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IMMERSIVE MARKETING AND THE METAVERSE IN THE CASE OF ZEPETO: A REVIEW OF THE ACTIVITY OF ASIAN STAKEHOLDERS

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The metaverse is an emerging space for digital communication, where platforms like ZEPETO are essential for reaching new audiences. The goal of this research is to analyze the marketing strategies of Asian brands on ZEPETO to understand how cultural and technological factors influence consumer engagement and global reach. **Methodology:** An exploratory and descriptive study was conducted using a mixed content analysis approach. The sample, initially consisting of 59 brand experiences, allowed for an in-depth analysis of 13 of them, representing companies from the five most significant Asian economies in the third decade of the 21st century (China, Japan, India, Indonesia, and South Korea). **Results:** The findings indicate that Asian brands focus on creating immersive worlds rather than traditional advertising, employing destination marketing strategies, community hubs for fans, and innovative showrooms. **Discussion:** User involvement is encouraged through digital identities of avatars, virtual goods, gamification, and role-playing narratives. **Conclusions:** A key takeaway is that the use of specific Asian cultural elements, linked to the "Korean Wave" (Hallyu), is not merely a secondary factor but a vital strategic asset for building authentic connections, expanding global influence, and serving as a soft power tool.

Keywords: virtual marketing; metaverse; Asia; Zepeto; avatars; soft power.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing has proven to be a powerful force that can significantly influence the audiovisual industry, especially the online gaming sector. Its influence not only changes the perception of the digital gamification industry but also opens up new job opportunities in a sector that many consider the largest in entertainment, with annual revenues exceeding those of all other industries combined (Bonales-Daimiel et al., 2022), highlighting the transformative power of digital marketing in this field (Singh & Pillai, 2022).

According to a report by We Are Social (2024), the use of cloud-connected virtual reality devices has increased by more than ten points, while console and desktop video games have declined, and metaverse platforms like Roblox have reported a notable increase in usage. This data highlights the importance of video games as a significant market and business opportunity (Jungherr & Schlarb, 2022; Wongkitrungrueng & Suprawan, 2024), although there is still a considerable lack of research directly examining the connections between brand strategic practices and immersive games in the metaverse, as the latter is still in its early stages of development.

The multi-layered structure of digital platforms with standardized interfaces allows companies to create content that fits the specific needs of each platform and the profile of each consumer, thus meeting the audience interaction expectations.

The dynamic relationship between brands, users, promotional strategies, interactions, and storytelling —encompassing both businesses and games or metaverses— establishes a new paradigm of performative action in these environments (Hening-Thurau & Ogniben, 2022). Data suggests new forms of interaction today, highlighting aspects such as experiential marketing, immersive commerce products, and their connection to brand value through intangibles (Ayra et al., 2024).

Just as in the physical realm, in the virtual sphere of the metaverse various economic, political and social actors emerge irregularly, attempting to establish cultural models, boost commercial operations, expedite marketing campaigns and connect with emerging audiences that they find difficult to reach through other digital channels.

This is how Asia stands out as a prominent stakeholder in this context (Sidorenko Bautista et al., 2024), not only because of the actions of various brands and companies, but also because of the development of leading platforms, such as ZEPETO, which exerts a significant influence on Korean youth, mainly, although with a replicating effect on the environment, including China.

Through this exploratory study, the specific campaigns and strategies designed by companies and brands in the region on this platform will be analyzed in order to understand the apparent communication motivations, the narrative and interactive

elements used, and the degree of connection sought to be established with the user community.

1.1. The metaverse and its Implications

The term Metaverse arises from the combination of the Greek preposition "meta" (meaning "beyond" or "higher") and the word "universe." This concept evokes the idea of a three-dimensional virtual world. Its origin dates back to Neal Stephenson's science fiction novel *Snow Crash*, published in 1992, where it was described as a highly immersive virtual space accessible through a virtual reality interface. In Stephenson's vision, this space allowed avatars (the user's digital *alter ego*, derived from the Sanskrit *avataara*, meaning "to descend") to carry out social, economic, and everyday activities (Seongeun & Yoonjae, 2024).

Currently, the metaverse is defined as a computer-mediated environment where people participate in social activities through avatars within persistent virtual "worlds." It represents a continuous, multi-user, post-reality virtual or augmented reality environment that merges physical reality with digital virtuality. (Hennig-Thurau & Ognibeni, 2022; Joon-Hee & Boa-A, 2022).

Unlike virtual reality as an isolated technology, the metaverse establishes itself as a comprehensive technological paradigm, whose essence lies in its social nature, in the act of "doing things together," from which its main value derives, thus distinguishing itself from traditional goal-oriented video games (such as *Call of Duty* or MMORPGs, where the content is managed by the operating company) (Jungyong et al., 2023).

The metaverse is characterized by the convergence of extended reality technologies as a whole, allowing virtual environments where users can participate in immersive or semi-immersive experiences and communicate through their avatars in real time.

A key conceptualization defines the characteristics of the metaverse using the "5 Cs" model: Canon (worldview), Creator, Currency, Continuity, and Connectivity. Another perspective employs the SPICE model, which includes: Seamlessness (Continuity), Presence, Interoperability, Concurrence, and Economic flow (Joon-Hee & Boa-A, 2022).

It can therefore be stated that the metaverse is a network of interconnected virtual worlds, envisioned as an additional 3D layer on top of the traditional 2D internet (Park & Kim, 2022). Simon (2023) adds that it is a network of interconnected virtual spaces where the boundaries between physical and digital reality become blurred. The Acceleration Studies Foundation (ASF) (Smart et al., 2007) has classified the metaverse into four categories, based on the augmentation/simulation and interior/exterior axes: virtual worlds, augmented reality, mirror worlds, and lifelogging. In particular, the "virtual worlds" category has experienced accelerated growth following COVID-19, becoming the most common concept within the current metaverse (Jina et al., 2022).

Some essential elements of the metaverse would be:

- User-Generated Content (UGC) (as occurs in Roblox, Minecraft and Fortnite's creator mode, for example).
- A digital economy that thrives on cryptocurrencies, non-fungible tokens (NFTs), and other digital assets.
- Virtual identities represented by avatars.

According to Seongeun and Yoonjae (2024), the user experience in the metaverse is based on basic psychological and design concepts such as:

- Presence: It refers to an individual's subjective feeling of being within a specific virtual environment (Mantovani & Riva, 1999). It is divided into four main categories: copresence (the feeling of being with other users), social realism (the degree to which the virtual environment emulates real-life social situations), spatial presence (the feeling of being there), and motion sickness or discomfort; the latter being a negative effect. Spatial presence, along with copresence, can foster an attachment to or connection with the place.
- Affordance: It is a concept developed by Gibson (1977), defined as the perceived and actual attributes of an object that determine its potential uses. In the context of the metaverse, affordance represents the functional utility and perceived possibilities of a digital environment. Good design determines the sense of presence in the metaverse. Hartson (2003) expanded on this, categorizing functional utility as sensory, physical, functional, and cognitive, with the first three being highly relevant in the design of digital and virtual interfaces.

The rise of the metaverse offers a solution to the challenges companies face in strengthening relationships with their target audience and capitalizing on opportunities to grow into new audiences, due to the saturation of traditional marketing channels and their rapid evolution. Therefore, this technology is projected to significantly influence consumer behavior, enhancing destination awareness, refining positioning and branding strategies, and improving process coordination and management (Sidorenko Bautista, 2022).

The metaverse is a unique and immersive marketing channel that allows companies to create captivating brand experiences. The ability to interact through avatars and digital objects facilitates more direct and personal interactions between businesses and consumers, setting it apart from traditional media.

Organizations have the opportunity to create memorable virtual events, immersive experiences, and interactive brand environments tailored to their audience. Furthermore, the metaverse allows them to reach a global audience, eliminating geographical and physical barriers. The potential of the metaverse lies in its ability to foster more creative and interactive marketing approaches, surpassing the engagement levels achieved by current social media platforms.

1.2. Marketing and Communication in the Metaverse

To analyze how marketing in the metaverse affects the consumer, one can use the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Framework (Al-Adwan et al., 2025; Kumar et al., 2023; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Yang et al., 2022):

1. Stimulus (S): In the context of the metaverse, gamified marketing activities (MGMA) act as stimuli. Gamification integrates game elements, such as points, badges, challenges, and rewards, into marketing strategies to engage users and customers interactively and foster brand loyalty. Key elements of MGMA include novelty, entertainment, trendiness, intimacy, and interaction.
2. Organism (O): The MGMA positively influences organism factors such as brand satisfaction, hedonic value (experiential pleasures and enjoyment), utilitarian value (functional benefits), and brand commitment. These factors, in turn, foster brand love and become a key determinant of brand success in the metaverse.
3. Response (R): The increased brand love leads to favorable consumer responses, including higher purchase intent, increased positive word-of-mouth (PWOM), and greater brand loyalty. These results demonstrate that gamified marketing in the metaverse is a driver that fosters longer-lasting relationships due to the high degree of user involvement and engagement, leading to repeat purchases and positive brand promotion within prosumer dynamics.

Based on this, brands can leverage—and are leveraging—the characteristics of the metaverse to create experiences that reinforce their identity and attract young and emerging audiences. Examples include Nike (with its virtual world "Nike Land" on Roblox, which reached 25 million visits in a year) and Gucci (with the "Gucci Garden Experience" on Roblox, which attracted over 20 million visitors, in addition to other worlds on other platforms) that have established a presence to promote products and services. Other major entertainment corporations, such as Disney and Warner Bros., have invested significantly in platforms like Fortnite, using their franchises (Marvel, Star Wars) for promotion, and have not only an active but also a dominant presence in terms of branded content in this space.

Thus, strategies in the metaverse typically follow the logic of transmedia narratives, where the user actively participates and becomes a creator and distributor of content, primarily through user-generated content (UGC) (Abellán & de Miguel, 2016). The user's involvement in the narrative, to the point of designing and expanding the universe, therefore strengthens brand engagement. For example:

- Personalization and avatars: Customizing avatar assets is the most widely used strategy by brands, especially on platforms like Fortnite, since the avatar is the primary digital representation in the interaction. Users voluntarily purchase customizations (accessories, dances, gestures) to personalize their experience, which fosters a positive relationship between the brand and the audience.
- Tourism opportunities: The metaverse can be a powerful strategy for tourism, as it fosters a desire to visit replicated locations. The act of virtually visiting a

destination can serve as a pre-experience that sparks interest in the real trip. Destination marketing organizations should focus on creating virtual affordances and representations that capture the essence and emotional appeal of real destinations.

However, despite the opportunities, the metaverse currently faces some difficulties or weaknesses. First, the ecosystem is perceived as unstable and constantly evolving, making it difficult for companies to plan and execute marketing campaigns (Abdulzaher et al., 2023).

Despite technological advancements and the reduction in the cost of consumer devices, there is still a need for significant investments in technology and content creation (Alfonso, 2023). Furthermore, a lack of standardization and interoperability persists among the multiple metaverse platforms, limiting the brand's consistent reach (Abdulzaher et al., 2023), as well as ethical concerns about user data privacy and security and the risk of negative publicity in a highly competitive environment where users have great control over their experiences (Seongeun & Yoonjae, 2024).

Ultimately, it all comes down to the need to balance virtual experiences so that they complement the appeal of the real trip, rather than replace it. Successful marketing implementation in the metaverse requires rapid adaptation to trends, focusing on innovation, personalization, and cultural sensitivity (Alfonso, 2023; Spais et al., 2024).

1.3. Zepeto, the Platform, its Audience and Success Factors

ZEPETO is a platform developed by Naver Z Corporation (Naver Z) in 2018. Based on the mobile metaverse concept, it has reached over 300 million users worldwide (as of 2022) (Joon-Hee & Boa-A, 2022). Its enterprise value has been estimated at approximately 3 billion KRW (Korean won), equivalent to nearly 2 million euros.

And according to (Hennig-Thurau & Ognibeni, 2022) ZEPETO's user base is primarily composed of Generation Z (80.0%), making it a prime target for digital marketing strategies aimed at this young and digitally native demographic segment (Jungyong et al., 2023).

The current success of this platform in Asia is attributed to its high capacity for interaction among users globally in a non-face-to-face environment and its focus on avatar personalization. It uses Augmented Reality (AR) technology from its parent company (SNOW) to create avatars in the user's likeness, something that Snap has also experimented with in the United States, without the same success (Joon-Hee & Boa-A, 2022).

The study of Jungyong et al. (2023), on an experimental basis of 315 ZEPETO users, identified seven main social and psychological motivations for its use: self-expression, socialization, information sharing, escape, adventure, non-face-to-face communication, and entertainment/fun.

The authors highlight that self-expression is the strongest motivation, showing a stronger correlation with the amount of money spent on ZEPETO. In other words, users turn to this channel to satisfy their desire for self-expression by customizing avatars, reflecting their personality and identity.

Furthermore, in terms of usability, the avatar's design and customization are at the heart of ZEPETO, and are positively valued for their perceived affordances. Elements such as free customization and the avatar's graphic quality correlate positively with both satisfaction and the intention to continue using it, according to the researchers (p. 31).

ZEPETO's marketing and communication strategy focuses on leveraging social interaction, self-expression, and user-generated content (UGC), as seen on other similar platforms. Given this potential, its parent company, Naver Z, has fostered collaborations with global fashion and entertainment brands (such as SM, YG, Big Hit, Gucci, and Nike) to expand the ecosystem. Gucci, for example, sells virtual fashion collections within ZEPETO, as has ZARA, which has used this strategy to enter the Asian market through a "phygital" approach (Martínez, 2021). This involves creating digital outfits for avatars with similar options available in physical stores, as Balenciaga did in Fortnite.

Brands' use of ZEPETO is highly influenced, firstly, by the perceived usefulness of the platform, especially in the ability to create avatars that reflect the user's taste or identity, also by the perceived ease of customizing the avatar, as well as by the quality of the avatar's graphic and technical elements, including the freedom of customization.

As with fashion, ZEPETO has been an important object of study for destination marketing, as evidenced by the study by Seongeun and Yoonjae (2024), whose results point to reflections such as that perceptions of co-presence and spatial presence in ZEPETO can foster attachment to the place, the intention of continuous use of ZEPETO (BIUZ) is positively associated with the behavioral intention to visit or recommend the real-world locations replicated in the metaverse, and that the attachment to the place generated in the metaverse also positively influences the behavioral intention to visit or recommend those places.

However, as the authors themselves point out, excessive immersion does not guarantee a greater intention to visit the actual destination, which implies the need for marketers to design strategies that complement the physical travel experience and not replace it (Seongeun & Yoonjae, 2024, p.9).

Creating virtual spaces and experiences that authentically reflect product characteristics and foster continuous social interaction is vital for effective marketing at ZEPETO. However, despite its success, the platform has limitations, such as its reliance on a predominantly female and young (under 30) user base (Aris et al., 2023). Furthermore, while it promotes business creation and value (through the ZEPETO Studio platform), factors like business value and profitability do not have a significant direct impact on user satisfaction. This suggests that users prioritize self-

expression and playful value over economic potential, highlighting the need to delve deeper into usability issues such as interface complexity, system instability, and communication quality.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this research is to analyze the marketing and communication strategies implemented by Asian brands in ZEPETO to understand how cultural, technological, and geopolitical factors seek to influence consumer engagement and the global projection of the brand's digital communication.

The following specific objectives have been established:

SO1. To identify the distinctive characteristics and narratives of the digital marketing and communication strategies of the brands in ZEPETO.

SO2. To examine how ZEPETO, through its personalized avatar and virtual world functionalities, fosters consumer engagement and loyalty in the context of experiential consumption.

SO3. To evaluate the strategic challenges and opportunities facing ZEPETO in its ambitious quest for global reach, in its competition with similar Western platforms.

3. METHODOLOGY

Statista Market Insights estimates that by 2030, the metaverse as a whole could reach 2.6 billion users, with penetration increasing from 14.6% in 2024 to almost 40% in 2030, and a potential to generate up to \$5 trillion in value (Statista, 2024).

However, not all regions are progressing in the adoption of these narratives and this technology at the same pace. While development in the West is uneven, especially in Europe, in Asia the metaverse is emerging more strongly as a dynamic leader in adoption and innovation (Eurasia Group, 2021; Skeldon, 2022; Wolfenstein, 2023).

Understanding that younger users and emerging audiences connect through virtual dynamics and gamified interactive experiences, and given that ZEPETO particularly enjoys a remarkable reach and influence in South Korea and much of Asia, the following research questions have been established:

RQ1. What are the predominant digital marketing and communication proposals and strategies in ZEPETO from Asian brands and companies?

RQ2. What narrative features and operational functionalities surrounding avatars and personalized experiences contribute to greater user engagement with branded content?

RQ2. Are there specific Asian cultural elements that are imposed or reiterated in brand content by Asian stakeholders?

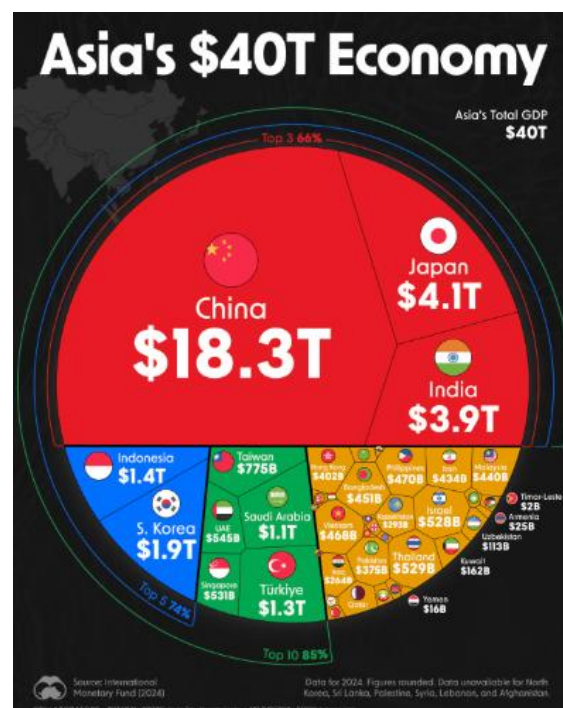
The unit of analysis was defined as "immersive brand experiences" active on the ZEPETO platform. The sampling process was carried out in three phases:

1. Exploratory search: An initial sweep was performed on the application's search engine using keywords associated with strategic sectors ("brand", "kpop", "official", "store") and reviewing the "Official Worlds" section, which yielded an initial universe of 59 experiences.
2. Filter based on economic relevance: An intentional selection criterion based on market relevance was applied, filtering brands from the five main Asian economies (China, Japan, India, Indonesia, and South Korea) according to Zhu's ranking (2025) (see Figure 1). The communication justification for this economic criterion lies in the fact that these markets lead investment in digital infrastructure and set consumption trends in the regional metaverse (Skeldon, 2022).
3. Exclusion criteria: From the resulting experiences, those that were discarded had the following characteristics: a) They did not have their own interactive virtual environment (limiting themselves to the sale of 2D items); b) They did not present user-environment interactivity (only decorative); c) They were not active or accessible during the data collection period (first half of 2025); d) They were designed directly by the platform for users to interconnect, but without express reference to products, brands or services.

After applying these filters, the final sample consisted of 13 cases (n=13), which allows for an in-depth analysis of discursive and functional strategies.

Figure 1

Visualization of Asian Economies up to the First Quarter of 2025



Source: Zhu (2025).

This does not indicate that there are no other Asian actors active in ZEPETO. However, the search mechanisms and criteria applied only allowed access to the number of cases.

This research adopts a qualitative methodological design based on a multiple case study, employing structured content analysis as the primary technique, in order to address the communication strategies related to the immersive and interactive virtual experiential model through the South Korean platform ZEPETO. This approach was chosen due to the emergent nature of the object of study, where the exploration of narratives and interaction dynamics takes precedence over mass statistical measurement at this early stage of the phenomenon.

To systematize data collection, a deductive coding matrix was designed based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theoretical framework, previously validated for metaverse marketing studies by authors such as Al-Adwan et al. (2025), Csoban-Mirka et al. (2024), and Yang et al. (2022). As detailed in Table 1, the instrument breaks down the immersive experience into three dimensions: the narrative and cultural stimuli designed by the brand (S), the internal role and personalization experience processed by the user (O), and the behavioral responses in terms of transaction and content creation (R). This structure allowed for the identification of cross-cutting patterns in the 13 case studies in Table 2. The data were manually coded to identify recurring patterns in engagement strategies.

Table 1
SOR Coding Matrix

Dimension (SOR)	Analysis Category	Indicators / Registered Variables
STIMULUS (S) <i>(Environmental design and narrative)</i>	World typology	Nature: Digital Twin (Physical Recreation) vs. Fantasy World/Original Setting: Visual aesthetics and graphic quality.
	Cultural markers	Symbolism: Presence of local or national icons Rituals: Fan culture practices (K-Pop) or local traditions
	Gamification Mechanics	Interactivity: Minigames, missions and challenges. Events: Synchronous programming (e.g., concerts, premieres)
ORGANISM (O) <i>(Internal experience)</i>	Role adoption	Assigned role: Spectator vs. Active protagonist Personalization: Ability to modify the environment or avatar
	Emotional bonding	Connection drivers: Nostalgia, Aspiration, Exclusivity, Technological curiosity
RESPONSE (R) <i>(Behavior)</i>	Virtual Economy	Merchandising: sale of digital goods (skins, accessories, lightsticks) Model: Direct Purchase vs. Reward.
	Socialization and UGC	Content creation: Spaces designed for photos/video (Photo Booths) Community: Real-time social interaction

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In order to remedy any weaknesses in the writing and presentation of arguments, the scientific artificial intelligence tool, Paperpal, has been used through its extension for Microsoft Word in its version Paperpal Prime 4.27.3 and the scientific writing option, on February 6, 2026.

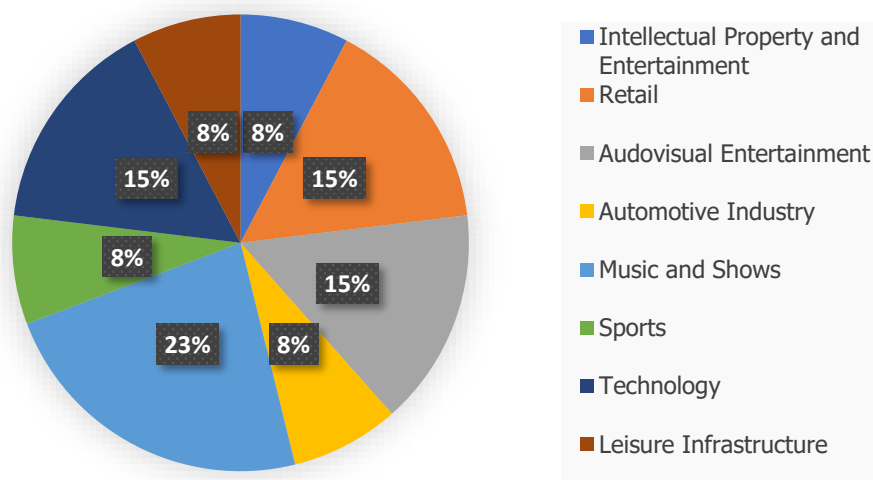
4. RESULTS

The final sample, made up of 13 specifically Asian companies and brands active in ZEPETO until the first half of 2025, reveals a remarkable heterogeneity regarding the nature of these actors, as they come from dissimilar fields such as technology, intellectual property and entertainment, as in the particular case of BT21, which is backed by the technology company LINE and the BTS group, the automotive sector, cultural industries, recreational infrastructure, retail and consumption, sports and audiovisual entertainment.

In quantitative terms, the greatest efforts to venture into the virtual realm come from companies in the Music and Entertainment sector, associated with the K-Pop product, followed by Retail, Technology and Audiovisual Entertainment (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Sectors and Productive Areas to Which the Asian Brands and Companies That Have Active Experiences in ZEPETO Belong Until the First Half of 2025



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

These are mostly prominent companies and brands in South Korea - many with a global, if not regional, reach - with the exception of One Siam, which is based in Thailand, although its business model focuses on attracting visitors from all over the world.

Once the sample was classified and analyzed, it is presented in Table 2 to more effectively visualize the collected data. The analysis of this instrument reveals, firstly, that Asian companies and brands have moved beyond traditional advertising models to adopt an approach of creating persistent virtual worlds, in this particular case,

through the ZEPETO platform, which has a significant reach and influence in the regional context.

Preliminary results suggest that marketing and communication strategies can be classified into five predominant models. The first is virtual destination marketing, employed by brands such as Lotte World Adventure and One Siam to promote physical locations and foster aspirational tourism. The second model is the innovation showroom, where technology companies like Hyundai and Naver 1784 position their brand image around a forward-looking vision and technological leadership. A third model is the fan community hub, a core strategy in the entertainment industry implemented by companies such as NMIXX, YG Entertainment, TVN, and LG Twins, which seek to build loyalty and strengthen relationships with their fans. The fourth model is a gamified product demonstration, used in cases such as CGV and Samsung to allow users to virtually "try out" or "discover" services and products. Finally, the virtual commerce and direct monetization model appears to be a key objective, especially for intellectual properties such as BT21 and K-pop groups, where the sale of digital items constitutes a pillar of the strategy.

Table 2.

Presence and Strategies of Asian Brands and Companies in ZEPETO That Have Active Experiences in ZEPETO Until the First Half of 2025

Experience	Marketing and Communication Objectives	Main Narrative and Interactive Resources	Level and Key Elements of User Engagement
T21 ZEPETO PARK	- Immersion in intellectual property: Creating a "Brand Land" for the characters. - Connecting with the global fandom (ARMY): Creating a social and leisure hub. - Character monetization: Sale of themed virtual merchandise.	- Narrative: Play and have fun in the UNIVERSTAR BT21 theme park. - Interactive features: Character-themed zones, virtual attractions, minigames, and BT21 clothing stores.	- Emotional and playful connection: The connection is based on affection for the characters. Key elements are the themed areas for each character and the interaction with their giant statues, which reinforces the emotional bond.

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BT21 ZEPETO PARK NIGHT	- To increase re-engagement: To offer users a reason to return to a familiar world. - To offer new content: To keep the experience fresh and dynamic. - New monetization opportunities: Launch a new line of virtual items.	- Narrative: The magic of the park comes to life at night." - Interactive elements: The same park structure, but with nighttime ambiance, lighting, fireworks and new limited edition items (for example, glow-in-the-dark items).	- Aesthetic and novel connection: The connection is renewed through a visually striking and novel experience. The key elements are the fireworks and the new lighting, which generate an effect of wonder and rediscovery.
CU Hangang Park	- Experiential marketing: Associating the brand with a positive social experience. - Brand affinity (Gen Z): Positioning itself as a relevant and modern digital "third place". - Brand awareness: Fostering recall through an authentic experience.	- Narrative: A relaxed day with friends in Han River Park - Interactive features: Virtual store, collection missions, rooftop cafe, social spaces (picnic).	- Cultural and social connection: The user connects through the recreation of a shared cultural ritual. Key elements are the accessible environment and spaces that encourage social interaction among friends.
CGV 4DX Screen	- Demonstration of a premium product: Showcasing the 4DX experience and justifying its value. - Reconnecting with young audiences: Bringing the "magic of cinema" to their digital world. - Selling the experience: Differentiating yourself from home streaming.	- Narrative: It discovers a new way of experiencing cinema. - Interactive: 4DX virtual simulation (avatar movement, visual effects), cinema exploration, employee role-playing, virtual merchandise purchase.	- Linking curiosity and simulated sensory experience: The connection is established by visually and playfully simulating a physical experience. The key element is the 4DX virtual room, which sparks curiosity to experience the real thing.
Hyundai Driving Zone	- To communicate the vision for the future: To position Hyundai as a leader in electric mobility and technology. - Product marketing: To demonstrate the capabilities of your concept vehicles. - To connect with future consumers: To create an innovative brand image for Generation Z.	- Narrative: It explores the city of the future and drive the mobility of tomorrow. - Interactive: Virtual car test, open world exploration, racing minigames.	- Technological and functional connection: The user connects by directly experiencing the brand's technology. The key element is the test drive simulation, which consists of a playful interaction with the product.
ITZY "Not Shy" Desert	- Transmedia Marketing: Promoting a specific music release (Not Shy) - Fandom loyalty (MIDZYs): Allowing fans to "enter" the music video. Viral content: To promote the song's dance challenge.	- Narrative: Become a member of ITZY in the 'Not Shy' universe. - Interactive: Recreation of the music video sets, purchase of iconic outfits, completion of the dance challenge.	- Participatory and fandom engagement: The connection is based on the desire to be part of a song's narrative. Key elements include virtual cosplay with official

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			costumes and a dance challenge, which make the fan the protagonist.
LG Twins Seoul	- Fan loyalty: To deepen the relationship with the team's supporters. - Create an annual hub: To keep the community active during the off-season. - Modernizing the sports brand: To position itself as an innovative club.	- Narrative: Don't just support the team, get on the field! - Interactive: Baseball minigames (home run derby), stadium exploration, purchase of official uniforms, meeting with mascots.	- Linking identity and community: The connection is established through the feeling of belonging to a team. The key element is the virtual uniform, which allows the user to express their identity as a fan.
Lotte World	- Virtual tourism and destination marketing: Promoting the physical theme park to a global audience. - Brand extension: Maintaining relevance with the young audience. - Create a desire to visit: Generating an aspiration to know the real place.	- Narrative: Experience the magic of Korea's most famous amusement park. - Interactive: Accessing virtual attractions (carousel, pirate ship), meeting the mascots, buying iconic headbands.	- Nostalgic and playful connection: The user connects through the simulation of a universal leisure experience. Key elements include virtual attractions and iconic merchandise, such as headbands, that replicate the real experience.
Naver 1784	- Demonstration of corporate synergy: Using their own platform, ZEPETO, to showcase their headquarters. - Technology showroom: Positioning Naver as a leader in AI and robotics. - Recruitment and employer branding: Attracting global talent by showcasing a futuristic workplace.	- Narrative: An exclusive tour of the world's most advanced office. - Interactive features: A digital twin of the building to explore, interaction with "Rookie" robot avatars, and information panels about Naver's technology.	- Informative and admiring connection: The connection is based on curiosity and wonder at the technology of the future. The key elements are virtual robots and the exploration of the futuristic building, which generate admiration for the brand.
NMIXX Island	- Fandom monetization: To sell virtual items to a dedicated fanbase. - To deepen the connection between idol and fan: To offer a space for interaction and closeness. - Music promotion: To create a center to celebrate releases and anniversaries.	- Narrative: Immerse yourself in the conceptual universe of NMIXX. - Interactive features: Dance challenges, virtual fan parties, photo spots with idol avatars, purchase of stage outfits.	- Emotional and aspirational connection: The connection is based on devotion to the artist. Key elements are the idols 'avatars (closeness) and virtual merchandise (identity and cosplay).
OneSiam Summer Runway	- Destination marketing: Promoting a luxury shopping center (Thailand) globally. - Physical-digital connection: Creating a bridge between the real shopping experience and the metaverse. - Promotion of local fashion:	- Narrative: Become a supermodel on a world-class summer catwalk. - Interactive: Virtual catwalk for the avatar to walk, virtual clothing fitting room with a seasonal collection,	- Aspirational and event-based connection: The connection is based on participation in a glamorous and ephemeral fashion event. The key elements are the virtual catwalk,

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	Showcasing the talent of Thai designers.	catwalk video contests (UGC).	which empowers the user, and the exclusivity of seasonal fashion.
Samsung Galaxy House	- Promotion of a specific product: Focused on the Galaxy mobile line. - Playful engagement: To create a fun and memorable interaction with the brand. - To generate a "buzz": An early and simple foray to test the metaverse.	- Narrative: It overcomes the challenge in Galaxy's house. - Interactive: Jumping Game minigame, exploration of a themed house, photo spots with virtual devices.	- Playful and competitive connection: The connection is established through a casual and entertaining game. The key element is the minigame, a simple mechanic that links the brand with fun and overcoming a challenge.
Samsung My House	- Product demonstration in context: To show how household appliances improve life at home. - Promoting personalization (Bespoke line): Aligning the brand with self-expression. - Creating aspirational desire: Fostering the yearning for a premium lifestyle.	- Narrative: Design the house of your dreams with the best technology. - Interactive: Decorating the user's own virtual space with Samsung products and gamified missions, such as cleaning with the robot vacuum cleaner, for example.	- Personal and aspirational connection: The most intimate connection, as it integrates the brand into the user's personal space. The key element is the decoration of their own virtual home, which transforms it into a personal showroom and an element of projection and desire in the physical world.
TVN Soul World	- Transmedia Marketing: Extending the universe of a successful K-drama (Alchemy of Souls). - Fan loyalty: Offering a space for the community to experience the story. - Intellectual property monetization: Selling outfits and accessories based on the series.	- Narrative: Enter the magical world of Daeho and become a sorcerer. - Interactive: Exploration of iconic settings (Danhgyanggok), purchase of character costumes and recreation of famous scenes.	- Immersive and fandom engagement: The connection is based on a love for a story and its characters. Key elements include virtual cosplay (dressing up as the protagonists) and exploring the drama's settings.
YG SAM'E	- Offer exclusivity: To give fans access to a "sacred" and inaccessible space. - Strengthen the corporate brand (YG): To centralize the <i>fandom</i> of all its artists under one roof. - Catalog monetization: To promote and sell items from your entire cast of artists.	- Narrative: A VIP tour of the secret headquarters of your favorite idols - Interactive: Exploration of rehearsal rooms and studios, virtual signing events, YG content hub.	- Connection of exclusivity and belonging: The connection is established through the feeling of having privileged access. The key element is the recreation of the iconic building, which functions as a virtual "behind the scenes".

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

As Table 3 indicates, the marketing and communication objectives of these brands and companies through ZEPETO have focused especially on providing virtual experiences that strengthen fandom-which impacts brand loyalty and community

building- before focusing more explicitly on more conventional marketing formulas, virtual merchandising, and gaining notoriety.

The entire sample opts for the creation of persistent worlds rather than static advertising. Furthermore, the high prevalence of virtual merchandising (85%) and the use of cultural markers (69%) is noteworthy, corroborating the hypothesis regarding the importance of digital identity and local context in engagement strategy.

Table 3

Communication and Marketing Objectives of Asian Brands and Companies in ZEPETO That Have Active Experiences in ZEPETO Until the First Half of 2025

Identified Strategy / Resource	Absolute Frequency	% (Approx.)	Representative Cases
Space Simulation <i>(Creation of one's own immersive environments)</i>	13	100%	All (Lotte World, Naver 1784, Samsung House...)
Virtual Merchandising <i>(Sale or use of digital items/skins)</i>	11	85%	BT21, Gucci, ZARA, NMIXX, LG Twins, TVN
Cultural Markers <i>(K-Pop, Korean places, language)</i>	9	69%	CU Hangang Park, ITZY, YG SAM'E, Lotte World
Active Gamification <i>(Minigames, missions or dance challenges)</i>	7	54%	Hyundai (racing), Samsung (jumping), ITZY (dance)
Socialization Tools / UGC <i>(Photo Booths, synchronous events)</i>	8	62%	BT21 (fireworks), OneSiam (catwalk)
Adoption of Roles <i>(Professions or fantasy characters)</i>	4	31%	CGV (employee), TVN (sorcerer), OneSiam (model)

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Regarding the narrative and interactive resources that encourage user engagement in these virtual experiences, the results indicate that the most effective experiences combine a set of avatar-centric functionalities with active participation. The most essential element is the simulation of spaces, which transports the user to recreations of real places, as seen, for example, in the cases of YG SAM'E and CU Hangang Park, or fictional ones, such as TVN Soul World. Gamification is then superimposed on this foundation, manifesting in minigames, present in specific examples like Hyundai Driving Zone, skill challenges such as ITZY's dance challenges, or guided missions that structure the interaction.

However, the most ubiquitous resource is digital acquisition and identity. Many of the experiences analyzed employ the sale of virtual merchandise—ranging from team uniforms (LG Twins) to K-drama outfits (TVN) and home appliances (Samsung My House)—as the primary mechanism for users to personalize their avatar and space,

integrating the brand into their digital identity. This is complemented by immersive narratives that allow users to assume a role, such as being a model in OneSiam, or by community interaction features, such as scheduled events like the fireworks in BT21 Park Night, which foster the creation of a community around the brand and a particular event.

As shown in Table 4, the main narrative and interactive motivations in these cases are primarily gamification, the user role-playing aspect (which allows for a more direct and profound engagement with the content through direct involvement), and fun as a common denominator. Subsequently, other associated terms and ideas emerge, such as exclusivity, aspiration (the user's aspirations, based on the experience and role-playing), and User-Generated Content, especially in locations designed to capture screenshots and export the content to other platforms and digital networks.

Table 4

Main Narrative and Interactive Resources and Associated Values (n=13) of Asian Brands and Companies in ZEPETO That Have Active Experiences in ZEPETO Until the First Half of 2025

Interactive Resource (Practical Details)	Motivation / Associated Value (Narrative)	Observed Presence
Space Simulation (Digital Twins)	Discovery / Realism <i>(Exploration of recreated physical environments)</i>	13 (100%)
Merchandising and Skins (Item Sales)	Identity / Belonging <i>(Expression of the digital "self" through the brand)</i>	11 (85%)
Photo Booth and Video	Socialization / UGC <i>(Creating content to share)</i>	8 (62%)
Minigames and Missions (Gamification)	Fun / Entertainment <i>(Active play challenges)</i>	7 (54%)
Role-Playing	Aspiration / Exclusivity <i>(To live an aspirational profession or status)</i>	4 (31%)

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Finally, the results regarding the level of connection reveal that it is not superficial, but rather focuses on emotional, aspirational, and, significantly, cultural connections. A systematic reiteration of specific South Korean cultural elements has been identified as a fundamental pillar for generating authenticity and establishing a deeper connection.

This strategy manifests itself in the digitization of social rituals, such as park culture at CU Hangang Park, the recreation of iconic national landmarks (Lotte World), and the export of K-pop fandom practices (fan centers, dance covers). Evidence suggests that user engagement is strengthened when a brand connects with the cultural

capital of a global audience already familiar with the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*). This connection, therefore, is not only with the brand itself, but also with the cultural universe it represents and in which it directly participates.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The metaverse, conceptualized as a persistent network of interconnected, avatar-mediated virtual worlds, has emerged as a new frontier for digital marketing and communication. Platforms like Zepeto, with a user base of over 300 million, predominantly from Generation Z (similar to Roblox), and a strong presence in the Asian market, provide an ideal laboratory for analyzing emerging brand strategies within this new paradigm. Analyzing the sample, comprised of Asian corporations (mainly South Korean), provides an empirical basis for addressing questions and concerns about their communication strategies, user engagement mechanisms, and the influence of cultural factors through interactive virtual experiences.

Asian brands on ZEPETO have adopted an approach that could be called "immersion marketing", whose objective is not only to convey a message, but to build a persistent brand universe in which the user assumes an active role and interacts directly with the content.

By contrasting these findings with the theoretical framework presented, it is observed that the five strategic models identified do not operate in isolation, but rather materialize the dimensions of the metaverse proposed in the scientific and technical literature.

First, the 'Gamification' and 'Technology Showroom' models empirically validate the applicability of the SOR (Stimulus-Organism-Response) framework in immersive environments (Al-Adwan et al., 2025; Csoban-Mirka et al., 2024). The playful dynamics observed in cases such as Hyundai or Samsung act as the gamified Stimulus (S) which, through novelty and interaction, triggers a hedonic response in the Organism (O), facilitating the absorption of the brand message without the friction of traditional advertising.

For its part, the 'Virtual Destination Marketing' model (cases such as Lotte World and Hangang Park) confirms the relevance of the spatial presence described by Mantovani and Riva (1999). Unlike traditional video, these experiences generate a sense of being there, which, in line with the findings of Seongeun and Yoonjae (2024), fosters place attachment prior to the physical visit. The brand ceases to be a logo and becomes a habitable territory.

Figure 3

Lotte World Adventure Experience in Zepeto



Source: ZEPETO.

Figure 4

Naver 1784 Experience in ZEPETO



Source: ZEPETO.

Furthermore, the predominance of the 'Community Hub' and 'Virtual Merchandising' in the entertainment sector aligns with the theory of 'Affordances' or functional utilities (Gibson, 1977; Hartson, 2003). Virtual items (lightsticks, uniforms) are not mere products, but rather social affordance tools, as they allow the user to perform communicative actions (belonging, status) within the group. This reinforces the 'Connectivity' component of the '5 Cs' model (Joon-Hee & Boa-A, 2022), demonstrating that at ZEPETO, the brand's exchange value lies in its ability to facilitate socialization and the construction of avatar identity, rather than in the intrinsic value of the digital object.

Figure 5
TVN's Experience in ZEPETO



Source: ZEPETO.

Figure 6
CGV 4Dx Experience in ZEPETO



Source: ZEPETO.

To answer the research questions, it is important to point out that user engagement with branded content in ZEPETO does not stem from a single functionality, but from a strategic synergy between narrative resources and operational details that revolve around the avatar.

The predominant approach across all the analyzed experiences focuses on the avatar as an extension of the digital self, where engagement is achieved by allowing the user to integrate the brand into their own identity. The key operational functionality is the virtual merchandise store, although its success lies not only in the transaction itself, but also in what the item represents. For example, the LG Twins uniform or the TVN Soul World sorcerer costume are not mere garments, but virtual cosplay tools that allow the user to embody a role and reinforce their sense of belonging to a community. Similarly, the Lotte World or BT21 headbands act as identity badges that communicate affinity. The Samsung My House experience elevates this concept to a higher level, allowing the personalization not of the avatar, but of their personal space, achieving the deepest level of brand integration into the user's digital identity, with the goal of reflecting this in a corresponding way in the physical space.

The most engaging experiences are those that present a clear narrative in which the user takes on the main role. Two predominant narrative approaches are identified: the first is role-playing, which invites the user to "become." For example, in 'OneSiam Summer Runway,' the narrative isn't "watch our fashion show," but rather "you are the supermodel." This transformation of the user's role from spectator to protagonist is a key driver of engagement. The second approach is the expansion of transmedia universes, as seen in the cases of TVN, ITZY, and NMIXX. In these cases, the experiences act as an interactive extension of an existing intellectual property (a K-drama or a music video). The narrative is already familiar and appreciated by fans, and ZEPETO's affordances allows them to integrate into that narrative and experience it firsthand, generating a higher level of emotional engagement.

Gamification is an operational feature designed to structure interaction and maintain user engagement. This can manifest itself, for example, through direct and competitive minigames, such as the LG Twins home run derby or the Samsung Galaxy House jumping game, which offer instant gratification and a replay cycle. Alternatively, it can be presented more subtly through guided missions, as in the case of CU Hangang Park or Samsung My House, which function as an interactive tutorial. These missions guide the user through the brand's points of interest, ensuring they interact with key communication elements in a way that feels organic and entertaining, rather than promotional.

However, none of these features would work independently. Engagement is amplified exponentially due to the platform's inherent social layer, and Asian brands and companies foster this through two main functionalities. First, scheduled community events, such as fireworks at BT21 Park Night or fan parties on NMIXX ISLAND, create moments of synchronous interaction that strengthen the sense of community. Second, optimizing the world design for user-generated content (UGC) creation, through photo spots, dance challenges, or virtual catwalks, provides tools

that encourage users to become organic creators and promoters of the brand experience, closing the engagement loop on other digital platforms and exporting that content.

A comprehensive analysis of the cases reveals that Asian brands are not simply using ZEPETO as a neutral channel, but rather configuring their virtual worlds with cultural elements specific to South Korea, primarily. This strategy, far from being an obstacle to their global reach, appears to be one of the keys to their success, leveraging the popularity of the "Korean Wave" (*Hallyu*). The most evident and recurring cultural element is the structure of K-pop fandom culture. In this sense, the experiences of NMIXX, ITZY, YG SAM'E, and BT21 digitally replicate fan practices.

This strategy of 'ethnifying' the metaverse theoretically contrasts with the trends observed in global Western brands (such as Nike or Gucci on Roblox), which tend to construct fantastical 'non-places' or culturally neutral brand architectures to maximize their universal appeal. While the West seems to favor cultural asepsis or globalized fantasy, Asian actors, particularly South Koreans, use ZEPETO to exert explicit digital soft power. The reiteration of local symbolism (the Han River, Seoul's architecture, K-pop rituals) in 90% of the analyzed sample suggests that culture is not an accessory, but rather the primary vehicle for engagement. This validates the hypothesis that, in the Asian metaverse, cultural authenticity generates a superior emotional affordance compared to global neutrality.

Far from being an anecdotal tactic, the data reveals that the integration of local cultural elements constitutes the hegemonic strategy in the analyzed sample. While only 31% of the cases (mainly from the technology sector, such as Hyundai or Samsung) opt for global or culturally neutral codes—focused exclusively on functionality or sterile futurism—69% of the analyzed experiences explicitly incorporate markers of Asian or South Korean identity.

This statistical prevalence supports the assertion that the use of "soft power" is a deliberate strategic asset. This 'ethnification' of experience manifests itself systematically through three quantifiable vectors, as previously indicated: the digitization of K-pop fandom rituals (present in all entertainment experiences), the recreation of specific local topographies (such as the Han River or Jamsil, as opposed to generic cities), and the use of the vernacular in virtual signage.

By prioritizing these codes over global standardization, Asian brands not only seek differentiation, but also validate the metaverse's ability to act as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy.

The sale of outfits represents a virtual version of cosplay and the purchase of merchandise. Dance challenges digitize choreography, while fan parties emulate fan gatherings. The virtual pilgrimage to YG headquarters reflects the real-life practice of fans visiting agency buildings.

Ultimately, these brands aren't imposing an external culture, but rather catering to a global community that already participates in, understands, and embraces these rituals. They aren't simply brands, but cultural catalysts.

Several experiences in the exhibition are based on the recreation of physical locations that hold deep cultural resonance in South Korea. CU Hangang Park is not merely a park, but the digitization of a social ritual among Seoul's younger generation. Lotte World transcends its function as an amusement park, becoming a cultural icon of leisure and nostalgia, while the LG Twins' stadium stands as a community hub for Seoul's fans. By transferring these places to the metaverse, the brands transform them into virtual tourist destinations that act as ambassadors of modern Korean culture, offering authenticity to a global audience fascinated by it and fostering interest in and visits to these locations in the physical world.

In conclusion, a specific cultural phenomenon is the presentation of the corporate headquarters as a monument to national pride and innovation. The experiences of Naver 1784 and YG SAM'E transform what in the West would be a simple office space into a pilgrimage destination. Naver's "smart building" and YG's "exclusive club" are presented as spectacles in themselves, reflecting a corporate culture that values the physical and visible manifestation of success and technological leadership. This narrative seeks to have an impact both locally and internationally, positioning these companies as key players in a dynamic of globalization.

This study aimed to investigate the digital marketing and communication strategies of predominantly Asian brands on the ZEPETO metaverse platform. Through a qualitative analysis of a broad spectrum of brand experiences, the research sought to answer questions about the predominant strategies employed by these companies, the types of narrative and functional resources that have driven user engagement with brand content, and how specific Asian cultural elements have manifested in these activations.

In line with the points discussed in the previous section, Asian brands on ZEPETO have consistently adopted an immersive marketing model, replacing conventional, interruptive advertising and favoring the creation of persistent brand universes. Five main strategic archetypes have been identified, which, often in a hybrid fashion, define this approach. In short, success in this environment is not measured in terms of exposure, but rather through the ability to build a world in which users actively choose to spend their time, regardless of the content, as long as it aligns with their interests.

Effective engagement has been shown to result from a synergy of resources converging on the avatar as the central nexus of digital identity. The acquisition of virtual goods, such as clothing, accessories, and home decor, emerges as the most significant functionality, as it allows the user to integrate the brand into the expression of their own digital self. This mechanism is enhanced by immersive narratives that invite the user to assume a role, such as being a supermodel for OneSiam or a sorcerer in TVN's Soul World series, thus transforming the user from a passive player into a protagonist.

Gamification, through the use of minigames and missions, structures the interaction and establishes clear objectives in order to encourage user participation, while the simulation of spaces provides the scenario that gives context and credibility to the experience.

Furthermore, the layer of social and community interaction, inherent in the platform's metaverse possibilities and facilitated, for example, by scheduled events and content creation tools, amplifies and enhances the reach of the experience, transforming users into organic brand ambassadors. This engagement, therefore, is not the result of a single feature, but rather of an ecosystem of interdependent functionalities that empower user identity and creativity.

In the specific case of the analyzed sample, the incorporation of particular Asian cultural elements is not merely an aesthetic detail, but rather an essential strategic pillar. Instead of seeking cultural neutrality to attract a global audience, South Korean brands, in particular, capitalize on their cultural capital as a differentiating asset. A systematic reiteration of three key elements has been observed: the digitization of K-pop fandom rituals through dance challenges and idol merchandise; the recreation of iconic locations with social resonance in South Korea, such as Hangang Park or Jamsil Stadium, transforming them into virtual tourism destinations; and how corporate culture has been turned into a spectacle as a symbol of innovation and national pride, as exemplified by the specific case of Naver and its "1784" initiative.

This strategy demonstrates remarkable effectiveness by aligning with the global phenomenon known as the "Korean Wave" (*Hallyu*), providing an international audience with an authentic and culturally resonant experience. This strengthens the emotional connection with the brand and reinforces its soft power in digital dynamics, especially within the context of young and emerging audiences.

Ultimately, this study addresses a long-term value creation model through immersive, participatory, and culturally authentic worlds. However, it is important to recognize that this analysis has focused exclusively on the ZEPETO platform and a set of brands, primarily from South Korea, due to the limitations imposed by the search and data collection methods. Therefore, the findings should not be uncritically generalized to other platforms with different demographics and functionalities, such as Roblox, Minecraft, or Fortnite, nor to the strategies of Western brands. Furthermore, the research does not include quantitative data on the performance of these experiences or direct user perceptions.

Future research should focus on comparative studies of Asian and Western brand strategies, as well as user perceptions. Quantitative analyses evaluating the return on investment of these activations and their impact on physical-world metrics would be highly beneficial. Furthermore, ethnographic research and direct surveys of ZEPETO users would be of great interest in understanding their motivations and the meaning they attribute to these brand interactions within the metaverse.

Furthermore, it is proposed that future research move beyond the exploratory nature of this study by incorporating quantitative performance metrics (KPIs) that link cultural strategy with return on investment. Indicators such as time spent in the virtual world, the conversion rate from virtual trial to physical purchase, the volume of user-generated assets (UGCs) shared on external networks, and visit frequency (retention rate) will be fundamental to empirically validating whether soft power effectively results into market power.

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