

Fashion Joining Online Gaming and the Metaverse

Petra PATRUTI*

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

** Corresponding author, petra.patruti@facultateademangement.ro*

Alexandra ZBUCHEA

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

alexandra.zbucnea@facultateademangement.ro

Florina PÎNZARU

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

florina.pinzaru@facultateademangement.ro

Abstract. *In an era when targeting younger generations becomes more and more challenging, and classic fashion is starting to be seen as being outdated, the Metaverse and online gaming has attracted fashion brands' interest. Increasingly more fashion brands, such as Nike, Vans, Gucci, Supreme, Forever 21, Ralph Lauren, and NASCAR, are being present in the Metaverse and online games. The purpose of the study will be to bring some light on how the Metaverse might revolutionize fashion marketing communication for the younger and future generations. The paper also explores the customer benefits that the brands offer through the Metaverse and why the younger public tends to find this marketing type so appealing. From a methodological point of view, two focus groups were organized, one for gamers and another for casual players. The research directions investigate the relationship between fashion, Metaverse, and gaming marketing communications. It follows the perception of the audience, as also the benefits for organizations and consumers of games that include fashion brands. The qualitative analysis results showed that the gap between gamers and nongamers is becoming more and more narrow, as both consume the same type of content, and the benefits for organizations are worth the investment. For consumers, on the other hand, both advantages and disadvantages were highlighted as concerns for future generations. The study acknowledges why the younger generations invest so much time and money in the digital fashion world. It clarifies aspects related to the Romanian market, giving useful insights for fashion brands and not only.*

Keywords: Digital Fashion, Gaming, Metaverse, Fashion Industry, Marketing Communications

Introduction

Since the start of the Internet era around 1990, the way that consumers and organizations communicate has changed. More and more virtual environments have been created, such as networks, virtual 3D worlds, video teaching and conferences, non-fungible tokens, and augmented reality applications (Lee et al., 2021). Metaverse has been promising to change and digitally transform a lot of aspects of our life, including the way we buy, wear, and store clothing. The term Metaverse can be defined as "a digital reality that combines aspects of social media, online gaming, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and cryptocurrencies to allow users to interact virtually" (Folger, 2022; Bobier, 2022). This universe is continuously increasing and diversifying. Gartner (2022) has predicted that 25% of people will spend at least one hour in the Metaverse by 2026. Metaverse games are a special dimension of this universe, which is increasingly more popular, with games allowing an immersive experience for gamers (Shin, 2022). The gaming

industry develops Metaverse infrastructure, gathering a very large customer base, globally located and interconnected.

Therefore, investigating the dynamic relationships between the Metaverse games and brands is of high interest. The fashion industry makes no exception. Thus the scope of the present paper is to explore the potential that Metaverse, more precisely the digital games, offer to fashion brands. The paper's originality lies in approaching a new topic of study. Therefore, it fills the gap of knowledge in a new field of digital fashion (Hellard, 2021). Leading luxury and fast fashion brands have already integrated technologies like VR, Metaverse, NFT, and AI in their strategies to reinvent consumers' experiences and further communicate the brand's image. Furthermore, Metaverse is starting to be seen as the new social platform that has attracted practitioners interested in studying how these technologies might shape and reinvent the consumer experience and brand communications (Joy, Zhu, Peña, & Brouard, 2022).

Considering the explorative, pioneering nature of the study, the methodology considers a qualitative perspective; two focus groups are organized, one for casual players and another for gaming enthusiasts. The comparative analysis of the two types of players allows a deeper understanding of the target and also the general opinion of the youth regarding this matter. The geographic factor may impact the results of the research, as the mentality of the Romanians plays a big role in this matter. The research is of high interest to practitioners as the Metaverse market is expected to bring more than \$40 billion by 2026 (Hellard, 2021). The study aims to acknowledge why the younger generations invest so much time and money in the digital fashion world, and why they choose to buy digital fashion items in the case of the Romanian youths. We may find different data compared to other countries and different reasoning behind choosing the digital fashion world than the traditional association between players and fashion brands. Nevertheless, the results are useful for fashion brand managers to better communicate with consumers in Metaverse games and to develop this specific market.

Literature review

Although people thought that Metaverse would be designed more towards gaming and entertainment, the integration of blockchain technologies, NFT-s, artificial intelligence, cryptocurrencies, and IoT will likely transform it into a business model platform for the fashion world. Metaverse has already opened new opportunities. The adoption of virtual fashion is influenced by the need for gratification, attitude towards fashion innovativeness, and digital fashion, and it is not influenced by peer pressure (Kobia & Liu, 2016). Digitalizing the fashion industry aims to effectively align processes to the market and increase sustainability (Sayem, 2022) and interaction with younger audiences (Meli, 2021). Marketers now aim to use engagement practices as well as algorithmic activation, amplification, customization, and connectivity to drive consumers deeper into the brand spiral, entangling them in networks of brand-related desire, as the old communication ways are being forgotten (Kozinets, 2021). As Milanese, Guercini & Runfola (2022) state, "Thus, despite the numerous examples of the integration of gamification into luxury companies' marketing strategies, the academic research on gamification and luxury is limited and mainly focused on branding, there is a dearth of empirical evidence supporting the features and implications of gamification for luxury companies, especially in terms of delivering a digital luxury experience" (p.3).

But the changes may not be seen only on the organization's part but also for consumers. A study developed by Seo, Jung, Sng, and Park (2019) on a sample of 534 players of "Summoners of war" revealed that nowadays, more impulsive buying is being displayed and not only towards

in-game fashion products. Besides these, the new way of socializing and spending time may lead in time to new behaviors and changes as research is further expanded.

The Metaverse, including the associated games, is credited to extend real-life experiences, being a way of enhancing all sorts of immersive experiences (Shin, 2022). It is a way of connecting real and digital universes. The Metaverse allows for a holistic presence of consumers, encompassing a social presence, a spatial presence, and a self-presence, allowing both emotional and cognitive involvements and perceptions (Tsai, 2022). Therefore, the Metaverse games offer many marketing and branding opportunities.

One of the main purposes of Metaverse, from a business point of view, is the communication between brands and people (Periyasami & Peryasami, 2022), as Metaverse will allow players to create their avatars and explore different stores or locations. Avatar customization has become an industry (Johnson, 2016). Self Theory might help us explain the reasoning behind spending so much time creating and dressing up an avatar in a digital world by identifying with an ideal self, while fashion and even digital fashion can improve the individual image and grant them recognition in their digital environment. The previous study discussed the user-avatar relationships, not only at the psychological level but also considering the business implications (Sibilla & Mancini, 2018). Two main relationships have been considered – actualization and idealization. Both of them offer fashion brands commercial opportunities.

Another theoretical topic that we will approach is the Maslow hierarchy; as consumers usually spend their income on buying physical items or services to satisfy different needs, wants, and demands, it's important to understand what specific needs this digital fashion answers, potentially talking about the social and individual needs. The Maslow theory has been also considered to explain problematic aspects of gaming, being connected with the lack of fulfillment (Sharma, Narasimha, & Singh, 2022).

A study by Gazzola, Pavione, Pezzetti, and Grechi (2020) refers to the following sustainable trends in the fashion industry: digitalization, technological improvement, attention to sustainability, circular economy, personalization, AI, and social media. The study states that the nature of the fashion business is a highly competitive business, which translates into a permanent change and evolution in the field; therefore, more and more technological-related trends are coming out each year. However, a lot of luxury brands have already stepped into the digital environment, like Gucci with the world's first virtual sneaker, Bvlgari with brand extensions via AI & NFT, and many other luxury brands that still seem cautious related to the metaverse and AI opportunities. Providing more information by academics and being more informed and experienced will lead to exploring new revenue streams for the fashion industry (Joy et al., 2022). Digital fashion can also be a zero-waste option for fashion companies, which would lead to the desired sustainability in the fashion industry as the fashion industry is the second most polluting industry on the planet after the oil industry (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Moreover, more than 500\$ billion is lost yearly because of the lack of utilization and recycling of clothing (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Therefore, Metaverse may help organizations reduce costs and consumers manage their impulsive shopping desires.

Summing up, there is no question regarding the paradigm shift that the fashion companies will need to adapt to as Metaverse and further technologies demand it. Besides being a medium for branding, it also can give digital and physical consumer experience, employee experience as they can join, Metaverse for culture building and collaboration, and of course, NFT opportunities (Balis, 2022). Businesses are yet still attempting to capitalize on capitalizing these digital worlds as they can provide even more outstanding possibilities in the future.

Methodology

Considering the nature of the objectives and how little is known about the topic, qualitative research was considered. Two focus groups were organized, one for casual players and another for gaming enthusiasts. The comparative analysis of the two types of players has provided us with a deeper understanding of the target market. The geographic factor may impact the results of the research, as also the mentality of the Romanians plays a big role in this matter. An online survey was used to determine if they perceived themselves as gamer/casual players also; the demographic details of the sample are displayed in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Casual Players Demographic and Questionnaire

Casual Players Demographic – Focus Group 1							
Respondents	Gender	Age	Gaming frequency	Metaverse Fashion Purchases?	Tech enthusiast?	Do you invest in tech?	Gaming purpose
R1	Female	19	Few times per year	No	No	Only when is needed.	Relaxation
R2	Female	20	2-3 times per week	No	Yes	Only when is needed.	Relaxation
R3	Male	22	When Im bored	No	Yes	Only when is needed.	Relaxation
R4	Male	23	2-3 times per week	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Relaxation
R5	Male	33	Few times per month	No	Yes	Never	Relaxation
R6	Female	35	2-3 times per week	Yes	No	Sometimes	Relaxation
R7	Female	49	Once per week	Yes	Yes	Only when is needed.	Relaxation
R8	Male	54	Few times per month	No	Yes	Yes	Finishing the game

Source: Authors' own research

Table 2. Gamers Demographic and Questionnaire

Gamers Players Demographic – Focus Group 2							
Respondents	Gender	Age	Gaming frequency	Metaverse Fashion Purchases?	Tech enthusiast?	Do you invest in tech?	Gaming purpose
R1	Male	23	Daily	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Being better than other players
R2	Female	25	Daily	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Relaxation
R3	Male	25	Daily	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Relaxation
R4	Male	24	Daily	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Relaxation
R5	Male	31	Daily	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Finishing the Game

Source: Authors' own research

The variables mentioned by both focus groups were related to the drive for gaming, time, competition, purchase, customization, AI, and virtualization advancement. Each participant mentioned the drive for gaming at specific times of her/his life or daily, as also the time availability, which plays a big role. Next, the competitiveness variable was more present in the gamers' focus

group rather than casual players. Both groups felt the need to be able to customize and were happy to be able to express themselves freely through in-game fashion purchases while also being excited about new virtualization and AI advancements.

The next step consisted in coding the themes, in order to better observe them (Table 3).

Table 3- Themes and corresponding codes

Themes	Codes	
	Casual Players	Gamers
Gaming experience	Time Availability	Competition
Avatar Experience	Experience Experimentation Customization Opportunity Personality	Opportunity Uniqueness Experimentation Self-Image Customization
Metaverse Experience	Familiarity Purchases	Familiarity Purchases
In-Game Marketing Communication	Shoe brand Makeup Brands	Fashion Brands Shoe Brands Make-up brands
In-Game Fashion Purchases Benefits	Pay to Win Competitiveness Affordable Longevity Reward Fast	Competitiveness Opportunity Boost Self Esteem Dopamine Buying Time Custom
In-Game Fashion Purchases Disadvantages	Cost No Return	Boredom Guiltiness Portability
Future of Marketing Communications	Generations Advertising	Continuous Shopping Generations
Younger audience perception of Metaverse	Cheaper Spending too much time Virtualization AI	Marketing Advertising Children Virtualization AI
Fashion companies' investments in Metaverse	AI Virtualization Opportunity Future	Opportunity Investment Huge Market Profitability

Source: Authors' own research

The Research Directions were exploratory. The interview guide included several segments, focusing on:

- (1) The relationship between Fashion and Marketing Communication
- (2) The companies' benefits regarding investments in Metaverse
- (3) The consumer benefits from Metaverse fashion purchases
- (4) The younger audience's perception of the Metaverse fashion communication

Results and discussions

The Relationship between Fashion and Metaverse Marketing Communication

The respondents perceive Metaverse as a digital world where they can express themselves and not be judged. Almost all participants were aware of the fashion marketing communication from real brands in Metaverse and had a positive impression of it. Avatars in Metaverse gave the player the option to create either character "*alter ego of themselves*" or totally different looks for those who want to experiment, which allows them to discover and try brands. R4 found that the avatar customization part of the game enables exclusive items that make your avatar stand out and look unique. This was perceived as one of the main reasons for gaming for himself and that he loved experimenting with avatars as far from reality as possible. Therefore most likely, the link between fashion items and the gaming world is this feeling of uniqueness that it gives to players and the opportunity to afford items that they wouldn't otherwise. The marketing communication offers, therefore, the player information about the latest collaborations in-game with fashion brands:

"Yes. It has potential, but I don't like advertising, and I think that this sort of fashion collaboration is still advertising" (Respondent 4, Gamer group)

On the other hand, the respondents were also worried about the marketing communication increase and the potential effect on the younger audience, which already spends so much time in Metaverse.

"I think that the Metaverse is already a marketing channel. What I hope for the future is that metaverse communication will be more limiting towards children, especially referring to the volume and intensity of advertising communication. I have seen this happening in some games, and I know loot boxes were forbidden in Australia for children"(Respondent 5, Gamer Group)

Brand benefits from investing in Metaverse

Here respondents mentioned the ability to target more than one generation at once and to address a public that you can't reach through other communication channels, the ability to start trends, the fact that it is easier to test campaigns and trends on the platform, and that customers get bored easily and because purchases are instant it creates an addiction.

"I think that fashion brands should accept this future and prepare for it, and there are a lot of metaverse specialists that agreed that one of the probabilities of the fashion future is metaverse or an augmented reality world, and therefore, it makes sense to catch the wave with metaverse being the next big thing and the competitiveness rules of marketing make you go to the direction of the future consumers" (Respondent 5, Casual Player group)

Respondents also mentioned the implication of a smaller cost for now in the digital sector but bigger with the virtualization advancement that may come in the future and the possibilities regarding creating a symbiosis between digital and real brands and even creating brands in Metaverse.

The customers' benefits from Metaverse fashion purchases

As Seo et al. (2019) noticed, planned in-game purchases tend to be a regular behavior, especially for gamers, as our participants admitted. Some psychological traits that are also influencing in-game buying are low self-control and general stress factors from the real world. Another game-related factor that also positively influences buying is the competition's desire to win. Here our respondents spoke about: the fact that they are getting an "*instant reward*". R4 (Gamer Group): mentioned that Word of Warcraft players spend a lot of money for the latest skins and the fact there is a "*dopamine effect*" with the reputation of having something that others don't have, which blurs

the line of reality. And as a streamer himself, this is a business, and fashion purchase helps the business. Sales and marketing are helping the business a lot also and make people purchase because they are better than real-life ones. They perceive Metaverse as an opportunity to remain young. Another benefit seen by respondents was that they don't have to stress about storing fashion purchases, and hence they are not creating environmental issues. Another interesting benefit coming from digital fashion purchases was the ability to experiment/try different brands and looks that players wouldn't be able to afford otherwise, which gave them a boost of confidence and increased their self-esteem.

"I believe that there are some moments in life where things are not going ok, and you use the game as a place to escape and to buy stuff and be recognized as somebody in the game, which helps self-esteem boost and getting through real-life problems easily" (Respondent 2, Gamer Group)

The younger audience's perception of the Metaverse fashion communication

All respondents perceive Metaverse communication as being the future of marketing communication, with a few concerns related to children's consumption regulations. They perceive metaverse communications as the best way to target the younger generations that don't consume "old media" anymore. They also perceive Metaverse as an opportunity for brands to create a symbiosis between real and digital brands and to create even more alike and realistic fashion/avatars through virtualization, AR, and 3d printing. Respondent 8 from Casual Player Group mentioned that:

"Marketers come where younger people are, so it's going to be a crowd on 7-10 games that everybody knows but generally you live with the perception that they want to take your money, but you still play and look for them and marketers transform all those into assets, but I see it as a virtualization of us. I think that's what's interesting, starting to play for half an hour ending by spending 2 hours or more and its addictive. Anything with virtualization is next! "

As for the similarities between the 2 groups, both saw avatar creation either as an opportunity given by the game to create an idealistic version of themselves or to experiment with more outfits/looks or they were not interested in avatars at all, seeing it as wasted gaming time. R5 from the casual gamers mentioned:

"I know gamers that have no interest in fashion in real life, but in the game when you see their avatars, you wouldn't believe it's theirs. They can't express themselves in reality but they do in the digital world. And there they have new personalities." (Respondent 5, Gamers Group)

Meanwhile, all gamers were familiar with metaverse games and had bought fashion items online, while half of the casual players' respondents chose to purchase digital items in Metaverse. The respondents that haven't decided to buy fashion products were happy that the game gave them the option to unlock some items for free and it was against their belief to spend real money online.

Some respondents also spoke about having a limit on how much they are willing to spend on digital items per day and the feeling of guilt for not spending this money on more productive things:

"I am feeling guilty cause I could be productive with the money, especially because fashion items are not essential, more of a luxury." (R4, Gamers Group)

As Hamari et al. (2017) showed in a study with a sample size of 519 players, the purchase reasoning could be converted into six categories: 1) Unobstructed play, 2) Social interaction, 3) Competition, 4) Economic rationale, 5) Indulging the children, and 6) Unlocking content, dimensions that were also mentioned by our respondents during our focus group discussions. The purchase motivations of unobstructed play, social interaction, and economic rationale were

positively associated with how much money players spend on in-game content with social interactions.

As for the differences between gamers and casual players, we noticed that gamers were playing daily for a long time while casual players were only playing from time to time and focusing more on mobile games as they are less time-consuming. R5 from our gamers group mentioned that either way the gap between the two groups is starting to close:

"There are two types of hardcore gamers, either specialized in one game or on more games and, of course, the casual gamers. But sometimes, there is not a big difference between them because casual players also get relaxed when playing and consuming gaming media, and even if they don't play as many hours, they enjoy the content and are influenced and feel included. Hours don't matter as much but consistency. But hardcore gamers are the early adapters on more expensive fashion purchases."

Gamers saw as the primary benefit coming from metaverse fashion purchases the ability to be the best player, the fact that they were buying time in the game, the ability to escape reality, boost self-esteem, and keep their reputation. They also mentioned the competitiveness and dopamine effect as triggers. On the other hand, casual players saw the Metaverse fashion purchase benefits as the option to experiment, role-play, and afford designer items that remain stored in the game. While all casual players mainly saw metaverse gaming as a way of relaxation, 60% of gamers also agreed that they are gaming for relaxation purposes.

Conclusion

The Metaverse has already built a link between Fashion and Marketing Communications, which provides casual players and gamers the feeling of uniqueness and the ability to experiment or create an ideal version of themselves. On the other hand, this link also comes with the fear of potentially unwanted and harmful effects on younger generations that can be a direction of further research for academicians. The link mentioned above comes with a lot of benefits for brands that want to invest in Metaverse, like the ability to target a hard-to-reach generation, that doesn't consume traditional media anymore, potential technological advancements, the ability to start trends, test campaigns and the possibility of creating a symbiosis between real and digital brands. Another potential benefit may be that these generations grow up with the brands transforming them into loyal consumers.

The perceived consumer benefits that we highlighted in our study were the opportunity to remain young and experiment with fashion items that players wouldn't be able to afford in real life, as also not having to worry about how to store these items. All these gave the players confidence and a "dopamine effect". Metaverse can target gamers and casual players at once, and the benefits are equal, as they consume these types of media no matter the time and engagement they dedicate. We might see in the future a link between "new fashion," and "old fashion" as more and more digital trends are being created each year. Our respondents were excited about the future virtualization and AR advancement they might experience; therefore, Metaverse could be the next big hit for marketers. Fashion brands should already be moving and investing in this direction.

The limitation of this study is linked to the research method, which is qualitative; therefore, it may be seen as being subjective for some researchers as this type of research "are often accused of reading into texts things that are not there or are not being specific enough, making interpretations and having subjective opinions, etc." (Berger 2018, p.28). The study may be further extended to a qualitative approach in the future.

The main contributions of this study from an academic point of view were to comprehend better the consumers and brand benefits that come from Metaverse and the relationship between the fashion and Metaverse marketing communications, as well the audience perception of these new ways of fashion marketing communication. The importance of this paper for practitioners is that they will be able to design better strategies to target the Metaverse casual players and gamers and to adapt to the digital fashion shift toward Metaverse that is already happening.

As for further study directions, more research is needed on the potential effects that these metaverse communication and fashion purchases have on the younger generation, as also on the gap between casual players and gamers that in terms of media consumption and desire to purchase digital items is becoming more and more narrow. Also, the path of this new digital Metaverse fashion is still in its early stages, so more overall research is needed to adapt to this transition.

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