	33	Female	VML	Digital Account	Bachelor's Degree	13
Interview 24	45	Male	Loba	Brand Strategy Team Leader	N.A.	20+
Interview 25	32	Female	Omnicom Media	Senior Account	Bachelor's Degree	9
Interview 26	37	Female	Euro M'	Account Manager	Bachelor's Degree	17

Table 3 - Sample Characterization
Source: Own Elaboration

3.5 Saturation Point

To calculate the saturation point, the first four interviewers will be considered as the 'base size'. This group will serve as a basis for comparison regarding the number of themes we identify in each interview. To find out how many new codes emerged during the interviews, we will use the same sample size as Guest et al. (2020) for the run length, with two or three interviewees. Once the information threshold (≤5% new information) was reached, the study assumed that it had reached saturation and proceeded to analyze the collected information.

The baseline interviews (4 people) identified 39 new themes, while the first run (interviews 5-6) identified 4 new themes, giving us a saturation rate of 4/39 = 10,26%. In the second run (interviews 6-7) it was even further from achieving the saturation point due to the large number of additional themes that were discovered (9/39 = 23,08%). By the third run (interviews 7-8), the percentage of new topics didn't change much (8/39 = 20,51%). The fourth (interviews 8-9) and fifth run (interviews 9-10) had the same saturation rate of 2/39 = 5,13%. The saturation point (1/39 = 2,56%) was finally reached by the sixth run (interviews 10-11), but it's important to point out that new topics kept being introduced after that. It was not until the seventeenth run (interviews 21–22) that new topics stopped emerging. All themes identified during the interview are detailed in Table 4.

Codes	Absolute Frequency
Stimuli	
Innovative Communication	
Immersion	20
Interactivity	16
Technological Innovation	14
Masstige Cues	
Aesthetics	20
Aspirational desires	5
Brand identity	12
Brand Values	18
Quality Signals	7
Social Status Signaling	20

Storytelling	7
Organism	
Authenticity	11
Brand-Self Congruity	14
Curiosity	15
Desire	5
Emotional Engagement	21
Escapism	12
Feeling of Relevancy	6
Feeling part of an exclusive group	17
Perceived Innovation	19
Psychological Discomfort	10
Sense of Belonging, Inclusion & Connection	5
Social Pressure (ex. FOMO, social anxiety, etc...)	6
Response	
Brand or Metaverse Adoption	10
Brand or Metaverse Rejection	13
Gen Z Offline Behaviour	
Increase purchase intention offline	19
Offline Engagement	18
Gen Z Online Behaviour	
Increase purchase potential online	17
Longer Dwell Time	19
Online Engagement	18
Strengthen the relationship with the brand	18
WOM	18

Table 4 - Overview of Main Themes and Subthemes

Source: Own Elaboration

4. Discussion

This section covers the conclusions drawn from the interviews. The findings are structured according to the various dimensions of the conceptual framework and the themes that emerged from abductive interpretation. Throughout this chapter, direct statements from the interviews were used to point out patterns or opposing viewpoints.

4.1 Perceived Potential of the Metaverse

Table 5 shows that, out of 26 participants, 18 feel that some brands should invest in the metaverse (depending on their target, strategic goals, etc.), while 5 believe all brands should. Only two people argued that it would be unwise to invest in the metaverse.

Investment in the Metaverse	Absolute Frequency
Brands SHOULD invest in the metaverse	5
Brands SHOULDN'T invest in the metaverse	2
SOME brands should invest in the metaverse	18

Table 5 - Professional Opinions on Metaverse Investment

Source: Own Elaboration

Most professionals (21 out of 26) expressed confidence in the metaverse's current or future potential, as seen in Table 6. When comparing these data to each professional's level of familiarity, we can see that 83.3% (5 people) of those with a high level of familiarity are optimistic about this technology, followed by 81.3% (13 people) of those with moderate knowledge and 75% (3 people) of those with little experience. Although there is not complete consensus, one can observe that this positive attitude toward the metaverse is present at all degrees of familiarity. However, in most cases, experts with greater sector experience have higher expectations. Only I07 expressed a pessimistic attitude, despite having worked with this technology before. However, it is important to note the nuances of this opinion, as the participant believes that "the digital world does more harm than good," implying that this pessimistic attitude may reflect a broader sentiment across various technologies rather than an isolated feeling specific to the metaverse.

Participant	Attitude toward Metaverse	Metaverse Familiarity
I01	**Pessimistic**	Medium
I02	**Optimistic**	**High**
I03	**Optimistic**	Medium
I04	**Optimistic**	Low
I05	**Optimistic**	Medium
I06	**Optimistic**	Medium
I07	**Pessimistic**	**High**
I08	**Optimistic**	**High**
I09	**Optimistic**	Medium
I10	**Optimistic**	Medium
I11	**Optimistic**	Low
I12	**Optimistic**	Medium
I13	**Optimistic**	**High**
I14	**Optimistic**	**High**
I15	**Optimistic**	Low
I16	**Optimistic**	Medium
I17	**Optimistic**	Medium
I18	**Optimistic**	Medium
I19	**Optimistic**	Medium
I20	**Optimistic**	Medium
I21	**Optimistic**	Medium
I22	**Optimistic**	Medium
I23	**Pessimistic**	Medium
I24	**Pessimistic**	Low
I25	**Optimistic**	**High**
I26	**Pessimistic**	Medium

Table 6 - Relationship Between "Attitude Toward the Metaverse" and "Metaverse Familiarity"

Source: Own Elaboration

One of the most knowledgeable participants about the metaverse shared their perspective on how the future could look for this technology:

> **"From my agency's perspective, and as a professional who works with brands and has extensive experience with the metaverse (always through devices like virtual glasses), the experiences are getting better and better, and they're truly spectacular. However, day-to-day brands still aren't investing due to limited reach. However, as soon as the devices needed to access the metaverse become accessible to a large number of people, I believe there could suddenly be a very rapid adoption." (I02)**

4.2 Stimuli Encouraging Consumer Engagement With Masstige Brands

Studying Generation Z (individuals aged 14 to 29) was a particularly significant choice as most experts interviewed saw them as the primary demographic for the metaverse, as it is highlighted in Table 7. Generation Alpha (individuals aged between 2 and 13) was also mentioned several times as a potential target group for this digital environment in the long run, followed by Millennials (individuals aged between 30 and 45), who were occasionally referenced, but not frequently enough to be considered a particularly relevant target group.

Best Generation to Approach in the Metaverse	Absolute Frequency
Gen Alpha	18
Gen Z	24
Millenials	9

Table 7 - Best Generation to Approach in the Metaverse

Source: Own Elaboration

Interestingly, when asked about the individuals most susceptible to being targeted by the metaverse, the majority of professionals responded solely based on age, with only a small fraction adding psychological traits, like those mentioned in Table 8, that might categorize metaverse users.

Psychological Traits of Metaverse's Target Users	Absolute Frequency
Digital savvy audiences	3
Gamers	3
Innovation Seekers	2
Pop culture-interested people	2
Technology enthusiasts	4

Table 8 - Psychological Traits of Metaverse's Target Users

Source: Own Elaboration

Findings revealed that the technological features that most attract users to the metaverse are the depth of immersion, as well as the ability to interact much more with the technology itself and with others within this environment (something that is still very limited in other digital media), along with the innovation factor associated with the technology. Several participants pointed out

the importance of creating interactive experiences that fully absorb users:

> **"(…) the environment is so completely immersive that, when we're there, we don't even notice time passing. We're truly focused on what we're doing because it's so different from what we're used to, and, as a rule, the experiences there are quite unique, so they captivate people more." (I10)**

> **"This is an audience that highly values interactivity and likes to participate in things, not just be a passive spectator." (I12)**

However, when it comes to attracting customers to a specific brand type, technology alone is insufficient. Curated aesthetics is commonly highlighted as a significant criterion for masstige brands, but it is not a deciding factor in and of itself. Brand identity and values, along with everything the brand represents, are typically a big draw. This demonstrates how individuals tend to associate themselves with brands that convey a sense of prestige and provide value to their customers. Many professionals also emphasized the persuasive power of storytelling, which has proven particularly significant for this generation, noting that it should not be overlooked in the future.

> **"(…) it's all about the storytelling created around it. In the metaverse, I would say that storytelling has to be even stronger" (I06)**

During the discussion, various experts also pointed out some of the disadvantages of this technological innovation that may dissuade or concern some people. Table 8 outlines the main negative aspects that came up during interviews.

Negative Aspects of the Metaverse	Absolute Frequency
Information & Trust Risks	3
Isolation & Detachment from Reality	4
Psychological Strain	3

Tabela 9 - Negative Aspects of the Metaverse

Source: Own Elaboration

4.3 Consumers' Interpretation of the Experience

As the conversation turned to how consumers might interpret these experiences and feel during

them, marketing professionals drew attention to the nuances surrounding these issues, nothing that a user can have either a good or a bad experience, which affects the emotions they experience.

Most participants assumed that the experience would be well-designed and that users would have a pleasant experience, generating emotional engagement. They mentioned feelings such as escapism, curiosity, and a sense of belonging to an exclusive group.

> **"What I've experienced myself, and what I believe users might also feel, is a sense of excitement, enthusiasm, and wonder, given the entire technological universe that the metaverse creates." (I14)**

When it comes to negative feelings, the reflection was more complex. Although the possibility of a poorly designed or overly commercial experience was acknowledged, it's important to note that not all negative fears are directed at the metaverse or the experience itself. Occasionally, negative feelings like frustration are directed at reality, which bears no resemblance to the life they have created for themselves in the metaverse, which is tailored to the user.

> **"On the other hand, experiences that are too commercial or invasive can lead to rejection and a loss of authenticity." (I09)**

> **"(…) if you become too attached to the character you've created, you might find that you like it so much that you end up living solely based on a projection and an ideal you've created and then struggle to accept even physical aspects of yourself. If you're creating a character who dresses a certain way, who hangs out with certain people, who travels, who has a range of experiences, and then, in your day-to-day life, you don't have money, you don't accept your physical self, or you struggle to make friends, that can create a lot of frustration." (I08)**

Despite everything discussed, the majority of participants believe that Gen Z users would enjoy their time in the metaverse.

4.4 Consumers' Responses

The responses indicate a certain level of sensitivity to the individual's internal processes.

Participants concluded that a positive experience would lead to positive attitudes toward the brand, whereas a negative experience would lead to the opposite effect. Although the responses were consistent with the initially proposed model, new codes emerged, as shown in Table 10. Among the most widely agreed-upon points, a substantial number of participants emphasized that it would lead to positive word of mouth (whether in person or online), ignite curiosity to learn more about the brand and/or the metaverse, and strengthen the relationship with the brand.

Response	
Gen Z Offline Behaviour	
Increase purchase intention offline	19
Offline Engagement	18
Gen Z Online Behaviour	
Increase purchase potential online	17
Longer Dwell Time	19
Online Engagement	18
Brand or Metaverse Adoption	10
Brand or Metaverse Rejection	13
Strengthen the relationship with the brand	18
WOM	18

Tabela 10 - Gen Z Users' Expected Responses

Source: Own Elaboration

4.5 Relationships Across the S-O-R Framework

After examining the results for the different parameters of the S-O-R model separately, Table 11 was developed with the intention of studying the relationship among these dimensions and identifying patterns across the interviews.

During this cross-sectional assessment of marketing professionals' responses, a correlation was identified between participants' overall attitude toward the metaverse and their perceptions of its potential. Among the 21 individuals identified as positive, 18 recognized the metaverse's allure,

while 19 anticipated increased brand interaction. In contrast, none of the five pessimistic participants rated the metaverse's appeal highly, and only one mentioned that this technology could generate a high level of brand engagement.

When we focus our analysis on the dimensions of the S-O-R model, we can assert that the most consistent patterns emerged around brand engagement. Among the 18 participants who rated the metaverse's appeal highly, 17 (94.4%) believed it would lead to strong brand engagement. Similarly, 18 of the 20 participants who rated the influence of masstige cues positively predicted that the experience would result in high brand engagement. These findings reveal that both the perceived appeal of the metaverse's specific qualities and the characteristics and positioning elements of masstige brands (e.g., prestige, aspiration, exclusivity, etc.) were consistently linked to higher expectations of consumer engagement.

Participant	STIMULUS (S)		ORGANISM (O)			RESPONSE (R)		
Participant	Metaverse Appeal	Masstige Cue Impact	Expected User Experience	Emotional Response	Revisit / Continued Use	WOM	Brand Engagement	Purchase Intention
I01	Medium	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Conditional	Mixed	Medium	Conditional
I02	**High**	Positive	Positive	Positive	**Yes**	Positive	**High**	**Yes**
I03	Medium	Positive	Mixed	Positive	Not explicit	Positive	Medium	Conditional
I04	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	**Yes**	Not explicit	**High**	**Yes**
I05	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	Not explicit	Not explicit	**High**	**Yes**
I06	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	Conditional	Not explicit	**High**	Conditional
I07	Medium	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Conditional	Not explicit	Medium	Conditional
I08	Medium	Positive	Mixed	Positive	Conditional	Not explicit	**High**	Conditional
I09	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	**Yes**	Positive	**High**	Conditional
I10	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	**Yes**	Positive	**High**	Not explicit
I11	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	Conditional	Positive	**High**	Not explicit
I12	**High**	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	**Yes**	Positive	**High**	Conditional
I13	Medium	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	Conditional	Mixed	**High**	**Yes**
I14	**High**	Positive	Positive	Positive	Conditional	Not explicit	**High**	Conditional
I15	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	**Yes**	Positive	**High**	**Yes**
I16	**High**	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Conditional	Mixed	**High**	Conditional
I17	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	Not explicit	Positive	**High**	**Yes**
I18	**High**	Positive	Positive	Mixed	Not explicit	Positive	**High**	**Yes**
I19	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	Not explicit	Positive	**High**	**Yes**
I20	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	Not explicit	Positive	**High**	**Yes**
I21	**High**	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	**Yes**	Not explicit	Medium	Not explicit
I22	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	Not explicit	Positive	**High**	Conditional
I23	Medium	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	**Yes**	Not explicit	Medium	Conditional
I24	Medium	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	**Yes**	Not explicit	Medium	Not explicit
I25	**High**	Positive	Mixed	Mixed	Not explicit	Mixed	**High**	Not explicit
I26	Medium	Positive	Mixed	Positive	Conditional	Positive	**High**	Not explicit

Table 11 - Relationship Between S-O-R Variables
Source: Own Elaboration

5. Conclusion

This study was designed to determine how the metaverse can be used as an innovative communication channel to help masstige businesses gain a competitive advantage with Generation Z. The data presented above generally support the framework outlined earlier, as well as several points raised in the literature review. Still, they also reveal that certain relations are more complex and conditional than the framework initially suggested.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study suggest that innovative communication generates value through the experience itself, rather than through technological novelty. Characteristics such as immersion and innovation matter only because of the environments they create and the experiences they enable, not simply because the technology is perceived as "novel". This data is entirely consistent with the latest research conducted by academics (Bogicevic et al., 2024; Butcher & Sung, 2024; Tao et al., 2025), who acknowledge that all previously discussed factors are influenced by each individual's subjective perception of the experience and device used, which must be taken into consideration. Although these characteristics remain the primary drivers of the metaverse, another important factor has emerged: socialization and a sense of community, as shown by Jafar et al. (2023), suggests that the initially presented metaverse stimuli may be overly focused on the technological aspect.

Expanding on the discussion of stimuli, but now focusing on masstige cues, several participants emphasized the importance of achieving a balance between the aspirational/premium segment while remaining attainable and accessible to a broad audience, something that has been pointed out several times over the years by many authors (Al-Issa et al., 2024; Anning-Dorson & Tackie, 2025; Kumar et al., 2020). Accessibility and exclusivity should not be viewed as opposing concepts in which one must dominate the other, especially in a digital environment recognized for blurring the boundaries and restraints that exist in the physical world. Our findings support Perez et al.'s (2026) theory that the metaverse can democratize access without democratizing prestige, while challenging the argument of Shukla et al. (2022), who claim that accessibility can threaten symbolic value. While this may be the reality for luxury brands, the results show that masstige brands not only tolerate it but also require it to build scale and gain cultural relevance. This tension highlights the distinction

between luxury democratization and masstige value creation.

Nonetheless, the comments acquired from the experts provide an interesting counterpoint to some of the findings in Perez et al. (2026) and Anning-Dorson and Tackie (2025) work. While acknowledging the importance of accessibility, the interviewees emphasized the need not to completely dismiss the issue of exclusivity, which conflicts with Perez's claim that popularity-based social cues can shape actual purchasing behavior in the metaverse and increase purchase intent.

When it comes to the organism, the findings suggest adopting the same approach as Jafar et al. (2024) and viewing this aspect of the S-O-R framework as an evaluative filter rather than an automatic favorable reaction. Much like those authors, participants repeatedly stated that users' feelings would be dependent on execution, which may result in either positive or negative internal processes. Factors such as relevance, authenticity, and execution are essential variables in determining whether the technological stimuli result in a positive or negative outcome.

As we move towards users' responses, surfaced far more frequently than direct purchase intention. Participants often framed purchases as something that could occur later, after developing a relationship with a brand, as Payal et al. (2024). On a more comprehensive level, Santini et al. (2020) analysis of 97 studies validates the idea that customer engagement directly influences behavioral intentions and word-of-mouth. This could imply that engagement should be viewed as an intermediary stage between the organism and the response rather than being placed at the same conceptual level as all other behavioural outcomes.

Still on the subject of consumer behaviour, there are also authors such as Alipour and Gallegos (2026) who suggest slight modifications to the conceptual model initially presented, as they believe that a longer dwell time can be integrated into the overall concept of online/offline engagement. However, the authors point out that this metric relies heavily on consumers' emotional and cognitive responses and argue that they should be evaluated together, a perspective shared by many interviewees (Alipour & Gallegos, 2026).

With all of this in mind, Figure 2 shows the new proposal for the conceptual model.

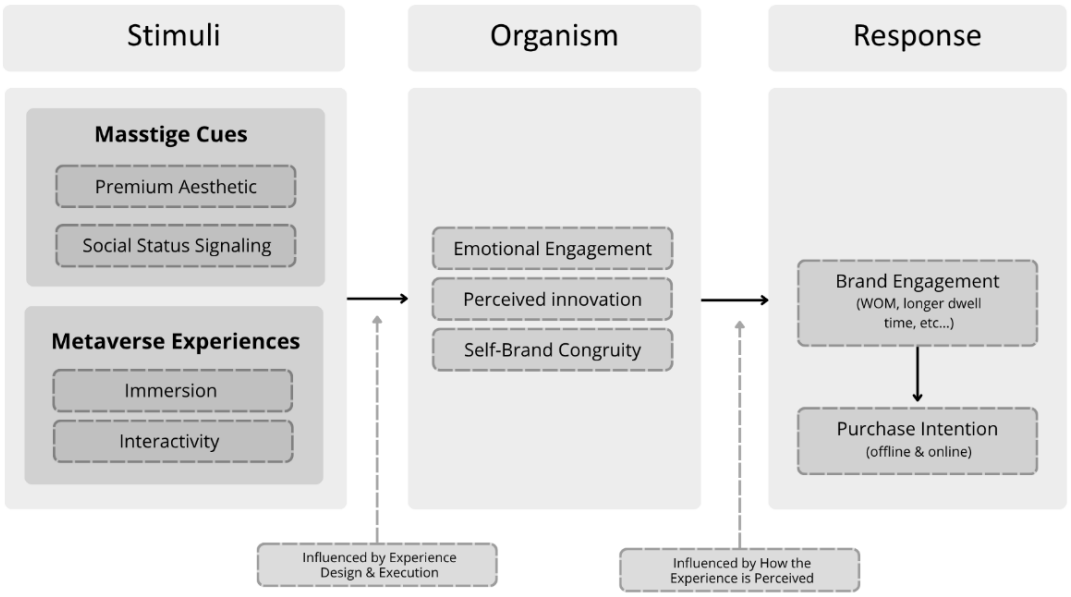


Figure 2 - Revised Conceptual Framework

Source: Own Elaboration

5.2 Practical Implications

The research conducted in this paper also presents practical implications that should be considered by professionals who wish to work with masstige brands in the metaverse. Before entering this channel, brands must verify whether their consumers are actually present there and whether the cost-benefit ratio justifies the investment, as the experts interviewed have repeatedly stated. They shouldn't enter the metaverse to show off their innovativeness (Koohang et al., 2023).

Participants' emphasis on gamification, customization, social interaction, and active participation reinforces the view that metaverse communication should be designed around experience. Some of them even stated explicitly that communication should be experiential rather than promotional. This evidence shows that participants are well aware of the current market, as recent studies (Bogicevic et al., 2024; Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024) indicate that people don't respond well to forced promotional activities, especially among younger audiences who see them as inauthentic and a direct demotivator. It's important to build activations around what users can do, such as exploring, playing, customizing, and interacting.

Another perspective shared that reflects the current reality is that marketers shouldn't measure their success through immediate purchases alone. Engagement, repeated participation, WOM, and more should be considered KPIs as relevant as sales numbers, given that consumers are more likely to engage in these behaviors than to make actual purchases. That being said, this doesn't imply that their affinity for the brand isn't growing and that, ultimately, it will not result in a purchase. Payal et al. (2024) actively support these claims by explaining the relationship between metaverse brand engagement and real-world purchases. However, it appears that there is no consensus on this matter, as scholars such as Perez et al. (2026) caution that intentions don't necessarily translate into actions.

If brands decide to incorporate this technology into their communications strategy, it's important to treat it as part of the wider communication ecosystem rather than an isolated effort. Many professionals tackled this issue, highlighting the value of phygital experiences, which aligns with recent studies in this field (Anwar et al., 2025; Chang & Li, 2022; Kalender & Guzmán, 2026).

Most importantly, practitioners should take from this research that the metaverse's value extends beyond consumption or communication. This is directly endorsed by Lu et al. (2026), who argue that it can be used as an observational environment to gather multimodal data and analyze consumer behavior. Perez et al. (2026) appear to agree with this statement, as he repeatedly emphasizes the need to observe actual behavior rather than focusing too much on intentions because, after all, that is what truly matters. Additionally, beyond the possibility of examining behaviour, it is also possible to understand how people feel and express themselves as they go about their own experiences. Since boundaries are constantly being challenged in the metaverse, this platform allows professionals to test and deploy different approaches to gather insights that they can subsequently apply to their real-life strategies (Lu et al., 2026).

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, its scope and findings must be interpreted considering certain limitations. To begin, the study focuses entirely on marketing professionals' perspectives, capturing only expected consumer reactions based on their prior experiences and/or expertise rather than directly observed consumer behavior. Since many have not worked with the metaverse in a while, it is important to consider that consumers (and the technology itself) have

changed, and outcomes may differ. Future research would benefit from an investigation centered on both perspectives (users and professionals), not in hypothetical scenarios but in an actual experiment in which users could be observed interacting with the metaverse in real time.

The fact that all the interviewees reside or work in Portugal also limits the generalizability of the conclusions. The Portuguese market is relatively small, and there are fewer prospects for large-scale investments in emerging technologies such as the metaverse, which limits research and experimentation. Future research could expand upon these findings by focusing on larger countries, groups of countries, or even comparing developed countries with emerging economies. Not only would the results be more comprehensive, but this approach would also allow us to understand the role cultural context may play in the adoption of these technologies.

Additionally, given the broader scope of this analysis within the masstige sector, consumer responsiveness is likely to vary across specific industries and brands. This means that investigating these cross-industry nuances presents a valuable avenue for future research.

Ultimately, because this is a qualitative study, the researchers' subjective analysis is also applied, and the results collected are detailed interpretations that do not allow for an assessment of the prevalence of these patterns in larger groups.

Despite the above limitations, these do not undermine the study or call into question its contributions. Instead, they serve as potential starting points for scholars who want to explore the themes discussed here in greater depth.

5.4 Final Remarks

This study conducted a qualitative analysis of marketing professionals' perspectives on the use of metaverse-based communication initiatives by masstige brands, as well as the expected responses to such initiatives among Generation Z. The findings suggest that assessing the metaverse's significance for brand communication should not be based solely on technological novelty. The value of this immersive environment appears to be measured by its ability to create meaningful interaction while remaining consistent with the brand's identity and positioning. By answering the stated research questions, this study increases understanding of how this form of innovative communication may influence consumer-brand connections within the specific context

of masstige positioning.

Overall, the study emphasizes the need to approach the metaverse as a strategic tool rather than purely a technological opportunity, while also paving the way for future research to validate and extend these insights through consumer-based and behavioral approaches. For masstige brands specifically, future competitiveness may depend not on being present in every emerging technology space but on recognizing when those environments can boost brand positioning without weakening the aspirational value that distinguished the brand.

Appendix

Questionnaire

Statements Reported on Academic Literature	Questions
Profile Characterization of the Interviewee	
It's important to gather demographic data on the group of individuals being interviewed (in a way that does not compromise the anonymity of participants) in order to contextualize the qualitative data collected and allow for an adequate assessment of the sample (Braun & Clarke, 2025).	**Q1:** Age Range **Q2:** Gender **Q3:** Position currently held and company name **Q4:** Years of professional experience **Q5:** Area of specialization
Metaverse as a Strategic Brand Tool	
The Metaverse has become highly appealing to the marketing field, not only due to its social and entertaining profile but also for its potential to reach a vast audience (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024). Tech-savvy consumers, such as Gen Z, are particularly curious about this technology and manifest interest in experimenting with it (Kaur et al., 2024).	**Q6:** How has the role of the metaverse been evolving in marketing until now, and how do you predict it will evolve in the future? **Q7:** Should a brand invest in its presence at the metaverse? Why? **(If answered "yes" to the previous question) → Q7.1:** What are the best strategies and actions for brands in the metaverse? **Q8:** According to your experience, what target audience would this platform be effective in attracting?
Stimuli in the Metaverse	
Novel technologies create numerous opportunities for consumer-brand interactions (Santini et al., 2020). In this context, immersiveness can increase engagement if consumers perceive the experience as innovative (Butcher & Sung, 2024), while interactivity affects engagement based on the interactions users have with each other, the brand, and the technology itself (Payal et al., 2024).	**Q9:** Which aspects of the metaverse do you believe have the greatest potential to stimulate or engage Gen Z users? **Q10:** Which specific features of the metaverse do you consider most stimulating or appealing to users? **Q11:** Which brand elements do you believe should be communicated through the metaverse to stimulate user engagement? **Q12:** Are there any particularities or

Masstige brands focus on creating an emotional connection with consumers (Michael J Silverstein, 2003). Their prestige arises from elements like brand aesthetics, and many consumers purchase them as a way to gain social approval and signal their social status (Shahid et al., 2024). Additionally, masstige consumers exhibit a strong preference to buy from brands they identify themselves with (Al-Issa et al., 2024)	peculiarities among the elements that masstige brands should communicate compared with other brands? **Q13:** Which brand elements do you believe could influence Gen Z consumers' perception in the context of the metaverse?
Internal Feeling Triggered by the Metaverse	
Positive brand behaviors are the outcome of a consumer's emotional engagement with a brand (Bilro et al., 2022). On a related note, consumers' decision to engage with the brand is influenced by how innovative they perceive the immersive experience to be; therefore, it is important to ensure this internal process is created during the experience (Butcher & Sung, 2024). Lastly, Al-Issa et al. (2024) have elaborated on the importance of consumers feeling a sense of identification with the brand to generate positive brand behavior.	**Q14:** Which emotional or psychological responses do you believe the metaverse environment may evoke in individuals? **Q15.** How do you think the experiences created by brands in the metaverse could emotionally impact Gen Z users (positively or negatively) and why?
Consumer's Response to the Metaverse	
An individual's spending habits are more influenced by how they feel about the product rather than their disposable income (Kumar et al., 2020). When consumers feel emotionally connected with a brand, they display favorable behaviors towards it, such as increased purchase intention (Bilro et al., 2022). At the same time, when users deem their experience in the metaverse enjoyable, they're more likely to want to experience it again (Roh et al., 2024).	**Q16:** According to your experience, how is it expected that the internal feelings triggered by the metaverse manifest in Gen Z users' behavior? **Q17:** How would you expect Gen Z users to react after interacting with masstige brands in the metaverse?
Conclusion	

N/A.	**Q18:** Are there any other relevant aspects you would like to discuss regarding the role of the metaverse in attracting Gen Z consumers in the context of masstige brands? **At the End:** Express gratitude for the contribution of participants and ask if they would like to have access to the research results.

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