The DRAM, Vol. 21(7) – Alcohol marketing in the metaverse

July 15, 2025

Mataverses are virtual-reality worlds that combine aspects of augmented reality, virtual reality, social media, online gaming, and non-fungible tokens (NFTs) into one digital space. Users explore the space as avatars by interacting with one another and engaging in virtual experiences. Alcohol marketers have captured users' attention in these new spaces by inviting them to engage with their products in a way that could pose risks, especially to underage youth who may be more susceptible to marketing tactics. For example, some metaverses allow for users to interact with virtual bars; others allow for real-life alcohol purchases. This week, The DRAM reviews a study by Taisia Huckle and colleagues that explored alcohol marketing in metaverses and the meaning behind the promotional efforts.

What were the research questions?

(1) What alcohol promotional efforts are currently being used in metaverses, and (2) how are alcohol and drinking being represented?

What did the researchers do?

In this exploratory study, the researchers conducted a content analysis to identify alcohol marketing that they encountered as they navigated through twenty eligible metaverses. They analyzed aspects of each metaverse by engaging in "quests" (i.e., videogame-style activities), interacting with alcohol promotional products, and conversing with non-player characters (NPCs). Only two of the twenty metaverses the researchers identified, Decentraland and The Sandbox, contained alcohol marketing and promotion. Three experiences/scenes from these metaverses warranted deeper evaluation – Heineken Silver and Jose Cuervo Tequila in Decentraland and San Matias Tequila in The Sandbox. The research team discussed marketing materials found in these three spaces, focusing on how alcohol, drinking, and marketing were being represented. They used a reflexive thematic analysis to analyze their discussion and develop themes related to their experiences.

What did they find?

Decentraland and The Sandbox metaverses contained a variety of alcohol promotional efforts, such as NPCs acting as bartenders and discussing their products, opportunities to earn NFTs by completing alcohol-related quests, NFTs available for purchase for exchange for alcohol in the real world, and engagement with virtual alcohol tasting menus. Based on the analysis of experiences/scenes with Heineken, Jose Curevo, and San Matias, four key themes were identified: immersive branding, immersive engagement, immersive commerce, and virtual drinking (see Figure).

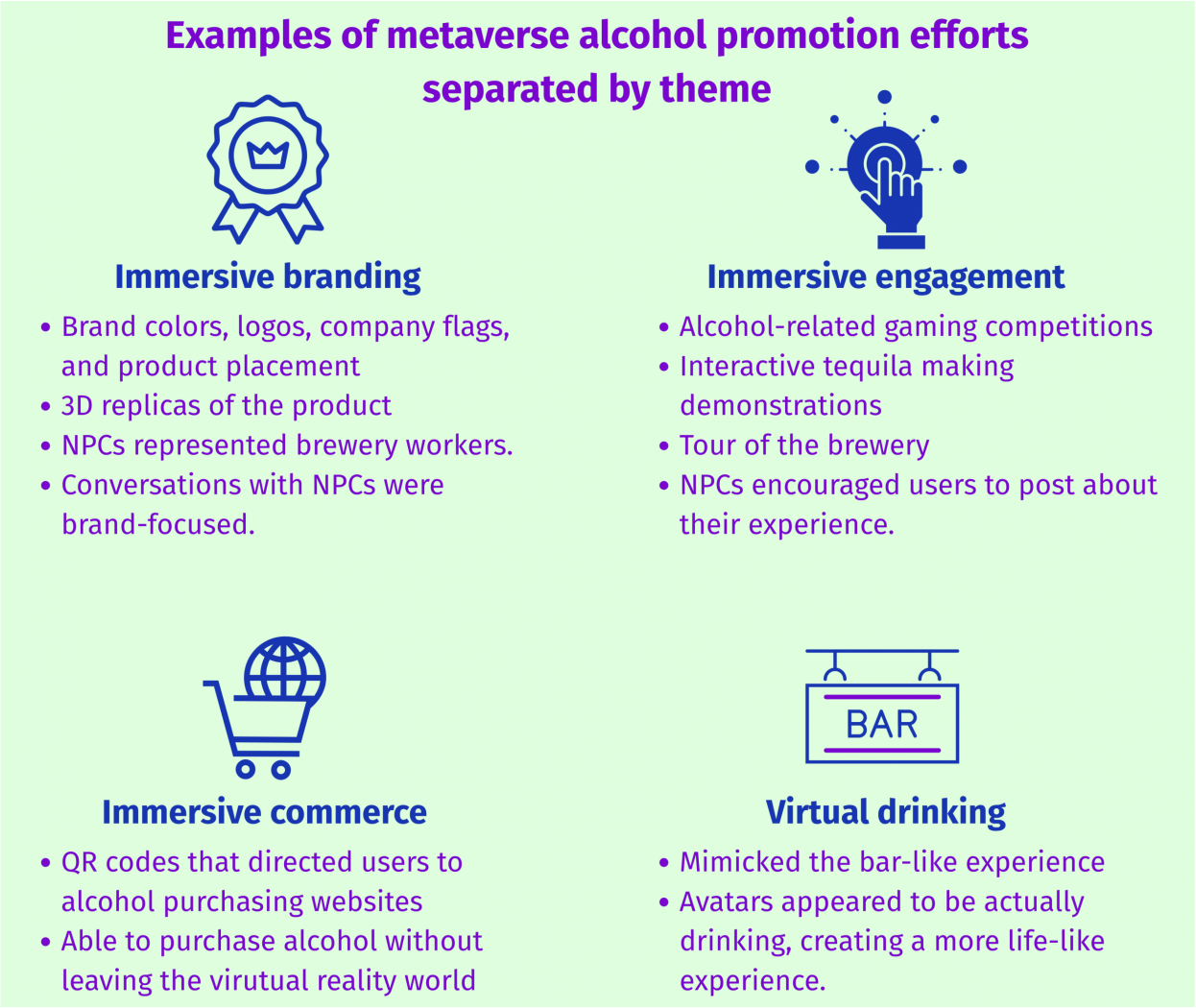

Figure. Examples of alcohol promotion in the metaverses separated into four themes: (1) immersive branding, (2) immersive engagement, (3) immersive commerce, and (4) virtual drinking. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

Metaverses offer new ways to market alcohol to the general public, and more importantly, underage youth. Alcohol promotions in these metaverses served to increase user familiarity with the product and attempted to link alcohol with fun activities. Their use of gamified virtual experiences might be especially appealing

to youth. Metaverses also offer users the ability to drink virtually and purchase alcohol without leaving the digital space, which may reduce stigma around drinking and promote drinking behaviors outside of the metaverse. Policymakers can use this information to respond to alcohol marketing tactics by banning promotion of their products in spaces that are accessible to youth.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations of this study?
Because metaverses are so vast, it is likely that researchers missed instances of alcohol marketing while navigating the virtual worlds. Additionally, the themes identified by the discussion group are subject to personal bias, which might have altered researcher's understanding and interpretation of the marketing tactics. To improve upon this, future research could study how users interpret alcohol marketing in the metaverses. Lastly, new findings suggest that metaverses may not have the long-lasting impact that some originally expected.

For more information:
The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has tips and resources for people struggling with problem drinking. For additional drinking self-help tools, please visit our Addiction Resources page.

— Nakita Sconsoni, MSW

Want CE credit for reading BASIS articles? Click here to visit our Courses Website and access our free online courses.